

Japan's Party Politics and China Policy: The Chinese Fishing Boat Collision Incident

Ming WAN

Abstract

The September 2010 Chinese fishing boat collision incident is studied as a case for Japanese party politics and diplomacy. While the Democratic Party of Japan's inexperience was a common factor, Japanese party politics played out differently in different stages of the incident. The DPJ was preoccupied with intra-party politics driven by personality clashes before the crisis. Its hard-line position combined with insufficient understanding of Japan's previous diplomatic dealing helped to turn the incident into a crisis. Its lack of foreign policy expertise combined with suppressed bureaucracy made the crisis management difficult. The post-crisis finger-pointing was typical of party politics in Japan and elsewhere. The DPJ diplomacy was troubled across the board, making regime transition in Japan more difficult than in South Korea and Taiwan.

Key words: The Democratic Party of Japan, the Chinese fishing boat collision incident, party politics, Japanese diplomacy, Japan-China relations

The September 2010 Chinese fishing boat collision incident was a serious dispute in Japan-China relations.¹⁾ Like all international disputes, a whole range of causal factors were involved in this incident and one could identify problems in all directions. But consistent with the theme of this project that focuses on the foreign policy of three democracies in Northeast Asia (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan), this paper examines mainly how Japanese party politics contributed to the start, the middle and the end of the collision dispute, with how China conducted itself kept in the background.

Japanese Party Politics and Diplomacy

Japanese party politics was important for postwar Japanese diplomacy and arguably more

1) For my own analysis of the incident, see Ming Wan, "Sino-Japanese Relations Adrift in a Changing World," *Asia-Pacific Review* 18, 1 (May 2011), pp. 73-83.

important than for most major advanced democracies. It is often said that for the United States politics stopped at the water's edge, which means that partisanship should not be reflected in American foreign policy. There were ideological fights in the United States, particularly between the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. The Republicans consistently view competition as the defining feature of international politics and the United States should therefore take a hardline position, including use of military force to destroy enemies or to deter aggression. The Democrats generally prefer international cooperation by accommodating other countries. But the Republican presidents define what Republic foreign policy is.²⁾ So do the Democrat presidents. Thus, party politics was important for selecting a president but not as much the conduct of diplomacy. There was general consensus on foreign policy for the United States for a long time and one can still see much bipartisanship in American diplomacy now, fierce rhetoric aside. One may suggest that it is unfair to compare Japan to a hegemon. But Japanese party politics was more constraining on Japanese diplomacy than most major Western European powers such as France, Britain, and Germany.³⁾

Important though it was, the role of Japanese party politics in Japanese diplomacy was well-understood, which explains partly why scholars did not write that much about this topic.⁴⁾ Similar to other parliamentary systems, the Japanese Diet often simply ratified the decision by the prime ministers who by definition had a majority at least in the Lower House. But unlike most other parliamentary systems, the LDP enjoyed single-party domination, which helped explain the fundamental stability in postwar Japanese political system.⁵⁾ The Japanese Diet did offer a public forum for discussing national policies and most postwar controversies in the parliament involved foreign policy issues.⁶⁾ Japanese party politics was reflected in the intra-party politics of the LDP, dominated with the Yoshida line and the Hatoyama line. Both were conservative but differed over defense policy and alliance with the U.S. The Japanese Foreign Ministry bureaucrats typically handled routine business while political leaders focused on

2) Colin Dueck, *Hardline: The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

3) For example, Guibourg Delamotte, a French specialist on Japan, judges Japan as different from France that has much diplomatic consistency despite power transitions between political parties. Guibourg Delamotte, "China and the United States as 'Alternatives', in the Diplomacy of the Democratic Party of Japan," in Bert Edström, ed., *Japan's Foreign Policy in Transition: The Way Forward for Japan as an International Actor in a World in Flux* (Stockholm: Institute for Security & Development Policy, 2011), p. 28.

4) For important exceptions, see Robert A. Scalapino, ed., *The Foreign Policy of Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Donald C. Hellmann, *Japanese Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

5) Gerald L. Curtis, *The Japanese Way of Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 1-2. See also Nathaniel B. Thayer, *How the Conservatives Rule Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); Satō Seizaburō and Matsuzaki Tetsuhisa, *Jimintō seiken* [LDP regime] (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1986).

6) Hans H. Baerwald, "The Diet and Foreign Policy," in Robert A. Scalapino, ed., *The Foreign Policy of Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 37-54.

sensitive and controversial diplomatic issues.⁷⁾ Major foreign policy decisions such as normalizing relations with the Soviet Union, renegotiating the revision of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, and normalizing relations with China all came from LDP leaders rather than bureaucrats.⁸⁾ The differences among various decision makers were managed by the Policy Affairs Research Council and various committees within the LDP.⁹⁾ There was also inter-party politics between the LDP and main opposition parties such as the Japan Socialist Party. Again, the difference mainly lay in the defense policy and the Constitution. While the LDP could ignore the opposition parties in most cases, the opposition parties could make things difficult for the LDP through obstruction techniques, as vividly shown in the case of the revision of the security treaty with the United States. Thus, there was much restriction on Japanese diplomacy. With its focus on economic development and aversion to conflicts and use of military force, Japan had a distinct style of diplomacy, which was highly predictable even though Japanese policy over a specific issue was complex.

Japanese party politics began to change significantly with the end of the Cold War.¹⁰⁾ Powerful global and domestic forces affected the Japanese political regime. We do not yet know whether we will see a stable two-party system in Japan, but we will surely see more frequent power transition between political parties. As a result, there are more policy debates and the political parties have to explain their positions better to win votes. Thus, Japanese party politics should have a greater direct impact on Japanese foreign policy than before.

This paper contributes to our understanding of Japanese party politics and diplomacy by examining how Japanese party politics affected the Chinese fishing boat collision incident as one of numerous causal factors. As of now, we do not have sufficient theoretical analysis of the incident. The collision incident was relatively recent and was overshadowed as should be by the mega disasters on March 11, 2011. But there was also reluctance in both Japan and China to think about the collision incident theoretically. While there have been some casual references to Japanese domestic politics, Japanese commentators have focused on the Chinese problems. If it was China's fault, how Japan handled this, including the role of its domestic politics, is largely irrelevant. Moreover, since many Japanese felt humiliated, it seemed inappropriate to engage in self-reflection. In addition, when some Japanese wanted to blame the DPJ government they focused on what they viewed as its ineptness and mostly attacked the government on a personal level. The Chinese analysts blame Japan and therefore think that Japan's behavior

7) Haruhiro Fukui, "Policy-Making in the Japanese Foreign Ministry," in Robert A. Scalapino, ed., *The Foreign Policy of Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 3-36.

8) Curtis, *Japanese Way of Politics*, pp. 106-107.

9) Edwin O. Reischauer, "Foreword," in Robert A. Scalapino, ed., *The Foreign Policy of Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. xiv.

10) Gerald L. Curtis, *The Logic of Japanese Politics: Leaders, Institutions, and the Limits of Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Ellis S. Krauss and Robert J. Pekkanen, *The Rise and Fall of Japan's LDP: Political Party Organizations as Historical Institutions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

had domestic sources but they tend to write about the supposedly conspiracies by some Japanese politicians viewed as hawkish. Departing from how they dealt with the previous disputes, the Chinese showed little interest in figuring out what was going on inside “the Japanese black box” this time around and focused instead on the policy output.

Thus, I will use the collision incident case against the following broad theoretical arguments people have advanced to explain how Japanese electoral politics has affected Japanese diplomacy in general or toward other countries such as the United States.

1. High turnover of prime ministers: With frequent change of prime ministers, it is difficult to maintain any continuity in foreign policy, as recognized inside and outside Japan. As a case in point, as observed by Japanese media and lamented by Japanese diplomats, for four years in a row in 2006-2009, there was a new prime minister in that position for less than a month before they needed to speak at the UN General Assembly in September.¹¹⁾ Kan Naoto had been on the job for three months before the UN General Assembly in 2010. But there would be a new prime minister again in early September in 2011.¹²⁾ In fact, Japanese media observed that only Japan had a different prime minister speaking at the UN General Assembly every year in the past three years.¹³⁾

In terms of Japan-China relations, five Chinese leaders have interacted with 23 Japanese prime ministers starting with Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei in 1972. As a contrast, there have been eight American presidents in the same period, which has been a contributing factor for the two countries to be able to manage their often testy relations.¹⁴⁾ The Chinese and American leaders often have tension at start but they serve long enough to adapt and mend the relationship. With a parliamentary system, Great Britain has also had eight prime ministers in this period. But frequency of leadership turnover is an insufficient causal argument to explain the ebb and flow of Japan-China relations. After all, the longest tension in the bilateral relationship occurred during the term of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō, a long-serving popular leader (April 26, 2001-September 26, 2006).

2. Transitional challenge from shift to a two-party system: This was indeed a major reason why the collision incident became such a crisis because such transition affected long-term foreign policy commitment. All regime transition would cause some diplomatic problems. By definition, a new ruling party comes to power partly based on its different policy programs from the previous government. But regime change does not have to cause problems for all foreign partners, potential gains for some and losses for others. Specific to Japan-China relations, a prevalent view in the West was that the DPJ government would significantly reorient

11) *Asahi shimbun*, September 8, 2010, p. 4.

12) *Asahi shimbun*, August 20, 2011, p. 4. See also *Asahi shimbun*, August 26, 2011, p. 14.

13) *Asahi shimbun*, September 2, 2011, p. 4.

14) As Henry Kissinger noted, “eight American presidents and four generations of Chinese leaders have managed this delicate relationship in an astonishingly consistent manner, considering the differences in starting points.” Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin, 2011), p. xvi.

Japan's diplomacy to a pro-China stance and move away from the United States. The DPJ wanted to differentiate itself from the LDP and said so in its manifesto and various documents.¹⁵⁾ But it was incorrect to view the DPJ as pro-China. As the Chinese understood it, while there was potential gain from a DPJ government, there was inherent danger for Beijing with this regime transition. Despite high tension during the Koizumi years, Koizumi's successors Abe Shinzō, Fukuda Yasuo and Asō Tarō maintained decent relations with China. The three prime ministers had different ideological orientations but behaved consistently. There was thus a sentiment that there was now some consensus in Japan about how to deal with China. That is why although people knew that there were structural problems troubling Japan-China relations, analysts including myself were cautiously optimistic that both the Japanese government and the Chinese government would value their hard-learned lessons and tread carefully over sensitive issues.

There was some hope on the Chinese side that the DPJ government would continue the LDP government's China policy under Abe, Fukuda and Asō and possibly do more. But they also knew that the DPJ took what Beijing viewed as hard-line positions on a number of foreign policy issues such as territory, human rights, Chinese military spending and Taiwan even though they were more careful than the LDP regarding controversial prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni Shrine.¹⁶⁾ While the Chinese like to emphasize certain "principles" to guide their relationship with a foreign country, they are also driven by the imperative of a particular diplomatic issue. Principles affect how those issues are framed and handled, but those issues that have their own history and dynamic often take on a life of their own. So the Chinese would go over the list of issues to see how a new Japanese government might affect them. It is not regime transition per se but what the new government brings to the table that ultimately matters.

The Japanese political system as a whole was inexperienced with regime transition, which complicated Japan's foreign policy. Since the LDP had stayed in power for such a long time, Japan has an inadequate system of power transition unlike countries with more established practice of power shift. The DPJ was inexperienced as a ruling party even though some DPJ leaders served in the ruling party or government before. But the LDP also has no experience

15) For some good analysis of what the DPJ intended to do in foreign policy, see Leif-Eric Easley, Tetsuo Kotani and Aki Mori, "Electing a New Japanese Security Policy? Examining Foreign Policy Visions within the Democratic Party of Japan," *Asia Policy* 9 (January 2010), pp. 45-66; Tobias Harris, "How Will the DPJ Change Japan?" *Naval War College Review* 63, 1 (Winter 2010), pp. 77-96.

16) Indeed, the DPJ cabinet avoided Yasukuni on August 15 twice in a row. But right before the August 29, 2011 DPJ presidential election, Noda Yoshihiko caused a controversy with his comment that Class-A war criminals were really not war criminals and that there is no reason asking a prime minister not to visit Yasukuni during a press conference on August 15, 2011. Alex Martin and Eric Johnston, "Noda Po-U.S. but Past Remarks May Haunt Asia Ties," *The Japan Times*, August 30, 2011, p. 2. Now a prime minister, Noda stated at his first prime ministerial press conference that he and his cabinet would continue the policy of the previous cabinets and would not visit Yasukuni. *Asahi shimbun*, September 3, 2011, p. 1.

being a responsible opposition party. This problem should be temporary however. By definition, the Japanese political parties will become more experienced over time. But one wishes for a shorter and smoother transition period.

3. Politics in command versus bureaucracy in command: Since the DPJ government was inept to some extent, the fact that bureaucrats were pushed down added to the difficulties in Japanese diplomacy. The dynamic between politicians and diplomats was different from the dynamic between politicians and domestic ministries. Major postwar diplomatic initiatives came from the prime ministers and required cooperation between politicians and bureaucrats. But the DPJ initially took a populist, harsh position on the bureaucracy, which affected negatively the morale and way of doing things for elite bureaucrats and prevented effective information sharing.

4. Democratic accountability for diplomacy: It is important in the long run to have transparency and accountability in diplomacy. But if one believes that diplomacy is preferable to non-diplomatic measures, one has to give political leaders and diplomats some space to operate. The U.S. government certainly has much autonomy in conducting American foreign policy. Fundamentally, voters should also be held accountable because they have voted those leaders in. And public opinion partially shaped by big media (major print papers and TV stations) influences foreign policy, for better or for worse.

This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of Japanese party politics and foreign policy by being more precise about how the arguments discussed above apply in different stages of the incident. While the DPJ's inexperience was a common factor in all stages, Japanese party politics played out differently in different stages. The DPJ was preoccupied with intra-party politics driven by personality clashes and policy differences before the crisis. Its hard-line positions combined with insufficient understanding of how the previous Japanese governments handled some diplomatic issues. Its lack of foreign policy expertise combined with intimidated bureaucracy made the crisis management difficult. The post-crisis finger-pointing was more typical of party politics in Japan and elsewhere. The analysis in this paper is based on observation, interviews, reading of Japanese newspapers and magazines and watching of Japanese television programs based in Tokyo from early August 2010 to present.

Before the Crisis

The fishing boat collision incident took place in an improved atmosphere between Japan and China, continuing the general trend since late 2006 after Prime Minister Abe mended relations with Beijing. There were underlying structural problems between the two countries such as China's rise and difference in political systems, but the two governments managed the relationship without major incidents.¹⁷⁾ In fact, the existence of structural reasons for tension makes skilled management of disputes more important.

The regime transition from the LDP to the DPJ in August 2009 did not have an immediate negative impact on Japan-China relations. There was actually much expectation that the DPJ would lean to China and away from the United States. However, while it is true that Hatoyama managed to worsen relations with the United States over the Futenma issue that does not necessarily prove that the DPJ was pro-China. As discussed previously, the DPJ was a mixed bag for Beijing. The Chinese assessment of the DPJ's China policy was basically right. While Japan's strained relationship with the United States was necessarily in China's interest, Beijing was cautious reflecting its understanding of the DPJ. This was an untested government and nobody was certain how it would handle crises. And it was well understood that the DPJ took hardline positions on territorial disputes, Taiwan and human rights while being "correct" over prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni Shrine. By contrast, the post-Koizumi LDP leaders seemed to have formed a realistic understanding of Japan's relations with China and followed a cautious policy line.

Beijing's underlying uneasiness with the DPJ does not mean that it created a crisis to test the DPJ government or to take advantage of Tokyo's strained relations with Washington. Fundamentally, the Chinese government would react the same way if a LDP government behaved like the Kan government. But in retrospect, while the LDP feels equally strongly about Senkaku being Japanese territory it is likely that we would have an ugly incident but not a crisis. The DPJ dropped the ball.

The DPJ's intra-party politics was the principal factor explaining how the incident was handled on the Japanese side. This is not because some DPJ politicians created an incident involving China to advance their domestic agenda against political rivals such as Ozawa Ichirō and to create a crisis situation to justify better relations with the United States. Politicians seek to advance their political agenda, which means that they make choices accordingly when facing an evolving situation. Some politicians may indeed have thought about how tension with China might help improve relations with the United States by providing a stronger rationale to the public about the importance of the alliance and may even claim credit for such moves years later. But this author did not observe any conspiracy. To have a conspiracy, one has to be well organized and think through multiple steps.

Rather, the DPJ was preoccupied with intra-party politics. The incident occurred in the middle of a highly contentious DPJ presidential election between the pro- and anti-Ozawa camps. China was not mentioned that much in the scheme of things in this period. Domestic issues dominated in the debate as it is normally the case for democratic elections. When it comes to foreign policy, Futenma was the single most important issue. China factored in over that issue because Futenma became almost a test whether Japan was leaning to China and moving away from the United States. To further discredit a conspiracy theory, it is difficult to

17) Ming Wan, "Japan-China Relations: Structure or Management?" in Alisa Gaunder, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Politics* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 339-49.

see how creating an incident would advance anyone's political interest. To utilize a crisis, one needs to work through media to influence public opinion. Since Ozawa was viewed as pro-China, he did not have incentives to talk about China that much. Kan did not need an incident because he already had overwhelming public support in his fight with Ozawa. Japanese big media followed mainly domestic political drama. They did not like Ozawa. But on the whole they did not link Ozawa to China as a way to attack him. Rather, they focused on Ozawa's money politics. Moreover, Japanese big media generally toned down the incident before the presidential election ended on September 14.

One could be cautiously optimistic about the Japan-China relationship through August 2010. It was apparent that the most serious issue between the two countries was territorial dispute. There were increased Chinese activities and Japan was also moving to strengthen its position. But the two sides discussed restarting negotiations over the East China Sea natural gas field again in May 2011. The two countries reached an agreement in 2008, but that needs to be legalized into a binding arrangement. The negotiations would not be easy, but the two governments were talking, which was a good sign.

During the Crisis

The fishing boat collision incident was serious but it did not have to turn into a crisis. The problem resulted partly from the tension between the DPJ commitment to voters and Japan's past diplomatic practices and partly from Beijing's harsh reaction. Crisis is defined here as an emotionally charged stage of event in which high instability may lead to a decisive negative turn for the relationship. The crisis over the fishing boat collision incident lasted for two weeks from September 10 to September 24. The collision took place in the morning of September 7. The Japanese officers boarded the Chinese ship early that afternoon and took the Chinese captain and his crew to a Japanese port. The captain was formally arrested that night. But what triggered strong Chinese reaction was the Japanese government's decision on September 10 to detain the captain for ten days. That decision was important because the incident now largely became a zero-sum game. Someone now had to "lose" in the immediate sense. The Japanese government decided in the afternoon of September 19 to extend the detention of the captain. The crisis escalated with China's increasingly tougher retaliatory measures. In the end, the Japanese government released the captain, announced in the afternoon of September 24, and the Chinese government took him back with a charter plane that night. The crisis was over with the release of the Chinese captain but tension between the two nations continued.

Given the growing tension in the disputed area and moves taken by both sides, the fishing boat collision was an accident waiting to happen. This was a worse incident than previous ones and things could be ugly. But one could imagine how the two governments would somehow muddle through as they had done before to avoid a major confrontation. But it became clear

within two days that the Japanese side was not going to play by the old rule book, which the Chinese side viewed as unilateral and thus unacceptable. Since the Japanese had the Chinese captain in captivity, the only way now for the Chinese government to get him back would be to apply pressure. China's rise added to Beijing's determination and leverage but China would have done the same even if it were in decline. One may argue that the Japanese government was perfectly justified to do what it did given the nature of the incident (ramming of a Japanese law-enforcing ship in what the Japanese side considers to be its territorial water) or Japan should have done so before, but the fact of matter is that the Japanese government's decision to try the Chinese captain according to Japanese domestic law was a departure from past Japanese practice.

Japanese party politics was indeed the principal driver for the crucial decision to try the Chinese fishing boat captain. The DPJ government treated the incident as a domestic law and order issue, which should be dealt with within the Japanese judicial system. However, they had to frame the issue first, which was political in nature.

The DPJ departed from Japan's past practice, namely shelving the territorial dispute over Senkaku/Diaoyuda. To complicate things, we need to discuss whether Japan had indeed agreed to "shelve" the Senkaku issue. Some leading DPJ politicians have stated that Japan never accepted that position.¹⁸⁾ That was a surprise for this author since it was widely assumed that such a fundamental mutual understanding between the two sides existed even though it did not ever appear in any official agreements.

Like in some other countries, the political leaders in Japan, including those in the LDP, often avoid explaining and informing their successors and the public what kind of commitments they have made and why it is so important for the country. They often promise to get out of a tough spot and then backtrack, particularly under public scrutiny. A prominent example is the U.S.-Japan textile dispute during the Nixon administration, worsened because Nixon thought Prime Minister Satō Eisaku had promised to reduce Japanese textile exports to the United States but Sato denied making such a promise. In a recently revealed case, when the Japanese and Americans negotiated over right of jurisdiction over crimes committed by American soldiers in Japan in 1953, a Japanese justice ministry official stated that Japan would not exercise such rights unless the criminal cases are important. The Japanese negotiators faced domestic criticism of inequality and the resistance in the U.S. Congress to passing the right to Japan. The record was kept from the Japanese public. The Japanese government had denied the existence of such a secret agreement. But after the U.S. documents were opened, Foreign Minister Okada Katsuya requested an investigation. Foreign Minister Matsumoto Takeaki announced on August 26, 2011 that the Japanese document reflected a unilateral

18) Maehara said at a Diet committee meeting on October 20, 2011 that shelving the Senkaku issue was Deng's own remark and that the Japanese side did not agree. *Asahi shimbun evening*, October 21, 2010, p. 10.

policy statement rather than a bilateral agreement and it was difficult to confirm whether there was a secret agreement.¹⁹ By that standard, the Japanese government would find it easier to deny an informal agreement believed to be operating for so many years with a country not as important as the United States.

This commitment problem happens in the domestic context as well. For example, did Prime Minister Kan commit to stepping down in a short time period or not? The Kan exit episode shows that this is not simply a lost-in-translation issue because Kan made that promise to his fellow Japanese political leaders and the Japanese public.

Both the Japanese and Chinese governments made important compromises as they should, but they chose not to inform and let alone explain to their public. As a non-democracy, the Chinese government is worse in this regard. But they do on the whole keep their promise precisely because they do not have to tell the public what they are doing although it is getting more difficult for Beijing due to the Chinese citizens' greater ability to access alternative sources of information.

The DPJ government behaved the way most Japanese thought reasonable and the Japanese public was disappointed only because the DPJ government did not get the job done. The Japanese public basically shared the view that the Chinese captain should be tried according to Japanese domestic law. Senkaku is Japanese territory. The Chinese captain violated Japanese law in the Japanese territory and should be punished. Japan is a country of law, unlike China. Japanese big media has been part of that commonsense consensus forming process. Japan is not unique because all countries have their own consensus or commonsense about certain issues and build opinion bubbles around them.

Similar to other countries, Japan's opinion bubbles cause problems. This is the case when it comes to Japan's territorial disputes with all its neighbors, including totalitarian North Korea, authoritarian China, basically authoritarian Russia, and democratic South Korea and Taiwan. Some of Japan's neighbors such as Taiwan like Japan and others do not. With such a huge variation, commonsense should be that the problems cannot be all on Japan's neighbors. Thus, there should be greater recognition of other countries' viewpoints, some of which have merit.

We should also know about the fundamental beliefs of some DPJ leaders. As discussed before, the DPJ takes hardline positions on a number of issues including territorial disputes. The DPJ politicians in charge did not believe that Senkaku was a diplomatic issue. Since the Japanese side has already defined the issue as domestic, if China protests, it is by definition unreasonable. Japan therefore should act sternly or *kizen* as a favorite Japanese expression used at the time to indicate how Tokyo should act towards Beijing. However, the fact that the DPJ seems to be completely convinced about Senkaku being a non-issue diplomatically rather than being rhetorical made a major difference. From Beijing's perspective, that very denial was

19) *Asahi shimbun* (evening), August 26, 2011, p. 1; *Asahi shimbun*, August 27, 2011, p. 5; Alex Martin, "1953 Records on Handling U.S. Forces Released," *The Japan Times*, August 27, 2011, p. 2.

an emotional trigger for its tough reactions. As one seasoned China thinker put it to this author, since Japan unilaterally refuses to recognize the dispute, it has left no room for the Chinese but to react strongly to force recognition of the dispute despite obvious costs to Beijing.

Furthermore, the DPJ did not know what they were doing. The DPJ actually has people familiar with foreign policy, people like Ozawa who have spent years cultivating relations with China. He took over 140 parliamentarians to China in December 2009. But the Kan camp did not want to use the Ozawa people due to an ugly intra-party fight. Kan and his supporters seemed determined to end Ozawa's influence once for all. This internal fight affected the Japanese handling of the incident. Kan was not that familiar with foreign policy and if his key supporters in the intra-party fight made policy suggestions, he went along. But this incident would cost him politically. He was reportedly angry at what he viewed as Chinese arrogance. But he most probably would have done things differently if he could do this again.²⁰⁾

The DPJ did not appear to have a good institutional memory, which resulted from regime transition and its efforts to push the bureaucracy down. In a democracy, elected politicians should ultimately be in charge, but the Japanese Foreign Ministry was somewhat different from more domestic ministries. Virtually all big postwar foreign policy decisions were decided by political leaders and supported by diplomats. When Japan was successful, it was typically when a political leader made a reasonable choice and then let able bureaucrats do their job. The DPJ seemed to think that bureaucrats were above politicians, but instead of elevating the politicians to a higher level, it managed to push down the bureaucracy, resulting in an overall lowering of Japanese diplomacy.

Messy party politics complicates foreign policy in any democracy. A non-democracy may be more consistent with its foreign policy but often suffers greater disasters in the absence of healthy domestic checks on the government. A democracy can sometimes use its party politics to its advantage in diplomatic negotiations. When you have power transition or intra-party difficulties, a foreign government might give you a temporary pass, but it still fundamentally wants to see you keep your commitment.

In the collision case, the Chinese side did not act that tough initially by its standard because they wanted a low-key solution and because they recognized that Kan could not look weak in his fight with Ozawa. The Chinese did not want themselves to be the main issue of Japanese party politics, which could only be negative for Beijing given Japan's current political atmosphere.

20) In fact, the Kan people seem to have learned the lesson, as revealed in their more cautious reaction to the two Chinese fishing patrol ships operating in the Senkaku area and reportedly briefly entering what the Japanese side considers to be the Japanese territorial water to avoid a repeat of the incident right before another DPJ presidential election. *Asahi shimbun*, August 25, 2011, p. 4. As a principal player in the 2010 incident, Maehara was not in the government this time around, but the other key players remained in the cabinet.

The DPJ government adopted what it viewed as a calm and reasonable approach by denying the existence of any diplomatic dispute. Japanese media played along. Both the government and big media thought that talking too much about the dispute would play into China's hand. That would backfire. In any dispute, one of the worst things one can do to the other side is to dismiss their grievance. It did not help when some key Japanese politicians took Beijing's relative calm as vindication of their own approach and publicly praised the Chinese government for doing so, which embarrassed it in front of the Chinese public and providing weapon for hardliners. The Chinese were angry at the DPJ and still are for unilaterally destroying the mutual understanding and humiliating the Chinese government in front of Chinese people and the international community. That is why the Chinese government urged the Japanese side to recognize the severity of the incident and do not misread the situation.

When the DPJ presidential election was over, the Chinese government promptly urged Prime Minister Kan to make a "political decision" to release the Chinese captain.²¹⁾ Kan and his key supporters were preoccupied with forming a new cabinet while keeping Ozawa and his supporters from any posts of importance. China was not mentioned that much.²²⁾ Coming out of a convincing victory over powerful Ozawa, the Kan government appeared confident. The day after a new cabinet was announced, there were two prominent stories on the front page of the *Asahi shimbun*, one to the right about the new cabinet and the other to the left about Chinese activities at their East China Sea natural gas field.²³⁾ That was a clear case of the government using media to shape a narrative. The details about what was going on in the natural gas field had to come from government sources released strategically to put a check on China.²⁴⁾ But that story would not stick. The eyes were focused on the Chinese captain.

Beijing began to take much harsher measures. The DPJ government began to feel the heat. Kan himself became more involved. In particular, if the Chinese president decided to boycott the APEC summit to be held in Yokohama, that would be a serious blow to his image. Since he had to attend the UN General Assembly in New York City, Chief Cabinet Secretary Sengoku Yoshito was in charge. He made the right and courageous decision to let the Chinese captain go to defuse a crisis. Diplomacy is different from domestic politics in that compromises

21) Reflecting the government's view, an editorial at *Huanqiu shibao* [Global times] the day after the DPJ presidential election said specifically that now with electoral pressure gone Kan should be resolute and release the Chinese captain immediately. *Huanqiu shibao*, September 15, 2010, accessed on September 20, 2010, <<http://opinion.huanqiu.com/roll/2010-09/1102231.html>>.

22) There were some stories on page 4, page 9 and page 11. But the dominant story was the presidential election. *Asahi shimbun*, September 15, 2011.

23) *Asahi shimbun*, September 18, 2011, p. 1.

24) In a role reversal, immediately after the Noda cabinet was announced, *Asahi shimbun* carried a substantive story about "new waves in the South China Sea" on Page 4 on September 4, 2011. It was actually one-month old news, without commenting on recent developments such as the Philippine president's recent visit to China. The news story linked the South China Sea to Senkaku and the Japan-U.S. alliance. This was big media reminding the Noda government and the public of the China threat.

have to be made between countries with different political systems and values in the absence of an overarching authority. Much of the criticism of him over his ending of the crisis was not particularly fair. If politicians are always criticized by media if they seek some compromise with foreign countries and they become too afraid as a result, what would happen to Japan's foreign relations? If one cannot do diplomacy, which by definition involves compromises, one would probably end up with less desirable non-diplomatic solutions.

Having said that, Sengoku's decision looked sudden and the rationale for the decision was convoluted. It would have been better to explain why the Japanese government needed to end the crisis or at least to spin the outcome as strengthening the Japanese territorial claim. Instead, the government shifted the burden to a district prosecutor's office. The Japanese government of course had its calculations for releasing the captain. They may not be the best arguments but should be shared publicly with the nation. Not saying them served to erode the legitimacy of those arguments. As a case in point, a senior official at the prime minister's office reportedly refuted the critics of the decision to release the Chinese captain by asking what else Japan should do and whether people want to go to war like in the past.²⁵⁾ That was a legitimate argument to make for any international disputes. In fact, Japan-China relations have deteriorated so much that people need to recall that avoiding another war was a fundamental motivation for the early Japanese and Chinese leaders to make compromise to make this relationship work. Shelving of territorial disputes was essentially a delay strategy to avoid conflicts now. China had just had a border clash with the Soviet Union over territorial disputes in 1969, merely three years before Premier Zhou Enlai wanted to push the Diaoyudao/Senkaku issue to the side, essentially shelving the issue without using that expression. By saying that the Japanese government made its decision to prevent conflict, the Japanese government would take some criticism, but it was criticized anyway. Moreover, taking some domestic heat would also help improve relations with the Chinese government, which felt that by forgoing previous commitment, the Japanese government had unfairly exposed the Chinese government to domestic criticism.

The DPJ government was severely criticized by the media, the public, the opposition and from within the DPJ. In some way, the treatment of the DPJ government is typical in a democracy when the government is perceived to have failed in a major foreign policy issue and to have embarrassed the nation. But in the Japanese case, all these attacks were mainly personal in nature and there was not much serious debate over policy. In particular, even though the LDP might have done better if they had been in charge but viewing their attack on the DPJ without any clear policy alternative makes you wonder whether that would necessarily be the case. The simple fact is that Japanese party politics is not functioning as well as it should at this juncture of Japanese political history.

25) *Asahi shimbun*, September 26, 2010, p. 2.

Regional Comparisons

If we put the collision incident in the context of China's interaction with the Northeast Asian democracies, a few observations stand out about Japanese diplomacy. Comparing the three democracies, Taiwan should be most concerned and vulnerable vis-à-vis China. China claims Taiwan, which would be an ultimate threat if one considers Taiwan not to be part of China. China supports half of Korea while maintaining a good relationship with the other half. From an international law perspective, both Koreas are sovereign states. But from a historical cultural perspective, the Korean nation is divided. By contrast, China and Japan have territorial disputes over a few rocks at their peripheries. But they managed to turn the dispute into a major fight a year ago. What does this say about Taiwanese diplomacy, Korean diplomacy or Japanese diplomacy?

One may argue that precisely when China affects a country's basic national security interest that country has to be more careful. By contrast, because Japan is in the same power league as China and has a formal alliance with the United States, it may feel more confident facing China. One may also argue that this is more about China's growing ambition, capability and domestic vulnerabilities than about the three democracies. But focusing on the Japanese side of the story in this paper, this author views a key reason for the differences between the three democracies in their relations with China in the fact that transition in Japan has been particularly detrimental to its diplomacy. The DPJ government managed to have problems with most of its neighbors and for a time with the United States over Futenma. Japan has also not helped itself in the multilateral forums such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement or climate change.

When Taiwan went through transition in the mid 1990s, it experienced far worse security tension with China. Then both the Kuomintang and the Democratic Progressive Party adapted. President Ma Ying-jeou has demonstrated impressive diplomatic skills by maintaining a good relationship with Beijing without compromising Taiwan's autonomy. Taiwan also has a good relationship with Japan. The transition in the Republic of Korea actually helped to improve relations with China. President Kim Daejong adopted a sunshine policy towards North Korea. In the end, what matters is what policy a new government adopts rather than power transition itself. The DPJ government has not been that flexible over a number of issues. Right now, Japan does not appear able to compromise in an autonomous fashion. When it comes to tough issues, the government either drags things out until circumstances change, as in the case of Futenma, or to appear that Japan has no choice, thus shifting responsibility to foreign pressure. Both approaches create their own problems.

Japan's diplomatic problems result from dysfunctional party politics and lack of effective leadership, which refers to the ability to set a clear and reasonable objective, be decisive, have courage to tell the public what he or she is really doing and why that is important, formulate

a plan, and follow through. To do that, one has to have a system to choose the most capable leader and then give that leader a reasonable length of time to accomplish policy goals for the country.

Looking into the Future

The March 11th disasters helped to improve the Japan-China relationship. While feeling compassionate based on their own experience with mega natural disasters, the Chinese also saw March 11 as creating an opportunity to improve relations with Japan, allowing them to do things that could not yet be done prior to March 11.²⁶⁾ The Kan government was also seeking to repair the relationship with China. But despite better atmosphere in Japan-China relations, all the existing issues remain.

China's rise has shaken up East Asian international relations and there is much uncertainty about its intention and ability. Specific to Japan-China relations, the old structure and commitment are breaking down but we are yet to see a new structure for the relationship. Strategic partnership sounds good but it is too broad and vague for operational impact. What the two countries need are practical, middle-range mechanisms to manage existing and emerging disputes while allowing the deep and extensive economic and cultural ties built over the past four decades to finally have a chance to play a greater moderating effect on the relationship. It is doubtful that the two countries can manage another collision incident without a serious breach in their relationship. Right now, the best they can do is to avoid disputes. The Chinese government is going through its own power transition and facing severe domestic challenges despite its relatively stronger performance in the Great Recession. And Japan needs to put its house in order.

But Japanese party politics is adrift, which is a principal reason that Japanese diplomacy is also adrift. The confusion in Japanese party politics is likely to continue in the short term at least. The DPJ will have its general party election in September 2012, which means that Noda Yoshihiko, who became Japan's new prime minister on August 30, 2011, will have to face possible contenders within a year if not being challenged before. Like the September 2010 election, the August 2011 election was also defined by the pro- and anti-Ozawa tension. Noda's cabinet lineup announced on September 2 reflected these intra-party concerns, balancing different factions to achieve intra-party harmony and including few big names seemingly with a one-year term in mind. Thus, the Noda government was not ambitious. While Noda wants to improve cooperation with the opposition parties, they are likely to continue criticizing the DPJ. In particular, the LDP is determined to force a snap election in which the DPJ will surely lose seats if not power altogether. With all these party politics intrigues and given that Japan

26) Discussion with Chinese analysts, Beijing, June 9-11, 2011.

should indeed focus on reconstruction and bringing the Fukushima nuclear accident to a closure, it is difficult to see how Japan would be able to punch at its weight in the world in the short term.

To make things worse for Japanese diplomacy, some foreign countries may stop considering the nuance of Japanese party politics and simply move forward with their agenda following their own timetable and bureaucratic routine. As a case in point, two Chinese fishing patrol ships operated in the area close to Senkaku and briefly breached the area considered by Japan to be its territorial water in the morning of August 24, 2011. This Chinese move did not appear to be a test of Japanese resolve during another DPJ presidential election. Rather, the Chinese were trying to regularize their claim to Diaoyudao without much concern about Japanese domestic politics. An accident would be far more serious this time around than in September 2010 because it would now involve Chinese government ships rather than a private fishing boat.

One cannot just blame foreign governments in this regard since much of Japanese public is also turned off by Japanese party politics. But there is danger when it comes to foreign policy because foreign governments should pay more attention now precisely because what happens within the DPJ and between the DPJ and other parties matters more than before. Unlike in the 1955 system, it is harder to predict how the Japanese government would react in a particular case. One can imagine a scenario in which an incident coincides with a particular stage of Japanese party politics combined with strong public sentiment, providing conditions for a perfect storm. That would surely not be in anyone's interest.