

From “Strategic Reciprocity” to “Strategic Suspicion”: On the 50th Anniversary of Japan-China Rapprochement

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1. News Highlights

Established diplomatic relations on September 29, 1972, Japan and China celebrate 50 years of their rapprochement on September 29, 2022. On the 29th, the Chinese Embassy in Japan held a celebration at a hotel in Tokyo, to which Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi was invited. At the event, Chinese Ambassador Kong Xuanyou stated that he wanted to “build a new Japan-China relationship” with a strong sense of mission and responsibility.¹ On the same day, Natsuo Yamaguchi, the Representative (Chairman) of the Komeito Party, part of Japan’s ruling coalition,

also stated that “a stable Japan-China relationship” should be established.²

It is worth noting that Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida was invited but did not attend the event and only exchanged congratulatory messages with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The messages were read out at the event. Prime Minister Kishida said Japan and China have a great responsibility for the peace and prosperity of the region and the world, stressing the need to “build a constructive and stable relationship.” Xi Jinping said, “I highly regard the development of China-Japanese relations,” and expressed his willingness to work with Kishida to lead

1. “Chinese Ambassador Kong Xuanyou Says New China-Japan Relations Need to be Constructed,” *Kyodo News*, September 29, 2022, <https://tchina.kyodonews.net/news/2022/09/3cbdc771aa58.html>.

2. “The Komeito Party Speaks on the 50th Anniversary of the Diplomatic Relation Normalization between Japan and China,” *Kyodo News*, September 29, 2022, <https://tchina.kyodonews.net/news/2022/09/49a534ef82c4-50.html>.

both sides to follow the trend and work together to build a mutual relationship that meets the needs of the new era.³

2. Security Implications

2-1. The atmosphere of commemoration reflects the instability of China-Japan relations

The 50th anniversary of the establishment of relations between Japan and China is an important diplomatic occasion for both countries. However, as mentioned above, the Japanese Prime Minister’s absence from the event to which he was invited highlighted the rather strained diplomatic atmosphere between Japan and China at this stage. The Komeito representative, Yamaguchi, even admitted that there are various problems between the two countries and stressed that “the two countries should respond positively to the overall situation.” His comment shows that even

the Komeito, more China-friendly than the LDP, is aware of the tension between Japan and China.⁴

Looking back at the disagreement between Japan and China in recent years, this situation is actually not surprising. Aside from the continued presence of Chinese maritime police vessels in the waters surrounding the Diaoyutai Islands (called Senkaku Islands in Japan), recently, even on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, three Chinese vessels entered Japan’s claimed territorial waters on September 28, (the second time that month) and six entered the adjacent area (the largest number of vessels that month).⁵ Not to mention the PLA’s ballistic missiles that landed in Japan’s claimed exclusive economic waters when PLA conducted military exercises against Taiwan in August 2022. In addition, when the Japanese government held a state funeral for its late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on September 27, China sent Wan

3. “Detailed Information: 50th Anniversary of Japan-China Diplomatic Relation Normalization Held in Tokyo,” *Kyodo News*, September 29, 2022, <https://tchina.kyodonews.net/news/2022/09/44f24bd3571a-50.html>.
4. “The Komeito Party Speaks on the 50th Anniversary of the Diplomatic Relation Normalization between Japan and China,” *Kyodo News*, September 29, 2022, <https://tchina.kyodonews.net/news/2022/09/49a534ef82c4-50.html>.
5. 〈中国海警局に所属する船舶等による尖閣諸島接近（接続水域入域・領海侵入）状況－令和4年9月－（9/30現在）〉, 《日本海上保安廳》, <https://reurl.cc/Qb05N9>.

Gang (Chairman of the Chinese “Zhigong Party” and Vice Chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference), who is not a Communist Party member, to attend, without hiding its rudeness to Japan’s Kishida government. Since the atmosphere of discord between the two countries was already swirling long before the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations, the low-profile commemorative activities and the lack of substantiality in relevant speeches could be expected.

2-2. China suggests “new Japan-China relations” to deny Abe’s diplomatic legacy

Another noteworthy point is that China did not reaffirm the “strategic reciprocity” proposed by former Prime Minister Abe in 2006. In fact, “strategic reciprocity” was not mentioned in the telephone conversation between Kishida and Xi on October 8 last year, but only that the two countries should “build a constructive and stable relationship together” (建設的かつ安定的な関係を共に構築).⁶ During the event, the

Chinese side did not mention “strategic reciprocity.” Still, Ambassador Kong Xuanyou proposed to build a “new Japan-China relationship,” and Xi Jinping also said that the two countries should build “a relationship required by the new era.”

It is judged that this is the political message that Beijing wants to deliver: China is abandoning the “strategic reciprocity” diplomatic relationship achieved during the Abe administration. But even if Beijing wants to deny the outcome, there is still no basis for a new relationship between the two countries yet, and it is rather questionable what new one can be founded on in the future.

3. Trend Observation

3-1. Japan-China relationship is difficult to improve with China’s alliance with Russia and confrontation with Taiwan

As mentioned, the existing disagreement between Japan and China over the sovereignty of the Diaoyutai Islands remains unresolved, while the

6. 〈日中首脳電話会談〉，《日本外務省》，2021年10月8日，<https://reurl.cc/D3aKxR>。

conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the confrontation between China and Taiwan have further strained the two countries. The conflict with Ukraine has led Russia to lean on China and look for its support, and this has reinforced Japan’s belief that the activities of the Russian and Chinese naval and air forces in its peripheral air and sea domains in recent years are indeed the result of a concerted effort by the two countries to suppress the rise of Japan in the Indo-Pacific region.

Moreover, China’s sudden military exercises around Taiwan, while targeting Japan’s claimed exclusive economic waters, are tantamount to proving to Japan that “Taiwan’s crisis is Japan’s crisis.” Since some media reported that Taiwan-made drones appeared on the battlefield in Ukraine and attacked Russian troops, some Russian experts claimed that “Russia should help China subdue Taiwan.”⁷ It is not yet clear how Japan will react to China’s message, but it is expected to deepen Japan’s concern that “China and Russia could join forces against Japan and

possibly against Taiwan.”

The developments described above will inevitably raise Japan’s suspicions about the “China threat,” making it even more difficult to be optimistic about the direction of its relationship with China even after the 50th anniversary of the diplomatic rapprochement. At this stage, it is clear that the relationship between Japan and China has deteriorated from “strategic reciprocity” to “mutual strategic suspicion.”

3-2. Japan’s policy stance has become more determined against the China threat

According to the Japanese media, the new version of the “National Security Strategy” currently under revision will not only mention “the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait” but will also include the expression “not recognizing the unilateral change of status quo by force” due to the fact that China is exerting military pressure over Taiwan.⁸ Although the contents of the

7. “Worried about Taiwan-made Drones Boosting Ukrainian Force, Russians Clamoring for China to Fight Taiwan,” *The Liberty Times*, August 28, 2022, <https://ec.ltn.com.tw/article/breakingnews/4039967>.

8. 〈政府、台湾の現状変更認めず 安保戦略文書に明記へ〉, 《共同通信社》, 2022年10月12日, <https://nordot.app/952876002474868736?c=39546741839462401>.

new version are not yet finalized, the new “National Security Strategy” released by the Biden administration on October 12 also emphasizes peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and even spends a whole paragraph reiterating the US position on the Taiwan Strait situation.⁹ Considering the US stance, the aforementioned report on the additional content in the new Japanese National Security Strategy should not be considered groundless.

As the strategic suspicion rises, Japan is more determined to prepare itself against China. In addition, the other two core documents of Japan’s defense, “National Defense Program Guidelines” and “Medium-Term Defense Program,” are also expected to include contents concerning the Taiwan Strait and Japan’s intention not to give in to China.

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(The contents and views in the assessments are the personal opinions of the author, and do not represent the position of the Institute for National Defense and Security Research.)

9. The White House, *National Security Strategy*, October 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.