

## Topic and Research Question

This master's thesis focuses on bilateral security aspects of the Sino-Japanese relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Over the course of the realignment of the regional and international order following the end of the Cold War, the Sino-Japanese relationship appeared to be deteriorating, fueled by unresolved territorial issues, and the growth of military capabilities and strategic positioning. Thus, the thesis aims at answering the following questions:

**Has there been significant change in the military strategic positions of Japan and China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

**Has there been a palpable development toward armed conflict, and how high is the current risk of escalation?**

**What are the main threats to regional stability, and are they increasing or decreasing?**

## State of the Art

The groundwork for the Steps to War theory emerged with research from Vasquez (1993; 1995; 1996), and was later developed further by Senese and Vasquez (2005; 2008) and Valeriano and Marin (2010). The research of Senese and Vasquez is mostly focused on comparative analyses of moderate to high quantities of interstate conflicts and wars.

Another branch of research utilizing the Steps to War theory focuses on conflicts with one or a small number of participants to examine crises development and risk factors for specific countries, pioneered by Valeriano and Gibler (2006) and Maness and Valeriano (2012). Due to the design of the Steps to War theory, each step encompasses a different field of study with various different aspects. Publications on the Senkaku/Diaoyu territorial dispute focus on conflict development, strategic and economic importance and legal issues. Alliance-related research is mostly done by national institute and government entities. Interstate rivalry studies concern either separation of different rivalry degrees, or analyze Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) between rival nations. The field of arms race research has long been dominated by theoretical discourse concerning arms race onsets, empirical research for China and Japan is mostly focused on current naval modernization and Chinese military build-ups. Hardliner behavior studies are comparatively rare and are mainly political analyses of the political leadership.

## Methodology and Approach

This thesis follows the Steps to War theory developed by Senese and Vasquez, and its enhancement by Valeriano and Marin. The theory specifies five steps integral for the development of interstate conflict with the risk of war outbreak in a simple additive fashion. In each Japan and China are compared through analysis of peer-reviewed research, governmental publications, and, if necessary, statistical material.

**(1) Territorial Disputes** are determined by analyzing the development of disagreements, official and legal statements, and by identifying the economic, strategic and social value of the territory in question.

**(2) Alliances** are established by focusing on various bilateral relationships in order to determine the level of cooperation, and whether those are sufficient for a classification as a defensive alliance. These bilateral relations are further analyzed as to their political relevance in accordance to the *politically relevant alliance* definition, requiring minor states to be a neighboring country to conflict partners or adjacent to the area of conflict.

**(3) Rivalry** is determined by establishing three major factors, spatial consistency, duration and military competitiveness in the form of MIDs. These are analyzed and categorized to establish their relevance. The results of the analysis of these factors are three possible categories of rivalry, sporadic or isolated rivalries, proto-rivalries, and – necessary to fulfill this step to war – enduring rivalries.

**(4) Arms Race** and the existence of arms race precursors are partially reliant on previous steps. Furthermore, arms races are determined by comparative analysis of doctrinal and military modernization, perceived threats, military expenditure and qualitative and quantitative aspects of military build-ups.

**(5) Hardliners or Accommodationists in Power** is the last step, assessing the political orientation of the respective leaders by categorizing them as hardliner or accommodationist based on stances on nationalism, militarism, and willingness to cooperate and negotiate with adversaries by diplomatic means.

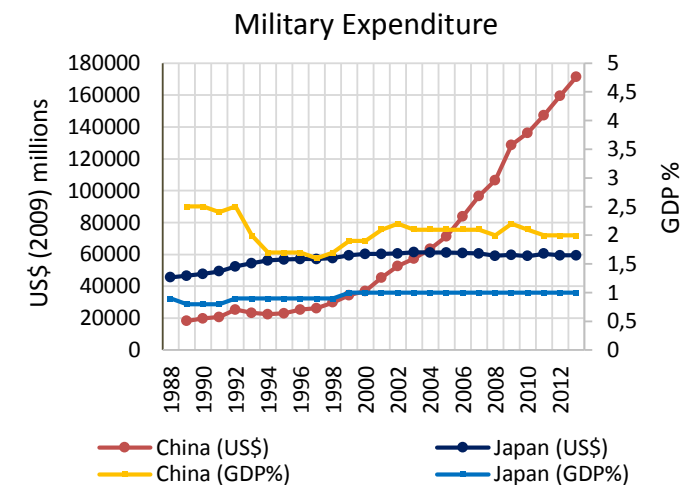
## Main Facts

The dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands started when China voiced its claim on the Japanese administered islands following the discovery of natural

gas and mineral oil deposits in the area of the island. Moreover, both nations have an ongoing dispute over the exact border between their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) in the East China Sea, which are also related to underwater resources. Claims are based on differing understandings of pre- and post-World War II treaties. The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands hold mainly economic and strategic significance for both nations.

Japan has a politically relevant defense alliance with the United States, and is currently cultivating close security relationships with Australia, the Philippines and India, although they are not yet on the level of a defensive alliance. China has traditionally opposed defensive alliances, although military exercises and cooperation with Russia has increased in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Beyond that, China retains a defensive alliance with North Korea.

The Sino-Japanese relationship can be classified as an enduring rivalry. Over the duration of 25 years 14 MIDs of various categories have been identified.



Following the end of the Cold War, there have been major shifts in the militaries of both countries regarding doctrine as well as threat perception. While Chinese military expenditure has steadily increased, it remained relatively constant in regards to GDP percentage. Japan's expenditure remained without significant change. Both nations are improving military quality through modernization, while quantity of troops and equipment remain stagnant or have been decreased.

The political leaders of both countries are nationalistically inclined, strong persons with connections to the military and visions to strengthen their nations, but are also able to seek diplomatic dialogue and negotiations to avoid crises.

## Results

Over the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the military strategic positions of Japan and China have partially changed, although some developments are continuations of the geopolitical and strategic shift following the end of the Cold War.

The analysis of the Steps to War showed that three out of five steps are fulfilled, namely, territorial dispute, alliances and rivalry. A fourth step, hardliners and accommodationists in power, remained inconclusive, since it was impossible to categorize Abe and Xi as hardliner or accommodationist, as both men exhibit characteristics applicable to either definition, which do not allow further breakdowns of categories. However, there is currently no arms race between Japan and China. Much rather, both nations are modernizing their military, while also reacting to the post-Cold War environment. Thus, the current risk of escalation is rated moderately high.

The biggest risk factors for further deterioration are the commencement of an arms race, a shift toward hardliner behavior in one or both leaders and attempts to create new defensive alliances. However, there is also a certain degree of ritualization in the territorial dispute and the rivalry behavior, and MIDs, despite their increase in intensity in recent years, have remained mostly non-violent.

## References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://othes.univie.ac.at/>

## About the Author

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