

JAPAN CHAIR PLATFORM

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China: Japan's Rising Power Conundrum

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China's reemergence as the preeminent power in East Asia poses a seminal challenge to Japan. In navigating this challenge, Tokyo has pursued two complementary strategies: *binding*—enmeshing Beijing in international institutions—and *hedging*—consolidating alliance ties with the United States and developing new indigenous military capabilities.

Why Japan has settled on this bifurcated approach to China is an understudied topic. To shed light on Japan's China policy, the author conducted 29 interviews in Tokyo from March to June 2009. The findings of this research trip are striking: China's regime type plays a key role in Japan's strategic calculus. Indeed, Beijing's decisionmaking process—opaque and unconstrained by checks and balances—has generated a host of negative perceptions in Tokyo. These perceptions have impelled Japan to bind and hedge. They will endure regardless of whether the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) takes power in the upcoming elections. As such, Japan's China policy will remain unmoved by political developments in Tokyo.

Perception 1: China Behaves Unpredictably

Japanese elites regard China's external behavior as potentially erratic. This perception—one commonly voiced during interviews—stems from China's regime type.

The Chinese government maintains a system of media censorship, so information concerning its internal deliberations remains closely held. Official circles in Tokyo have little ability to monitor the decisionmaking process in Beijing and, therefore, deem China unpredictable.

For Tokyo, China's murky civil-military relations—the byproduct of a political system lacking checks and balances—generates an additional layer of uncertainty. Across interviews, Japanese military officers, defense officials, diplomats, and lawmakers all question whether China's civilian leadership exercises full control over the People's Liberation Army (PLA). In their perspective, the PLA's potential autonomy ratchets up the likelihood of policy surprises.

Perception 2: China's Intentions Are Questionable...at Best

Japanese elites view China's intentions with a sense of trepidation. Indeed, they take the PLA's growing capabilities and assertive behavior as a harbinger of a more deep-seated antagonism. Inside the Japanese Ministry of Defense, a majority of uniformed and civilian leaders reportedly believe that over the medium or long term, China will adopt a hostile orientation toward Japan. Dark speculation about Chinese intentions is not limited to Japan's national security bureaucracy. China's military modernization and incidents like the 2007 antisatellite test have also sparked unease among Japanese lawmakers.

Such misgivings are linked to the nature of China's regime. By enforcing media censorship, Beijing eliminates sources of information that might illuminate the motivations behind its military buildup and international conduct. Both invariably appear more threatening when those motivations are unknown.

Moreover, in an environment of information scarcity, Japanese elites tend to draw worst-case assessments from specific Chinese capabilities and behaviors. One example of this dynamic is the antisatellite weapons test. Tokyo lacked the means to discern whether the test was intended as a symbol of China's Great Power status, a rogue action carried out by the PLA, or the first step in a systematic program to develop space weapons. With few insights on Chinese decisionmaking during the run-up to the test, Japanese elites have gravitated toward the most alarmist interpretation.

Perception 3: Japan's Influence in Beijing is Low

Tokyo is pessimistic about its capacity to influence China's internal deliberations. Until the mid-1990s, a small number of politicians in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) with close ties to Chinese leaders were seen to enjoy clout in Beijing. However, faith in the efficacy of these so-called pipes has waned. The reason: LDP members who served as conduits to Beijing have died, while younger lawmakers have not filled the void.

That Japanese elites have equated the existence of "pipes" with influence reflects China's regime type. In general, points of influence proliferate as the number of checks and balances expands. With the Communist Party enjoying untrammelled authority in China, a handful of inter-elite relationships have taken on outsized importance in Japanese eyes.

Lastly, Tokyo has written off another form of influence: enlisting nonofficial actors inside China to pressure the government on Japan's behalf. The structure of China's political system precludes such "American style" lobbying. Elements of Chinese society that might otherwise be targets for Japanese lobbying are either co-opted—the business community—or subject to direct state control—the media.

Policy Implications

Japanese perceptions of China are inseparable from the nature of its domestic institutions. This finding generates three policy implications:

- *Limits of confidence building.* In recent years, the Japanese and Chinese governments have engaged in confidence-building efforts including personnel exchanges and high-level dialogues. Although positive steps, such measures fail to address the taproot of Japanese mistrust: nontransparent governance obscures China's intentions. Consequently, existing confidence-building efforts will fail to dispel Japanese concerns about China's rise.
- *Focus on freedom of the press.* To date, Japanese efforts to boost China's transparency have emphasized the military sphere. However, information about the scope of China's military modernization and the disposition of its forces says little about its actual intentions. The only way to ascertain them is to boost China's overall transparency. To do this, Japan should promote greater freedom of the press within China. Tokyo can invite Chinese journalists to attend conferences with their Japanese counterparts. It can establish programs whereby Chinese journalists are "embedded" in Japanese media organizations for a fixed time period. And it can sponsor "track two" dialogues exploring the positive economic and social externalities of a free press. All of these steps would help to build bottom-up demand in China for a relaxation of censorship.
- *The stability of Japan's China policy.* The DPJ's recently released manifesto calls for realizing even more friendly and cooperative relations with China. Nonetheless, the DPJ is unlikely to jettison the approach to China pioneered under LDP rule: binding and hedging. Like their LDP counterparts, DPJ lawmakers are wary of China's unpredictability, mistrustful of its intentions, and skeptical of their influence in Beijing. Although the DPJ may favor softer rhetoric, the reality of its China policy will be the same. Japan will only move away from binding and hedging if China's regime becomes more transparent and rule based.

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