

A problem bigger than the Senkakus by Brad Glosserman

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The Japanese government's efforts to defuse the controversy over the Senkaku/Daiyutai islands have been based on a fatally flawed premise: that Tokyo could get Beijing to understand that its actions are *defensive* in nature. Faced with the prospect of Tokyo Gov. Ishihara Shintaro's purchase of the islands and then building something on them to both confirm Japan's ownership and stand tall against Chinese assertiveness, Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko figured nationalization – a purchase by the central government – would cool tensions. After taking title, Japan would quarantine the territory, permitting emotions to subside as both governments figured out how to return to the status quo ante and then forge some kind of enduring solution.

Unfortunately for Noda, Beijing either didn't get the memo or chose to ignore it.

In the aftermath of the 2010 incident, in which the arrest of a Chinese fishing boat captain after collisions with Japanese Coast Guard vessels triggered a full-blown diplomatic and economic crisis, Tokyo recognized the need to establish new channels of communication with Beijing. Top-level officials, including prime ministers, met on the sidelines of regional and international summits. Political leaders from each country visited the other on a regular – sometimes monthly – basis. After a brief lull, the two countries resumed security and strategic dialogues (two separate discussions). When Noda took office a year ago, China sent congratulations noting and appreciating his “commitment to developing the China-Japan strategic relationship of mutual benefit,” a sentiment the new prime minister reciprocated in his first policy address to the Diet. And hanging over all relations was the 40th anniversary of the normalization of bilateral relations that would occur in 2012, an occasion both sides saw as an opportunity to build stronger forward-oriented relations.

Then Gov. Ishihara decided to strengthen the spine of a “weak-kneed government.” That prompted a flurry of deliberations by the Cabinet on ways to counter the Ishihara gambit since the Japanese government knew, as one source confided to the *Asahi* newspaper, it would make the Japan-China relationship deteriorate further. Foreign Minister Gamba Koichiro reportedly explained Japanese thinking to Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in July, a meeting that was described as “not relaxed but neither was it tense.”

And yet, the downward spiral continues. We've seen anti-Japan demonstrations across China, prompting the reconsideration of business plans by Japanese companies as they look elsewhere for places to invest, and the cancellation

of the 40th anniversary celebrations. Major Chinese banks are skipping IMF/World Bank meetings being held this week in Tokyo and the official Chinese delegation is of a lower rank than usual, reportedly as a result of the spat. More worrying still, Chinese patrol vessels continue to ply waters near the islands, ensuring that tensions and the possibility of an incident remain high.

What went wrong? Of course, Gov. Ishihara is a loose cannon who delights in causing trouble; reining him in was always a nonstarter. But once the gambit was played, Japanese diplomats, who have shown considerable creativity in the past, should have come up with better options. That they didn't raises questions about the degree greater political direction over foreign policy – a stated goal of the DPJ government – has cost Japan expertise and diplomatic options.

That begs a basic question: would any Japanese proposal satisfy China? The short answer is no. Chinese officials and analysts dismiss *any* attempt to “buy” the islands; as far as they're concerned, no Japanese seller has title to transfer. But the real problem is that Tokyo has boxed itself into a corner. Japan insists that there is no territorial dispute, so it has to deal with all problems on its own. Yet when Japan acts to resolve problems, China deems that a violation of the status quo – because the dispute has been “shelved.” In this context, Japan's intent is irrelevant.

This conceptual box is constricted by another, even more disturbing trend. In two years of meetings with Chinese officials and thinkers, I've been struck by the fundamental misreading of Japanese actions and intentions, even among China's top Japan watchers. In discussions at the conference table, the coffee table, and the dinner table, I am told that Japan is in the thrall of rightwing conservatives eager to reclaim the country's militarist legacy. A newfound assertiveness in Tokyo threatens to destabilize the regional status quo. The Senkaku standoff is the product of this rightwing resurgence and the US must be careful that the “ally tail doesn't wag the American dog” – at least that is the concern when the US isn't using Japan to contain China.

What accounts for this lack of nuance concerning and understanding of Japanese political and security dynamics? One explanation blames group think, which forces conformity to a single interpretation of Japanese behavior. Another suggests that the nationalism that is coursing through the Chinese public has been projected onto Japan and has swamped more-reasoned analysis. A third explanation is that self-censorship is the culprit: being out of step with the prevailing political line in China is always a risky proposition, and the dangers are magnified during a leadership transition and when emotions are running as high as they are. Some experts insist that the problem is the people I talk to; if I had access to “real” experts, I'd be reassured. (The uniformity of

views over time makes me skeptical of that criticism, as does my ego.) A final explanation is that I have been duped. In fact, this is tactical – China senses weakness in Tokyo and an opportunity to make diplomatic and other gains. A hard line puts Japan and its ally on the defensive, and allows Beijing to paint itself as the aggrieved party and a rallying point for countries with complaints about Japan; as a strategy, this approach aims to separate Japan from its ally and other regional partners.

Whatever the explanation, the results are a problem. And, every analysis leads to the conclusion that the responsibility to fix the situation is China's. If this is a case of "ignoring the memo," or a deliberate and conscious process – a tactic – then there is nothing Japan can do to remedy the situation besides capitulate. That is both unlikely and unwise, as it will encourage more such behavior.

If this is a subconscious and wholly automatic process – if China "didn't get the memo" -- then Japanese attempts to defuse the situation – short of reversal -- will be dismissed. Suspicions about Japanese motives and intentions mean that confidence building measures – which is what the Noda government is trying to do – will fail. Ultimately, resolution will depend on a decision taken at the highest levels of the Chinese government to forge a new relationship with Japan, to prioritize cooperation despite the suspicions and demand a more open approach to and assessment of Japan. Japan must help, but China must lead. Such an outcome looks highly unlikely, but past Chinese leaders have shown the vision and capacity to embrace such a bold and visionary policy.

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