

## Sino-Japanese Relations after Japan's 2014 General Election

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The results of the House of Representatives elections in Japan in December 2014 were in line with expectations. They confirmed the mandate of Shinzo Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to continue ruling Japan. In contrast to the stability of its domestic political scene, Japan's foreign relations in Northeast Asia, particularly with China, are cause for concern for the international community.

The territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands remains unresolved. Chinese coast guard vessels continue to make incursions into waters near the disputed isles. In late May 2014, the situation escalated when Chinese fighter jets flew within unusually close range with aircraft of Japan's Air Self-Defense Forces (ASDF) and the Japan Coast Guard over the East China Sea. The incident triggered widespread concern that an accidental clash could lead to war. With regard to historical issues, China is clearly not ready to refrain from using the "history card" in its dealings with Japan. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has twice declared at news conferences that China will not concede to Japan on territorial and historical issues. The Chinese government recently built a memorial hall in Harbin Railway Station to commemorate Korean patriot Ahn Jung-geun, demonstrating that it is willing to join hands with South Korea to contain Japan.

On the other hand, there are a few signs of improving bilateral ties. In November 2014, Japan and China issued a four-point consensus on improving relationship that addressed the Diaoyu/

Senkaku Islands dispute, among others. They also went ahead with meetings between their foreign ministers and the two heads of government.

However, it remains to be seen whether these moves can begin to resolve the longstanding disputes between Japan and China or whether they will merely ease the tense atmosphere without effecting substantive development. The future progression of Sino-Japanese relations deserves continued attention.

### Positive Responses to the Four-point Consensus

Coming at a time of escalating tension over the disputed isles, the "four-point consensus" thawed the "political ice" between the two sides and eased the tense situation.

With the inauguration of the third government under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the two nations resumed talks for a maritime emergency communication mechanism (which was later renamed sea-air communication mechanism) on January 12, 2015 to prevent crises in the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands area. In fact, such talks had been initiated as early as 2008 but were suspended by China in protest after Japan nationalized its control over several islets in the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands chain in September 2012. Presumably, the talks became possible after Beijing, having recognized the necessity of crisis management, responded to Japanese overtures.

The Abe government has also adjusted its position on historical issues. Abe refrained from visiting the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in

2014, and the Japanese government has noted that Abe will express regret about the war when marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II later this year. He will generally adhere to the 1995 Murayama Statement, in which then Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama apologized for the damage and suffering caused by Japan to its Asian neighbors. Basically, this qualifies as a response to the commitment “to face history squarely” made in the “four-point consensus.”

### **Mutual Friction outside the Consensus**

Nevertheless, while both Japan and China have softened their stances in response to the “consensus,” they have also shown a tougher attitude in other instances. Just two weeks after the meeting between Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping, Chinese coast guard vessels again made incursions into Japanese territorial waters off the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. With regard to historical issues, Xi kept up his sharp criticism of Japan in a Dec. 13, 2014 speech marking the first National Memorial Day of Nanjing Massacre.

Having just issued the “four-point consensus” with China, Japan’s cabinet council passed a statement on Nov. 25, which claimed the consensus “is not legally binding.” After launching his third government, Abe immediately instructed relevant cabinet agencies to strengthen control over the disputed isles and to reexamine Japan’s offshore island policy. Japan’s defense budget will grow for the third consecutive year in 2015 as the buildup and deployment of the country’s military defense against Chinese threats becomes increasingly obvious. With regard to historical issues, Japan’s education ministry has approved school textbooks in which references to the country’s militarist past such as “comfort women” and “(Chinese) forced laborers” were deleted; So far, the Japanese government has not

made any pledges that Abe will not visit Yasukuni Shrine in the future.

### **Future Development: Interaction in the Absence of Mutual Trust**

The territorial and historical issues that have plagued Sino-Japanese relations will not be resolved in the foreseeable future. At the current stage, both sides adopt a two-pronged strategy mixing soft-hand and hard-line approaches: On the one hand, they have worked to reach consensus, realize talks and establish a crisis management mechanism; on the other hand, each continues to play the “territorial and historical cards” to keep the other at bay.

The short-term yard-stick for Sino-Japanese interaction will be whether the communication mechanism to avoid clashes in the air and at sea will go forward in the first half of 2015 as Japan wishes. Will Abe and his cabinet members visit Yasukuni Shrine this year as the world marks the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II? How will Abe sum up Japan’s post-war soul-searching? Will Beijing seize the opportunity to team up with other nations to trumpet the success of the “anti-fascist war” in order to humiliate Japan? Any of these developments could undermine an official Sino-Japanese interaction that was only restarted with great efforts. **BT**

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