

KEY POINTS

- Elevated political tensions in Northeast Asia have the possibility of spilling over into a larger military conflict. There should be high-level talks regarding North Korean denuclearization between China, Japan, the United States and South Korea.
- It is recommended that a working group be established to generate incentives for North Korea to denuclearize, and China should be incentivized to cooperate by linking North Korean denuclearization milestones with US military withdrawal from South Korea.
- Channels of communication should be kept open and active, while pursuing a goal that is beneficial to all parties interests, and that will work to generate empathy and foster an atmosphere of cooperation.

CHANGING THE CHANNEL: CULTIVATING SECURITY COOPERATION IN NORTHEAST ASIA

ALEX BROUSE AND DUSTIN MCDONALD

INTRODUCTION

High tensions in Northeast Asia are cause for considerable alarm. Of particular concern for the maintenance of global security are the disputes over Senkaku/Diaoyu and Dokdo/Takeshima islands. Strong grievances rooted in history and rising nationalistic sentiment in China, South Korea and Japan have made the positions of the respective parties currently irreconcilable. The tension surrounding the issue of territorial control, particularly between China and Japan, has the potential to spark a military confrontation. Due to a lack of empathy and the propensity to overestimate threats from neighbours, the region is especially volatile. Public commitments by US President Barack Obama in support of the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty could ensure that any military confrontation between China and Japan might quickly escalate and draw the United States into direct conflict with China. In order to improve empathy, a concerted effort must be made to change the channel and work on issues where interests do align. Nowhere do the interests of China, South Korea, Japan and the United States align more than on the issue of North Korean denuclearization. By working together on an issue of mutual concern, these four countries can counter the rapid erosion of trust. By cultivating a cooperative attitude, tensions can be lowered, increasing the prospects for peaceful management of current acute disputes.

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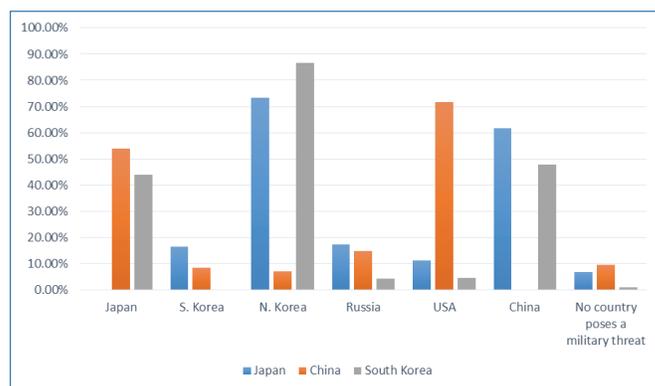
ATMOSPHERE OF INSECURITY

There is currently an explosive political, diplomatic and security atmosphere in Northeast Asia. The consequences for failing to lower the temperature in the region by fostering an atmosphere of cooperation have the potential to bring the world's top three economies — the United States, Japan and China into open conflict.

STATE-TO-STATE RELATIONS IN EAST ASIA: A BACKGROUND

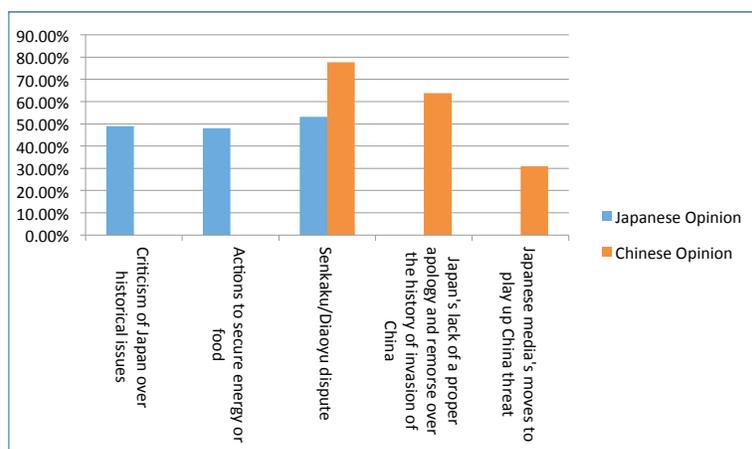
The flare up in diplomatic relations over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands continues to strain cooperation between China and Japan. The most recent spike in tensions occurred in 2012, after Japan moved to nationalize the islands. The Japanese claim the move was a preventive measure, aimed at thwarting the purchase of the islands by Shintaro Ishihara, the arch-nationalist governor of Tokyo. This action was seen by China as a deliberate provocation. The subsequent crisis led to deteriorating relations, the likes of which have not been seen since the end of World War II. In addition, both sides have made antagonistic statements over the last year and a half, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Yasukuni Shrine on December 26, 2013, has had a significant negative impact on any measure of reconciliation between the two parties (BBC News 2014). Despite rising tensions, both China and Japan do not see each other as their primary security concern. Public opinion polls show that China's number one security concern is the United States — by a 16 percent margin over Japan (The Genron NPO 2013b). China is leery about what it sees as American containment and rebalance to East Asia (Sieg and Spetalnick 2014). The Japanese public, although very concerned about Chinese aspirations and intentions in the region, is more concerned about the threat posed by North Korea, particularly their nuclear program. Although the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute

FIGURE 1: COUNTRIES THAT REPRESENT THE MOST SIGNIFICANT SECURITY THREAT



Source: The Genron NPO (2013a; 2013b).

FIGURE 2: CHINESE AND JAPANESE REASONS BEHIND NEGATIVE IMPRESSIONS (2013)



Source: The Genron NPO (2013b).

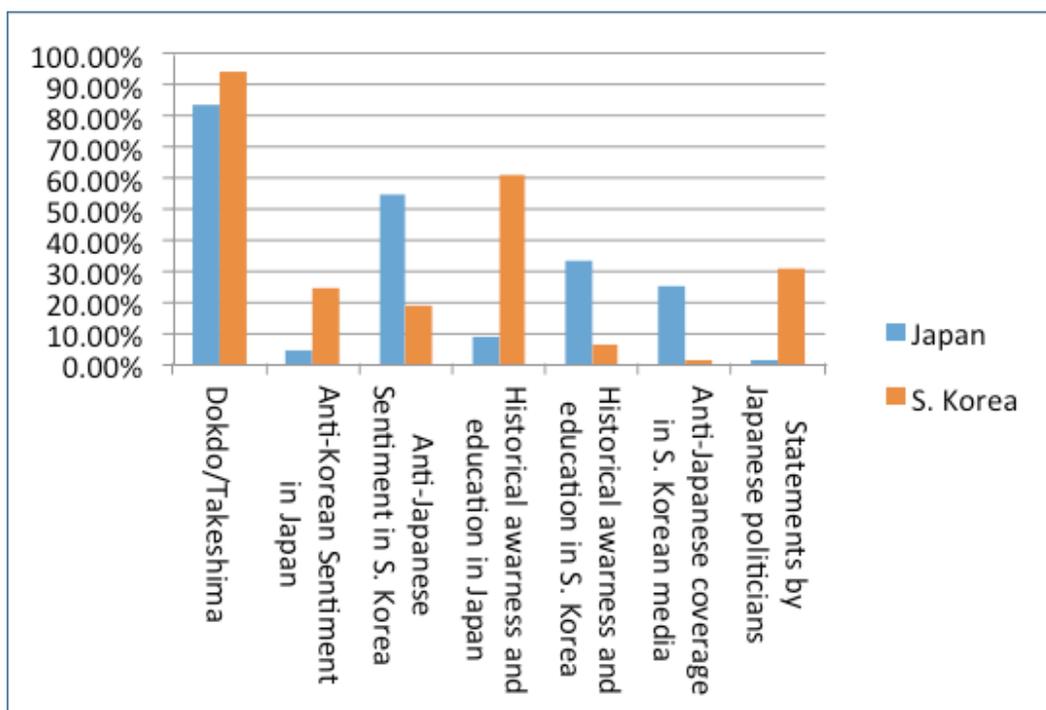
has dominated negative perceptions between both countries, majorities in both Japan and China are more interested in cooperation, rather than conflict, in East Asia (ibid.).

JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA

The Dokdo/Takeshima islands dispute is the most visible and hotly contested diplomatic row involving Japan and South Korea (The Genron NPO 2013a). Due to their symbolic nature, these islands are a lightning rod for patriotic and emotionally charged conflict. According to public opinion polls, the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute

is the largest factor fuelling the increasing number of citizens who view the other country in a negative light, at 76 percent and 37 percent for South Korea and Japan, respectively (ibid.). Disputes over historical events surrounding Japan’s imperial past are the second-largest issue impeding better relations between these neighbours. Each country blames the other for what they see as biased representation of historical events. Although Japan and South Korea have many differences, they both agree overwhelmingly that North Korea is the primary threat to security in East Asia. Recent actions by Supreme Leader of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) Kim

FIGURE 3: ISSUES HINDERING BILATERAL RELATIONS (2013)



Source: The Genron NPO (2013a).

Jong-un, including the recent flurry of missile launches, as well as promises to carry out “a new form” of nuclear test, only add to tension in the region (Sang-hun 2014).

INCENTIVES FOR CHINA TO COOPERATE

Regardless of future North Korean nuclear tests, the DPRK government’s steady pursuit of an intercontinental ballistic missile, capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, is bound to bring instability to East Asia. If North Korea manages to successfully test such a missile, given its previous nuclear threats against the United States, it would raise considerable alarm in Washington, DC. This perceived threat would trigger a proportionate US response, which could intensify the forward deployment of military assets in the Asian theatre. This would increase tension and thus threaten stability. Stability is a major regional policy objective of the Chinese government, and

failing to effectively address the North Korean nuclear issue threatens this goal. Furthermore, conflict on the Korean peninsula could trigger a humanitarian crisis that would see refugees flood into China. Thus, China has a strong incentive to engage in North Korean nuclear talks with constructive intention.

CHANGING THE CHANNEL

Nevertheless, in the interests of fostering stability and improving relations regionally, it remains worthwhile to focus diplomatic energy on issues where interests align; specifically the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. The six-party talks were a credible effort to work on the North Korean nuclear issue, but fell apart due to the North Korea’s disingenuous bargaining approach and the differing interests of the remaining parties. However, North Korea’s theatrics during the six-party talks, in addition to more recent actions, including the execution

of Chang Song-thaek (a comparatively progressive economic reformer and uncle of Kim Jong-un) and threats of another nuclear test, have brought China's interests more in line with those of South Korea, Japan and the United States. Thus, an opportunity for substantial cooperation exists.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of these changing circumstances, and the opportunity they present, the following recommendations attempt to capitalize on the current circumstances and improve empathy and trust in Northeast Asia between China, the United States, Japan and South Korea.

Foreign ministers should prepare the groundwork for a quadrilateral meeting between China, Japan, South Korea and the United States to re-energize cooperation on the North Korean nuclear issue. By bringing together high-level officials, the appropriate political traction can be applied and important relationships more effectively fostered. The group should agree to leverage all necessary resources and work in good faith to bring about North Korean denuclearization. In the interest of logistics and timing, this meeting could be attached to existing regional security meeting such as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation or the Asia-Pacific Regional Forum.

China, South Korea, Japan and the United States should establish a working group to generate clear incentives for North Korea to denuclearize. The group's primary mandate should be to establish specific incentives — both carrots and sticks — including increased pressure by China on the North Korean energy sector. This could be used to incentivize North Korea in return for complete denuclearization. By bringing together these four countries, toward a common purpose, contact between them will occur on a more regular basis. This

should have the effect of increasing empathy by ensuring lines of communication between parties remain open and active, with all committed to the common goal of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula.

Establish high-level military discussions between all five countries, pertaining to the redeployment of US military forces in South Korea. To assuage Chinese concerns regarding US military presence, incipient North Korean denuclearization should be concomitant with high-level military talks on American withdrawal from South Korea. Any reduction in forces should be directly tied to denuclearization milestones, which should be determined in conjuncture with an independent international body. This recommendation will justify continued US military presence on the Korean peninsula until North Korean denuclearization. As well, it further incentivizes China to work toward North Korean denuclearization by given them a clear road map for a US drawdown of forces on the Korean Peninsula and transfer of operational command to South Korean forces.

CONCLUSION

When pursued in good faith, these recommendations could improve communication pathways, opening space to increase empathy and lower tensions in the region. They nurture an atmosphere of cooperation with the goal of enhancing trust, while giving more flexibility to national governments to enact meaningful policies that will be acceptable to their own domestic populations. By convening a foreign ministers meeting (to initiate the process and forge high-level relationships) in addition to establishing a working group (tasked with finding incentives for North Korea to denuclearize), the relevant parties will be drawn into closer contact with the objective of rebuilding an atmosphere of empathy and cooperation in East Asia. The environment generated by cooperation

on the North Korean nuclear issue, regardless of its success, has the opportunity to reduce the inflammatory rhetoric that surrounds the territorial disputes at present. This would empower politicians to engage in meaningful dialogue and enact responsible, less emotionally driven policy solutions that could ensure a more stable and productive region in the future.

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