Getting Japan Wrong: A Review of David Kang's 'Describing East Asia'

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The economic success of China in the past forty years has induced a wealth of discussion on the implications of its rise. David Kang, in his chapter 'Describing East Asia: alignment strategies towards China' concludes that East Asia is not afraid of Chinese power (Kang, 2007). Kang's argument uses an amalgam of methodologies. From pages 54 to 66 he assess case by case the security alignment of South Korea, Vietnam, Southeast Asia and Japan. Subsequently, on pages 66, 67 and 71 respectively, Kang brings non-realist analyses to bear in his assessment of increased economic relations, fear absence and multilateral cooperation. His overall evaluation of the East Asian security situation is summarized in the chapter's penultimate paragraph, its most striking statement being: 'no state, other than Taiwan, fears the Chinese use of force against it,' followed, in a close second by: 'East Asian publics…tend to have favorable opinions of China.' (Kang, 2007, p. 73)

While Kang's chapter undoubtedly adds to the dynamic of the 'China's Rise' debate, there are some unfounded assumptions and empirical errors within the chapter. I focus on Kang's assertion that Japan does not fear China's rise. I assess Kang's opinion on the Sino-Japanese relationship through the dimensions of strategic balancing, economics, attitudes and multilateral institutions. Further, I argue that Kang's assessment of Japan is empirically unfounded and the logic of his argument is at times unclear. Specifically I argue that Japan-China relations are best described as 'hot economics, cold politics' (Youjun, 2012).

1. Strategic Balancing

Kang asserts that Japan is practicing neither external nor internal balancing in response to China's rise. This is untrue, Japan is partaking in both.

1.1 Internal Balancing

While Kang is correct that Japanese defense expenditure has not risen above 1% of GDP (compared to a much higher Chinese expenditure) (Kang, 2007, p. 64; He, 2008, pp. 168-169), Japan has performed a variety of internal security initiatives. Since the penning of Japan's constitution (specifically Article 9) it has self-imposed, for ideological and historical reasons, a restriction on military activities and spending (Tsuchiyama, 2007, pp. 47-53; Grimes, 2003, p. 354) . In the Post-Cold War Era, especially following the 1991 Gulf War, however, Japan has begun to assert a more 'normal' approach to its security (Singh, 2002, pp. 82-83). Ballistic missile defense systems, spy satellites and inflight refueling systems suggest a qualitative shift in Japanese defense expenditure in the Post-Cold War era (Tsuchiyama, 2007, pp. 246-253; Pyle, 2007, p. 334; Roy, 2004, pp. 98-99; Singh, 2002, p. 89). This qualitative shift addresses immediate threats to Japanese security – including an assertive China. A review of Japan's defense White Papers exposes an emerging trend: Japan's defense ministry is increasingly alarmed about China's opaque military capabilities and intentions (Japanese Ministry of Defense, 2005-2012).

In addition to qualitative changes in Japanese spending the recent era has seen Japan taking increasing responsibility internationally. An application for permanency on the UN Security Council and increasing international activities (often in conjunction with the US) are indicative of a period of precedent-setting by the SDF (Singh, 2002, p. 86; Xinbo, 2005, pp. 119-121; 123-124). Moreover, debate within Japan reveals a spectrum of thought on security: with many advocating increased Japanese assertiveness (He, 2008, pp. 182-185). Japan, it appears is steadily assuming the security mantle that comes with its economic prowess. In order to do so Japan is transcending the norms and legal precedents set in the last 70 years, paving the way for, if required, greater defense spending. In sum, Japan is practicing shifts in defense policy conducive to internal balancing against China.

1.2 *External Balancing*

Discussions regarding defense budgets are notoriously difficult to pin down. Exact figures, spending objectives and deployment patterns are, to an extent speculative. A more concrete demonstration of Japan's balancing against China is its ongoing 'unshakeable'[1] bilateral relationship with America. Since 2005 this relationship has become increasingly security-orientated, codified by a deeper strategic allegiance[2] and agreements for research on a theatre missile defense system (Singh, 2002, p. 87). Further milestones on the road to increasing security cooperation include; Japanese agreement for US patriot missile deployment on bases in Japan (2006), statements made by President Obama and PM Hataoyama describing the Japanese US alliance as 'indispensable' (2010) and trilateral Korea, Japan US initiatives (Embassy of the United States in Japan, 2012). Furthermore Obama's recently announced pivot back to Asia, which includes stationing 2500 marine troops in Darwin, Australia, has been generally welcomed by the Japanese Press (Daily Yomiuri Online, 2011; Shearer & Yoshihara, 2011).

Kang is correct when he describes Japan as possessing, and not utilizing, the capability for greater defense spending. It is clear, however, that qualitative changes in the allocation of defense spending are creating a more assertive and capable Japan. Furthermore, the US security umbrella currently negates a need for Japan to inflate its defense budget. The strategic triangle of US-Japan-China allows Japan to perform a dualistic policy of engaging China economically while balancing politically (Mochizuki, 2007, p. 251). Japan's balancing behavior conforms to the 'hot economics, cold politics' paradigm. Kang mistakenly interprets this dualistic hedging as an absence of fear.

2. Hot Economics

In his section on economics Kang (Kang, 2007, pp. 66-67)misses an opportunity to increase the power of his argument. He does not cite raw economic data such as trade figures, FDI and frequency of regional trade summits. Presenting more concretely the extent to which Asian states (and Japan in particular) have a stake in China's rise would, I feel, strengthen his argument. Nonetheless Kang is correct in his assertion that Japan is economically engaging China (Mochizuki, 2007, pp. 243-244; He, 2008, pp. 163-166). China is Japan's largest trading partner, with gross volume equaling US$344.9 billion in 2011 (JETRO, 2012). China is the largest destination for Japanese investment in Asia (He, 2008, p. 164). This is an aspect of Japan's dualistic policy towards China, political balancing and economic engagement.

3. Attitudes and History

Kang's third section is entitled 'East Asian Attitudes: The Absence of Fear'. He concludes from data in his figures 3.4 and 3.5 (Kang, 2007, p. 68) that, generally, East Asian publics feel cordial about China's rise. This section will evaluate his claim with reference to Japan. Firstly I present a discussion of the 'history factor.' Secondly I discuss flows of opinion amongst the Japanese public and Japanese elite.

3.1 The history factor

Understanding Sino-Japanese relations without a grasp of history is impossible (Mochizuki, 2007, pp. 241-243). Prior to the 19th Century, and Japan's unprecedented growth post-1853, China was Asia's pacesetter and power hub. The 1931 Manchuria Incident demonstrated how power had swung; Imperial Japan looked to dominate its 'backward' neighbors. The Japanese occupation of China brought with it many horrors; most infamous were the

Nanjing Massacre and the plight of 'comfort women.' Relations after World War Two have been tarred by Chinese memories of Japanese Occupation and a perceived lack of Japanese contrition (He, 2008, pp. 176-177; Mochizuki, 2007, pp. 241-243).

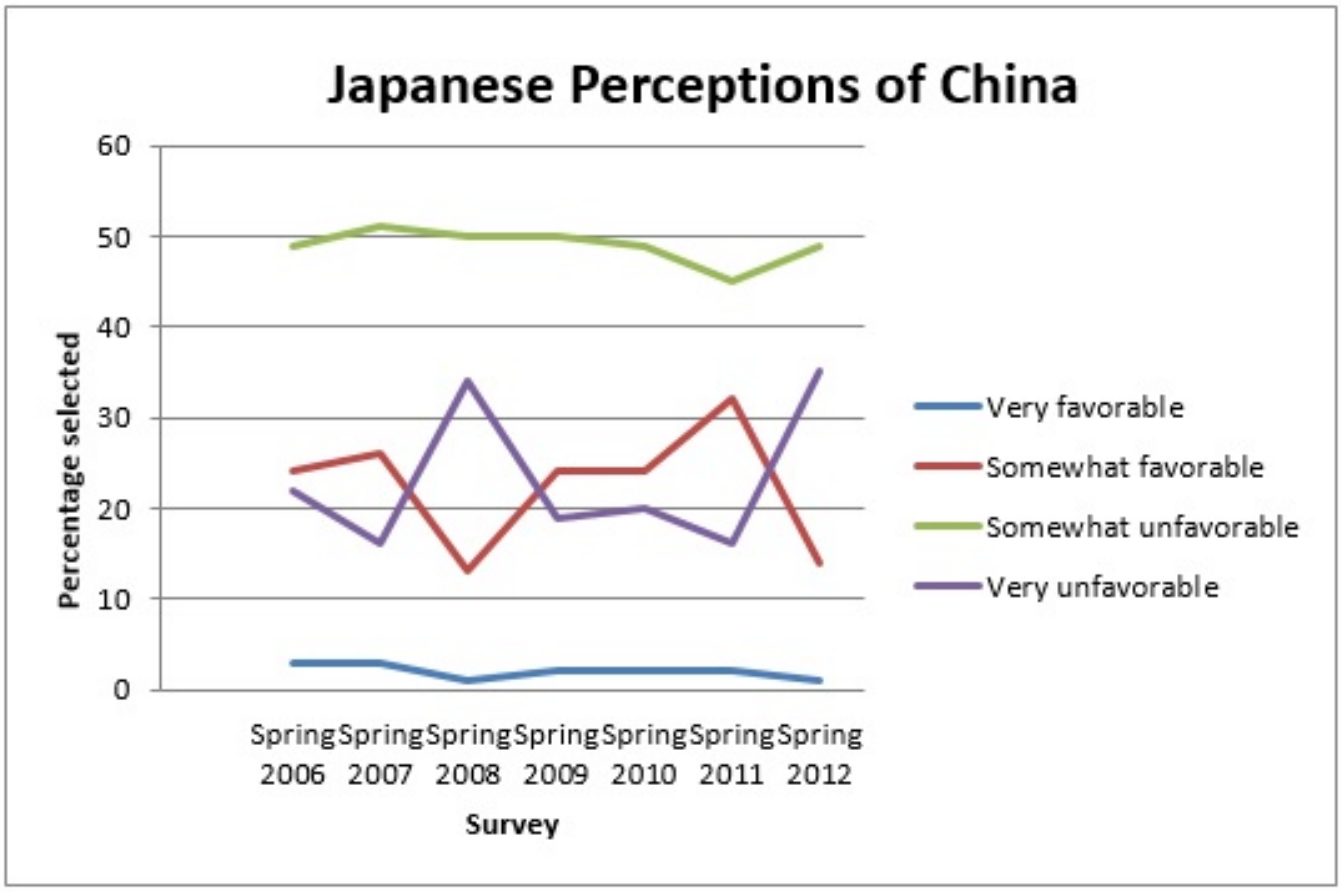
Visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese government officials regularly incenses China (He, 2008, p. 189). China, itself, does little to cool the issue, often publically lecturing Japan for its war history and apparent denial of past horrors (Smith, 2009, p. 232). For Japanese, the shame of the war is being steadily replaced by a general annoyance with what, they perceive as, Chinese self-victimization (He, 2008, p. 187).

3.2 The General Public

There have been a number of salient moments in the bilateral public relations: the 2004 Asia Cup Soccer Final, 2004 reaction to a Chinese submarine surfacing within Japan's EEZ, 2005 Anti-Japan protests in China, 2010 protests by Japan in response to comments made by Hu Jintao as well as recent concerns over the ECS (Gries, 2005, pp. 844-846; Mochizuki, 2007, p. 248; Reuters, 2012; Reuters, 2010). These incidents have strained mutual public perceptions. Even Kang's data (from his figures 3.4 and 3.5) demonstrates Japan's antipathy for China.

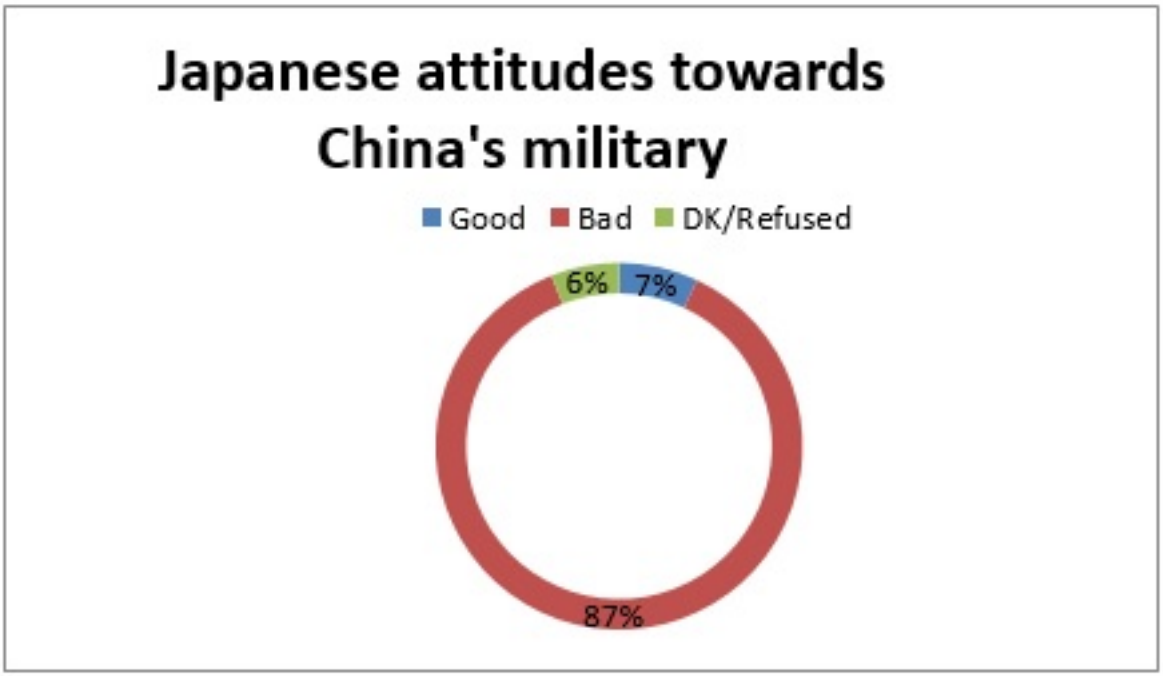
To supplement Kang's data I have included two figures from the PEW Attitude Surveys (2012) which directly contradict Kang's ultimate conclusion (though not his figures!). Figure 1 presents Japanese perceptions of China from 2002 to 2012. Two things should be apparent from Figure 1: firstly, the most selected option is 'somewhat unfavourable'; secondly that the perception 'very unfavourable' hovers around 20%, but has climbed dramatically from 2011-2012. Figure 2 is incommensurable with Kang's assertion that Japan does not fear China's use of force. The figure shows that over 87% of respondents believe that China's expanding military is 'a bad thing.' The existence of Japanese fear around China's military is reinforced by a finding in the Yomiuri Shimbun November 2009 Japan-China Joint Public Opinion Poll 2009 which shows that 56% of Japanese identify 'military expansion' with China. This data is supported by further research into Japanese opinions (Khoo, 2011, pp. 101-102).

Figure 1:



(PEW Research Centre, 2002-2012)

Figure 2:



(PEW Research Center, 2012)

3.3 Elite opinion

Japanese elite opinion of China has evolved in recent years. The accession to power of a number of hawkish leaders – including Abe Shinzo and Prime Minister Koizumi coincided with the decline of doves favourable to China – including Nonaka Hiromu and the "China School." (He, 2008, p. 183) This has created an assertive Japanese policy-making circle. This point is illustrated by the handling of the 2004 ECS disputes by METI Minister Nakagawa. His abrasive actions included conducting a 'personal inspection' of Chinese gas fields and inflammatory statements in the Diet and on public television. Furthermore Nakagawa's tough stance on China gained him broad public support (He, 2008, pp. 183-184). The same is also true of Yazukuni Shrine visits made by Junichiro Koizumi. It is likely that the recent spat over Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands will bring this hardline element to the fore again.

To continue with the theme of opinion polling; a survey performed by Gill, Green, Tsuji and Watts concludes that Japanese elite perceive China as the greatest threat to peace in the next ten years, ahead of even North Korea (2009, p. 7; Khoo, 2011, p. 102). Clearly, contrary to Kang's assessment, Japanese elites *are* fearful of China's increasing power.

In terms of the practical consequences of public opinion Japan has typically emphasized an elitist model of foreign policy making. There have, however, been recent suggestions that domestic pressure has started playing a larger role in Japanese decision making (He, 2008, pp. 182-183). The Japanese public and elite are very aware of China's power and are becoming less conciliatory in the political arena. Japanese public and elite attitudes cohere with the 'hot economics, cold politics' paradigm.

4. Multilateralism an Arena for Competition

Kang cites increased participation by Japan in various multilateral institutions as indicative of general engagement and goodwill towards China (Kang, 2007, pp. 71-74). In fact, Japan's participation in these organizations reflects, in part, a desire to restrict Sinocentrism taking hold in smaller Asian states. This is most clear in Japan's repeated attempts to include India, Australia and New Zealand into the APT as a means of balancing Chinese influence (Mochizuki, 2007, p. 245). The fear is that China, if unchecked in Asian institutions; (especially those in SEA) will induce a Sino centrism reminiscent of the Middle Kingdom (Mochizuki, 2007, p. 245). Japan's activities in these institutions, while also serving its own interests to a degree, should also be interpreted as a check on Chinese movements.

This analysis finds further credence in the respective opinions of Chinese and Japanese elite on the issue of India, New Zealand and Australian inclusion in East Asia security building. Chinese elites see their inclusion as largely unimportant. Their Japanese counterparts, on the other hand, are more insistent on the importance of these state's inclusion (Gill, et al., 2009, pp. 39-41).

5. Conclusion

To its great credit Kang's chapter highlights nicely the various dimensions and methodologies available for assessing China's relationships with states in the region. He describes the security situation, attitudes and multilateral institutions. Kang is correct in his assessment of increasing economic interdependence in the region. This is particularly true of Japan. His assessment of the Japanese security situation and multilateral activities are, however, incorrect. Furthermore, Kang fails to highlight the importance of Japanese antipathy for China (despite presenting it in his figures). Most unsettling in Kang's argument is the non-sequitur that low Japanese defense spending and high economic engagement are indicative of a lack of fear.

I have argued that in his assessment of Japan Kang not only contradicts his own evidence; he also fails to follow a logical argument. His key assertion that 'no state in Asia, other than Taiwan, fears China's use of force' is incorrect in light of the Japanese case. There is no reason, however, to suggest that this proves Kang's main interlocutor,

Mearsheimer's, thesis. Studies by Khoo and Tang (Khoo, 2011) suggest that states on China's periphery are cautious and fearful, without being all-consumingly so. A qualified fear thesis is consistent with the dichotomous Sino-Japanese relationship of 'hot economics, cold politics'.

Japan's relationship with China is dichotomous. There is definitive evidence of both economic engagement and strategic balancing. Furthermore Japan's public perception of China is rocky at best – with current problems (ECS) bringing out the domestic hard line in both countries. Japan's multilateral finessing also suggests a desire to avoid a return to a historic Sino centrist Asia. Japan's perception of China clearly could not be described as an 'absence of fear.'

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[1] Barack Obama, following the 2011 Japan Earthquake (Henry, 2011)

[2] see the U.S.-Japan Alliance: Transformation and Realignment for the Future (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2005)

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