

China and Japan's strategic competition in east Asia: The case of the east China sea

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Abstract: The East China Sea is an area of strategic significance in Sino-Japanese relations and security in the Asia-Pacific region. This article analyzes the strategic competition between China and Japan in the East China Sea during the period of 1991-2024, focusing on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute and maritime security issues. The study uses historical-logical, analytical and synthetic, and comparative methods, based on official sources and research works by international scholars to clarify the current situation of competition between the two Asian powers. The content is implemented in two main directions: analyzing the developments and nature of Sino-Japanese competition in the East China Sea, and assessing its prospects and impacts on the regional security situation. The research results not only clarify the dynamics and characteristics of strategic competition but also provide a scientific basis for forecasting the trend of bilateral relations and the situation in the East China Sea in the context of many fluctuations in the regional order.

Keywords: *China, East China Sea, Japan, Maritime security, Strategic competition.*

1. Introduction

After the Brzezinski [1] competition between China and Japan in the East China Sea has become one of the most tense hotspots in the Asia-Pacific region. This area is not only significant in terms of natural resources but also of strategic importance in controlling vital sea routes. Since the end of the Brzezinski [1], along with the strong rise of China and the US rebalancing policy in Asia, this competition has become more complicated and has had a profound impact on the regional security structure. "China's assertive moves to expand its influence, especially the unilateral establishment of an Air Defense Identification Zone over the East China Sea, have increased tensions in the region" [2]. The East China Sea has a particularly important geostrategic, geoeconomic and geopolitical position, therefore, "this area is part of China's grand strategy to build China into a maritime power" [3].

The Sino-Japanese competition in the East China Sea is not only a bilateral issue between the two countries but also affects the power structure, regional order and alliance relations in the Asia-Pacific. "Strategic competition in the East China Sea has become one of the biggest challenges to the regional security architecture, especially to the US-Japan alliance and the balance of power strategy in East Asia" [4].

Research on Sino-Japanese competition in the East China Sea and its geopolitical implications for the Asia-Pacific region not only helps to better understand the dynamics of strategic competition in the region but also provides valuable lessons on conflict management. "Research and analysis of strategic competition among major powers in the East China Sea are of great significance in seeking solutions to similar problems in the region, especially in the context of increasingly fierce competition among major powers" [5].

This article aims to analyze the current state of Sino-Japanese strategic competition in the East

China Sea from 1991 to present, assess its impact on regional security and forecast prospects in the coming time. The study focuses on answering the following questions: (1) What are the main drivers of Sino-Japanese competition in the East China Sea? (2) How has this competition impacted the regional security structure? (3) What are the development trends and possible scenarios in the future?

2. Context of Competition and Legal Basis in the Sovereignty Dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands

2.1. History and Legal Basis in the Sovereignty Dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands

The sovereignty dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands between China and Japan has deep historical roots and is reinforced by complex legal factors. Each party presents different arguments to establish its legitimate ownership of the islands.

2.1.1. China's Position and Arguments

China's stance is based on historical records from the Ming and Qing dynasties. According to Wang [6] "Chinese historical documents from the 14th century recorded the Diaoyu Islands as part of Chinese territory, and during the Qing Dynasty, the area was incorporated into Taiwan Province" [6]. Beijing asserts that the islands belonged to China before being occupied by Japan in the late 19th century.

Beyond historical evidence, China also invokes post-World War II international agreements, such as the Matray [7] and the Truman, et al. [8] to reinforce its claims. Zhao [9] emphasizes that "the Cairo Declaration laid the foundation for Japan to relinquish illegally occupied territories" [9]. On this basis, China contends that Japan must return the Diaoyu Islands along with other occupied territories.

From a domestic legal perspective, China enacted the Law on the Territorial Sea and the Roach and Smith [10] which explicitly defines the Diaoyu Islands as part of Chinese sovereignty, providing a legal framework for its territorial claim.

2.1.2. Japan's Position and Arguments

Conversely, Japan asserts that the Senkaku Islands were terra nullius (land belonging to no one) before it declared sovereignty over them in 1895. Drifte [11] states that "the Japanese government conducted a thorough survey in the late 19th century and found no evidence that the islands belonged to China before Japan formally claimed sovereignty in 1895 [11]. Under the principle of terra nullius, Japan maintains that it lawfully established control over the islands.

Tokyo also relies on the Roach and Smith [10] under which the United States administered the Senkaku Islands, and the Mendel [12] through which the U.S. transferred control of the islands to Japan. Pedrozo [13] argues that "the transfer of control of the islands to Japan by the United States in 1972 further solidified the legitimacy of Tokyo's sovereignty over the Senkakus" [14].

2.1.3. Legal Disputes within the Framework of UNCLOS

The dispute became even more complex when both China and Japan ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1996. Both sides have used UNCLOS to support their claims regarding exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and extended continental shelves, leading to overlapping claims in the East China Sea.

China argues that the Okinawa Trough serves as a natural boundary between the two countries, while Japan insists on the median line principle for EEZ delimitation. Hughes [15] notes that "the conflicting interpretations of UNCLOS between China and Japan have further complicated the dispute, especially in determining control over seabed resources" [16].

The profound differences in historical interpretations and the application of international law have created the foundation for a prolonged dispute between China and Japan in the East China Sea, making the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands one of the key geopolitical flashpoints in East Asia after the Cold War.

2.2. Escalation of Tensions in Recent Times

The conflict increased significantly in 2012 when Japan nationalized the Senkaku Islands. Liu [17] stated that "this move provoked a fierce reaction from China, causing bilateral relations between the two countries to plummet" [17]. Japan's tighter control of the islands was viewed by China as a unilateral change to the status quo in the region. In response, China increased its naval presence and took more assertive steps. Hughes [15] pointed out that "China mobilized coast guard and military vessels to assert its sovereignty, and increased patrols in the area" [16]. The climax of the tension came in 2013 when China established an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, covering the Senkaku Islands. Yoshihara [18] warns that "this is a significant escalation in the dispute, as Beijing attempts to control regional airspace and put pressure on Japan and its allies" [18].

In general, the Sino-Japanese dispute in the East China Sea is not only a historical or legal issue but also reflects the strategic competition between the two regional powers. Differences in the interpretation of sovereignty, international law and security interests have made the situation more complicated. In the context of increasingly tense regional geopolitical competition, finding a peaceful and sustainable solution remains a major challenge for both countries and the international community.

3. The Current State of Sino-Japanese Competition in the East China Sea Since the Cold War Until Now

3.1. Resource Disputes

The East China Sea is an area with large oil and gas reserves, of which the Shirakaba/Chunxiao natural gas field is at the center of the dispute between China and Japan. China claims exploitation rights based on the median line principle unilaterally proposed by Beijing, while Japan objects and argues that this activity violates its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). According to Wang [19] "disagreements in the interpretation of UNCLOS between the two sides have turned the oil and gas dispute in the East China Sea into a flashpoint in bilateral relations, with the risk of escalating into a more serious conflict" [20].

In addition to oil and gas, fisheries resources are also a major factor in tensions between the two countries. The East China Sea is one of the richest fishing grounds in East Asia, but overfishing and control measures by each side have fueled disputes. China regularly issues new regulations on fishing grounds and fishing permits, while Japan tightens its control over foreign fishing vessels in its EEZ. This has resulted in several clashes between the two countries' coast guards in recent years.

Although the two countries signed a joint fisheries agreement in 1997 to manage marine resources sustainably, violations still occur frequently. Japan accuses Chinese fishing vessels of illegally fishing in its EEZ, while China criticizes Japan's control measures as an exercise of "illegal sovereignty" in the disputed area. According to Li [21] "the fisheries dispute between the two countries is not only about economic interests but also reflects strategic rivalry, as both sides seek to expand their influence in the East China Sea" [21].

The seizure of fishing vessels and clashes between the two countries' coast guards not only escalate diplomatic tensions but also impact regional security. Japan deploys coast guards to monitor Chinese fishing activities, while China increases its coast guard presence to protect its fishing interests. According to Wang [20] "this is part of the 'gray-zone tactics' that both sides are adopting to strengthen their sovereignty positions without causing direct conflict" [19].

In short, the resource dispute between China and Japan in the East China Sea is not simply about oil and gas or fisheries, but also reflects the strategic competition between the two regional powers. As both Beijing and Tokyo seek to consolidate their positions, the dispute will continue to be a major challenge, requiring effective cooperation and conflict management mechanisms to maintain regional stability.

3.2. *Military and Security Competition in the East China Sea*

The resource dispute between China and Japan in the East China Sea is not limited to oil and gas and fisheries, but has serious implications for regional security. The efforts of both sides to control disputed waters have led to an increase in military presence, escalating the risk of clashes and shaping a long-term strategic confrontation.

One of the clear manifestations of this competition is that both China and Japan have stepped up military patrols to assert their national interests. China has continuously deployed warships and aircraft to monitor disputed areas, while Japan has also increased the activities of its Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) to protect its claimed exclusive economic zone (EEZ). According to Wang [19] "China's expansion of patrols is not only aimed at protecting its national interests, but also reflects a long-term strategy to establish a permanent presence and put strategic pressure on Japan and related countries" [20].

The increased frequency of surveillance and patrol activities means that the risk of military clashes is increasing. Pedrozo [13] stated that "the number of maritime encounters between the Chinese and Japanese navies and coast guards has increased significantly, increasing the risk of escalation into military conflict" [14]. A typical example was in 2013, when China unilaterally established an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) covering the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Japan immediately deployed fighter jets for surveillance, causing tensions to escalate significantly.

In addition to expanding patrols, both China and Japan are accelerating military modernization to strengthen their positions in the region. Japan has been steadily increasing its defense budget and developing its maritime defense forces to counter pressure from China. Meanwhile, Beijing has also invested heavily in modern warships and improved its naval and air force capabilities to expand its control over the sea. According to Wang [20] "the increased military presence of both sides is creating a dangerous competitive environment where conflict can break out at any time without an effective control mechanism" [19].

In general, the military competition between China and Japan in the East China Sea is not only a matter of resource disputes but also reflects the strategic confrontation between the two Asian powers. The escalation of military activities and the risk of collision at sea and in the air have posed serious challenges to regional security. To prevent the risk of conflict and maintain stability, the two sides need to establish effective dialogue mechanisms and crisis management measures to control tensions peacefully and sustainably.

3.3. *Consequences of the Race to Exploit Resources*

The competition between China and Japan for resources in the East China Sea is not only an economic issue but also has far-reaching implications for regional security, diplomatic relations, and international legal norms such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). These implications not only increase bilateral tensions but also shape the regional strategic environment, especially in the context of the involvement of external powers.

The race to exploit resources has led to China and Japan increasing their military presence in the East China Sea, increasing the risk of conflict. China deploys coast guard ships, warships, and surveillance aircraft to the disputed area, while Japan also mobilizes the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) to maintain control. Wang [19] commented that "the increased military presence of both sides is not only to protect resource interests but also represents a long-term strategy to shape the regional situation" [19]. In addition, China's unilateral establishment of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in 2013 prompted a strong reaction from Japan, which deployed surveillance fighter jets, escalating tensions. According to Pedrozo [22] "the frequency of maritime encounters between the two countries' navies and coast guards has increased significantly, creating the risk of military collision" [14]. This directly threatens regional security, raising urgent demands for conflict control mechanisms and security dialogue.

The confrontation between China and Japan in the East China Sea is not only a bilateral issue but is also influenced by other powers, especially the United States. As an important ally of Japan, the United States has a great influence on the regional situation through the Kapur [23] pledging to support Tokyo in case of attack, including in the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Hughes [15] argues that “Japan’s security policy under Abe has strengthened military relations with the United States, focusing on maritime cooperation and regional defense” [16]. Washington also deployed military forces in Okinawa, maintained naval patrols, and conducted joint exercises to affirm its commitment to defending its ally. Meanwhile, China sees the US presence as a factor that increases instability, while promoting a strategy of expanding its influence to challenge the position of the US and Japan in East Asia.

One of the important consequences of this competition is the risk of affecting the provisions of UNCLOS on the delimitation of exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and freedom of navigation. China and Japan have different interpretations of UNCLOS, especially in determining sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and surrounding waters. Pedrozo [13] stated that “China’s actions, including the declaration of ADIZ and the deployment of coast guard vessels, not only affect Japan but also affect the freedom of navigation of other countries” [14]. The United States and its allies have repeatedly affirmed their stance on protecting freedom of navigation, and have conducted patrols to ensure the safety of international sea lanes.

The race to exploit resources in the East China Sea is not limited to the economic field but also entails far-reaching consequences for security, diplomatic relations and international law. US involvement, changes in the balance of power and the risk of affecting freedom of navigation are all factors that increase regional tensions. In this context, establishing dialogue mechanisms, multilateral cooperation and compliance with UNCLOS are important solutions to maintain peace and stability in the East China Sea.

4. Prospects and Impacts on Regional Security

4.1. Development trends of Sino-Japanese Competition

4.1.1. Possible Scenarios

The competition between China and Japan in the region is not simply a bilateral issue but is also influenced by many geopolitical, economic and military factors. In this context, forecasting the development trend of Sino-Japanese relations can be approached through three main scenarios. *First*, the scenario of maintaining controlled tensions is the most realistic possibility in the medium term. Although both countries adopt a tough policy on sovereignty issues, there is still a certain restraint through dialogue channels and crisis management mechanisms. “This helps avoid conflicts that cross the “red line” that could lead to direct military confrontation” [24]. *Second*, the risk of escalation is always present if either side takes unilateral actions to change the status quo, serious clashes between law enforcement or military forces occur, or strong US intervention changes the regional balance of power. “These factors could push Sino-Japanese competition out of control and lead to unpredictable consequences [25]. *Ultimately*, although the sovereignty dispute is unlikely to be completely resolved, there is still room for pragmatic cooperation between the two countries. “Putting aside the dispute to jointly exploit marine resources and cooperate in areas such as environmental protection and search and rescue could be a viable option to maintain regional stability and avoid unnecessary confrontation” [26].

Thus, the development trend of Sino-Japanese competition depends on how the two sides manage tensions, respond to regional fluctuations, and the level of willingness to cooperate in areas of common interest.

4.1.2. Factors Affecting Relationship Prospects

The outlook for Sino-Japanese relations depends not only on the political will of the two countries, but also on many structural factors, including geopolitical, economic, domestic, military, and institutional factors. These factors not only shape the level of tension or cooperation, but also determine

the ability to control risks and maintain regional stability. *First of all*, geopolitical factors play an important role as the US-China competition becomes increasingly fierce, directly affecting Sino-Japanese relations. “Japan’s tightening of relations with the US and participation in mechanisms such as QUAD have increased China’s suspicion, creating an increasingly clear environment of strategic confrontation [27]. However, *in economic terms*, “the degree of interdependence between China and Japan remains very high, as demonstrated by the bilateral trade turnover reaching 317.5 billion USD in 2020. This economic linkage is an important driving force for both sides to contain tensions and maintain dialogue, avoiding extreme steps that could harm common interests” [28]. In addition, *internal factors* are also a major obstacle to the prospects of relations as nationalism increases in both countries. “Public opinion and internal political pressure often promote hardline policies, reducing the room for leaders to make concessions or seek conciliatory solutions” [29]. *In the military aspect*, China’s military modernization process, along with Japan’s security policy adjustments, including increased defense budgets and expanded roles for the Self-Defense Forces, increase the risk of clashes on the ground. “This poses a major challenge in managing conflicts and avoiding miscalculations that could escalate into military confrontations [30]. *Finally*, institutional factors also shape the outlook for Sino-Japanese relations. “The absence of effective dispute resolution mechanisms and regional legal constraints makes crisis management more difficult, increasing the risk of misunderstandings and loss of trust between the two sides [31].

The above analysis shows that in the coming years, Sino-Japanese relations are likely to continue to develop complicatedly, with the scenario of maintaining controlled tensions being the most realistic. However, the risk of conflict escalation is always present if the parties do not control well the risk factors and impacts from the regional geopolitical environment.

4.2. Impact on Regional Security

4.2.1. Impact on Regional Order

The Sino-Japanese competition in the East China Sea is not only a bilateral issue but also has a profound impact on the regional security order, “contributing to promoting multipolarity and increasing strategic instability” [32]. One obvious consequence is the arms race and military modernization. China is continuously expanding its naval and air power and developing advanced weapons to strengthen its sovereignty claims, while Japan is increasing its defense spending and expanding security cooperation with the US and its allies. “This has created a chain effect, forcing countries in the region to also improve their defense capabilities to protect their strategic interests” [33]. At the same time, the Sino-Japanese competition has promoted strategic alliances and partnerships. Japan has increased cooperation with the US, Australia and India within the Quad framework, while Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines have sought support from major powers to balance China’s influence. This has deepened polarization in the region. A worrying consequence is the declining role of international law. Despite UNCLOS and dispute resolution mechanisms, the priority of military power increasingly dominates legal diplomacy. China’s rejection of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling on the South China Sea has undermined confidence in multilateral mechanisms, setting a dangerous precedent for other territorial disputes.

In short, the competition between China and Japan not only increases tensions but also reshapes the regional order towards strategic confrontation, arms race and challenges to international law, posing the risk of long-term instability.

4.2.2. Impact on Countries in the Region

The Sino-Japanese rivalry in the East China Sea affects not only the two countries directly involved in the dispute, but also has far-reaching implications for countries in the region. Each country and region faces its own challenges in defining its position and protecting its interests.

For Southeast Asian countries, the tense situation puts them in a difficult position. “The Sino-Japanese tension creates pressure for countries to choose and balance their relations with the two

powers. Many countries are concerned that the East China Sea dispute could set a bad precedent for resolving other territorial disputes in the region" [34]. This is especially important for countries that have sovereignty disputes with China over islands in the South China Sea.

Meanwhile, South Korea faces a particularly complex situation. "Seoul faces the difficult situation of being both an ally of the US and Japan and having close economic ties with China. Its own historical and territorial disputes with Japan also make South Korea cautious about supporting Tokyo's stance" [35]. The geopolitical position and complex historical relationship force Seoul to constantly consider every step to maintain a balance in its relations with the major powers.

For Taiwan in particular, this tension is vital to its security. "The Sino-Japanese tensions have heightened Taiwan's security concerns, especially as the disputed islands lie close to its strategic space. Taipei is forced to strengthen its defense capabilities and seek support from its partners" [36]. The geographical proximity to the disputed area means that any Sino-Japanese conflict could directly affect Taiwan's security.

Thus, it can be seen that the impact of China-Japan competition on countries in the region does not stop at the security and defense aspect but also deeply affects the foreign policy choices, economic relations and geopolitical position of each country. This creates a complex picture of the moves and reactions of countries in adjusting policies to adapt to the new situation.

4.2.3. Implications for Multilateral Cooperation

The Sino-Japanese strategic competition in the East China Sea is having multi-dimensional impacts on multilateral cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. These consequences are evident in four main aspects: *First*, on ASEAN's role in the regional security architecture. "The Sino-Japanese tension weakens ASEAN's central role in the regional security architecture. The organization has difficulty maintaining consensus and promoting cooperation initiatives due to the divisions in the positions of its members" [37]. This situation poses a major challenge to ASEAN's ambition to maintain its centrality in the regional structure. *Second*, on the effectiveness of multilateral dialogue mechanisms. "Forums such as the ARF, EAS and ADMM+ are affected when the two major powers in the region cannot reach consensus on maritime security issues and regional order" [38]. The disagreement between China and Japan is undermining the effectiveness of regional security dialogue and cooperation mechanisms. *Third*, on the prospects for economic cooperation. "Security tensions are posing risks to regional economic cooperation initiatives such as RCEP and could slow down the integration process. The trend of depoliticizing economic cooperation is being challenged" [39]. This shows the increasingly close relationship between security and economics in the context of strategic competition. *Fourth*, on the risk of regional disintegration. "There is a risk that the region will be divided into blocs based on security alliances and economic relations, instead of moving towards a unified and inclusive regional community" [40]. This trend could undermine efforts to build a regional order based on rules and comprehensive cooperation.

The above consequences show that Sino-Japanese competition is creating serious challenges for the multilateral cooperation architecture in the Asia-Pacific. This requires countries in the region to make appropriate strategic adjustments to maintain the momentum of cooperation and prevent the risk of regional separation in the future.

5. Conclusion

The Sino-Japanese strategic competition in the East China Sea has undergone profound changes since the end of the Cold War, reflecting the changes in the regional and global balance of power. From the sovereignty dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the competition has expanded to many other areas such as maritime security, airspace control, and especially the race for strategic influence in the region. "This multi-dimensional competition reflects both countries' determination to secure their strategic interests in what they consider a vital maritime space, while highlighting the growing complexity of regional security dynamics" [41].

The prospects for Sino-Japanese competition in the coming period will continue to develop in a complex and unpredictable direction. Although the two sides maintain dialogue channels and crisis management mechanisms, deep disagreements over territorial sovereignty, coupled with the growing involvement of the United States and the impact of US-China strategic competition, have created an unstable security environment in the East China Sea. This not only directly affects Sino-Japanese bilateral relations but also has a strong impact on the regional security structure, forcing countries to continuously adjust their policies to adapt to the new situation.

To reduce the risk of conflict and promote regional stability, efforts from many sides are needed. China and Japan need to strengthen strategic dialogue, build trust, and seek cooperation mechanisms in areas of mutual benefit. "The development of effective crisis management mechanisms and confidence-building measures between Beijing and Tokyo is crucial for maintaining regional stability and preventing unintended escalation [42]. Countries in the region, especially ASEAN, need to play a role as a mediator and promote the development of maritime codes of conduct. At the same time, the international community needs to continue to support the settlement of disputes through peaceful means, respecting international law, in order to build a stable and prosperous regional order..

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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