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THE RESURGENCE OF NATIONALISM IN CHINA AND JAPAN:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Since the end of the Cold War several analysts have considered Asia as relatively prone to instability given the structure of the regional system, which is characterized by growing multi-polarity and shallow political and economic integration. Moreover, the presence of divergent political systems throughout the region in the form of democracies and authoritarian regimes, unsolved territorial claims, competition over energy resources, unresolved historical issues, and rising nationalism has contributed to the view that the region, in Aaron Friedberg's words, is «ripe for rivalry»¹.

In this context, Sino-Japanese relations are paramount to stability in the region since Japan and China are the most prominent regional actors. The two economies constitute approximately three-quarters of the region's economic activity, making them central to the sustainability of the regional economic framework. Moreover, the two countries enjoy high levels of economic interdependence: China is Japan's primary trading partner and Japan ranks as China's third largest trading partner and is also China's largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI), after Hong Kong². This economic

¹ A. Friedberg, «Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia», *International Security* XVIII/3 (winter 1993-94), p. 25.

² Kato Takatoshi, «The Us-Japan-China Triangle», lecture delivered at Johns Hopkins University, SAIS, Washington DC. 14 November 2008.

Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, the issues of historical burdens and animosities surrounding the visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, as well as violent anti-Japan demonstrations in China, became the source of heated discussions and contributed to the freezing of political relations between Japan and China. The demise of the USSR as a strategic concern and the end of bipolarity facilitated the resurgence of what is believed to be the main reason behind Sino-Japanese animosities: nationalism. The resurgence of nationalistic narratives in the last twenty years is an international phenomenon. Indeed, there are important common structural and domestic factors leading to renewed animosities around the world as well as in Japan and China.

However, there are distinctive traits of the two countries' respective new nationalistic waves, as Chinese neo-nationalism can be studied as an evolution from the old top-down pattern of anti-Japanese sentiment starting with the elite and trickling down to a bottom-up one. Japanese neo-nationalism, on the contrary, may be studied as a mostly top-down mindset, largely confined to parts of the conservative elite where nationalistic narratives are understood also as a means to move away from the deeply-rooted anti-militaristic ethos.

Chinese leaders' domestic support also depends on their foreign policy towards Japan. They are easily under substantial pressure when making deals with their Japanese counterparts, who, on the contrary, have a relatively free hand on their China policy, but are unable to rally domestic support towards a decisively more pro-active international posture. The paper attempts to dissect the two nationalisms and understand how their respective active and reactive dynamics affect bilateral relations.

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