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- Back to Basics: The Power Politics behind Sino–Japanese Identity Politics
- Japan’s National Role Conception and its Perceptions of China in the Region and World: The View of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō’s Administration
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Refereed article

## Back to Basics: The Power Politics behind Sino–Japanese Identity Politics

Giulio Pugliese

### Summary

This article argues that the assertive Chinese and Japanese foreign and security stances of the Xi Jinping and Abe Shinzō administrations have resulted in a government-led renaissance of their respective identity politics, one qualified by top-down, adversarial nationalism. Aided by the nation-state's communication firepower, the two governments have instrumentally insisted upon antagonistic discourses — with domestic and foreign audiences in mind. This article does not deny the many bottom-up sources of Chinese and Japanese nationalism already discovered by constructivist scholars, but introduces rather a different perspective on identity construction in Japan and China. On the basis of an array of primary sources, this article argues that the logic of Sino–Japanese identity politics has been increasingly rooted in the neoclassical realism of Sino–Japanese confrontation. Within the broader structural picture of great power competition, the Chinese and Japanese elite have engaged in a more assertive foreign policy aimed at territorial defense. Central governments enjoy leverage in defining the perimeters of discourse-making, and the nationalistic Abe and Xi administrations have mobilized public opinion following the 2012 crisis surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands standoff.

**Keywords:** constructivism, neoclassical realism, propaganda, Japan–China, Victory Day parade, Abe statement

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## Introduction

In the late summer of 2015 Japan and China celebrated the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. They did so, however, in a way that betrayed their very current antagonism. These commemorations would have not halted the very timid Sino–Japanese political thaw occurring, but China’s display of its newly operational artillery — alongside the shifting regional realignments and security doctrines — pointed at a less promising picture for the broader East Asian trends. Japanese and Chinese claims over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which Japan had quietly incorporated 120 years earlier, ran in parallel lines as did their mounting rivalry; in tandem, meanwhile, ran also their official pronouncements. State-led narratives actively reconstructed their self-righteous position and made active use of, or manipulated, foreign endorsements so as to reinforce it. It all looked so old, but this was in fact the new landscape in the East Asian region 70 years from the end of the Second World War. Only three years earlier the standoff over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands ushered in the foundational power politics behind Sino–Japanese mutually antagonistic discourses, wherein the stable Xi and Abe governments beat the nationalistic drums with gusto.

In September 2012 Tokyo and Beijing entered into a heated standoff over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands — a small, uninhabited archipelago administered by Japan and located in the East China Sea. Japan’s decision to nationalize three islands in the archipelago sparked what has since become the worst crisis in Sino–Japanese relations since the end of the Second World War. China reacted assertively to the Noda Yoshihiko government’s ill-managed acquisition of the islands from a private Japanese citizen. While the aim was to thwart the populist bid launched by Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō, the islands’ nationalization and China’s heavy-handed response led to Japan and China becoming entangled in a bilateral power game. China immediately sought to challenge Japan’s effective control and force it to recognize the existence of a dispute. However Japan’s position was unwavering and, under Abe’s leadership, the government beefed up its hard power and security partnerships: it made full use of the country’s economic statecraft to more confidently deter China’s coercive retaliation. The more Tokyo and Beijing resorted to power politics and economic statecraft to soften their counterpart, the more their stances hardened and the higher the risks grew of a potentially serious clash occurring. In addition, since each side saw the other as vulnerable to public relations attacks on both the international and domestic stages then the power game necessarily spilled over into the field of government-led strategic communications, commonly known as propaganda.

Thus, the Japanese and Chinese governments hoisted up a set of vivid and simplistic images to mobilize the home front against the counterpart. In this context, Japan and China’s official 70th anniversary commemorations of the end of the Second World War toed earlier state-sanctioned messages, where the counterpart (“them”) figured

as the negative mirror image in the formation of their respective identity (“us”). Three discursive threads were discernible in these pronouncements. The first painted Japan as a benign and peaceful power pitted against an aggressive China, and vice versa. The second stressed the revisionist nature of the neighbor as a challenge to the international order, while depicting China/Japan as a status quo country that upholds it and abides by international norms. The third set of images was variegated. Japan highlighted its political modernization as the first Asian country to uphold universal values, such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, doing so in order to underline the differences to autocratic China, whose economy surpassed Japan’s in 2010. In lieu of democratic values, Chinese discourses underlined Japanese leaders’ historical revisionism as a sign of Japan’s supposed militaristic behavior. Both states’ insistence on the above mirror-like characterizations of each other ultimately reinforced, through a loop mechanism, their reciprocal antagonism.

To be sure, at the dawn of the 21st century Japan and China had already come to redefine their state identity vis-à-vis the counterpart in new and, often, adversarial ways. Christian Wirth (2015), for instance, has demonstrated the Japanese conservative elite’s rediscovery of its democratic and West-sympathetic identity in direct relation to China’s rise to Asian primacy; a similar understanding, albeit at a more diffuse level, has also been advanced by Kai Schulze (2015). But adversarial characterizations soaked into Japanese and Chinese official government pronouncements only after the onset of the 2012 Senkaku/Diaoyu standoff; in addition, the identity chasm widened even further following the consolidation of power by the Xi and Abe administrations. This was because political agents actively remolded these antagonistic narratives, often in new ways and with clear political aims. For instance, both the Noda and Abe administrations insisted on universal values — but prized the “international rule of law” over democracy, human rights, and the like. They did so in order to underline what they understood as China’s coercive behavior, and to corner Beijing among international and domestic audiences — because of its abjuration of legal international arbitration over the islands through the International Court of Justice.

Tokyo’s change of the language register to insist on the rule of law hinted at the instrumentalist nature of these discourses. In 2013 former Ambassador to Beijing Miyamoto Yūji, then special counsellor to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), explicated the clear geopolitical implications of Japan’s new message. China was at the center of this: “How many states can take Japan’s side if we insist on universal values alone? [...] honestly, Central Asian states, Vietnam and Myanmar are not generally in favor of universal values” (Interview 2013a). Abe’s keynote speech at the premium venue for security dialogue in the Asia-Pacific region, the Shangri-La Dialogue, encapsulated Tokyo’s leitmotifs when it stated that: “Japan for the rule of law. Asia for the rule of law. And the rule of law for all of us. Peace and prosperity in Asia, for evermore” (Abe 2014). But the China–Japan finger-pointing that ensued, for the first time in the Dialogue’s history, testified to

the hardening of discourses (Inkster 2014). In fact such messages were a clear expression of the bilateral standoff unfolding, with them being rooted in the political calculations of both states and strongly resonating domestically — thereby cementing Japan and China’s self-righteous position.

China immediately turned up the volume on its rhetorical offensive. It did so by instrumentalizing the history issue, specifically to accuse Japan of acting as a revisionist country that acted in defiance of the postwar order. In fact, China’s state-sanctioned narrative enshrined the connection between its territorial claims and its victimization at the hands of Imperial Japan for the first time following the 2012 nationalization of the islands (Drifte 2014; Fravel 2015; Zhang 2014). On September 10, 2012 China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) stated that: “Japan’s position on the issue of the Diaoyu Island is an outright denial of the outcomes of the victory of the World Anti-Fascist War and constitutes a grave challenge to the postwar international order” (MFA 2012a). Moreover Beijing reframed the history issue in such a way as to reinforce its new-found role as the founder and upholder of the international system: present-day Japan was demonized in its guise of challenger to international society, just like pre-war Japan had been. These new narratives figured in official government pronouncements and state-sanctioned discourses following the September 2012 nationalization. Only a couple of weeks later, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi’s address to the 2012 United Nations General Assembly connected Japan’s nationalization with the tune already set by the above-cited MFA statement: “[The ‘acquisition’] is an outright denial of the outcomes of the victory of the world anti-fascist war and poses a grave challenge to the postwar international order” (UN 2012). The message, one seemingly meant for international consumption, in fact mostly targeted domestic audiences and would have dominated China’s narratives of Japan.

The Noda government responded in kind to China’s angered lamentations. It walked parallel lines to claim that Japan abided by the UN Charter and called on its neighbor to “settle disputes in a peaceful manner based on international law” (MOFA 2012). But it was the second Abe administration, which came to power in December 2012, that understood the need to match China’s display of nationalistic resolve and retaliated with its own communication firepower at the international and domestic levels. It did so on the basis of deeply-held beliefs that only a “resolute stance” would have tamed an assertive China and that domestic morale needed to be on board. Thus, the Senkaku-Diaoyu Islands standoff came to acquire the contours of a “game of chicken”: China pressed Japan into recognizing the existence of a dispute, while Japan raised its security profile so as to deter China from sending vessels and aircraft to the vicinity of the disputed islands. Neither China nor Japan capitulated to the opponent’s requests, and played, instead, by the power politics book across the security, economic, and communication chessboards.

Specific to Japan, these messages had another clear political implication — one again rooted in the power politics of the Senkaku/Diaoyu crisis. Abe capitalized on foreign endorsements and the Chinese threat to endow Japan with the right to collective self-defense and to enhance deterrence against an assertive China. For instance, Abe's July 2015 appearance on primetime television sold his unpopular security bills as a means "to shut the doors [of House Japan] from thieves [...] so that they would neither plan nor continue meddling with our territory [...] and they would finally resort to international law" (*Minna no Nyūsu* 2015). By the end of the show, Abe had stressed how many foreign states had blessed Japan's greater security responsibility and included explicit reference to the aforementioned 2014 Shangri-La Security Dialogue as *the* example of such international support (*Minna no Nyūsu* 2015). These international information wars, defined as government-led public diplomacy battles for "soft power," had a clear domestic angle to reinforce the respective bubble of each side's self-righteousness; in the case of Japan, they were also targeted at legitimizing the enhancement of the country's power projection capabilities.

In other words, China and Japan's messages bore the hallmarks of government propaganda. They were issue-specific, vivid simplifications of a complex reality — ones that struck an emotional chord with their respective citizens (Snow 2003: 60-3). These messages represented "a systematic form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence emotions, attitudes, and actions of specified audiences for ideological, political, or commercial purposes through the controlled transmission of one-sided messages (which may or may not be factual) via mass and direct media channels" (Nelson 1996: 232). Propaganda is thus concerned with the efficiency of its aims, not with truthfulness. Differently from soft power, it engages more decisively with message manipulation and negative publicity — rather than playing merely on the appeal of one's own country. Tokyo's repeated references to the contested concept of the international rule of law is a case in point. In the same TV debate that Abe participated in, former Defense Minister Morimoto Satoshi — who was also a retired defense official — recognized the complexity of the issue:

China is certainly advancing in the South and East China Seas, but this does not mean that China is using military force in the conventional sense [...] it certainly is using force to change the status quo, as stated by the prime minister, but it is not deploying military power in contravention to international law (*Minna no Nyūsu* 2015).

Moreover, China's claim that Japan altered the status quo by nationalizing the islands in contravention to a tacit bilateral agreement to shelve the territorial dispute certainly complicated the latter's identification of Beijing as the revisionist state here (Drifte 2013). While it is worth stressing that Japan is ready to bring the case to international arbitration if China so wishes, Tokyo willingly simplified the message on Chinese coercive behavior in the East China Sea in the courts of foreign and domestic public opinion.

Thus the logic of the Sino–Japanese discourses was one that toed the line advanced by E. H. Carr’s classic study on International Relations:

The “Jingoes” who sang “We’ve got the ships, we’ve got the men, we’ve got the money too” had accurately diagnosed the three essential elements of political power: armaments, manpower and economic power. But manpower is not reckoned by the mere counting of heads. Power over opinion is [...] essential. [Because] it was a condition of success [that] the “morale” of one’s own side should be maintained, and that of the other side sapped and destroyed. Propaganda was the instrument by which both these ends were pursued (2001: 120, 123).

Propaganda was Beijing’s traditional instrument of choice to win the bilateral communication standoff, but it also became the one that Tokyo resorted to as well and with vigor. Propaganda ultimately permeated the public discourse of both countries, in the process progressively crystallizing into an antagonistic identity on each side.

### **The power politics of Sino–Japanese antagonistic identities**

#### **The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands standoff: A mirror of the Sino–Japanese transition to unbalanced multipolarity**

While scholars have already pointed out the geopolitical and security nexus lying behind China and Japan’s chosen diplomatic, military, and economic strategies following the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands standoff, this has not been the case for the thorny issue of identity. To be sure, recent original scholarship has pointed to the spiraling nature of discursive animosity between the Chinese and Japanese governments. Nonetheless it has simultaneously failed to recognize the international power politics behind this progressive construction of mutually antagonistic identities, that is to say the realist underpinnings of discourse making. This is an argument worth making by first properly introducing the foundational structural realist ontology of this study.

The leading assumptions are those of structural realist, or neorealist, studies: sovereign states are the primary actors in a Hobbesian international system defined by the logic of self-help. In the anarchical international system, states aim primarily at enhancing the material capabilities essential to national survival, such as industrial production, weaponry, conscripts, economic power, and the like. The international system is characterized by the distribution of power among its major units, and by the number of great powers; however since the international system is more than the sum of its constitutive individual states, it exerts pressure over these actors. Such pressure ultimately constitutes an incentive toward the maximization of states’ own security, hence leading to the recurrence of balancing behavior in international politics (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). At the dawn of the 21st century, Japan confronted a multipolar post-Cold War regional order premised not only on China’s staggering, if bumpy, ascendance to regional hegemony but also on the relative

decline of the United States — whose commitment to its ally's security cannot be taken for granted indefinitely.

Structural realism has defined Sino–Japanese interactions throughout the modern era. The *coup de grâce* to Qing China's clout in the Sinocentric order was inflicted at the hands of a modernizing Japan that rapidly turned into the regional hegemonic power. With regard to China, Peter Hays Gries (2004) and Zheng Wang (2014) have both convincingly demonstrated that anti-Japanese nationalism is a structural force in China to be reckoned with. Its recurrence is indicative of resentment over China's "Century of Humiliation," a trauma engraved in the Chinese national psyche and historical consciousness. Indeed, the first Sino–Japanese war of 1894–1895 was the conflict that de facto allowed Meiji Japan to seize the Diaoyu Islands as *terra nullius* and to rise unrivalled. At the same time, China was carved up through semicolonial, unequal treaties and, from the 1930s onward, by Japanese aggression and military encroachment.

One hundred and twenty years or two full sexagenary Chinese cycles later, Japan and China traded roles as East Asia's dominant resident power. China's growing clout and its increased leverage, provided by its might and wealth, has been accompanied by an ill-defined "Chinese Dream" premised on louder calls to maintain "territorial integrity." Thus China's "national rejuvenation" acquired the contours of "payback time," because in the elite's parlance coming in the wake of the 2012 nationalization "Japan stole (*qiequ*) Diaoyu and its affiliated islands from China" during the first Sino–Japanese war (UN 2012).

In other words, Japan and China's battle for territory, honor, and status over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands coincided with the 21st century transition to an unbalanced multipolar order in East Asia. Unbalanced multipolarity is defined as a regional system that contains a potential hegemon with "so much actual military capability and so much potential power that it stands a good chance of dominating and controlling all of the other great powers in its region of the world" (Mearsheimer 2001: 44–5). According to Mearsheimer, unbalanced multipolarity qualifies as the configuration of power that generates the most fear — as evidenced by Japan's growing sense of insecurity. Given the growing power differential between China and Japan, the second-most powerful East Asian resident regional state, unbalanced multipolarity emboldens China as the potential regional hegemon. This has been evident in China's more frequent, if ambiguous, calls to defend its "core interests" (*hexin liyi*). For these reasons, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands standoff has coincided with the broader strategic interaction between the by now greatest naval powers in the East and South China Seas: China, Japan, and, most importantly, the United States.

While it is important to understand China's position, it is also worth noting that Beijing had increased its naval presence in the vicinity of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands already by 2008. Post-Beijing Olympics and post-international financial

crisis China reflected the growing clout of nationalistic voices from within the country's military apparatus, with emboldened portions of the Chinese policymaking elite coming to refer to the disputed islands as "core interests" around the same time. Beijing traditionally adopted such a wording to keep third-party actors from meddling in Taiwan and Tibet, but it ambiguously expanded its usage to disputed islands in the South and East China Seas — respectively by 2010 and 2012. Repeated commentary on and testimonies about Chinese claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands as core interests in early 2012 indicate that China's novel assertions came prior to Japan's actual acquisition of these territories (*Japan Times* 24 May 2012).

While it is important to note that the Chinese government had never formally sanctioned the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands being part of the country's core interests, it did not deny their inclusion therein either (US–China Economic and Security Review Commission 2013). At the same time, and pointing at the aforementioned ambiguity, in April 2013 the MFA suggested that the islands were, indeed, a core interest, the first time a major government body had hinted at that possibility (MFA 2013). This statement was later echoed by General Qi Jianguo, deputy chief of the Headquarters of the General Staff, who stated in August 2013 that "the Diaoyu Islands are within the range of [China's] core interests" (Fravel 2015: 268).

Conversely, a stagnating Japan advanced more assertively its maritime interests — but doing so in a way reflective of its growing sense of insecurity. Japan expanded its scope of action also in light of the limited "window of opportunity" of the early 21st century, a period of flux wherein US military aegis and power projection was still unmatched by China's own military might. A key foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo revealed this logic in a private interview, when he incited Fukuda to push China to accept an agreement in principle on the joint development of gas fields in the East China Sea because the power balance still favored Japan. It would have been impossible to later convince China to agree, according to him (Interview 2013b). Four years later, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands standoff was a clear expression of East Asia's increasingly unbalanced multipolar regional order and Japan strongly felt — and very early in the 21st century at that — the regional sands shifting. Japan needed to act quickly too, but the ill-managed nationalization provoked China and fueled its forceful reaction, thus inaugurating the bilateral power game that has since unfolded.

### **Neoclassical realism and the power politics of Sino–Japanese identity politics**

Within the broader structural picture of a Japan caught between the Scylla of a rising and assertive China and the Charybdis of a declining US (in relative terms), the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute functioned as cognitive transference of the broader undercurrents of the transition to an unbalanced multipolar order in East Asia. The

same undercurrents of great power politics, reified through the heated standoff, impacted also on the reconstruction of the two states' identities.

Previous research has employed broad constructivist theories of International Relations in order to underline how domestic public discourses since the end of the Cold War have increasingly constructed Japan and China's respective state identities in relation to an antagonistic or aberrant counterpart: "Self" and "Other," or more simply "Us" and "Them" (Gustafsson 2015). Scholars have looked at antagonistic narratives taken from war memorials, the media, as well as political and public debates in both China and Japan, to contend that the sedimentation and active reconstruction of such discourses eventually define Tokyo's foreign policy options vis-à-vis Beijing and vice versa (Gustafsson 2011; Hagström and Jerdén 2010; Suzuki 2015; Suzuki and Murai 2014; Wirth 2009;). Japan and China scholars have prized the ontological centrality of constructivist dynamics in the shaping of each state's identity. With regard to China, Callahan demonstrates how "the identity politics of Chinese nationalism produce the security politics of Chinese foreign policy" (2010: 13). Here Chinese nationalism is interactive and intersubjective in a constant ping-pong between the party-state and deep-layered grassroots nationalism. Others have prized either a top-down or, with time, a bottom-up account of Chinese nationalism.

To be sure, China specialists have demonstrated an appreciation for the intricate domestic and international politics underpinning China's instrumentalist identity construction vis-à-vis Japan. They have done so by explicitly highlighting the formative role of Jiang Zemin in beating the drums of patriotic education around the time of the end of the Cold War. Some scholars have traced back the campaign's origins to Jiang's own personal and familial interaction with the Japanese invaders (Wan 2006: 142-5), while others have identified the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) need to cement its domestic legitimacy in narratives of "victimhood" during the Second Sino-Japanese War. In other words, patriotic education was the natural corollary of the progressive opening up of the Chinese economy in the 1980s and 1990s. These reforms opened up the rule of the CCP to questioning, as demonstrated by the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989. In order to counter its loss of legitimacy in an increasing a-ideological society, the government strategy shifted to fostering nationalistic narratives through its propaganda apparatus. These discourses touched on China's righteous place among the great powers, on its multimillennarian civilization and Confucian culture, but most importantly on the confrontational definition of China against "Others." In this context, the Chinese movement has portrayed Japan as the antagonist and core aggressor during China's Century of Humiliation.

There are indeed many sources of Chinese nationalism, but the aim of this study is in fact broader: turning around Callahan's (2010) argument to posit instead that the security politics of Chinese foreign policy have produced the identity politics of top-



down Chinese nationalism. Moreover, this study argues that the same has been true for Japan, away from constructivist analyses of Japanese identity formation vis-à-vis China. The post-2012 antagonistic discourses have, then, abided by a state-centered instrumentalist logic that is rooted in power politics. The two governments adhered to the neoclassical realist logic expounded by Thomas Christensen, according to which state leaders “mobilize their nation’s *human* and material resources behind security policy initiatives” (1996: 11, emphasis added) — as was the case for the 1947 Truman Doctrine and for Mao’s Great Leap Forward of 1958. From 2012 onward, Japan and China beat the nationalistic drums to signal more confidently the active reclamation or defense of the disputed territories and to show favor for a more assertive foreign policy.

This argument emphasizes instrumentalist uses of nationalistic sources, but does not stop at the domestic level of regime security or domestic legitimacy (Edney 2014). There is a higher layer of causality in the broader undercurrents of the regional power transition to unbalanced multipolarity occurring, ones that have emerged in full force following the 2012 nationalization of three of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The key independent variable that sparked the flames of Beijing’s and Tokyo’s top-down identity politics was that East Asian regional transition to an unbalanced multipolar setting; along came with it both Japan and China’s more proactive assertion of territorial integrity. In turn, so manifested the threat to homeland territories and as an offset to it Tokyo’s and Beijing’s full commitment to counterbalancing the opposing state.

In that spirit, the article moves beyond the parsimonious computation of material capabilities provided by orthodox structural realism to take into account the effects of a state-led mobilization of human resources for territorial defense. The concomitant focus on the domestic dynamics within the state is a hallmark of neoclassical realism’s research agenda (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009). Specifically, it details the top-down, state-led mobilization of human resources for strategic purposes. This is because both nationalistic governments understood their counterpart as being weaker than as met the eye, a typical harbinger of tension during turbulent power transitions (Shearman 2013). Thus, the two governments drew on propaganda to cement their position over the disputed islands and to actively reconstruct the narratives surrounding the counterpart’s actions so as to showcase their own domestic resolve.

Within the crisis scenario, constructivist scholars concerned with identity change in Japan’s international relations qualified such particular instances as a window of opportunity for (re)creating state identity (Hagström and Gustafsson 2015). Yet, they have failed to operationalize the transmission belt between external shocks, or critical junctures, and the active re-fabrication of these crises to the governments’ own liking. In fact, different from the media and grassroots discourses, the political capacity and the pervasiveness of state-sanctioned institutions and information at a

time of crisis are unmatched. This is true of authoritarian regimes and democracies alike. For instance, studies have found that as much as 80 percent of reporting in Western media is dependent on government sources, thanks to governments being reciprocally reliant on the media's capacity to spin and set the agenda, while in Japan the figure has gravitated toward a slightly higher percentage than even the aforementioned figure (Freeman 2000: 63).

These scholars have also failed to notice that both Beijing and Tokyo have acted in full force through the zero-sum logic embedded in realist thinking within the communication landscape. Contrary to recurrent claims that both governments had their hands tied, they in fact both tied their own hands with vigor over their self-righteous position on the islands and in opposition to the counterpart. Evidence shows the cross-fertilization between China's political-economic retaliation against Japan and its appreciation for the realist underpinnings of identity politics. Immediately after the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands nationalization, Assistant Minister of Commerce Jiang Zewei threatened economic retaliation through boycotts — garnering strong attention in the process (Reuters 2012). But Assistant Foreign Minister Le Yucheng's address to a symposium on “Uniting and Working Hard to Safeguard Sovereignty” was illuminating of the power politics of China's virulent and new rhetorical offensive:

There is a sinister tendency inside Japan [that aims at] rewriting Japan's inglorious history of illegally stealing Chinese territory. [In the] face of the latest developments of the situation surrounding Diaoyu Dao, we should *enhance confidence*. We should note that our motherland is growing more prosperous and stronger by the day. China's international status is rising fast. Gone are the days when the Chinese nation was bullied by others at will. We *should maintain unity*. China had untold suffering from the Japanese aggression in modern history, because our country was then as disunited as a heap of loose sand (MFA 2012b, emphasis added).

In other words, a victimized China had to mobilize its political, economic, and psychological leverage against a revisionist and increasingly assertive Japan. Certainly Xi Jinping wore the mantle of nationalism in the face of the CCP elite's exploitation of the upturn in confrontation with Japan, but he was no victim of this trend. It became evident that the rhetorical assertiveness and institutionalization of China's sufferings and victory over Japan reached their peak alongside Xi's domestic consolidation of power. In other words, Chinese discourses clearly mirrored the administration's willingness to abandon the cautious foreign policy approach taken under Deng Xiaoping's “keep a low profile and bide one's time” (*taoguang yanghui*) dictum — being a change in the language register that would gradually emerge in the latter Hu Jintao era. The new paramount leader publicly sanctioned change on October 24, 2013, during a speech given at an important party conference on China's relations with neighboring powers. Xi stated that Chinese diplomacy needed to now “strive for achievements” (*fenfa youwei*) (Xinhua 2013).

Following his speech, the various actors involved in shaping the grand narrative of China’s foreign policy came to increasingly adopt the same expression used by Xi during the conference in order to highlight the new reality of the country’s “great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” — doing so over the head of Deng’s decades-old pleas for caution. Indeed, tracking the phasing out of Deng’s *taoguang yanghui* strategy from the Chinese public discourse there are a few documents that stand out above the white noise of propaganda for their timing and their relevance. First is an interview with the influential public intellectual Yan Xuetong that appeared a few weeks after Xi’s speech in a publication of the *Renmin Ribao* network as a feature entitled “Yan Xuetong: From Keeping a Low Profile and Biding One’s Time to Striving for Achievements” (2013). Second is another speech by Xi himself, delivered in November 2014 at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs. Herein he stressed that “China should develop a distinctive approach befitting its role of a major country” without mentioning the “incriminated” locution (Xinhua wang 2014). Thus China’s more confident, assertive behavior coincided with the rise of a new nationalistic administration that shared the growing grassroots yearning to secure China’s interests.

By comparison, Abe’s ascension saw redoubled efforts at identity politics in line with his personal ideology and, similarly to China, the concrete need to cement Japanese resolve. First-hand evidence corroborates this view, with spectacular similarities with the aforementioned Chinese statements. An Abe advisor in charge of communication strategies confided to the author that Abe’s speeches at international venues aimed to “infuse the Japanese people with confidence [by] insisting on discourses on Japan’s freedom and democracy; [such speeches] were intended for foreign and domestic audiences [to] flesh out a new type of Japanese, who would have provided moral leadership” (Interview 2014). Moreover Abe demonstrated an appreciation of a nationalist agenda aimed at the recovery of pride and great power status for Japan (Hughes 2015; Pugliese 2014).

Thus, contrary to constructivist claims, the dynamics that followed in the wake of the 2012 nationalization of three of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands have in fact highlighted the eminently realist logic underpinning Sino–Japanese identity creation. This identity formation has become increasingly rooted in the instrumentalism of the power politics of the Sino–Japanese standoff; the latter is, in turn, a reflection of the underlying regional unbalanced multipolarity and of its embedded insecurities. Both governments have stirred their bureaucratic machines to embark on top-down communication efforts. They have beaten the drums of identity politics to cement their self-righteousness over the territorial row, to showcase domestic resolve, and to intimidate their counterpart.

### **Case studies: China and Japan's drum beating in 2015, the "Year of History"**

It is all the more worrying that the top-down efforts came to abide by a logic of their own, one fed by both countries' respective feeling of insecurity — thus mirroring the broader geopolitical insecurities embedded in the regional shift to unbalanced multipolarity. Indicative of this logic, the two governments were actually trying to mend ties in 2015 — but were seemingly incapacitated also by the very rhetorical nationalistic firepower that they had unleashed in previous years. Interestingly, Japan and China's war commemorations became the epitome of their reciprocal propaganda wars. An original, narrative appraisal of both events, one that makes use of Japanese and Chinese primary sources, provides evidence of the neoclassical realist state-led dynamics lying behind discourse making.

#### **China commemorates the Second World War: The Victory Day parade**

With regard to the 2015 Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People's Resistance] only by showing its military capabilities can China show Japan its attitude and determination and let Japan know one thing: whoever dares to challenge China's postwar order and touches China's core interests is China's enemy, an enemy who must be psychologically prepared for China's strong counterattack ("Zhanhao," *Renmin Ribao* Weixin account, January 26, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

China's grandiose September 3, 2015 celebrations of its victory against Japan looked so old, but were — in fact — so new. Only one year before had the National People's Congress (NPC) institutionalized the memorialization of Japan's surrender, and only then did it inaugurate two more state-sanctioned days of national mourning: the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Day and, later, Martyrs' Day. It was also the very first time that China commemorated its war against Imperial Japan's brutal aggression through a chest-thumping display of military artillery rather than quieter, more solemn celebrations. It was possible that the authorities were merely granting the unrestrained expression of China's deeply-scarred historical consciousness; this national psyche was rooted in the state-sanctioned China Dream's nightmarish mirror opposite, its Century of Humiliation at the mercy of Western and Japanese imperialism. After all, the Chinese state-led media drew explicit connections between past humiliation and future rejuvenation: "Celebrate Martyrs, the National Spirit, and the Chinese Dream" (*yinglieji minzuhun Zhongguo meng*) (Xinhua 2015a). But the NPC Standing Committee's reference to the "promotion of patriotism as the core of China's great national spirit" (NPC 2014) as part of the

<sup>1</sup> Zhanhao is the nom de plume of a popular blogger operating in the *People's Daily's* social network. It is likely a pseudonym used by the Chinese propaganda apparatus to convey certain ultra-nationalistic positions within the Chinese media and blogosphere. Many articles from the state-sanctioned media have reprised and elaborated on the calls of Zhanhao (*Renminwang* 27 January 2015).

rationale for establishing Victory Day hinted at the active involvement of the state apparatus in the deliberate reawakening of China’s scarred consciousness 70 years after the end of the Second World War.

It was also the first time that foreign militaries had participated in a Chinese military parade (*China Military Online* 2015). Indeed, the angle to that year’s anniversary was markedly more international than those of previous commemorations had been: it was a feast devoted in equal part to the CCP’s contribution to national liberation and also to its righteous cause in the world anti-fascist war. But the CCP’s insistence on China’s sacrifice for the last “good” war, as evidenced by Xi Jinping’s speech, was less aimed at international recognition than it was at creating a new history for domestic audiences (*Xinhua* 2015b). In this history the CCP is the vanguard fighter for, and the guardian of, national liberation, and of the international order born from the ashes of the Second World War — a vision carried forth by a deluge of state-sanctioned movies and dramas that flooded China around the same time. Thus it looked like a coming-of-age party for China, where foreign dignitaries — including UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon — came to appreciate China’s oft-forgotten war sacrifices and its role in ushering in the postwar order. At the same time, the decision by the Chinese authorities to fill many empty chairs with former Western statesmen famous for their lucrative political afterlives, such as former United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair and former German Chancellor Gerard Schröder, betrayed the role of these “friends” coming from afar. They were part of the display and, with a little help from the Central Propaganda Department, they helped cater a message to awed Chinese viewers: the world was with China.

In this context, the Victory Day celebrations were Xi’s biggest political spectacle for domestic audiences. At a time of wobbling economic performance, the new CCP leadership wore the nationalist mantle to cover over brewing internal (intra-CCP and broader domestic) political instability and to reinforce domestic legitimacy. That the advent of the Xi Jinping’s administration rule coincided with the heated Sino–Japanese standoff over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands reinforced scholars and practitioners’ suspicion that the CCP had unleashed the anti-Japan tiger so as to divert domestic discontent away from the Party. After all, the Bo Xilai imbroglio in early 2012 set the score for the turbulent leadership transition that would be staged during the 18th Party Congress — while a military parade held only two and a half years into Xi’s administration signaled his own impatience. Instead of waiting four more years for the canonical military display during the China National Day’s decennial, Xi opted for an altogether new and bombastic celebration — one accompanied by China’s first general pardon since 1975 (*Xinhua* 2015c).<sup>2</sup> Even the State Council Information Office’s exegesis of the event’s complex symbolism

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2 The international media misrepresented it as a general amnesty, but this was in fact not the case since those released retained their status of being convicted criminals.

hinted at the CCP's appropriation of the international message to the end of domestic regime stability:

The doves demonstrate the memory of history and the aspirations for peace, representing people from the five continents, who are united and moving together toward a beautiful future after going through blood and fire. They also symbolize the Chinese people flying into a future of great rejuvenation under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (*China Daily* 2015).

After all, five in number are the stars depicted in the Chinese national flag, where they represent the unity of the Chinese nation under the CCP's leadership.

However there was another concomitant cause that prompted the Party's original call for the parade and memorialization. This factor has often remained overlooked in international commentary thereon: it was also a display of physical strength and psychological unity. The celebrations sent both a domestic and an international message of Chinese strength and resolve in the face of foreign encroachment. It was a message of deterrence: China displayed 500 units of its latest weaponry, 84 percent of which were revealed in public for the first time (Erickson 2015). The parade's symbolism also presented a fascinating mix of positive and negative feelings that straddled the lines between confidence over China's victorious war and a nagging sense of insecurity, an aspect brilliantly highlighted in William Callahan's (2010) study on Chinese identity politics. For instance the five doves flying over the Great Wall-shaped "V for Victory" symbol represented a plea for international peace, away from the blood-stained Century of Humiliation. China's Great Wall was the leading symbol of the day, with it also giving shape to the massive audience repository built for the occasion around Tiananmen Square. This was the military outpost from which Chinese border defenses had sought to force out the Japanese invaders in the early 1930s, but it was also an implicit reminder of the need to guard against the infiltration of subversive forces and to protect China's physical and cultural security — high-priority missions during the Xi and later Hu Jintao administrations (Wong 2012; Osnos 2015). The NPC Standing Committee's long explanation of the rationale behind Victory Day clearly vindicated such views: "[The national day] indicates the Chinese position of resolutely safeguarding national sovereignty" (NPC 2014). Not by chance, the NPC also promulgated Victory Day legislation right at the peak of Sino-Japanese tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands: in the face of a more ominous regional security environment, the Chinese authorities decided to celebrate the Second World War decennial with a display of military might.

The leading foreign recipients of such a display of resolve and military prowess were arguably Japan and the US, the principal provider of regional extended deterrence. By June 2015 China's Deputy Foreign Minister Zhang Ming had reassured reporters that the celebrations targeted no country specifically, and certainly "neither today's Japan nor the Japanese people in general" (Straits Times 26 August 2015). Yet only five months earlier popular *Renmin Ribao* blogger

Zhanhao and the many news outlets that carried his analysis had put forward different ideas about the parade’s underlying aims. Its main goal was apparently to “showcase China’s military strength; to frighten Japan for the sake of maintaining the postwar order; to unite the people’s confidence and pride; and, to showcase the People’s Liberation Army’s discipline” (*Reminwang* 27 January 2015). In other words, a status quo China still confronted a revisionist and militarist Japan, one that was set to change the international order yet again at the dawn of the 21st century. This showcase of resolve was matched with action too: China accompanied the jingoistic military display with the greatest Russo–Chinese joint naval exercises in history, which took place in the Sea of Japan, another first. Concomitantly, it sent — again for the first time — five Chinese naval vessels to the Bering Sea off Alaska’s coast. Matching words with deeds made sure that the two main recipients firmly got the message.

Finally, on the historically sensitive date of August 15 — when in 1945 the Shōwa Emperor had announced Japan’s decision to unconditionally surrender — China unveiled the new version of a website devoted to “the historical basis, legal documentation, and video data to back the assertion that the Diaoyu Islands have been Chinese territory since ancient times” (Diaoyu Dao 2015; Xinhua 2015d). The website was launched in additional languages on August 15, 2015, following the establishment of the original Chinese version in December 2014 and the Japanese version in March 2015. In the words of Zhanhao, Japan better not continue “challenging the postwar order” by meddling in the Diaoyu Islands — now often included, together with Taiwan and Tibet, as one of China’s core interests. Xi’s speech also indirectly targeted present-day Japan when he ended his remembrance of Chinese bravery and suffering vis-à-vis Japan with an admonishment: “War is the sword of Damocles that still hangs over mankind. We must learn the lessons of history and dedicate ourselves to peace” (Xinhua 2015b). China was clearly still angry. Furthermore many foreign countries were seemingly with China, with the CCP, with Xi Jinping, and against Abe Shinzō’s Japan. In fact Tokyo made its “strong displeasure” at the UN Secretary General’s presence at the ceremony publicly known; however it perhaps went unnoticed that Xi’s bombastic Victory Parade merely mirrored the dynamics and narratives contained in Abe’s own long-awaited commemorative statement.

### **Japan commemorates the Second World War: The Abe statement**

We will engrave in our hearts the past, when Japan ended up becoming a challenger to the international order. Upon this reflection, Japan will firmly uphold basic values such as freedom, democracy, and human rights as unyielding values and, by working hand in hand with countries that share such values, hoist the flag of “Proactive Contribution to Peace,” and contribute to the peace and prosperity of the world more than ever before (Abe Shinzō concludes his government-backed statement, August 14, 2015 — coming on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War).

Only three weeks earlier, Tokyo's commemoration of the end of the Second World War had too garnered international attention. On August 14, 2015 conservative Abe Shinzō enounced a government-backed statement that was seemingly in line with the previous ones given on the 50th and 60th anniversaries thereof. However this statement constituted a novelty too. It reflected only briefly and quite ambiguously on pre-war Japan's darker pages to emphasize postwar Japan's positive role in, and its further contribution, to world peace as a status quo country. In fact, in typically demure style, the Japanese premier was sending a signal to China and Japan's citizens.

First, the statement betrayed the prime minister's aspiration for Japan to outgrow what he probably understood as masochistic acts of contrition. Abe was moved by a Nietzschean *ressentiment* for his countrymen's inability to be fully proud of their national history, like any other normal country. It was mandatory to "move on" and look to the future, also in response to what he understood as China and South Korea's political use of their "history card." An early draft of Abe's initial posturing on the Murayama and Kōno Statements (which explicated and apologized for Imperial Japan's war and colonial legacy in East Asia) opens a window onto the prime minister's "future-oriented" thinking:

Do you follow through (*tōshū*), or not? Yes or no? Prime ministers of Japan have been presented with simple binary options with regard to the Murayama and Kōno Statements. But history contains instances of glory and disgrace, instances to treasure with pride and instances to treasure as admonition. I can say only one thing: Japan intends to build relations with neighboring countries such as South Korea and China to share the fruits of prosperity. I am earnestly devoted to the future, because the Japan of 30 years from now will bring peace and prosperity and I intend to move forward and pursue these objectives with my heart and soul (Participatory observation 2012).

Three years later, Abe's pledge of looking to the future and his variegated, if ambiguous, overview of the past was intact in his statement's most relevant passage: "We must not let our children, grandchildren, and even further generations to come, who have nothing to do with that war, be predestined to apologize. Still, even so, we Japanese, across generations, must squarely face the history of the past" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2015). In the summer of 2015, Abe's desire to move on was on full display.

While the Abe statement was meant as a message aimed at the world, the declaration's external components were also tailored for domestic audiences. It praised the tolerance of postwar China, a country that "paid hatred with virtue," to hint at China's more recent uncompromising stance over the history issue. In stark comparison, Abe acknowledged Western governments' forgiveness and willingness to move forward. This attitude toed the line of Abe's heavily mediatized state visits to Australia and the US, where Tokyo staged highly symbolic instances of historical reconciliation with former prisoners of war and war veterans. These messages



certainly resonated well with Abe’s insistence on a future-oriented outlook, which stressed postwar Japan’s constructive role in international society and its “proactive contribution to peace.” However the unspoken aim here was to neutralize Beijing’s (and Seoul’s) politically-charged accusations and to showcase to international *and* domestic audiences that the international community was with Abe. This was not always the case, though: the US government’s 2013 “disappointment” over Abe’s pilgrimage to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine seemed to reflect and prove deeply held suspicions about the Japanese premier’s own historical revisionism.

The thinly veiled negative messages about China’s political use of history are better rendered in an illuminating video — “Communication and Reconciliation in the Post War Era” — that was produced in mid-2015 by the MOFA, being available both in Japanese and in a number of foreign languages. The documentary stressed how Australia, the Philippines, the United States and Southeast Asian countries have moved past the war’s legacy to the extent that “enemies that have fought each other so fiercely have become friends bonded in spirit” (MOFA 2015). In vivid contrast, the documentary’s parallel focus on postwar Japan’s economic support to China and Korea — the two states that had often lamented Japan’s historical revisionism — implicitly stressed Tokyo’s taking the moral high ground. The documentary also showed footage of the Japan–China Friendship Hospital, a facility built thanks to Japanese Official Development Assistance that Chinese managers decided to rename and overhaul in 2015 (Japan News 2015). The Japanese government too was capitalizing on foreign governments’ endorsements to reinforce its bubble of self-righteousness against its Chinese counterpart.

Finally, the statement superficially echoed, almost verbatim, the Chinese government’s politically charged calls for Japan to “squarely face the history of the past.” But it did so with an implicit, if also recurrent, desire to highlight the identity chasm between a virtuous postwar Japan that forcefully upheld the international order against an aberrant wartime doppelgänger that sounded like present-day China. Abe’s introspection on the “mistaken road to war” taken in the 1930s sounded very much like a warning to Beijing, not least because of the added emphasis in the original text: “Japan gradually transformed into a *challenger* to the *new international order* that the international community sought to establish” (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2015). If there ever was a doubt about the identity of this aleatory challenger, the conclusions (reported in the incipit of this section) reached certainly dispelled it.

The intriguing mix of soothing words and thinly veiled antagonistic discourses confirmed that Abe and the Japanese government’s resolute stance was an unwavering one. Japan too was displaying a message of physical strength and psychological unity here, one rooted in power politics: under the banner of a “proactive contribution to peace” Japan and fellow democracies would balance China’s assertiveness. Given Beijing’s persistent refusal to go before international

arbitration on its territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas, it was China that had started to look like a challenger to the established international system. In short, China's challenge to Japan's effective control over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands met with an unwavering display of resolve from Tokyo: an autocratic China had better stop challenging the international status quo, because a democratic Japan was angry — and the “free world” was with Japan, and against a revisionist China. It is all the more fascinating to notice the parallel qualities to Chinese and Japanese narratives here.

Critics may counter that these narratives are mere objective representations of Japan. However Abe's insistence on the primacy of universal values, democracy, the rule of law, and freedom of navigation came despite these not typically being associated with Japan's traditionally pragmatic approach to foreign policy. Nor did these values match the Japanese premier's own conservative political philosophy, according to which individual rights rest on the primacy of a strong nation-state that is capable of safeguarding them. In fact, 20 years earlier Abe's mentor in foreign and security policy summarized the endurance of Japan's geopolitical imperatives when answering a question posed by an American journalist: “The histories of our two countries are different. Your country was built on principles. Japan was built on an archipelago” (Okazaki 1993: 61). Geopolitical imperatives and a heated crisis cajoled the active reconstruction of Chinese and Japanese identities and discourses centered on the past. The mirror-like quality to China's and Japan's barrage of antagonism alienated, in turn, the counterpart even further. It was the age of great power identity politics.

## Conclusion

The broader geostrategic environment of Sino–Japanese great power politics has unleashed Beijing and Tokyo's active manipulation of antagonistic discourses vis-à-vis the counterpart. More broadly, the insecurity embedded in the shifting sands of an increasingly unbalanced multipolar order in East Asia has been the underlying incentive behind Sino–Japanese rivalry, an assertive foreign policy on both sides (but especially China's), and security and identity politics' renaissance. As both governments raised the stakes on the security and economic chessboards, the heated standoff immediately spilt over onto the communication one as well. Certainly for China, behind the issue of Japan looms even larger its American adversary — whose position can be weakened by attacking Japan and positioning China as the better guarantor of the post-war world order as compared to the US and Japan. At the same time, while the China Dream narratives hint at China's insistence on a mirror-like negative imagining of the US (Callahan 2015) the sheer outright negative quality to messages put forward regarding Japan confirms that country as in fact China's most demonized “Other.”

This article has highlighted the centrality of governmental and political actors — such as the Abe and Xi administrations, which seem prone to leaving an indelible footprint on the history of both polities — as “identity entrepreneurs” involved in reconstructing Japan’s “Self” and the Chinese “Other,” and vice versa. While some scholars have pointed to the importance of the identity politics lying behind Sino–Japanese hostilities, they have altogether failed to notice the formative role therein of power politics — and the active involvement of political actors in discourse making for clear instrumental purposes, namely being aimed at building up national resolve.

It is all the more worrying, however, that the Sino–Japanese, state-led identity politics abided by an action–reaction logic of an arms race. In fact, these propaganda efforts became increasingly driven by international imperatives; they were bilateral in scope; they were intense in their rapidity and expression; they were associated with ongoing high political tension; and, they were operationally specific, indicating high strategic stakes in the eyes of policymakers in both states (Till 2012: 18–9). As shown elsewhere, the flaring up of the Japan–China battle for the sympathies of informed public opinion in turn cemented in place novel domestic institutions — ones that echoed the chorus of voices coming from within the government and media organs lamenting the counterpart’s behavior. While the Chinese state propaganda apparatus is by now well known, the Japanese polity gradually saw the creation of a more unfamiliar “government-institutional-media complex” preoccupied with China’s assertiveness (Pugliese 2015). Meanwhile the Chinese government’s decision in early 2014 to institutionalize and memorialize the anniversaries of its victory against Japan and the Nanjing Massacre constituted two important novel domestic institutions, ones that will further engrave anti-Japanese sentiment into the Chinese national psyche. While Xi Jinping was the first Chinese president to publicly commemorate the tragic and brutal massacre at the hands of the Japanese occupiers in Nanjing, he toned down criticism in 2014 and he decided altogether to skip these remembrance in 2015. Yet, the institution is now in place and was concomitant to China’s quest for recognition of the massacre in the Memory of the World UNESCO list. Its inclusion in 2015 prompted an angry reaction from the Japanese government, which threatened to cut down Japanese funding to the UN agency (*Japan Times* 2015; *Guardian* 2015).

In fact, in 2014 China pursued a tactical detente with Japan in the East China Sea and pulled out an oil rig from the waters of the South China Sea — which Vietnam claims as its Exclusive Economic Zone. Thus Xi Jinping has agreed to meet Prime Minister Abe, and made some gestures toward reopening the frozen official dialogue channels at the ministerial level. The Xi administration did so to temporarily appease Abe’s powerful and economically appealing Japan, while going “all in” with the construction of artificial islands on disputed reefs within the Spratly Islands. As the US somewhat showcases its own resolve against Chinese assertiveness there, Japan has been also signaling greater interest in the proactive

preservation of regional stability. The practice of power politics is slowly being routinized in Sino–Japanese relations, pointing ultimately at the perseverance of underlying antagonistic identity politics therein.

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