

NORTH-EAST ASIA: NATIONALIST RHETORIC SUBMITTED TO A REALITY CHECK

*By André Burstin
ESISC Research Associate*

After a series of naval incidents at the end of last year (see ESISC briefing: [Threats to world peace in the East China Sea](#)), the beginning of 2013 was marked by a new peak in tensions between China and Japan. Sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, historical controversies over Japanese militarism and fears about the Korean peninsula nuclear build-up are indeed-likely to disturb the Asian diplomatic climate in the short term.

Statements made in recent days by Chinese and Japanese leaders however suggest that the two countries are determined to maintain an acceptable relationship in order to face a particularly difficult economic situation. The coming weeks will tell if these efforts produce calming effects, or if the Chinese and Japanese governments persist in their nationalist impulses to please public opinion inflamed by the provocations in the East China Sea.

New political background in Northeast Asia

Thursday, January 10, Japan Self-Defense Forces sent two F-15 fighters after the intrusion of a Chinese patrol aircraft in the airspace of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. In response, Beijing sent J-10 fighter jets to show its determination to defend its territorial claims in the East China Sea. A similar incident occurred on Thursday, December 13, the day of the 75th anniversary of the Nanjing Massacre. It has to be recalled that the announcement in September of the nationalization of these formerly privately owned islands provoked violent anti-Japanese demonstrations in China and the temporary closure of several factories over fears of nationalist activists' violent actions.

In this context, new leaders came to power in the three largest economies in Asia: China, Japan and South Korea. On November 15, delegates to the eighteenth congress elected Xi Jinping to succeed Hu Jintao as Secretary General of the Communist Party. On Sunday, December 16, and on Wednesday, December 19, Japanese and South Korean voters gave power to Shinzo Abe and Park Geun-Hye's conservative parties. The magnitude of these simultaneous policy changes, to which one can add the rise to power of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un at the beginning of 2012, is unprecedented in the recent history of Asia.

Assertion of nationalist discourse

During his first press conference as leader of the Communist Party, Xi Jinping said that “the great renaissance of the Chinese nation” would remain the main objective of its term of office as the head of the “Middle Kingdom”. The man, prominent member of the Communist aristocracy, is the leader of the “Red Princes” faction. He is on the frontline of the Communist leadership concerning diplomatic issues, particularly regarding Chinese sovereignty on disputed islands in South China Sea (Spratly and Paracel) and in the Eastern China Sea (Senkaku/Diaoyu). His speech echoed the position of the Japanese government, which considers that the sovereignty of the islands of Japan on the East China Sea is “not negotiable”.

In Japan, the “hawk” Shinzo Abe, already head of the government from September 2006 to September 2007, offered the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) a triumphant election victory based on an openly nationalist program. Upon his accession to power, the new government announced the first raise in military spending since 2001. Shortly before the elections, Abe also visited the Yasukuni Shrine, honoring the souls of Japanese soldiers killed from 1868 to 1951, including “Class A” war criminals hanged after Tokyo trial in 1946. This sanctuary, as well as the refusal of Japan to compensate women forced into sexual slavery during World War II, is one of the main drivers of China’s, South Korea’s, Indonesia’s and the Philippines’s rejection of Japan.

Ideological realities faced with diplomacy

The LDP’s electoral program included the drafting of a new constitution and the abolition of the pacifist constitution of 1947, the transformation of the SDF into a national army and the strengthening of the security cooperation with the United States. Abe nevertheless faced diplomatic difficulties shortly after his appointment. He couldn’t pay the first official visit of his mandate to the United States. Spokespeople from both governments stated that the meeting had not been feasible due to some problems in coordinating the agendas. The episode, nevertheless, has been translated as Japan’s taking a position of distance from Barack Obama, for whom relations with China are a diplomatic priority.

During one of his first press conferences as Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe also said that Japan-China bilateral relationship remained fundamental to Japan. According to him, it is crucial to manage the existing problems between the two countries; therefore he stated that Japan would patiently resume talks with China. On Thursday, January 24, the leader of the Buddhist New Komeito party, Natsuo Yamaguchi, delivered to Xi Jinping a letter from his ally Shinzo Abe during a meeting in Beijing. This has been interpreted as a gesture of goodwill towards China, which has announced its intention to bring the territorial dispute that opposes the two countries before a UN commission.

Uncertain diplomatic future

New nationalist outbreaks are not excluded in the coming months. Naval provocations will certainly occur off the coast of Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. In addition to that, the radicalization of public opinion in Japan, China and South Korea hinder the process that would lead to the solution of the controversy over the recognition of

the Japanese Imperial Army's crimes. During his first term in 2006, Abe had not visited the Yasukuni Shrine as Prime Minister. Driven by the more nationalist elements in his coalition, one can fear that he will show less restraint in his comeback to power.

The visit of Natsuo Yamaguchi to Beijing in a reconciliatory attempt however points to a timid desire to conciliate the Sino-Japanese relations. Similarly, the warnings issued by Beijing this week after threats from Pyongyang to conduct a nuclear test illustrate China's willingness to emerge as a responsible regional power.

Copyright© ESISC 2012