

# U.S. Involvement in Sino-Japanese Relations

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**Abstract.** As the world continues to follow up on the world's first and second most largest economies, the U.S. and China, what often goes unnoticed is the inextricable ties that China shares with Japan, and how the U.S. might play a role in that relationship. As each independent state interact with another continuously, this article thus looks at two of the main current disputes between China and Japan, and what role the U.S. has played in those disputes. First is the Senkaku-Diaoyudao land dispute between China and Japan, where the U.S. military and government has played both a historical and modern role in. Another is China's growing relationship with Russia, which poses a historical threat to Japan. In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian War, Sino-Russian relations become increasingly relevant in this article. The outcome of this war may well determine the uncertain future of Sino-Russian relationships, and how that may allow the U.S. to partake in the dispute between China and Japan regarding such a ties between China and Russia. It is evaluated that in these cases, the U.S. with its identity as the global hegemon in mind, does not fulfill the "peacemaker" role that it is responsible for and sides with one state over the over. As an alternative, the article offers methods in which the U.S. can effectively involve itself in those disputes to offer greater stability.

**Keywords:** Sino-Japanese Relations; U.S. influence on Asian Countries; Modern International Hegemony.

## 1. Introduction

This paper is about the role that the U.S. plays as an international hegemon in current Sino-Japanese relations. Two main issues are explored that hinder the development of better Sino-Japanese relations; the Senkaku/Diaoyudao/Diaoyutai Island dispute and China's growing relations with Russia, especially in the context of the Ukrainian War. The main finding of the paper is that the U.S. has continually sided with in Sino-Japanese relations, while not solving its rocky relations with China. The outcome is increased U.S. support for Japan, which is negatively perceived by the Chinese and weakens Sino-Japanese relations. Different solutions are offered on how the U.S. can be a better mediator between the two countries, thus helping to effectively communicate and better the relations among all three nations. The paper is divided into three sections. Section 1 gives background on the history of Sino-Japanese relations, and then considers the island dispute and U.S. involvement in that dispute. Section 2 analyses Sino-Japanese relations over Russian-Chinese relations in the context of the Ukrainian War, and it also considers U.S. involvement on this issue. Section three suggests ways that the U.S. can more effectively involve itself in Sino-Japanese relations in order to create greater stability in those relations.

## 2. Sino-Japanese Relations

The current Sino-Japanese relationship carries on a legacy from past history of the two nations. Starting from ancient times, in the absence of Western influence, China had been recognized as being at the center of international politics by other Asian countries. This of course included Japan. Japan had been a country focused mainly on domestic affairs with an economy built on fishing and agriculture, but had started to have more contact with China starting from the end of the Jomon period—ca. 10,500–8000 B.C. (Cartwright 2017). The most visible of these contacts were those made by Prince Shotoku during the Asuka Period of Japan —592 AD – 710 AD, where he avidly promoted ties with China and held many missions to bring Chinese culture and knowledge to Japan. In this respect, Chinese culture would manifest itself in Japan and become configured to Japanese customs. Over time, China, weakened with the fall of the Qing dynasty and Chinese influence in

Japan, had declined. Japan saw this as an opportunity to challenge China militarily. In the late 19th century, the first Sino-Japanese war broke out. Japan had its sights set on controlling Korea, who was then still a tributary state of China. It was hoped that the addition of new territory would strengthen Japan and its political regime (Hur 2021). A second war between the nations was World War II, during which the infamous Nanking massacre took place. During these wars Japan committed unforgivable atrocities against the people of China. Such events brought forth an acrimonious transition in “modern” Sino-Japanese relations.

Entering the 21st Century, China enjoyed the greatest economic growth in the history of a modern major nation. Japan on the other hand has continued an economic stagnation that became acute in the 1990s (Miller 2015). Not only has it grown economically, but China has also expanded in other aspects, such as in its military and technologically. Such changes have brought China to its present status as a superpower. The growth of modern China has been so extraordinary that some have coined our age today the “Chinese Century” (The Economist 2018). This has caused Japan to fall into what has been called the Thucydides Trap. As regional neighbours, Japan may feel the threat of a stronger China. Japan thus may feel that it must take a cautionary and even adversarial posture toward China because of its rise to superpower status. Indeed, just this year in August, Japan declared the largest-ever budget request for its military, suggesting that it must prepare for war against its neighbour. The U.S., of course, would play a part in this because of its alliance with Japan: its military would be obligated to assist the Japanese should war with China break out. China’s rise also resonates with the U.S. for other reasons involving the U.S.’s goals in Asia and the world at large, independently of Japan. Hence, both nations perceive a threat from Chinese expansion. While Japan feels more of a regional threat, the U.S. feels an international threat from the possibility of China, the new global hegemon. As a result, Japan and the U.S. would be closely aligned in their concern over China.

## 2.1 China-Japan Relations on The Islands

As for the tensions that currently face China and Japan, one of the thorniest issues is the Senkaku-Diaoyudao dispute. The Senkaku Islands/Diaoyudao are a group of islands in the East China Sea, Northeast of Taiwan, East of China, and West of the Japanese Okinawa Islands. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan 2015). Located in both Chinese and Japanese exclusive economic zones (EEZs), the status of the islands has been a significant source of controversy. Although lawfully under Japanese rule, such acquisition of the land was done through dubious means. The Senkaku Islands/Diaoyudao have been part of China since as early as the 14th century when it was first discovered, owned, and named by the Chinese (Embassy of the PRC in the U.S.A 2012). The Japanese took formal control of the islands during the First Sino-Japanese War and named them the Senkaku Islands. After World War II, the U.S. took control of the islands until 1972. It was from the 1950s preceding the San Francisco Treaty that the United States stated arbitrarily in the Military Government Ordinance “Law Concerning the Establishment of the Archipelago Governments” that it had military control over the Ryukyu Islands, including the Yaeyama and Senkaku Islands. In 1972 the U.S. returned the Islands to Japan. Of course, during this entire period, the Chinese strongly argued for their sovereignty over those islands. World War II Japanese took the Diaoyudao Islands (Jansen, Marius B. et al 1979). In short, Diaoyudao now legally belongs to the Japanese, but the Chinese and their supporters insisted that the assignment of land rights was not done through the rightful means and should belong to China.

Currently, possession of the island is still a heated debate between China and Japan. Chinese interest in the islands has grown since 1970 when it was found that it had valuable resources like oil and natural gases (Goldman 2015). The islands are also in a strategic geographic position between both China and Japan. Should war ever break out between the two countries, the one with possession of the islands should have the upper hand and easier access to the other country. China also has historical rights to Diaoyudao, which were unfairly taken away. Because of these three main reasons, China is still determined to obtain possession of the Diaoyudao back today. Last year,

Chinese coast guard vessels have been patrolling the Senkaku waters, and just last month in 2022, the Chinese Air Force and Navy have been active around Senkaku as well (Mahadizr 2022). Through such actions, the Chinese are trying to show ownership of this territory.

The Japanese responded vigorously to such actions, saying that it is preparing itself for war with China. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan (MFA) has stated that “Japan’s defence budget has increased for 10 straight years and its per capita defence expenditure is more than triple that of China’s” (Buddhavarapu 2022). What has also changed is the Japanese belief in pacifism. After its defeat in WWII, Japan was allowed only to defend its country and was unable to wage war. Consequently, pacifist beliefs have rooted themselves deeply in Japanese opinions. However, new surveys showed a departure from past beliefs because of the consequences in the Ukrainian war and China’s growing aggression towards the country. Japan has conveyed a disposition that it will be growing its military against China.

## **2.2 U.S. Involvement in the Island Dispute**

Through arbitrarily ceding the islands to Japan through the U.S.’ “Law Concerning the Establishment of the Archipelago Governments,” America also has involved itself in the issue. China values the land deeply, and consequently views the U.S. as a biased arbiter in this territorial dispute. Thus, the U.S. is viewed as an accomplice to Japan’s treachery. Military action was taken on both sides to solidify their claims. The Japanese government has reported that it has seen China recently patrol the land both last year and this year through its Air Force and Navy. Japan, who has legal possession of the islands, has also stood strong in their military posture. Although the U.S. has officially stated during the Nixon Administration that it has left the issue to the relevant countries, the fact still stands that American military would support Japan in the case of an outbreak of hostilities. After further incidents among the two nations in 2012, the U.S. has also expanded rhetorical support for Japan, saying in the resolution of a 2013 National Defense Act that “the unilateral action of a third party will not affect the United States’ acknowledgment of the administration of Japan over the Senkaku Islands” (Congressional Research Service 2021). Current leaders such as Trump and Biden have also voiced their support for Japanese possession of the Senkaku Islands/Diaoyudao. So, while the U.S. is rhetorically playing fair, it has been widely recognized that the leaders of the U.S. are avidly supporting Japanese possession of the islands

On the other hand, China has also been preparing itself for the possibility of a war with the U.S. and Japan. This year, President Xi Jinping has declared the Chinese military to modernize by 2035, and in 2049 to become a “world class” military capable of “fighting and winning wars.” In the late 2010’s, the CCP had already replaced the U.S. as the largest navy in the world, and the trend continues to rise (Congressional Research Service 2021). This poses both a threat to the U.S. and Japan as its military power begins to challenge the U.S., and the newly maritime-focused army may also threaten Japan as China’s neighbour. However, the U.S. still undeniably possesses the world’s most powerful military, so the extent of this threat may still not establish itself as noticeably as it would years later, when the Chinese military would have completed its modernization.

Overall, it was wrong of the U.S. to arbitrarily hand possession of the islands to Japan. By doing so, it had involved itself in the affairs of China and Japan and sided with one party, making relations with the other worse. As the U.S. was a global leader both then and now, it should be careful as to taking sides with one country over another. The consequences of this has caused Japan and China to be on a rockier road in their relations.

## **3. China’s Growing Relationship with Russia**

China has developed increasingly close relations with Russia. Both China and Russia are states that have undergone Communist revolutions, but what ties them so closely today is not their Communist pasts, but their will to compete with and challenge the power of America and Japan, bringing back their countries the “splendor” of their pasts. Like two ends of a string, as the

Ukrainian War worsens Russian-American ties, it has also pulled Russian-Chinese ties closer. Such an example of recent Chinese-Russian cooperation is the establishment of a new reserve currency among the BRICS countries released in late August. Aimed at challenging the U.S. dollar, this shows the start of a new and stronger cooperation between Russia and China in their challenge of western hegemony. The most recent meeting of the two leaders on September 16, Putin and Xi's recent meeting at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan showed that the two leaders would have a "no limit" alliance (Gan 2022). Indeed, as more tariffs are placed on Russia's "special military operation," Russia becomes more reliant on its relationship with China. China gets more cheap oil from Russia, and Russia gets support from a strong country. This threatens both the U.S. and Japan, making China their political adversary.

The Chinese-Russian alliance poses a threat to Japan too. While China and Japan jostle over the Senkaku-Diaoyudao islands, a similar dispute is brewing with Russia and Japan over the Kuril Islands. This makes Japan uneasy over the fact that it now has territorial disputes with two countries in a strong alliance, marking unsteady Japanese relations with China and Russia.

### 3.1 Japanese Reaction to Chinese-Russian Relations

The Japanese response to Chinese-Russian relations has been mostly critical, especially in regards to the Russian "special military operation" and the Chinese support it has received. Japanese defense minister Nobuo Kishi has stated strong opposition towards even the rhetorical support China has shown towards Russia in the Russian-Ukrainian war. He stated that any form of toleration towards the special operation in the international community may be interpreted as the act of impeachment of China in other parts of the world. Kishi said earlier this May that "Ukraine may be East Asia tomorrow," hinting towards the similar struggle Russia has with Japan or the situation China has with Taiwan (Hudson 2022). But while Japan has shown great distaste for Russian-Chinese relations and what the two countries stand for, it must be careful in its approach to China. Japan's largest trading partner is China, with the trade reaching up to U.S.D 141,399 million (World Integrated Trade Solution 2022). This makes its struggling economy largely dependent on the Chinese, who are could if pushed be willing to boycott Japanese businesses (Dominguez 2022). Consequently, Japan is reticent to take action, but is hopeful that the U.S. will take action against the Chinese-Russian relationship.

### 3.2 U.S. Involvement in Chinese-Russian Relations

Since a Sino-Russian alliance poses a threat to Japan, Japan has become more dependent on U.S. support on this issue. The U.S. and Japan have enjoyed close ties since the 1950s, when the two countries joined in military alliance and Japan's economic performance flourished under American military support and its nuclear umbrella. And as the U.S. seeks to increase its influence and presence in Asia and Japan needs more U.S. support, the two countries are drawing closer. The close ties between them allow the U.S. to also influence other Asian countries. The U.S. may utilize such a close tie to also better monitor relations with China.

The close relationship between Russia and China is quite concerning to the U.S. itself as well. We see this in trade. Russian-Chinese trade increased abruptly this year. In the first eight months of this year, trade between Russia and China jumped from 31.4% to \$117.2 billion, which may seem worrying to the U.S., which had a trade war with China just a few years ago, making the trade today quite unstable and ominous (Reuters 2022). With China as the rising competitor and Russia as the U.S.'s historical competitor in events such as the space race and the Cold War, the Chinese-Russian alliance appears all the more menacing to the U.S..

In response, the U.S. has tried to convince China to lessen its support for Russia. The G7, including the U.S., has implored China to not assist Russia in this war. U.S. Secretary of State Blinken told reporters after his meeting on Russia's actions in Ukraine with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi that he didn't "believe China is acting in a way that is neutral," when Beijing did state that it was neutral on the Russian-Ukrainian War. Such struggle for the U.S. to cooperate with

China on this issue causes it to turn to Japan, whom it hopes to side with against the possible Chinese-Russian relation.

#### 4. Possible Solutions

The U.S., being the current international hegemon, has great responsibility to balance the relations and act as a mediator between different states. Up until now, it has consistently sided with Japan, who has long been its ally and partner, and always against China who has increasingly been viewed negatively as its' fierce competitor (Huang et al. 2022). In this way the U.S. has pushed Chinese-Japanese relations in a pejorative direction, picking an ally over an erstwhile adversary. It has interceded in an incendiary manner in Senkaku-Diaoyudao dispute, and been unable to carve a stable path in China's relations with Russia.

In the Senkaku-Diaoyudao dispute, the U.S. should play a more neutral part in the resolution of the dispute. As it lies in the EEZ's of both countries, and both claim strong rights to the island, the possession of the islands should be fairly divided between the two. Both countries are strongly interested in the oil and gas reserves located on the islands. The division of the islands should be decided equally through a treaty signed by the U.S., China, and Japan, and checks and balances should be placed to keep track of either country's usage of the oil and gas resources.

In the case of the Russian-Chinese relations, America should continue to oversee the relation and that China would not use cooperation against either the U.S. or Japan. One big improvement in Sino-Japanese relations the U.S. can make is to work on the tensions it has with China and better Sino-American relations instead of focusing just on its ally Japan. The U.S., China, and Japan are all each other's largest trading partners. The U.S. should introduce agreements for China to increase trade with Japan to jumpstart its stagnant economy, so that the relations between the two may be further improved.

Lastly, to improve U.S. and Chinese relations, China and the U.S. should find more common ground. A good place to start would be the relations each has with Southeast-Asian countries. While China seeks to promote itself there economically and socially, China sees U.S. involvement in the region as inflammatory and causing conflict. Instead of creating a Chinese-centered Southeast Asia, China should step back and allow for the U.S. to participate as well, giving Southeast Asia the diversity of connections it needs. This allows for more cooperation and possible a possible alliance between China and U.S. on a common subject, giving rise to stronger Sino-American relationships that can allow America to better mediate the relationship between China and Japan.

#### 5. Conclusion

The lessons derived from U.S. involvement in Sino-Japanese affairs suggest that third-party intervention in the affairs of two states, especially in territorial disputes, should be made very rarely and carefully, and not arbitrarily carried out. The cases of the island dispute and the Ukrainian War have demonstratively proved that U.S. involvement has worsened rather than improved Sino-Japanese relations. Especially with Chinese-Russian relations, it is yet unclear what the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian war may be, and how that should affect the "no limit" Russian-Chinese relations currently. In such an event as well as in the island dispute, the U.S. should readily prepare itself to maintain peace in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict while also working with China to stabilize Sino-Japanese relations.

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