

Xi-Abe: Will They or Won't They? by Ralph A. Cossa

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The guessing game continues as to whether there will be a meaningful discussion between Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and Chinese President Xi Jinping along the sidelines of next week's APEC Leaders Meeting in Beijing. So far, a handshake is about the only thing the two sides are willing to guarantee. Both sides profess a willingness to meet, but China has made it clear that an extended conversation can only occur "under the right conditions." These conditions have been clearly spelled out by Beijing: first, a pledge by Abe to stop visiting the controversial Yasukuni Shrine which honors, among 2.5 million others, the spirits of 14 World War Two "Class A" war criminals; and second, an acknowledgment by Tokyo that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, occupied and administered by Japan but claimed by China (and Taiwan), are indeed disputed territory.

The Abe administration has made it clear that the prime minister, as a matter of conscience, is not prepared to publicly announce that he will forego future visits to Yasukuni, but several of his emissaries have reportedly provided private assurances to the Chinese that he would in fact refrain from future visits. Washington and Seoul would be equally pleased if this was true. Abe's visit to the Shrine in December 2013 resulted in a public expression of "disappointment" from Washington and considerably stronger admonitions from Beijing and Seoul.

The island dispute is more problematic. In an era when legal opinions trump strategic thinking, no leader seems prepared to acknowledge the existence of a dispute over territory currently under his nation's control. Beijing, while insisting that Tokyo admit a dispute exists over the East China Sea islands, is equally adamant that no dispute exists when it comes to the Paracels (seized by China from Vietnam by force in 1974), while claiming that all islands, reefs, and rocks within their infamous nine-dashed lines in the South China Sea are "indisputably" Chinese territory. Likewise, the Russians and South Koreans claim, respectively, that the so-called Northern Territories (southern Kuriles) and Dokdo (called Takeshima by Japan) are indisputably theirs, even though Tokyo lays claim to both. (Moscow in the past has at least been willing to discuss the issue with Tokyo, although the current Ukraine situation has made an Abe-Putin Summit to discuss this issue a nonstarter.)

When it comes to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the Chinese claim that the two nations agreed in the 1970s to shelve the dispute for future generations to resolve; Beijing says it would like to put the issue back on the shelf (once Tokyo acknowledges the dispute). Beijing also blames the nationalization of three of the islands in 2012 as the source of

the current problem. However, Tokyo argues that Chinese fishing boats and government escorts have been increasingly assertive in the East China Sea since 2010, culminating in the ramming of a Japanese Coast Guard ship by a drunken Chinese fishing boat captain in September of that year. It further argues (with some justification) that the 2012 nationalization of three of the islands was aimed at preserving, not changing the status quo and that the purchase was necessary to keep the islands out of the hands of right-wing nationalists who would have started erecting structures on the currently vacant islands. In truth, prior to 2012, four of the five islands were in private Japanese hands and one was under government control. Now, four are owned by the government and one is private; the ratio changed but the overall status did not; all five were under Japanese administrative control before and all remain under Japanese administrative control now.

Despite all the above, a grand bargain is possible which would allow both sides to put the issue back on the shelf, assuming both are willing to accept a win-win solution that trades a de facto admission by Japan that the islands are in dispute for an acknowledgment by Beijing that the islands are today under Tokyo's administrative control.

I would suggest that Prime Minister Abe, prior to going to APEC, make the following statement: "The government of Japan recognizes that many territorial disputes exist in our region and around the world. Japan has foresworn the use of force in settling such disputes and we call on our neighbors to show the same level of restraint. We believe that both the Northern Territories and Takeshima/Dokdo rightfully belong to Japan but acknowledge that they are today under the control of Russia and the ROK respectively and that we must peacefully resolve these dispute without the use or threatened use of force. We also recognize that the PRC believes, in our view without grounds, that the Senkakus, which the Chinese refer to as the Diaoyu Islands, are Chinese territory but we call on Beijing to likewise acknowledge and respect the fact that they are today clearly and indisputably under Japanese administrative control and to renounce the use or threaten use of force in dealing with this issue. We urge Beijing to follow the example of Deng Xiaoping and place this issue back on the shelf for future generations to resolve."

Beijing could then choose to interpret the Abe statement as an acknowledgment that a dispute and prior agreement both exist and welcome Prime Minister Abe's statement as an important first step in shelving the dispute, while agreeing to open up discussions on sharing fishing rights in the area (as Japan has already done with Taiwan). This opens the door for a Xi-Abe Summit to talk about larger issues, rather than a few disputed islands.

As an added benefit, such a statement would provide additional reassurance that Japan will not use force against

Dokdo. One would hope that Seoul would focus on the positive parts of this message and not the repeated sovereignty claim. An appropriate Blue House response would be to state that “In the ROK’s opinion, Dokdo is indisputably Korean territory but we applaud Prime Minister Abe’s acknowledgment that the islands are under ROK control and his nation’s continued commitment to a peaceful resolution of disputes. We urge all parties to show similar restraint in dealing with territorial disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea.” This would put additional pressure on Beijing to follow Japan’s example and refrain from confrontational actions at sea around the Senkakus/Diaoyu and hopefully in the South China Sea as well.

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