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EXPERTS TAKE

‘The more China makes claims of Japanese militarism, the more anti-China sentiment grows within Japan’

An Interview with Professor Kokubun Ryosei

Introduction

Japan and China bilateral relations are currently facing severe strain. Following remarks by Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi in November regarding a potential Taiwan contingency, and Beijing’s subsequent accusations of a Japanese “resurgence of militarism”, high-level dialogues and person-to-person exchanges have been canceled, military activity in and around East China Sea has heightened and China has implemented export controls on several Japanese companies and institutions. To understand whether this moment represents an unprecedented crisis or a familiar cyclical downturn, this Experts’ Take explores the intersecting historical, economic, and political patterns driving Tokyo and Beijing’s complex relationship today.

To navigate these issues, Viktor Hellbom, Mathilde Huard and Diana Nieto Cruz, sat down with Professor Kokubun Ryosei, a leading authority



on Sino-Japanese relations and Chinese domestic and foreign policy. Professor Kokubun is a Professor Emeritus at Keio University, where he served as the Director of the East Asian Institute (1999–2007) and Dean of the Faculty of Law and Politics (2007–2012). Bringing a vital security perspective to his extensive academic expertise, he also served as the President of the National Defense Academy of Japan from 2012 to 2021. The interview was conducted in early June 2026.

A prominent voice in regional diplomacy, Professor Kokubun is the former president of both the Japan Association for Asian Studies and the Japan Association of International Relations. He has edited several foundational works on regional security and diplomacy, including Challenges for China-Japan-US Cooperation (1998), The Rise of China and a Changing East Asian Order (2004), and Sino-Japanese Relations: The Need for Conflict Prevention and Management (2008).

Question: Given the deep historical grievances between China and Japan, especially after World War Two, how do familiar historical patterns and modern global geopolitical trends intersect to shape the dynamics of the current crisis?

Answer: Simply speaking, it's always ups and downs. Some people say the most critical moment between Japan and China is right now. Well, is it true? It's hard to tell, because in terms of the history of postwar Japan-China relations, there were no diplomatic ties between Tokyo and Beijing until 1972, and the two countries were in a state of hostility against each other amid the Cold War, and furthermore, so much has happened since diplomatic normalization started in 1972.

The main topics between the two countries have been mostly two: history perception issues and the Taiwan issue. Right now, China is criticizing Japan for a “resurgence of militarism,” but this kind of conflict has erupted so many times in the past. For example, China levelled the same accusations against Japan with the “textbook issue” in the 1980s. Back then we maintained good relations, so it didn't become a huge problem. In the 1990s, things changed as China started to rise. History issues continued, but the economic relationship was still okay because China was developing fast and every country was trying to invest there.

It was really only at the start of the 2000s that we faced a very serious history problem: the Yasukuni Shrine issue. When Prime Minister Koizumi started visiting the shrine every year officially, it became a major controversy because Class A war criminals are enshrined there. First, the Japanese newspapers criticized it, and then China and Korea followed. Because these history issues kept coming to the fore every time China felt geopolitically or economically confident, the Japanese public is frankly a bit tired of it: it's been going on for so many years.

The other constant issue is Taiwan. Japan has respected China's stance since 1972. We had two very serious Taiwan Strait crises in the 1950s, but the most critical period for us happened in the 1990s. Taiwan held its first democratic presidential election in 1996, and Lee Teng-hui was elected. Wary of his pro-independence leanings, China issued a missile threat in advance. At that time, a crisis erupted in the Taiwan Strait, prompting the U.S. military to dispatch two aircraft carriers, among other measures. Having received his education in Japanese-ruled colonies before World War II, President Lee Teng spoke Japanese almost every day and really loved Japan, which made China very angry. Given

these circumstances, it appears that the Jiang Zemin administration at that time even harbored suspicions that Japan might be considering re-colonizing Taiwan. In essence, these issues happen again and again, and the Japanese government has had to establish certain security arrangements in response.

Viewed from this historical perspective, China's current hardline stance toward Japan appears to follow a pattern that has been seen repeatedly. However, there are several key differences between past cases and the present situation.

First, in addition to issues related to history and Taiwan, problems concerning more concrete national interests such as territory and sovereignty have emerged. As a result, the clash of security interests between the two countries has become more pronounced. This situation has become even more complex as it intertwines with the issues of history and Taiwan. Second, while Japan was economically powerful in the past and wielded a certain degree of influence both internationally and over China, China now surpasses Japan across a range of domains, and Japan's own influence is steadily waning. Another is that, while the United States traditionally tended to prioritize its alliance with Japan during periods of Sino-Japanese tension, President Trump has shown no inclination to adopt that stance and maintains an ambiguous position regarding Sino-Japanese tensions.

In other words, China's recent hardline stance

clearly reflects an intention to isolate Japan, and this dynamic can be said to differ fundamentally from the past. One positive development for Japan is that, so far, South Korea has stopped simply falling in line with China.

Question: Sino-Japan relations are often described in terms of “cold politics, hot economics”. Another common description is “Mutually Beneficial Relationship Based on common Strategic Interests”. Do you see these descriptions as still valid in the near or the long-term future?

Answer: First of all, the term “cold politics, hot economics” doesn't apply anymore. That was a slogan for what happened in the early 21st century during the Koizumi administration. I was working in a kind of advisory committee for the Foreign Ministry on Sino-Japanese relations back then. Because the Yasukuni Shrine issue was so serious, the political relationship was almost disconnected, but the economy was still doing okay. So, politics was cold, but economics was hot. That was true at the time.

But 20 years have passed and a new agenda came in, particularly after 2010: the Senkaku Islands territorial dispute—or *Diaoyu dao* in Chinese. Security problems started taking over, but even before that, politics had already cooled down because of this historical perception issue.

I actually participated in shaping our new

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relationship. Sino-Japanese relations used to just be called “Friendship”, *Zhong-Ri youhao* in Chinese, *Nichū yūkō* in Japanese. But that concept can be very narrow-minded; if you have a disagreement over history, suddenly, “oh, you’re not a friend.” We decided we needed a new term. When Prime Minister Abe visited China in 2006, he met with President Hu Jintao, who knew Japan well. Under General Secretary Hu Yaobang, who was very close to Japan in the 1980s, Hu Jintao was effectively in charge of youth exchanges between Japan and China. Together, they decided on a “Mutually Beneficial Relationship Based on Common Strategic Interests.” This meant Sino-Japanese relations needed to be looked at through a broader international or East Asian framework.

That concept was elaborated further in a 2008 document. It’s an amazing document, even today: China under Hu Jintao agreed to joint exploration in the East China Sea, and I was so surprised because it was the first time China officially used the term “basic values,” which included human rights. But the problem is, it’s very difficult to actually achieve all those beautiful words. After Xi Jinping became president, they basically stopped using that term from the Chinese side, though surprisingly he brought it up again a couple of years ago.

So, it’s always ups and downs. Dealing with neighboring countries is just difficult sometimes, look at Japan and Korea, or even Sweden and Denmark. Right now, China is harshly criticizing Japan over a “resurgence of militarism,” and as I said, Japanese people are so tired of constantly hearing it. China uses it as a political card, but it’s often tied to their own domestic politics. Jiang Zemin raised history issues often, Hu Jintao did not, while Xi started to criticize Japan again for “resurgence of militarism”, especially since problems arose with the Takaichi administration.

Given this situation, while the ups and downs

in Japan-China relations are likely to continue, it seems unlikely that Japan’s political relations with China will ever return to the era of passionate “friendship” seen in the past. What is needed is “strategic thinking,” but judging from the current situation, this does not appear to be an easy task.

Question: Many commentators seem to compare the current crisis in Japan-China relations to the Senkaku/Diaoyu crisis in the 2010s, pointing to for example China’s repeated pattern of employing restrictions on exports, tourism and people-to-people exchanges. At the same time, Japan’s and China’s actions reflect some sharp breaks with the past, including Japan’s downgrading of its labeling for its relationship with China and China employing formal rather than informal economic sanctions. Do you think the two contexts are comparable, or is there a unique element to this new crisis?

Answer. Well, we have had these repeated kinds of cycles, always alternating between a good and bad relationship. But that point is changing a little bit. For example, you raised the concept of cold politics, hot economics. Japanese companies are gradually changing their attitude towards China. Japanese companies have faced many issues operating in China—boycotts against Japanese products, anti-Japanese campaigns. You also have the issue of the “Taiwan contingency,” and more importantly, the future of the Chinese economy. Japanese managers in the Chinese companies used to take all kinds of initiatives to do business in China, while European and American companies were mostly leaving operations to a Chinese management. Japanese companies are also changing into that kind of system nowadays. I think Japanese companies are preparing for the future. Most of them are really thinking to gradually retreat from the Chinese market. I think this has not gone unnoticed in China.

And then domestic politics is always in the background. In China there are some internationalist minded people, including top leaders. There are also many nationalistic-oriented people. Now we see the more nationalistic type dominating in China. And it's related to Xi Jinping's leadership. But of course they are always competing. And in the case of Japan, we see a similar dynamic. Now when Sino-Japanese relations are in trouble some of the internationalist minded people argue that we should have good relations with China. The other side maintain that China will always be China, a one-party state that has not changed at all.

China's attitude towards Japan has also changed, particular since 2010, when China's GDP surpassed Japan's. Since the Senkaku Islands dispute that year, there have been incidents such as restrictions on rare earth exports and the detention of Japanese businesspeople. This is correlated with the shift in national power, and from Japan's perspective, it amounts to China forgetting the favor Japan did in supporting it through yen loans and other means.

Then we have the U.S. factor as I mentioned before. I think when China is facing the relationship with Japan, they are always watching the U.S. reaction. So, if you look at the issue of history or territory issues in Sino-Japanese relations, you always need to consider the U.S. reaction.

Question: Since the devastating impact of China's rare earth export restrictions on Japan in 2010, the issue of economic security and reducing dependencies across the economy have been a central goal for Japan. With Beijing in February banning dual-use items to 20 Japanese defense companies as a response to Japan's alleged "remilitarization", how reliant is Japan on China's rare earth processing for its defense buildup? To what extent is the current diplomatic crisis accelerating Japan's diversification efforts?

Answer. Following the 2010 collision involving fishing vessels near the Senkaku Islands, China announced export restrictions on rare earths to Japan. Until then, Japan had relied on imports from China for approximately 90 percent of its supply. In response to China's measures, the Japanese government has sought to diversify its supply chain for these scarce resources by seeking new import sources in Australia, Vietnam, Thailand, and other countries. However, it appears that Japan still relies on China for about 60 percent of its supply.

It appears that companies had anticipated a potential export ban, and many reportedly stockpiled rare earths and other materials for future use, while imports were still possible; it is reported that they are currently utilizing those reserves. There is also talk of Japan on their own

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developing rare earths in its coastal waters, but this is said to be difficult due to the deep-sea locations and the long distances involved, making it costly.

Although China announced an export ban targeting 20 Japanese companies and institutions involved in the defense industry, the reality is that China has specifically designated only a few companies specializing in the defense sector from among the numerous small and medium-sized enterprises under the umbrella of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, Ltd. (4 companies) and IHI Corporation (6 companies). This is because imposing a ban on the entire Mitsubishi Heavy Industries or IHI Corporation would also cause problems for China itself. In other words, China is taking care not to suffer losses itself.

Question: During a joint military exercise by Chinese and Russian bombers around Japan in December 2025, the Chinese aircrafts aimed its radar system at Japanese aircrafts. The U.S. called the actions destabilizing but have so far, at least in public, been rather quiet on the diplomatic crisis between Japan and China. How should we understand the U.S. response? How do you think the US-China summit impacted tensions?

Answer. Of course in the short term there is a certain impact, but I think the impact is relatively minor.

If you look back at the history of Japan-China relations, as I mentioned, the U.S. has always been one of the most important factors. It is a key factor for China in its making of foreign policy towards Japan. Nowadays when President Trump is showing limited interest in the Taiwan issue and Sino-Japanese tensions, and the U.S. reaction to the diplomatic crisis has been rather toned down. I think China sees this as giving them leeway to

maintain a more aggressive stance towards Japan.

President Trump continues to take a clearly hardline stance toward allied countries including Japan, a phenomenon can be described as unprecedented in postwar U.S. diplomacy. The question is what will happen after the Trump administration. A useful point of reference is Trump's first term. Since then, President Trump has spoken of reducing the U.S. military burden worldwide and demanding that allies, including Japan, increase their own military contributions. However, during his first term, dissenting voices within the administration and a lack of policy consistency meant virtually no change occurred in the U.S. military posture in the Asia-Pacific region.

With the start of his second term, there were concerns that a gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Asia-Pacific might occur. However, the administration has so far been preoccupied with tariffs, issues in the Western Hemisphere, and military involvement in the Iran crisis, and no major changes have occurred in the U.S. military posture in the Pacific region. Joint U.S.-Japan military exercises, in fact, have been increasing year by year.

Given this, it is possible that no significant changes will occur in the composition of U.S. forces in the Asia-Pacific during the remaining two and a half years of the Trump administration. Japanese and U.S. security officials are quietly and closely monitoring this situation.

People say that recently U.S.-China relations have been, at least on the surface, improved because President Trump visited China. But the way I see it, this summit is not necessarily about the bilateral relations between United States and China. This was much more about a very personal relationship between President Trump and Xi Jinping and their calculations about domestic politics. The two leaders are scheduled

to hold another summit in the United States in September. Trump wants to win the midterm elections in November, and for Xi Jinping, this fall is crucial for securing a fourth term at next year's Party Congress; both need to project an image—particularly for domestic audiences—that they are ruling the world together. That is the essence of G2.

Question: China's unilateral gas development in defiance of the 2008 agreement, combined with the recent missile deployment near Yonaguni Island, suggests a deliberate hardening of its position in the East China Sea. Would you characterize this as a coordinated escalation strategy which could lead to a military clash given frozen diplomatic channel, or rather a series of opportunistic moves testing the limits of Japanese and American tolerance?

Answer. Because of the U.S.-Japan alliance, and later the so-called Yoshida doctrine, which put economic recovery on top of the agenda, Japan's security developments have always been particularly slow. Relying on U.S. security guarantees, Japan focused its resources on rapid economic development, while maintaining a low military defense budget.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, the question of Taiwan's contingency grew more

salient in Japan, although the situation has been the way it is for the past 70 years already. Since Prime Minister Takaichi's remarks last November regarding a contingency in Taiwan, China has stepped up its activities in the East China Sea. There has been a sharp increase in the activities of militia disguised as fishing boats; at one point, approximately 2,000 vessels simultaneously engaged in repeated acts of provocation against Japan.

Yonaguni Island is the closest island to Taiwan and is within sight of Taiwan on clear days. The deployment of the Self-Defense Forces to this island began about 10 years ago, following a decision made by a local referendum. The deployment of missiles to the Amami Islands, which stretches from Kyushu to Okinawa, also began in 2019.

Since the Senkaku Islands dispute in 2010, Chinese incursions into Japan's exclusive economic zone and territorial waters have become routine. The deployment of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) serves as a deterrent against these activities, not to escalate tensions. From Japan's perspective, it is China that is escalating tensions.

Regarding deterrence, while there has been talk of a reduction in U.S. military presence since the Trump administration, this has not materialized. However, given that an accidental clash between Japan and China could occur at any time, security dialogue is indispensable. Needless

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to say, the resumption of high-level exchanges is a prerequisite for this. Japan, from a defense point of view, is starting to realize the need to establish their own strong network, and it can be said, in my opinion, that Japan is finally awakening when it comes to realpolitik in world politics. Let me reiterate: this is the minimum obligation required to protect Japan's sovereignty, and it is intended to preserve peace, not to engage combat. What is needed in the meantime are diplomatic efforts to avoid conflict.

Question: Beijing has consistently framed Japan's defense buildup in the language of historical militarism, a narrative that resonates deeply with Chinese domestic opinion. To what extent is this rhetoric a tool of domestic political management, drawing onto China's behavior in the East China Sea?

Answer: China has repeatedly accused Japan of "militarism" in the past as mentioned before. In the 1980s, China criticized Japan in connection with issues such as the textbook controversy and Prime Minister Nakasone's official visit to the Yasukuni Shrine; in the 1990s, China did so regarding the redefinition of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, which coincided with the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996; and in the 21st century, China has criticized Japan over matters such as Prime Minister Koizumi's official visit to the

Yasukuni Shrine.

This has often served as a card for China to play to sway public opinion within Japan, and it has also been linked to power struggles within China's domestic politics. While the Japanese side is thoroughly fed up with these repeated accusations of "militarism" from the past, the more China makes such claims, the more anti-China sentiment grows within Japan.

Currently, China is once again criticizing Japan as "militarist," but from Japan's perspective, it is China that is expanding its military and is the one truly deserving of the label "militarist." Furthermore, there are almost no countries in the world that agree with this, and even South Korea is not siding with China this time. Since the end of the war, Japan has upheld democracy as an absolute national principle, and its political system is characterized by extremely robust civilian control. This is symbolized by the appointment of a private university professor like myself as the president of the National Defense Academy of Japan.

Question: Both the Japanese and Chinese side have intensified their rhetoric and military deployments during March and April (2026), most recently with the Japanese destroyer Ikazuchi transiting the Taiwan strait, and China sending patrols and warships to East China Sea. On the rhetorical front, China has called Sanae

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Takaichi's comments a challenge to "China's sovereignty" and a reflection of Japan's ambitions "to invade and colonize Taiwan" and "to revive militarism", while Japan is set to release an updated National Security Strategy later this year, which many expect will include much stronger language on China as a threat. With these developments in mind, how do you view potential escalation scenarios? Furthermore, are the current crisis management tools between Tokyo and Beijing strong enough to prevent further escalation?

Answer. Regarding Prime Minister Takaichi's remarks, opinions range from the government's assertion that they do not alter Japan's traditional stance to the view that she went too far. Even if Taiwan were attacked, Japan could not retaliate unless Japan itself was directly attacked. Or only after the United States is attacked and requests assistance from its ally, Japan, and the Japanese government considers whether to exercise its right to collective self-defense can it respond. Since Japan has no diplomatic relations with Taiwan, the reality is that Taiwan does not fall under the scope of the right to collective self-defense. Japan's legal restrictions are extremely strict.

As for why China reacted so harshly, it may have been an attempt to drive down the Takaichi administration's approval ratings, or perhaps to gauge the Trump administration's reaction. In reality, the more China criticizes Japan, the more support Takaichi receives. While the Trump administration's response to this issue is not entirely clear, the actual security cooperation between Japan and the U.S. in the Pacific is closer than one might imagine.

Within Japan, a majority supports improving relations with China. However, China continues to label Japan as a "resurgent militarist power," and there is absolutely no sign of any proactive arguments or positions in favor of dialogue with

Japan within China. While Japan's business community hopes to improve relations with China, the enthusiasm for the Chinese market seen in the past no longer exists. Rather, having experienced the ups and downs of Japan-China relations over the years, and due to concerns about the future of the Chinese economy, the business community tends to be somewhat cautious. China's attractiveness is decreasing in the eyes of Japanese companies.

Now, even Japanese China scholars and journalists are reluctant to visit China for fear of being detained. The scope of exchange in Japan-China relations is certainly shrinking. It is inevitable that this state of affairs will continue for some time, but such situations have occurred frequently in the past, and perhaps now is simply a period of endurance. For reconciliation between Japan and China, dialogue between the two leaders remains, above all, indispensable.

Yet, the Takaichi government reached a certain consensus: Japan is better off if it has a good and cordial relationship with China. The Chinese side may be trying to gauge whether the Takaichi administration is here for the short term or the long term.

Conclusion

During the interview, Professor Kokubun discussed different aspects of the Sino-Japanese diplomatic relationship starting from a historical point of view and concluding with a look into future possibilities. The main takeaways that emerged are:

Patterns in the relationship: Professor Kokubun describes Sino-Japanese relations as a constant cycle between tensions (downs) and rapprochements (ups), strongly cautioning against headlines that frame the current diplomatic crisis as an unprecedented "new historical low." Instead, he points to a set of enduring constants that drive friction: differences in historical perception, the Taiwan question, and since 2010 increasingly

security and territorial issues. He argues that domestic politics, the power balance between the two countries, and the influence of the United States heavily shape bilateral policy choices. Furthermore, the repeated use of historical grievances by Beijing has backfired, fueling public fatigue and anti-China sentiment in Japan. With recurring tensions, Kokubun argues for the establishment of a long-term pragmatic and strategic framework to govern relations, similar to what was achieved with the “strategic mutually beneficial relationship” in 2006.

Economic security: Cold politics, hot economics, or the deepening of economic relations despite political tensions, used to be an accurate description of Japan-China relations. However, driven by China’s decreasing economic growth prospects, geo-

political tensions and a deteriorating political climate for Japanese companies in China, Japanese businesses are gradually seeking to distance themselves from the Chinese market. Kokubun notes that this is a worrying development for China and that the limited and targeted scope of its economic sanctions on Japan indicate that economic dependencies are reciprocal.

Future actions: While characterizing the current geopolitical spat as a “period of endurance,” Kokubun stresses that the threat of an accidental military clash is still very present. To maintain and expand existing high-level communication is therefore an absolute prerequisite to prevent tactical miscalculations that could escalate into a broader conflict.