



CHINA ISN'T GETTING THE JAPAN IT WANTS

BY DENNY ROY

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As Beijing looked on angrily, the US and Japanese foreign and defense ministers met in Tokyo during the last week of July to announce they will increase bilateral security cooperation. The US government [said](#) it will upgrade its military command post in Japan to a joint force headquarters that will cooperate closely with the Japanese armed forces' new Joint Operations Command, improving interoperability between the two allies' militaries. A [joint statement](#) sharply criticized China over a broad range of policies. In response, the People's Republic of China (PRC) Ministry of Foreign Affairs [said](#) "We call on the US and Japan to immediately stop interfering in China's internal affairs, stop creating confrontation, [and] stop triggering a new Cold War."

This is yet another milestone marking the long-running failure of the PRC to domesticate its principal Asian rival. In profound ways, China isn't getting the Japan it wants, largely because of Beijing's own counterproductive behavior.

What does the Chinese government want from Japan?

First, Beijing wants Tokyo, along with all other governments, to refrain from criticizing China or its policies. Second, the PRC wants the international community to consider Japan perpetually unworthy of regional leadership because of Japan's sins during the 20th century. Third, Beijing wants Tokyo to acquiesce to all Chinese claims of ownership of

disputed territory—not only cases in which Japan is a rival claimant, but also the South China Sea and Taiwan. Fourth, the Chinese government wants a Japan that is militarily weak and neither allied nor aligned with the United States, leaving China the unchallenged strategic great power of its region.

Finally, China wants Japan to provide high technology and expertise to China, helping China move up the value-added ladder and eventually achieve global leadership in critical emerging technologies, as envisioned in Beijing's aspirational blueprint "[Made in China 2025](#)."

In each of these criteria, however, Tokyo is moving in the opposite direction of China's preferences.

Until recently, Tokyo was relatively cautious about calling out China. The US-Japan joint statement in late July, however, contained copious [criticisms](#). China, it said, "seeks to reshape the international order for its own benefit at the expense of others," uses "political, economic, and military coercion," and "represents the greatest strategic challenge in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond." The statement mentions China's "escalatory behavior" around Japan's southwestern islands, the "rapid" and non-transparent expansion of China's nuclear weapons inventory, "unlawful maritime claims" and "provocative activities" in the South China Sea, dangerous harassment by PRC vessels and aircraft, threatening behavior toward Taiwan, and support for Russia's war in Ukraine. It even condemns domestic Chinese policies such as the "dismantling of Hong Kong's autonomy and freedoms as well as the PRC's human rights issues, including in Xinjiang and Tibet."

Despite PRC diplomacy that disparages Japan, Japanese leadership is increasingly [welcome](#) in the region. While many Chinese and Koreans hold grudges, Japan is mostly rehabilitated in the eyes of the international community. PRC officials continue to [talk](#) about Japan needing to "gain the trust of its Asian neighbors," but the neighbors have moved on. In a 2024 [survey](#) of elite attitudes in Southeast Asian countries conducted by Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, respondents named Japan their "[most trusted](#)" major country.

Notwithstanding escalating Chinese pressure since 2012, Japan has refused to acknowledge China's claims to ownership of the Senkaku Islands as legitimate, insisting the issue is settled. Japan has never assented to Beijing's claim to sovereignty over Taiwan, and in recent years Tokyo has become more vocal in its criticism of Chinese attempts to militarily intimidate Taiwan's government. Tokyo [supports](#) the 2016 ruling by the intergovernmental Permanent Court of Arbitration that invalidated Beijing's claim to sovereignty over most of the South China Sea.

The US-Japan military alliance remains healthy and continues to deepen. Japan is increasing its military power and loosening the post-World War II restrictions on its use of military force. Both trends are fundamentally unfavorable to the PRC.

As Japan has gradually moved toward re-militarization over several decades, the Chinese government has loudly criticized every significant step. This did not, however, prevent an acceleration of re-militarization during the last two years, during which the Japanese government decided to increase defense spending from around 1 percent to 2 percent of Japan's GDP, build a long-range strike capability, operate small aircraft carriers, drop the ban on exporting weapons, and place the three branches of the Japanese military under a new unified command.

Instead of reliably supplying China with advanced technology, Japan supports economic [de-risking](#). In particular, Tokyo is [cooperating](#) with Washington's campaign to restrict the transfer of advanced semiconductors to China.

All this happening mostly because of a series of aggressive moves by Beijing, with secondary contributions from North Korea and Russia.

Japanese [think](#) China's military buildup is excessive and worrisome. China's burgeoning military capabilities and [intensifying](#) threats toward Taiwan seemingly increase the prospect of Beijing seizing control of the island, which would position the PRC to control sea lanes vital to Japan's well-being.

Xi's decision to build a complex of military bases on artificial islands in the South China Sea beginning in

2013 jolted the region, including [Japan](#), into viewing Chinese foreign policy more pessimistically.

Beijing has managed to convince Japan's people that China poses a threat to annex Japanese territory. China has increased the number of government vessels sailing near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands since 2012, overreacting to the decision of the Japanese government to purchase the islands from a Japanese family. The PRC releases occasional hints in [official media](#) and even from [Xi himself](#) that China rather than Japan is the rightful owner of the Ryukyu Islands.

Finally, Russia's attempt to annex all of Ukraine starting in 2022 made Japan feel much less secure, mostly because of the [sense](#) that the Russian invasion makes a Chinese war of conquest in Asia more likely. Beijing's diplomatic and material support for the Russian war effort does nothing to dispel Japan's fear.

Just before the July US-Japan meeting, Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa met PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi. PRC official media paraphrased Wang [telling](#) Kamikawa that "The China-Japan relationship is at a critical juncture where it would reverse if failing to advance," the [same thing](#) Wang [said](#) over a year ago. But if there was ever such a "critical juncture," Japan is now well past it.

The segregation between economic engagement and political signaling is no longer viable; concerted efforts are necessary to achieve meaningful progress in both.

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