

*RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: [RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg) for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.*

---

## **Sino-Japan Ties: Progress at the APEC Summit?**

*By Ian C. Forsyth*

### **Synopsis**

*While the visual impact of the meeting between Xi Jinping and Shinzo Abe was uninspiring, the communiqué regarding the disputed East China Sea islets is a positive step. The test of success, however, will be to see what effect it has on the two countries' rhetoric and behaviour.*

### **Commentary**

THE APEC Summit that recently concluded in Beijing was a forum for many memorable images, most notably the uncomfortable handshake between China's President Xi Jinping and Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. This long-delayed meeting was the follow-up of a communiqué drafted on 7 November 2014, when State Councillor Yang Jiechi held talks with visiting National Security Advisor of Japan Shotaro Yachi in Beijing.

At that prior meeting the two sides reached a four-point principled agreement to arrest deteriorating bilateral relations. The agreement's four terms are that the two sides: 1) affirm they will follow the principles and spirit of the four political documents between China and Japan and continue developing the China-Japan strategic relationship for mutual benefit; 2) agree on overcoming political obstacles in the bilateral relationship; 3) acknowledge that different positions exist between them regarding tensions over the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* Islands and some waters in the East China Sea, and agree to prevent these tensions from escalating *via* dialogue and consultation and to establish crisis management mechanisms to avoid contingencies; and 4) agree to gradually resume political, diplomatic, and security dialogue through various multilateral and bilateral channels and to make efforts to build political mutual trust.

### **Empty gestures or crucial first step?**

Opinion on the significance of the communiqué and the subsequent handshake is divided between optimists and pessimists. Pessimists assert that these are little more than symbolic, and that no real reduction in regional tensions will result. Evidence for this lies in the fact that hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels have been appearing off the *Ogasawara* Islands, preparing for illegal coral fishing. Furthermore, Abe declared there has been no change in Japan's stance on the isles at the heart of the territorial dispute.

Along those lines, the conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun* declared that the reference to “different views” do “not impair Japan’s position so far that ‘there is no territorial dispute’”. It said Tokyo has “firmly” maintained its stance, quoting an anonymous Foreign Ministry official as saying, “the Japanese side has not made any concession on territory”. This contrasts with the triumphalism of the Chinese media, proclaiming that Abe conceded to China’s demands.

Ultimately, pessimists do not see this as any real compromise on stances and that competing national interests ensure that regional tensions over maritime and sovereignty claims will persist.

Optimists choose to grade these meetings on a curve, however. Even having this meeting is a positive step, considering the low baseline of bilateral relations. The “differing positions” quoted is the closest the Abe administration has come to acknowledging China also claims sovereignty over the islets, and allows both parties to save face, which is what diplomatic statements must do. Moreover, revitalising the talks on establishing a hotline to be used for direct contact in case of incidents is a major part of the meeting.

Interestingly, Beijing also avoided sending any vessels at all to the *Diaoyus/Senkakus*’ contiguous zone during a two-week period in October. Ultimately, optimists assert that at this stage, it is about arresting the downward trend in bilateral relations more than anything else, and by this metric the meetings and communiqué are a success. Furthermore, meetings and agreements such as these – however modest – are what paves the way for improved bilateral relations.

### **Proof of the pudding**

So were the meetings a success? In the words of Zhou Enlai, it is too soon to say. The test for both countries will be how it changes future rhetoric and future behaviour.

The first test will be if Tokyo integrates “differing positions” into its official vernacular regarding the *Diaoyus/Senkakus*. If it reasserts that there is “no dispute” over the *Diaoyus/Senkakus* then the third point of the communiqué is essentially null and void and arguably the most important element of the meetings will fall inert. The follow-up test will be how Tokyo uses the “differing positions” verbiage. Beijing has always asserted that for any negotiations over the islands to commence, Tokyo must first acknowledge China’s claim over them. Does this provide such acknowledgement and if so, is China now on notice that it must come to the negotiating table?

If Tokyo uses this verbiage and in essence applies this communiqué, Beijing will be confronted with pressure to follow through on the spirit of it and respect Tokyo’s concessions to negotiate. Moreover, it frees Japan to seek international adjudication over the islets’ sovereignty, as acknowledging China’s claim is a prerequisite for doing so.

The second test will be the viability of the hotline. The countries have reinvigorated the proposal of a crisis hotline, but the success of such will lie in the details. Where will this hotline connect to? What is the protocol for using it? And most importantly, will someone actually pick up? It must be actually used in order to be considered a success.

Lastly, what are the expectations regarding Abe’s visits to the *Yasukuni* shrine? There was no public commitment from Abe that he would cease visits there, as Beijing demanded, but there is speculation that he has made private assurances to that effect. If he makes any visit, then Beijing has its excuse to completely disregard the communiqué.

### **Short term win-win-win**

There was nothing in the meetings nor in the communiqué itself that changes national interests, so there is no reason to believe that bilateral relations will enter a massive warming period and regional tensions will permanently be reduced. This is a short-term political victory for both leaders, however.

Abe wins by concluding a seeming rapprochement with Japan’s largest trading partner. He can claim that he has improved bilateral relations while not conceding any territory. Xi gets face and prestige by granting an audience on his home turf with a security rival but economic partner. He can claim that he

got Japan to agree there is a dispute, even if that particular word was not used. Both leaders realise that neither country can afford a dispute. Lastly, the region can win if both countries follow the spirit, if not the letter of the communiqué.

---

*Ian C. Forsyth is a Visiting Fellow at the Military Transformations Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. Dr. Forsyth works as an analyst at the United States Pacific Command in Hawaii.*

---

**Nanyang Technological University**  
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)