

Abe (Finally) Meets Xi: A Step towards Stabilization of Japan-China Relations?

Written by Yuki Tatsumi

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On November 10, the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the Chinese President Xi Jinping met at the sideline of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Beijing. This was the first time the two leaders had met since Abe returned to power in December 2012 and Xi ascended to the presidency in 2013. In fact, leaders of the two nations have not held a formal bilateral meeting since the former Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda met with the former Chinese President Hu Jintao in December 2011. Since the Japanese Government's decision in September 2012 to purchase three islands of the Senkaku Islands chain, there has been no cabinet-level meeting between Japan and China either. While the Abe-Xi meeting in Beijing does not suggest any dramatic improvement in Japan-China relations, it still marks an important first step towards the stabilization of Japan-China relations.

Allowing “Strategic Ambiguity”

The Abe-Xi meeting became possible only after the senior officials of both countries agreed on a set of four principles for future Japan-China engagement. On November 7, 2014, the Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi met with the Japanese National Security Advisor Shotaro Yachi in Beijing. After the meeting, the Governments released the agreed-upon principles to serve as the basis for future dialogue between Japan and China. [i]

These four principles include: (1) both sides agree to observe the spirit and principles of the four basic documents and continue to strive for a “mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests”; (2) domestic political difficulties need to be overcome within both countries, based on the spirit of “squarely facing history and advancing toward the future”; (3) both sides recognize and acknowledge the different views of the tensions in the East China Sea and agree that further deterioration of the situation must be prevented through dialogue and consultation, as well as the establishment of a crisis management mechanism; and (4) both sides agree to generally resume bilateral dialogue in various areas.

In short, these four principles show that Japan and China agree on two fundamental conditions for the future of Japan-China relations: that their relationship should be mutually beneficial based on common strategic interests and the need to pursue resumption of the dialogue across a wide range of issues. However, it is also notable that the four-point agenda allows both countries to essentially “agree to disagree” on the issues that are critically important for their respective national interests and sovereignty. In particular, it is evident that both sides effectively agreed to disagree on the East China Sea issue, especially the sovereignty claims over the Senkaku Islands. The third among the agreed principles, which directly refers to the issue, seems to have been carefully worded to allow room for “strategic ambiguity” on this contentious issue. This diplomatically-worded document successfully established a foundation for future engagement between Japan and China. It also created an environment for Abe and Xi to meet at the APEC without facing criticisms of compromising for the sake of a meeting in their respective countries.

The meeting so far has received mixed reactions from observers. Some have praised the meeting as “historically meaningful,” while others have called for caution. [ii] Some critics have gone so far as to say the meeting was “merely symbolic.” [iii] While Abe emphasized that the meeting was a positive first step toward salvaging a relationship that had hit the nadir for the past couple of years, the Chinese media focused on touting that the meeting was possible

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only because China pushed Japan to recognize Beijing's position that a sovereignty dispute over the Senkaku Islands exists, a proposition which Japan continues to adamantly reject.

Skepticism is understandable. The meeting can be hardly characterized as a warm rapprochement. Following the meeting, multiple media outlets focused on how Xi, who usually is full of smiles as he greets his guests, was stone-faced when he shook Abe's hands, completely ignoring Abe as he spoke to Xi. And, after all, neither side is willing to make significant compromises on the thorniest issues in the bilateral relationship: the Senkaku Islands and whether Abe may choose to visit Yasukuni Shrine again. To the former, Japan continues to maintain the position that there is no dispute over the Senkaku Islands' sovereignty and that the islands are under the effective control of Japan; China steadfastly maintains its territorial claim over the islands. To the latter, while the Chinese media considered the reference to history issues in the four-point consensus as Abe's commitment to refrain from returning to Yasukuni, Abe has refused to confirm this.

Still, the Abe-Xi meeting should not be dismissed as a meeting for the sake of a meeting. In fact, the two leaders' agreement to meet *despite* the ambiguity in the existing bilateral issues demonstrates their awareness that stabilization of Japan-China relations must be prioritized. In the short term, the Abe-Xi summit has created a modest yet important opportunity, by giving the green light to officials in both countries to engage in serious discussion on how to effectively operationalize the maritime communication mechanism as a crisis management mechanism in the East China Sea. The Japanese and Chinese defence officials have discussed and come to a shared understanding for a basic framework of such a mechanism, but the consultation for its implementation has stalled since 2012. The two leaders' agreement to operationalize this mechanism has brought a renewed momentum to the consultation that has remained dormant for the last two years. Since it is almost impossible for either side to compromise on sovereignty issues, the next-best course of action is to create a set of agreed processes and procedures, in order to prevent an accident from escalating out of control. The meeting on November 10 suggested that Japan and China may be able to achieve that much.

Does the summit lead to a diplomatic breakthrough between Japan and China? No. But the two sides have decided to discuss a concrete set of actions to prevent maritime accidents from turning into military crises, while working toward resuming bilateral dialogue in other areas. Reestablishing the habit of dialogue and cooperation is critical for Japan-China relations. Abe and Xi certainly did not embrace each other. Nonetheless, their meeting is definitely a step forward for stabilizing the relationship between the two major powers in East Asia.

References:

[i] See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. "Regarding Discussion Toward Improving Japan-China Relations." November 7, 2014 http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page4e_000150.html# (accessed November 12, 2014) for the release by Japan; for the release by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, see http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/t1208360.shtml (accessed November 12, 2014).

[ii] Simon Denyer and Anna Fifield. "Xi and Abe meet, but there's little warmth." *The Washington Post*. November 11, 2014. A9.

[iii] Michelle FlorCruz. "China-Japan Relations: Abe and Xi APEC Meeting Only Symbolic." *International Business Times*. November 13, 2014. <http://www.ibtimes.com/china-japan-relations-abe-xi-apec-meeting-only-symbolic-1723337> (accessed November 13, 2014).

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