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## China's Global Presence Is Alienating Bellicose Japan

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Recent Tokyo's bellicose attitude pushes Japan into alienation and relative isolation vis-à-vis China's growing global presence.

## Official Japan tends to alienation

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has seen bitter criticism after Japan's lower house of parliament, on July 16, approved legislation that dramatically changes the country's post-war Defense strategy by allowing the military to combat abroad for the first time since World War II. The move comes in the context of «The Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation», approved on April 27, and has been subsequently reinforced, on July 21, as the cabinet approved the 2015 Defense white paper compiled by the Ministry of Defense.

Maybe Abe considers his bellicose assertiveness as timely and proportional, but in fact it represents the opposite as World War II commemorations approach in Beijing in early September, a month when the new legislation most likely will be approved in the Japanese upper chamber of parliament and international attention will focus on Japanese war crimes, not only in China, but in the rest of East and Southeast Asia.

Why Shinzo Abe is inflicting damage to his international image and to his country's national interest? Japan was definitely not successful in power calculations leading to the country's destruction 70 years ago, and by mid-2015 is showing a repetitive lack of success in coming to terms with its aggressive past.

Last November the world witnessed a reconciliatory handshake between Chinese president Xi and Abe at the request of the latter ahead of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Tokyo's zig-zag attitude against its own interests has three explanations. *First*, Japan's own economic weakness over the last decades propelling anxiety about China's rise, *second*, the collapsing of Social Democratic Party (which historically and for years was a non-militarist party), and *third*, cyclical pressure from Washington. Actually the last thing a US president would like to see is Tokyo and Beijing coming along in good terms. In this sense, recent Koizumi, Aso and Abe administrations have been instrumental to Washington's Asia Pacific strategy, most recently including Obama's pivot to Asia policy complemented by Tokyo.

Explanations contending that Japan should contain China's military expansionism is unconvincing since Beijing is clearly setting up an alternative and collaborative international financial order for common prosperity which requires harmonic regionalism. Presumably official Japan is set to insist with bellicose rhetoric, including further obstacles to China's rise. Theoretically, constant provocation might cause an extraordinary increase in China's military budget. But Beijing is aware that such a strategy is a blind alley as superpowers Cold War arms race showed.

Keeping a balanced view Abe's administration has managed to alter the historic security treaty signed by Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida with Washington, in 1951. In other words, he has the dubious honour to have accomplished the division of society on a crucial matter. Internal public opinion overwhelmingly reacted against the recent approval of Japan's lower house of parliament allowing Japanese combat forces abroad. Opinion polls before the vote show about 80 percent doubting and opposing the move and the majority considering the legislation as unconstitutional. In spite of it, Abe's coalition blatantly ignored opposition on the streets, and

equally important, inside parliament.

There is room to interpret that Beijing could treat official Japan (the Japanese government) and civil society as separate entities and at the same time reassess the necessity to understand politics and economics as clearly intertwined, unlike previous bilateral crises. Actually following the 2012 crisis over the Diaoyu islands, bilateral trade stagnated last year.

One should not rest believing that dangerous escalation leading to an open conflict is impossible because both countries are part of the same global supply chain in the line of argument that «the world is flat». World War I and II (waged among closest commercial partners) must convince any observer that open conflict is possible between extremely intertwined economies such as China and Japan.

### **Relative isolation vis-à-vis China's growing global presence**

Since Xi Jinping's power has consolidated and will last beyond this decade, he is in a position for maneuvering that his Japanese counterpart lacks of (ruling coalitions are ephemeral in Japanese politics). Actually for the first time in history China has simultaneously the possibility to think and act regionally and globally.

Strategically Japan might feel increasingly isolated. First, former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi had a Central Asia strategy called "Central-Asia plus Japan" Dialogue, launched in 2004, to promote trade and security in the Eurasian region. Now it is clearly about to be overshadowed by China's Silk Road new grand strategy, which is bound to deepen Beijing's Eurasian strategic presence.

Second, name a hot spot and there is Beijing, either mediating in conflicts in South Sudan and Afghanistan or calling for negotiated settlements in Yemen and Syria, or ostensibly concerned about Libya, or getting a strategic advantage, as clearly indicates recent Iran nuclear agreement. Provided that the agreement goes ahead, presumably Tehran will be an important capital in China's Silk Road infrastructure and interconnectivity scheme.

Third, if we look at the international organizations, China is one of the key members of alternative financial and security structures such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), engulfing developed as well as underdeveloped countries. And while the China-Russian alliance has significantly reinforced, Tokyo has not managed to get closer to Moscow. Even New Delhi, for decades distant from Beijing, will enter an organization like the SCO in which Japan is not even observer or dialogue partner. With this panorama for Tokyo it turns into pure dream its future aspirations to access a permanent seat in United Nations Security Council.

Fourth, it is also clear that Tokyo is missing an important chance to keep its role in Latin America, especially in Brazil, where the most important Japanese diaspora outside Japan lives. China has not only become Brazil's main commercial partner, but also both countries are members of BRICS's Development Bank leaving nothing comparable for Tokyo to share with Brasilia. A similar panorama – more presence of China and comparably less for Japan - is clear

in Africa.

Fifth, even in cultural terms one should consider Confucius institutes spreading around the world at an impressive rhythm, overpassing actually what Tokyo has been doing for decades disseminating Japanese language and culture abroad.

### **Correcting patterns of behaviour**

Current perceptions based on recent history certainly play a significant role in bilateral ties. Unfortunately, a commonly accepted joint interpretation of the past looks remote with current or near future Japanese administration. And while presumably the adversarial nature of both countries on key issues will remain unchanged in the long run, certain steps could be taken.

In practical terms, it is clear that none of the parties intend proposing international arbitration to settle or mediate in territorial disputes. Perhaps an ad hoc regional forum to handle risk management in order to avoid escalation, other than Shangri-La Dialogue, should be considered.

Additional steps should include greater autonomy. Obama's administration hegemonic pattern of behaviour and close monitoring of Japan (as Wikileaks just disclosed on July 31) does not fit to the strategic requirements of a high-tech archipelago having a complementary economy with China.

It is interesting that Chinese-Japanese deteriorating ties are taking place while both countries are *de facto* contributing to financial multipolarism, since in 2012 they both decided to start direct trading of Japanese yen and Chinese yuan to boost mutual investment and trade. It is time for official Japan to definitely avoid regional instability, dangerous brinkmanship and futile shadowboxing.