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# MISPERCEPTIONS, THREAT INFLATION AND MISTRUST IN CHINA-JAPAN RELATIONS

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## ABOUT THE PROJECT: CONFIDENCE, TRUST AND EMPATHY IN ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY

Interstate conflict in the Asia-Pacific represents a serious threat, not only to millions of people in some of the most heavily and most densely populated countries on Earth, but to the global economy as a whole, for which the Asia-Pacific is increasingly the engine.

Begun in 2014, this project aims to make major contributions to the processes of security governance in the Asia-Pacific by designing and demonstrating the utility of empathy-building measures. The project's premise is that insecurity in the region is a function not of insufficient architecture, but of low-grade communication and a lack of mutual understanding.

The Asia-Pacific region is famously home to an "alphabet soup" of associations, forums, meetings, processes and other security governance mechanisms, making it the most thickly "governed" region of the world in this respect. Yet it is also the most precarious, as home to three of the world's most dangerous flashpoints — the Korean peninsula, the East China Sea and the South China Sea — each of which implicates at least two nuclear-armed states.

Researchers with the project are exploring two key current concepts in the Asia-Pacific security discourse — confidence and trust — and their relationship to empathy. They will further explore practical mechanisms for promoting confidence, trust and empathy in bilateral dialogues and multilateral settings. Their work will be shared through CIGI publications and political and public outreach activities in Canada and in participating countries in the Asia-Pacific.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Benoit Hardy-Chartrand** is a senior research associate at CIGI where he conducts research on Asia-Pacific security issues. Prior to joining CIGI, Benoit was an associate researcher at the Raoul-Dandurand Chair of Strategic and Diplomatic Studies and a junior fellow at United Nations University (UNU) in Tokyo. In addition, he conducted research at the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association, the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies in China and UNU's Institute for Sustainability and Peace. Benoit has a B.A. in Political Science from Université de Montréal, during which time he spent one year studying international relations at Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea. He then obtained a Master of Arts in International Relations from Université du Québec à Montréal. Benoit's research interests and expertise include East Asian geopolitics and China-Japan-Korea relations, as well as North Korean politics and society.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The period between 2012 and 2014 saw relations between East Asia's two pre-eminent powers, China and Japan, reach their lowest point since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1972. An acrimonious territorial dispute in the East China Sea and differing perceptions of their shared history have been the primary drivers of tensions. Despite a relative thaw at the official level since the countries' leaders met for the first time in November 2014, tensions have since remained high. As bilateral relations were in steep decline, China and Japan have mutually accused each other of posing a great danger to each other and the region in general. In both countries, threat-related rhetoric has permeated the official and media discourses. Through an analysis of these discourses, this paper explores mutual perceptions in China and Japan, and argues that each side systematically overestimates the level of threat the other poses, with pernicious consequences for bilateral relations and regional stability.

## INTRODUCTION

If one were to assess the recent state of affairs between China and Japan based on current official discourse and media commentary in both countries, one would likely think that Asia's two foremost powers had reached a critical stage in their relations. In 2014, one would have read in the Chinese media about "an increasingly aggressive Japan [that looks] poised to assert its military presence over the Asia-Pacific" (Xinhua 2014c), and heard from a Chinese official that its neighbour needed to make "a clean break with militarism" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2014c). Conversely, on the Japanese side, one would have read in its media that the "Chinese threat is already approaching right before our eyes" (Kasahara 2014) and heard the current Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe (2014) say that "China's foreign policy approach and its military developments have become issues of concern for the international community." Despite official pronouncements on both sides reiterating the importance of Sino-Japanese relations, a person reading these accounts would think that opposing political systems, ideologies, objectives and interests have made China and Japan natural rivals that can do no more than keep the lid on their inherent antagonism.

High prevalence of threat-related rhetoric in official and media discourses is linked to an overall weakening of Sino-Japanese relations, which raises certain questions about the impact and nature of threat perception and threat-related rhetoric. Can a lack of mutual understanding increase the perception to the public, and political leaders, that a foreign country presents a threat? Is the level of threat wilfully inflated by China and Japan? What does the nature of threat perception and discursive strategies tell us about potential de-escalation strategies available to states

involved in antagonistic relations? Few countries outside of China and Japan present a better case for the study of these questions.

While the relationship between China and Japan — respectively the second- and third-largest economies in the world — has long been fraught with mistrust, it has reached, in the past few years, a level of tension rarely seen since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1972. Since September 2012, when the government of Japan purchased islands that had been claimed by China, Tokyo and Beijing have mutually accused each other of representing a threat to peace and stability in the East Asian region. The rhetoric of threat has permeated the public and official discourse in both countries. The friction at the official level has also been reflected in public opinion, with mutual perceptions between the Japanese and Chinese populations reaching unprecedented levels of negativity in 2013 and 2014 (The Genron NPO 2015). By creating conditions that are ripe for miscalculations, the combination of heightened perceptions of threat and a high level of mistrust creates a potent mix that can have harmful consequences for bilateral relations and regional stability. While 2015 saw a relative decline in accusatory rhetoric and an increase in high-level contacts between the two countries, Sino-Japanese relations continue to be fragile. Above all, despite the apparent thaw, the underlying sources of tension remain wholly unresolved.

There have been few attempts to dissect Sino-Japanese mutual perceptions and analyze the views that hold most sway with political leaders and the media in both countries. Understanding perceptions is crucial, as country leaders (and the public) are not motivated by facts, but rather by their perceptions of the facts (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall 2005). These perceptions can be influenced by myriad factors, including history, culture and ideology. As China and Japan have a long and complex history of rivalry and war and can be prone to nationalist urges, they are both inclined to view the other through a lens that amplifies the significance of their words and actions. This lens contributes to distorted perceptions of threat, with negative consequences for bilateral relations.

This paper aims to explore the nature of official and non-official discourse and mutual perceptions in China and Japan as they relate to their bilateral relations. Drawing on analysis of Chinese and Japanese rhetoric, it will examine the nature and sources of both current and past threat perceptions. It will argue that government officials, the media and public figures in both countries inflate — in some cases deliberately, in others inadvertently — the level of threat posed by the other country, with a significant impact on public opinion, bilateral relations and regional tensions.

## SOURCES OF SINO-JAPANESE TENSIONS AND NEGATIVE MUTUAL PERCEPTIONS

Looking at the state of play since 2012 between Asia's two pre-eminent powers, it is easy to forget that, apart from a few bitter controversies and a lingering mistrust, their relations have been generally peaceful since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1972. "China fever," which was characterized by high enthusiasm for China in Japanese business circles and a romantic image of the country (Takeuchi 2012), hit Japan in the 1960s and reached its peak around the time of normalization (Ijiri 1990). This phenomenon would be unthinkable today given the high levels of public antipathy toward China in Japan. On the security and military side, neither country has posed a direct threat to the other and the sense of conflict that earlier characterized their relations was replaced by a generally stable situation (Iriye 1990) that lasted until the 2000s.

While relations between Tokyo and Beijing have long been balancing between closer cooperation and rivalry (Self 2002-3), relations took a turn for the worse in 2012. They have since been marred by high tensions, notwithstanding the relative thaw that started in early 2015 following the leaders' meeting in Beijing. Today, with an intensified rivalry, vociferous expressions of nationalism and high levels of popular enmity, China-Japan relations seem at times headed for conflict.

Current tensions are due to two main issues. First, a territorial standoff over the Senkaku islands, a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea, has led to an acrimonious war of words and potentially dangerous encounters in the surrounding waters and airspace. The disputed islands are administered by Japan, but claimed by China, which calls them the Diaoyu islands, and are located in an area potentially rich in oil and gas reserves.<sup>1</sup> Tensions flared in early 2012 when Shintaro Ishihara, then the governor of Tokyo, and a controversial right-wing politician known for his nationalistic views, announced that the Tokyo metropolitan government would buy the Senkaku islands from their private owners for the purpose of constructing facilities and forcefully asserting Japan's sovereignty. The Japanese prime minister at the time, Yoshihiko Noda, fearing severe backlash from Beijing as a result of Ishihara's intended actions, announced that the Japanese government would, itself, purchase three of the islands, officially for the purpose of "peaceful and stable management" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [MOFA] 2012a). With a view to minimizing confrontation, the Noda government notified Beijing of its plan to purchase the islands. Based on its previous interactions with Chinese

officials, Tokyo expected Beijing to perfunctorily express its opposition to the nationalization. However, after the move was made official in September 2012, China's angry reaction and confrontational stance took the Japanese government by surprise.<sup>2</sup> Beijing viewed Tokyo's move as breaking the status quo and directly undermining China's sovereignty claims.

China, however, was able to exploit the crisis triggered by the Japanese government's purchase of the islands, subsequently expanding its physical presence around the Senkaku islands (Manicom 2014). The months following nationalization saw an increase in the number of incursions by Chinese vessels in what Japan considers its territorial waters, as well as an increase in the number of scrambles by Japanese fighter jets in response to perceived violations of its airspace. During the last quarter of 2014 — a period that included the first summit meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Abe — Japan scrambled fighter jets a record 164 times in response to approaches by Chinese aircraft. In the period between April and September 2015, Japan scrambled jets 231 times against Chinese aircraft, 24 times more than the same period in 2014 and at the highest frequency since 2001 (Japan Ministry of Defense [MOD] 2015). This demonstrates that while official discourse was somewhat less heated in 2015 following the leaders' meeting, tensions continued to simmer under the surface.

While the Senkaku islands dispute remains a salient issue, Sino-Japanese rivalry has also started playing out in the South China Sea, where Beijing has taken assertive steps to support its territorial claims. China's extensive land reclamation activities in this body of water have also placed it at odds with Vietnam and the Philippines, among other claimants. Tokyo has been increasingly vocal in its support for Southeast Asian claimants, and has taken steps to help them bolster their position. In 2015, for example, Japan sold coast guard vessels to Vietnam, and has been in talks with the Philippines about closer defence cooperation. In early 2016, Beijing declared itself on "high alert" in response to Tokyo's criticisms, simultaneously using the occasion to draw attention to Japanese World War II aggression (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2016b).

Apart from territorial issues, the second major source of tension pertains to Japanese war memory. Beijing accuses Tokyo of attempting to downplay or deny the Japanese Imperial Army's history of aggression before and during World War II. Lamenting that Japan has not adequately faced its past, Beijing has called for its neighbour to "take a correct attitude towards its history of aggression" and to "take concrete actions to show its pursuit of a path of peaceful development" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2015). The Abe administration argues that Japan has sufficiently apologized for past

1 There is disagreement over their strategic or economic value, and control of the islands is sometimes perceived as a symbolic matter above all. See, for instance, Keck (2013).

2 Author's December 2014 interview in Tokyo with a Japanese scholar who has close ties to the Japanese government.



misdeeds and advocates a forward-looking Japan, free from the guilt-ridden conscience that has weighed on the national psyche for more than half a century. Although the latter part of 2015 saw a relative decline in the frequency and stridency of criticisms on the part of China, Beijing continues to urge Tokyo to “face up to and deeply reflect upon the history” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2016a), a demand that Tokyo is unlikely to satisfy.

At the macro level, geopolitical shifts in the regional balance of power have underpinned much of the Sino-Japanese tensions. Until the 1980s, regional primacy and order were not in question; China’s economic fortunes were beginning to change, spurred by paramount leader Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, but it was still far behind Japan economically, militarily and technologically. On the other hand, Japan’s post-war economic rise had cemented its place as the second-largest economy in the world, while its close alliance with the United States ensured its security. However, China’s inexorable rise since 1979, combined with Japan’s two decades of economic stagnation, has challenged — and in some respects overturned — old certainties. Although still lagging behind Japan on several fronts, China looks poised to assert itself as the foremost regional power. In 2010, it overtook Japan to become the second-largest economy. Merely four years later, its GDP was already more than double that of Japan in US dollars<sup>3</sup> (World Bank 2016a). Its industrial output is increasingly sophisticated, with high-tech products accounting for a growing portion of its total manufacturing (Singh Srai and Shi 2009). On the military front, although questions remain about the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA’s) readiness and professionalism (Chase et al. 2015), China has substantially improved its military and naval capabilities, resulting in a reduction of the technology gap with Japan (Kwok and Chan 2014). In early 2016, it also announced far-reaching military reforms designed to improve the PLA’s command structure and war-fighting capabilities. The Japanese discourse reveals deep and growing insecurities with regard to the geopolitical consequences of China’s rise.

However significant, the geopolitical changes resulting from China’s rise would not have heralded a momentous change had they not been accompanied by an attendant shift in Chinese foreign policy. This shift occurred with the arrival of Xi Jinping at the helm of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in late 2012. Considered by some to be China’s most powerful leader since Deng Xiaoping or Mao Zedong (*The Economist* 2014; Brown 2015), Xi Jinping quickly shed China’s long-standing self-imposed restraints in matters of foreign policy in favour of a more confident and far-reaching approach. China has assumed a greater voice and role in international affairs and expressed global

ambitions commensurate with its status as a great power. It has, among others, laid out ambitious plans for a “Silk Road Economic Belt” and a “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” designed to link China to Europe through massive infrastructural investments in Southeast and Central Asia. It has established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, an international institution that will finance the construction of infrastructure projects in the region, thereby challenging the role of older and similar institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. These two initiatives, among other endeavours, will likely increase Beijing’s clout over developing economies in the Asia-Pacific region and Central Asia.

China’s actions in the East and South China Seas since 2012 also illustrate this new ambitious foreign policy course. In both locales, China has unnerved its neighbours by taking forceful actions in order to support its territorial claims. Despite official pronouncements on the importance of a peaceful environment and “win-win cooperation,” Xi has shown that he is willing to take actions that strain ties with China’s neighbours as long as these actions are deemed to align with national interests.

Japan has undertaken a foreign policy shift of its own. On July 1, 2014, the Abe administration announced its plan to reinterpret article 9 of its pacifist constitution, which forbids the use of war and the maintenance of any “war potential.” According to the new interpretation, Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (SDF) — armed forces in all but name — will now be allowed to exercise collective self-defence; in effect, they could come to the aid of an allied country that is under attack if the situation was deemed to pose a threat to Japan’s security. In September 2015, the Japanese parliament adopted two legislative bills expanding the role of the SDF, thereby making the new interpretation of the constitution effective. This interpretation and its attendant legislative changes fall under Abe’s vaguely defined vision of “proactive contribution to peace,” which he has been promoting since his re-election in 2012. This vision is the product of the perception that the “security environment around Japan has become increasingly severe” (MOFA 2016). Japan’s first National Security Strategy, adopted in 2013, clarified Abe’s approach: “Surrounded by an increasingly severe security environment and confronted by complex and grave national security challenges, it has become indispensable for Japan to make more proactive efforts in line with the principle of international cooperation. Japan cannot secure its own peace and security by itself, and the international community expects Japan to play a more proactive role for peace and stability in the world, in a way commensurate with its national capabilities” (Government of Japan 2013).

If Chinese and Japanese discourses were to be taken at face value, the strategic shifts that have occurred in Beijing and Tokyo have directly contributed to a heightened sense of threat in both countries. Pointing to Abe’s push

3 China’s economy has weakened since 2015, with its growth rate slowing down to approximately 6–7 percent from earlier growth rates of 8–10 percent. China’s Premier Li Keqiang has spoken about this being the “new normal.”

for constitutional reinterpretation, Chinese officials declared that there were reasons to “question whether Japan is deviating from the path of peaceful development” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2014a) and state-owned media have accused Japan of “challenging the post-war world order” (Xinhua 2014b) and moving “toward old militarism” (Liu 2015). While it is important to note that Chinese accusations of militarism date back to at least the 1960s (Johnson 1986), for the first time, Beijing has been using these rhetorical attacks from a position of relative force, or at the very least, parity with Japan. Tokyo has, for its part, declared that Beijing’s “foreign policy approach and its military developments [had] become issues of concern for the international community, including Japan” (Abe 2014). Japanese government officials have repeatedly highlighted the evolving Chinese strategy and increasing proactivity in order to underline the severity of its security environment.

## MUTUAL PERCEPTIONS IN OFFICIAL AND NON-OFFICIAL DISCOURSES

In-depth analysis of the contents of Chinese and Japanese discourses provides an overall picture of the rhetorical environment as it pertains to mutual perceptions and perceptions of threat in both countries. For the purpose of this study, the discourse units (statements) that were analyzed came from both official and non-official sources. For instance, official sources consist of speeches, press releases, documents, press conferences and newspaper op-eds written by government representatives in their official capacity. Non-official sources include newspaper articles, newspaper editorials, op-eds and academic articles, as well as statements made by opinion leaders or public figures. Statements by government representatives made in their personal capacity also fall under this category. In the figures below, each theme is divided between official and non-official sources, which serves to highlight discrepancies between the perceptions of the government — or what it pretends to perceive — and the perceptions of the general public (or media). These discrepancies can provide insights into governments’ discursive strategies and public perceptions.

For the purpose of this analysis, close to 200 official and non-official declarations, pronouncements and statements from both countries were gathered, each representing a discourse unit. All were reported in English-, Chinese- or Japanese-language sources between 2011 and 2014. No random selection of sources was conducted, as all relevant discourse units found within that time frame were collected. To be taken into account, discourse units had to contain a subjective assessment or interpretation of the other country’s intentions, goals, nature and actions. Statements consisting of a description of facts (while acknowledging that such descriptions are rarely completely devoid of subjectivity) were not taken into

account. For instance, a statement such as “China has been intensifying its maritime activities around the islands in recent years” (MOFA 2012b), while pertaining to Chinese actions and policies, says little about Japan’s views of China’s intentions or nature.

Each discourse unit from both countries was analyzed by three independent coders to determine the nature of perception of threat that the unit exhibited. It is important to note that all discourse units found to be containing a subjective assessment of the other country were analyzed regardless of whether or not that country was characterized as a threat. Looking at the proportion of total discourse units depicting the other country as a threat provides a more accurate understanding of the prevalence of threat rhetoric in China and Japan. For instance, the following Japanese statement, containing a positive assessment of China, remains relevant and was included in this study:

(...) it seems likely that the government will continue to chart a cooperative foreign-policy course with a view to maintaining a stable and peaceful international climate. To be sure, one cannot rule out the possibility that the current government will shift at some point to a hardline, hawkish stance in hopes of fanning nationalist sentiment and strengthening unity at home. At present, however, the essence of the current government’s foreign policy is to carry on the previous regime’s campaign to expand China’s clout in the global community, while redoubling its efforts to maintain a stable international environment. (Aoyama 2014)

The analysis of Chinese and Japanese rhetoric was guided by three broad discursive themes: *threat*, *history* and *trust* (see Appendix 1 for details on coding categories). This provides an overview of the main themes that have salience for China and Japan when expressing mutual perceptions. Furthermore, by analyzing the combination of themes (i.e., themes that are most often linked together), we obtain a more complete view of perceptions and deeper insights into the discourse strategies that are adopted, and most importantly, better understand what the foreign threat is associated with. The “threat” category includes all depictions of a country as posing a danger to other countries, the region or the international order as a whole. Statements accusing the other of being responsible for tensions or warranting closer attention — even if not explicitly depicting it as a threat — are included in this category. For instance, this category includes passages such as “Japan keeps...stirring up troubles....[its actions have] raised great concerns from its Asian neighbors” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2014b).

Threats can be characterized in myriad ways, depending on what is being threatened (the referent object) or the

type of action that constitutes a threat in the eyes of a foreign entity. When trying to understand and illustrate the complex views of country A on country B, merely stating that country A believes country B poses a threat is of limited value. Therefore, dividing the *threat* theme into subcategories allows one to gain deeper insights into the discursive representations of the country. Moreover, by understanding how a threat is specifically perceived or presented, one can better devise strategies to debunk false narratives or misperceptions that directly undermine bilateral relations. In this study, depictions of threat are divided among the following:

- threats to territory, maritime space and/or airspace (i.e., threats to what a country can physically control or possess);
- domination, hegemony, threat to regional/international “order” or “status quo” (i.e., threats to what cannot be physically controlled but that nonetheless affect the security environment);
- aggressiveness, use of force (referring to a purported predisposition to act deliberately in an aggressive or forceful manner);
- dangerous, reckless or irresponsible behaviour (referring to a disposition to act in a way that increases the risk of inadvertent conflict, without necessarily posing a deliberate threat); and
- generic threat (i.e., when a country is broadly defined as a threat, without further explanation about the source of said threat or the object that is being threatened).

The *history* category encompasses explicit references to the other country’s own history or its treatment of history as a whole. It is further divided among references to the other country’s

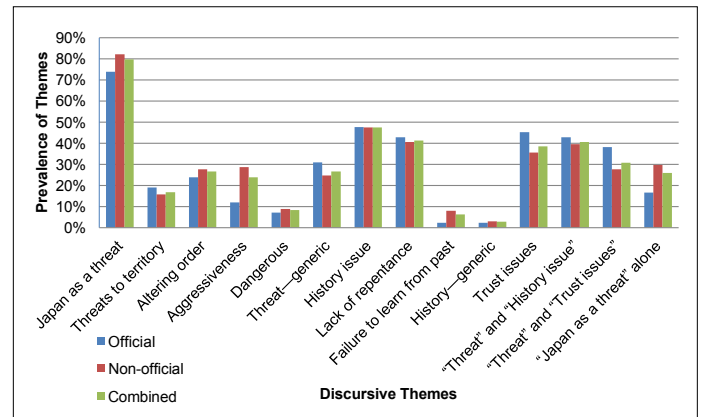
- lack of repentance, apology or atonement regarding the past;
- inability to move on from the past; and
- failure to learn from the past.

Lastly, the *trust* category refers to all statements accusing the other country of being untrustworthy. This includes mentions of hypocrisy, lack of transparency and accusations of uttering misleading statements.

## CHINA’S PERCEPTION OF JAPAN

Figure 1 presents an overview of Chinese perceptions of Japan. Each percentage refers to the proportion of total discourse units that touch on a particular theme or combination of themes.

Figure 1: China’s Perceptions of Japan



Source: Author.

Eighty percent of all Chinese discourse units depict Japan as a threat, with non-official sources doing so with more frequency than official sources (82 percent and 74 percent respectively). Unsurprisingly, historical issues remain important for China, with close to half of all statements referring to Japan’s lack of repentance or failure to learn from the past. The prevalence of references to history and the Japanese aggression toward China remains a defining feature of Chinese rhetoric on Japan. Moreover, 39 percent of all Chinese discourse units depict Japan as untrustworthy, although it was shown to have greater significance for Chinese officials (45 percent) than for non-officials (36 percent).

With what do the Chinese associate the Japanese threat? Forty-one percent of all Chinese statements link the Japanese threat to history issues, compared to 31 percent who link it to trust issues. Thus, when ascribing a reason to the Japanese threat, officials and media often point to their perception of Japan as an unrepentant nation. In this view, Japan’s failure to atone for its past transgressions makes it more likely to use force again. While not explicitly stated, this narrative implies that if Japan were to apologize sufficiently and show proper remorse (in the eyes of China), the perception of threat could be reduced.

More specifically, what kind of threat does Japan pose to China? In 27 percent of Chinese statements, Japan is presented as posing a threat to the international order by harbouring goals of hegemony, expansionism or domination. Japan’s announcement in 2014 that it would reinterpret its constitution to allow collective self-defence fuelled many such accusations from China. Japan is also frequently depicted (24 percent) as being menacing due to a purported predisposition to act in an aggressive, forceful manner. The Chinese generally point to Japan’s aggression prior to and during World War II to underscore this point. However, there is a substantial gap between official and non-official sources. Close to one-third of non-official discourse units view Japan as aggressive, as opposed to only 12 percent of official sources. In 17 percent of cases,

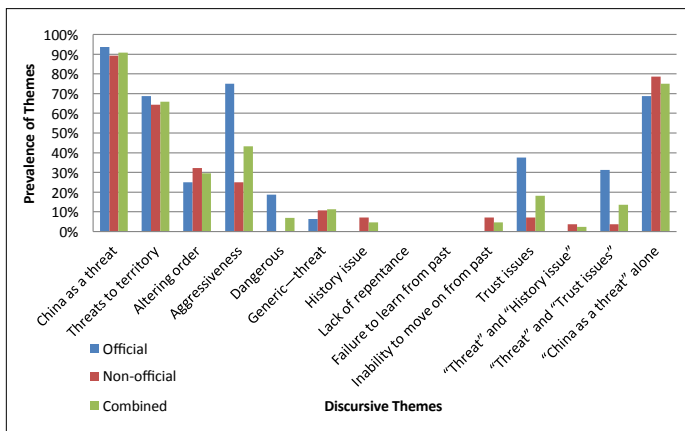
Japan is painted as a threat to Chinese territory, due to the dispute around the Senkaku islands, which Beijing claims as its own.

While both official and non-official discourses depict Japan as a threat with relatively similar frequency (74 percent and 82 percent respectively), the rhetoric is qualitatively different. Compared to the official discourse, newspaper op-eds, columns and analytical articles in Chinese media often display highly acerbic rhetoric. For instance, as will be shown later in greater detail, Japan has been compared to Nazi Germany (*People's Daily* 2014) and accused of reviving “devilish militarism” (Deng 2014). Undoubtedly constrained by diplomatic imperatives, Chinese officials use comparatively tame language when detailing their view of Japan.

## JAPAN'S PERCEPTION OF CHINA

Despite certain similarities with China, analysis of the Japanese discourse reveals notable differences when compared to its neighbour (Figure 2). One salient similarity is the very high prevalence of threat rhetoric (91 percent), although of an even greater degree than in China (80 percent). As opposed to Chinese discourse, however, Japanese official sources tend to describe China as a threat slightly more frequently (94 percent) than do non-official sources (89 percent), although the gap is small. Unsurprisingly, the Japanese refer very rarely to the history issue, given that they wish to move beyond the past. Close to one-fifth (18 percent) of all Japanese statements describe China as untrustworthy — much less than the other way around (39 percent).

Figure 2: Japan's Perceptions of China



Source: Author.

The Japanese discourse is significantly different from China's in terms of the depictions of threat. Two main features dominate Japanese views: threats to territory and China's “aggressiveness.” Close to 70 percent of Japanese statements regarding China express concern about its territory, due specifically to the Senkaku islands dispute. This perception of territorial threat is in striking contrast to

China, where only 17 percent of statements depicted Japan as a threat to its territory. The Japanese also often express concerns about China's aggressiveness or propensity to use force in its interactions with other countries. In this case, this view is remarkably more widespread among officials (75 percent) than among non-officials (25 percent).

In less than 20 percent of all statements, the Chinese threat is associated with (but not necessarily caused by) a lack of trust in China. While the issue of trust is raised in several ways, the Japanese often express uncertainty and wariness regarding China's future direction. It must be noted that these concerns are mirrored in large part by the United States, where China's increasing power has been accompanied by growing uneasiness about the consequences of this rise (Johnston 2003). As demonstrated by the Japanese MOD in its 2013 defence white paper, one of the most common targets of Japanese accusations is China's “lack of transparency” in its military expenditures: “China has not clarified the current status and future vision of its military modernization initiatives, while its decision-making process in military and security affairs is not sufficiently transparent: Hence it has been pointed out that this could potentially lead to a sense of distrust and misunderstanding by other countries” (MOD 2013, 3).

Despite the guarded language, the difficulty in gauging China's future intentions with regards to its military and geostrategic ambitions evidently underlies much of Japan's concerns about the so-called Chinese threat.

Japan's and China's criticisms often strikingly mirror each other. Tokyo and Beijing both accuse each other of attempting to challenge the international order and the status quo, pointing to what they view as assertive foreign policies and actions in the East and South China Seas. They criticize each other in similar terms for lacking transparency, creating uncertainty and raising concerns in the region about the direction they intend to take.

## PERCEPTIONS OF THE CAUSE OF TENSIONS

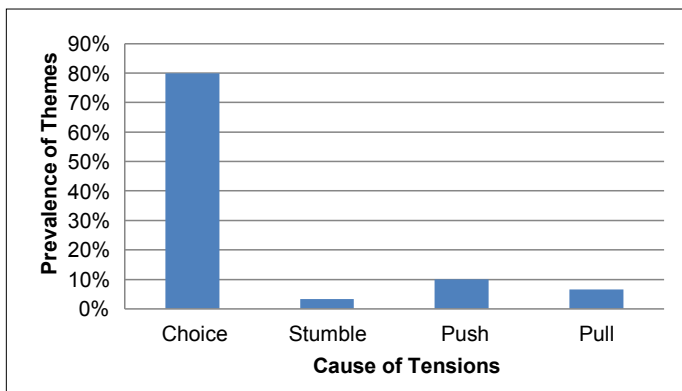
The following figures provide insights into what the Chinese (Figure 3a) and the Japanese (Figure 3b) believe to be the source of the other country's actions or the cause (or causes) of current Sino-Japanese tensions. While both sides are usually mum on this matter, they occasionally — in 20 percent of statements — reveal more or less directly their views on the underlying reasons for conflict (i.e., how they got there). For this section, four categories were used:

- “Choice” denotes a rational calculation, a deliberate effort by the country leaders to bring about the situation at hand.
- “Stumble” refers to the perception that the other side is “stumbling” into conflict, due to miscalculation,

carelessness, accident, misperceptions or any other means that exclude conscious or deliberate decisions. In other words, the country does not wish to create conflict, but does so more or less inadvertently.

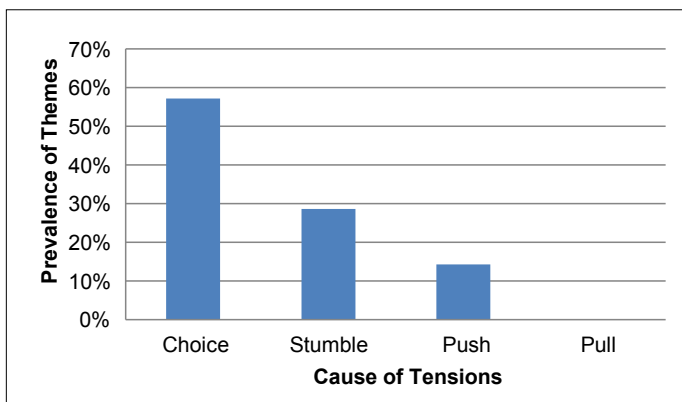
- “Push” refers to the influence of domestic politics when, for instance, leaders feel forced to adopt uncompromising positions due to a highly nationalistic populace.
- “Pull” refers to situations where a country is pulled or dragged into conflict by an ally or a client state.

**Figure 3a: China’s Perception of Conflict Pathway**



Source: Author.

**Figure 3b: Japan’s Perception of Conflict Pathway**



Source: Author.

## THREAT RHETORIC AND MEDIA SENSATIONALISM

The rhetoric of threat is alive and well in China and Japan. Taken at face value, the results indicate high levels of anxiety toward the other country’s actions and intentions. Both countries repeatedly present each other as posing a direct danger due to their aggressive disposition, territorial ambitions, attempts to change the international order, or reckless behaviour. The stridency and intensity of the discourse, however, tends to be greater in China, especially in non-official sources. The emergence of this type of rhetoric is in large part linked to the liberalization of the

Chinese media environment since the 1990s. With media needing to compete for readers and advertising revenue, they have resorted to sensationalist media coverage in order to appeal to the masses, a phenomenon that has in turn caused escalation in public sentiment against Japan (He 2007). As a result, coverage of Japan in the Chinese media is often rife with exaggerations, strident language, analogies of dubious validity and fear mongering. A 2014 article in a state news agency Xinhua stated that “Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s administration...[was] running fast on a right-leaning trail featured by denial of wartime atrocities and *thirst for military glory* [emphasis added]” (Xinhua 2014a).

In a similar vein, Lin Wen, a Chinese specialist of international affairs, offered an analysis of Japanese foreign policy under Abe, saying, “In fact, the revival of Japanese militarism is the real threat to the international community. ...the purpose for Japan to amend the constitution is nothing but to seek the right to wage war, to open the way for Japan to launch new wars in the future....While offering no repentance for the past, Japanese right-wing forces seek to become a so-called ‘normal state,’ which is tantamount to militarism reincarnated. *Current Japan is very much like Nazi Germany before World War II* [emphasis added]” (People’s Daily 2014).

Clearly meant to evoke thoughts of large-scale invasions and devastating wars, the explicit analogy with Nazi Germany is striking in both its inaccuracy and its boldness. Due to the sensitivity related to the history of the Third Reich, drawing such an analogy would be widely decried in the West. However, as bold and incorrect (as well as politically incorrect) as it is, this statement appeared in the official newspaper of the CPC, a mainstream publication. Beyond the reference to Nazi Germany, this statement encapsulates many of the Chinese preoccupations with Japan: it references history issues and Japan’s perceived lack of repentance, and argues that Tokyo’s decision to reinterpret the constitution and expand the SDF’s scope of operations equates to a desire to wage war. It is also noteworthy that it specifically points the finger at Japanese right-wing forces, rather than at Japan as a whole. In numerous discourse units, criticism is explicitly directed at “right-wing” or “conservative” forces in Japan. This indicates a deliberate effort to distinguish between, on the one hand, the general population and politicians as a whole and, on the other hand, a presumably small group of radical right-wing leaders, of which Prime Minister Abe is a part. From this, one can surmise that the Chinese view the Japanese population as a victim of its leaders’ aggressiveness and militarism. Indeed, as seen in Figure 3a, the Chinese often portray Japan as being misled by its leaders who are acting based on rational calculations, rather than as being pushed or pressured into conflict by a restless and nationalist population.

Rhetorical tools, as has been shown, are also significantly different. Chinese officials and media often use history (41 percent of all statements) as a discursive tool to enhance the perception of the Japanese threat. They argue that because Japan has not properly atoned for its wartime actions, it does not see its past misdeeds negatively and is thus bound to repeat them. This view, prevalent in both official and non-official discourse, is often directly tied to accusations of resurgent militarism in Japan. The following passage by Yang Yujun, spokesman for China's Ministry of National Defense, illustrates this thinking: "How can a country that refuses to admit and repent for its mistakes in history convince people on issues such as its adjustment of military and security policies with empty rhetoric. While pretending to be pacifist, Japan has brought threat to the region, stirring trouble on maritime interests and having a negative impact on Asian security" (Xinhua 2014d).

Similarly, Zhang Jian, president of the Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences and president of the Chinese Society of Japanese History, laments that "Japanese leaders have already forgotten history, insist on resuming their old business...and even [on] challenging the postwar international order" (*People's Daily* 2014). The Chinese explicitly tie the lack of trust in bilateral relations and the perception of threat to what they see as historical amnesia and lack of repentance on the part of Japan. Generally, any declaration by prominent Japanese figures that seems to question or belittle Japan's responsibility for wartime actions is widely taken up and criticized in the Chinese media in an attempt to highlight the Japanese lack of remorse. History-related grievances are not limited to revisionist declarations; visits by politicians to the Yasukuni shrine, where 14 class-A war criminals — including some who planned the wars against China — are enshrined, are inevitably presented in China as a manifestation of Japan's unwillingness to reflect on its historical wrongdoings.

## MISPERCEPTIONS OR EXAGGERATION OF THREAT?

Countering perceptions that derive from a genuine fear requires strategies and approaches that are different from those needed to counter threat inflation. As public pronouncements by officials or the media cannot always be taken at face value, it is necessary to scratch below the surface and determine whether the mutual portrayals of China and Japan are accurate and sincere, or constitute exaggerations of the level of threat.

Are the fears expressed by China and Japan genuine or are both sides wilfully playing up the foreign threat for political purposes? Threat inflation, as Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer (2009, 1–15) define it, is understood as an "attempt to create concern for a threat that goes beyond the scope and urgency that a disinterested analysis would justify." It is a deliberate decision made by leaders for the

purpose of pushing a particular agenda. To address this question, one first needs to understand how the threat is being described and examine it against the available evidence.

As the foregoing discussion has shown, the most common Chinese accusation is that Japan harbours milieu goals, which means that it wishes to act as a hegemon or alter the regional or international order. According to this view, the Japanese reinterpretation of its constitution, along with Abe's proactive pacifism, signal the intent to disrupt the current security architecture and change the rules of international relations, presumably through the use of force. Do the practical, real-world consequences of the new Japanese security posture align with such a view? As explained previously, the security bills adopted in September 2015 for the first time allow the SDF to operate beyond Japan's borders to assist a foreign country that is under attack, if the contingency is deemed to affect the security of Japan. For instance, the SDF is now permitted to come to the aid of the United States if an American ship came under attack or if a missile was headed toward the United States. This is consistent with the principle of collective self-defence, which is recognized by the UN Charter. However, following their defeat in World War II, the United States-imposed constitution forbade Japan the possession of any war potential<sup>4</sup> and thus the right to the free exercise of collective self-defence. Although constitutional restrictions have affected its operations, Japan's SDF are among the world's most capable and boast highly advanced military equipment.

Despite looser restraints on the SDF, Tokyo continues to be far less willing to participate in military operations than most other American partners (Dujarric 2015). There is no political or popular will to see Japan develop an interventionist streak, and the security bills cannot suddenly overturn seven decades of anti-militarism, which remains a defining feature of Japanese society and politics (Hardy-Chartrand 2015a). In terms of practical consequences, the constitutional reinterpretation has no impact on Japan's capacity to directly defend itself. The first six months since the adoption of the new defence posture have seen no increase in Japanese activity outside of its borders and no indication that it intends to challenge the current security order. Moreover, beyond expressions of concern over its security environment, Japanese leaders have shown no discontent with the regional or international order, and no intent, through actions or words, to impose its will on the region or act as a hegemon. The Japanese security bills have, in effect, a much more limited impact on regional peace and security than China — and many

4 Article 9 of the Constitution states that "land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized." Under the interpretation favoured by the Japanese government, "war potential" refers to capabilities that exceed the level required for self-defence.

a Western analyst — admits. Therefore, equating the Japanese constitutional reinterpretation with an attempt to alter the East Asian or international security environment is misleading.

In conjunction with the reinterpretation of the constitution, Prime Minister Abe and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) want Japan to play a larger role in regional and international security. Abe has made it clear that he wants Japan to be a more proactive contributor to peace, for instance, through greater contributions to multilateral peacekeeping operations and coordination with other countries (MOFA 2016). Above all, Japanese leaders have been striving for “normality,” which is to say the capacity to devise independent foreign and defence policies, free from historical constraints and stigma, and within the confines of international law. As Japanese scholar Masayuki Tadokoro (2011, 38) explains, article 9 of the constitution “has always stood in the way of Japanese foreign policy, effectively handicapping Japan’s involvement in international affairs.” While pledging to reinforce its alliance with the United States, Japan under Abe has lowered the restrictions on arms transfers, signing in 2016 a defence deal with the Philippines and strengthening defence cooperation with Vietnam and Australia, among others. Japan’s pursuit of normality, as outlined by official policy documents and demonstrated through actions, has never been related to the milieu goals that China has accused Japan of harbouring.

The other main sources of the Japanese threat, according to Beijing, are the Japanese disposition to use force and the return of militarism.<sup>5</sup> Accusations of usage of force and militarism are most often linked to Japan’s actions in the East China Sea and the constitutional reinterpretation that paved the way to collective self-defence. The following remarks, made by a PLA major general at an event in Beijing, demonstrate the clear attempt made by many Chinese to link Japan’s history and collective self-defence to militarism: “Japan is striding on the path of remilitarization now....What should cause serious concern is that while completely denying its history of aggression and eagerly reviving the militaristic ideology, the Japanese administration has flagrantly broken the restriction of the constitution and law and successively lifted the ban on its right of weapon export and collective self-defence” (*The Korea Times* 2014).

A return of militarism in Japan would imply a significant increase in military spending, reminiscent of the military budget in pre-World War II Japan, when military expenditures stood around five percent of national output before rising dramatically in the late 1930s (Castillo et al. 2001). Under a cabinet guideline dating back to 1976, the

Japanese military budget has been limited to one percent of GDP. In 2013, Japan announced a defence budget increase of 0.9 percent, its first in 11 years, and a 1.5 percent increase for 2016. Abe’s election in 2012 was followed by four consecutive increases in military budgets. Despite these increases in absolute amounts, Japan’s defence budget as a function of GDP remains low, especially when compared to that of its neighbours China, South Korea and North Korea (World Bank 2016b). A militaristic Japan would also entail a politicized military with a recognized role in forming governments and implementing policy, as well as an outsized influence on society, as was the case in the pre-war period. This has not been the case in Japan since 1945, and there are no realistic prospects of it being the case again.

In terms of policy, Japan has shown no indication of being more disposed to using force beyond self-defence and has not threatened the use of non-defensive force against any of its neighbours. Its naval and aerial activities around the Senkaku islands have increased since 2012, but these mirror Chinese activities and speak to the intensification of the territorial dispute with China rather than an increased inclination toward aggressive actions. While there is no doubt that the Abe administration has brought transformations to Japan’s defence and security postures, recent changes remain moderate and demonstrate the persistence of the core principles of self-restraint in Japanese defence policy (Liff 2015). In fact, Japan has been moving steadily toward normality since the 1990s (Tadokoro 2011), and the security changes implemented by the LDP since Abe’s re-election in 2012 constitute no more than a continuation of this trend. Therefore, recent claims of Japan returning to a militaristic ideology and foreign policy do not hold up to close examination.

Conversely, Japanese statements on China must also be examined against the available evidence. The most common depiction (66 percent of all statements) of China expressed by Japan is that it harbours goals of possession, threatening Japanese territory, maritime waters or airspace. This view is not surprising, given that the main bone of contention and biggest flashpoint between the two countries is the Senkaku islands dispute. Does China pose a danger to Japan’s control of the islands?

In order to assess the threat to Japan’s territory, one must look beyond claims of “indisputable sovereignty” and determine whether or not China is likely to reclaim the islands by force. While Chinese leaders and public figures in the media have been vociferous in their opposition to Japan’s control of the Senkakus, their actions in the East China Sea have remained somewhat tame, contrary to assertions by the Japanese media and leaders. China has not fired a shot or directly threatened Japanese assets, and despite increasing naval capabilities, has not come close to landing on the Senkakus. China has limited itself to shows of force, deploying boats (often civilian) around the islands

<sup>5</sup> Militarism is an ideology or political system that implies an aggressive foreign policy and the subordination of all competing interests to those of the military.

and flying sorties in the surrounding airspace. While such moves can be understandably perceived as menacing, they cannot be equated with the actual willingness to use force, despite the inherent risks of such manoeuvres. Beijing remains wary of an American intervention in the case of a confrontation over the islands,<sup>6</sup> reducing, even further, the likelihood of China taking actions that would almost certainly provoke an armed conflict. In the event of a crisis in the East China Sea, Beijing and Tokyo have the capacity to manage their differences, as they have historically cooperated on bilateral maritime issues much more than is commonly believed (Manicom 2014). However, in times of economic uncertainty, it remains important for the CPC to maintain its carefully crafted image as the one true defender of the country's national interests, of which territorial integrity forms an important part. To this end, it must continue to clearly demonstrate its opposition to Japanese control of the islands through words and (limited) actions.

The second-most prevalent characterization of threat in the Japanese view is what they perceive as China's disposition to use force or aggressive actions. A passage in MOD's *Defense of Japan 2014* sums up this view: "Especially in regard to conflicts over maritime interests, China has adopted so-called assertive measures, including attempts to alter the status quo by coercive measures based on China's own assertion which is incompatible with the existing international law and order....Japan has great concerns over such Chinese military activities...." (MOD 2014, 32, 34).

Does this passage conform to facts on the ground? China's foreign policy and approach to territorial claims have undoubtedly undergone changes since Xi Jinping's rise to power. It has not held back from taking assertive measures to support its territorial claims in the East and South China Seas. In the South China Sea, it has built artificial islands at a brisk rate, which has provoked tensions with Vietnam and the Philippines, among other claimants. Manila has brought a case against China in international court to contest the legitimacy of its claims. China is also increasingly at odds with the United States, which has been conducting Freedom of Navigation operations in the South China Sea to signal its opposition to China's territorial claims. Beijing ostensibly views these operations as highly provocative (Hardy-Chartrand 2015b), although it has done nothing to interdict them, issued no threats, and drawn no red lines not to cross (Welch 2015).

In two recent incidents with neighbouring countries, China adopted a stance that could have escalated. Since April 2012, it has been locked in a standoff with the Philippines over the Scarborough Shoal — located about 200 km off

the Philippines' west coast — where Chinese frigates have impeded access to traditional fishing grounds for Filipino fishermen. In May 2014, Chinese state-owned China National Offshore Oil Company deployed an oil rig near the Paracel Islands, in waters claimed by Vietnam. Opposing what it perceived as a breach of its sovereignty, Vietnam sent ships to disrupt the work of the oil rig. During the standoff that ensued, Chinese ships used water cannons and rammed a Vietnamese fishing boat, causing it to sink.

However, what critics of China often seem to overlook is the fact that apart from those two confrontations, it has been generally restrained in its interactions with neighbouring states and its actions have had limited direct consequences for their security. China has not fired a shot, has not made direct threats, and has been careful not to cross obvious red lines. Such red lines would be, for example, the forceful removal of people and infrastructure from islands controlled by other claimants, or the landing of forces on the Senkaku islands. This restraint has become more evident since the oil rig standoff.

The fact that China's actions in the South China Sea raise concerns in neighbouring states is understandable. The country is governed by an authoritarian leader who operates under a system that lacks transparency. Its defence budget has grown exponentially in the last decade, giving it military capabilities that far exceed those of several neighbours. Official pronouncements on "win-win cooperation" and the importance of a "peaceful neighbourhood" are offset by uncompromising rhetoric on sovereignty issues, which gives rise to uncertainty over its future actions. However, while China has used muscular tactics in the aforementioned episodes, on the whole, it has appeared no more willing to use direct force than Japan has. It has limited itself to posturing, which is to say that it means to impress or appear threatening. This cannot, however, be equated with an actual predisposition or intent to use force. With its public pronouncements and activities in the East China Sea, there is no doubt that China has attempted to *appear* threatening, or to ingrain in the Japanese psyche an image of a country willing to take action to defend its claims. With the decline of communism as a uniting ideology, the CPC now relies, to a great degree, on nationalism to strengthen its legitimacy (He 2007). It must show resolve and determination to defend China's sovereignty, and thus needs to create the *appearance* of danger for Japan.

## THREAT INFLATION AS A POLITICAL TOOL

A telling feature of Figure 1 is the fact that in almost 30 percent of all Chinese discourse units, the Japanese threat is characterized only in the broadest terms, without attempting to explain what kind of threat it poses or to justify the assessment. In contrast, only 11 percent of Japanese statements describe the Chinese threat in similarly

6 While Washington does not officially take sides on the matter of sovereignty, it recognizes that Japan controls the islands, thus bringing them under the purview of the US-Japan security treaty.



broad terms. These Chinese statements are devoid of details as to the reasons or source of threat, and are limited to pronouncements on the need to keep a close watch on Japan. Occasionally, while the threat is generically linked to Japanese history, there is no explanation as to how this translates into danger. There is no evidence to support a correlation or causal link between Japan's treatment of its own history and the narrative that Japan poses a threat.

Why are the Chinese not attempting to lay their claims upon more solid foundations? There are two possible explanations. The first is that the Chinese are aware that assumptions of a Japanese threat rest on unsubstantiated assertions and fragile foundations, but feel compelled to continuously depict Japan as a danger in order to shore up support for the CPC, which presents itself as a bulwark for the nation. As a result, in nearly one-third of all statements, given the lack of evidence of a clear and present Japanese threat, Chinese interlocutors resort to vague exhortations to "watch out" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2014d) for Japan and to stating that Japanese actions "generate concerns" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2013). The second possibility is that officials and the media, in many cases, take the idea that Japan poses a threat as self-evident and not requiring a justification.

The first hypothesis has gained traction at MOFA and within Japanese academia.<sup>7</sup> MOFA officials largely subscribe to the view that the Chinese do not really view Japan as a serious threat, despite what their rhetoric would lead one to believe. Many subscribe to the idea that the CPC uses threat inflation and anti-Japan rhetoric as a political tool to unite the country and maintain its legitimacy. China's oft-repeated accusation of returning Japanese militarism, for instance, is decades-old and has long been used to pressure and "skilfully manipulate Japan" (Ijiri 1990, 648). The Japan threat is used as a political tool both internally, to create a rally-around-the-flag effect, and externally, to keep Japan on its toes and put it on the defensive.

Discontent with the rivals' discourse goes both ways. China's discourse also points to high levels of dissatisfaction with the way it is portrayed by Japanese officials and the media. Trust issues, as Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate, feature more prominently in the Chinese discourse (39 percent) than in the Japanese discourse (18 percent). In these statements, Japan is accused, for instance, of "defaming its neighbour" (Wu 2014), attempting to "deceive [the] international society" (Yoshida and Aoki 2014) and "slander[ing]...China...to win more international support" (Tang 2013). The Chinese often point to Japan's purported attempts to paint China as a threat in the media and obtain the support of foreign countries. Following Prime Minister Abe's European visit in early 2014, China's former foreign

minister accused Japan of "spreading stories around the world about China's threat," which would make it hard to "gain the trust of China" (Kwan 2014), illustrating Beijing's frustrations. The perception that a country engages in deliberate threat inflation fuels mistrust, poisons bilateral relations and hinders cooperation, with potential negative consequences for regional stability. Indeed, the view that your neighbour is trying to deceive other inhabitants on the block by making slanderous remarks and false accusations is a recipe for contentious relations. Both the Chinese and Japanese share this view.

In many cases, political leaders can have a thorough understanding of a phenomenon (for example, arrival of refugees) and still choose to present it as a security threat in order to adopt drastic security measures<sup>8</sup> (for example, closure of borders). However, the process by which countries exaggerate the foreign threat is often compounded by misunderstanding and misperceptions. Widespread misreading of Japanese intentions and actions aggravates the inflation of threat in the Chinese discourse. Even statements (both official and non-official) that do not necessarily depict Japan as dangerous will often portray its intentions and world view in ways that are not supported by evidence. Misperceptions also run deep on the Japanese side. As a MOFA official in Tokyo admitted, there are substantial gaps in mutual understanding, especially on history issues.<sup>9</sup> Many in Japan do not understand to what extent history impacts the Chinese, who in turn fail to grasp their neighbour's desire to move on from a victim perspective of history. These gaps drive, to a large extent, the lack of trust that discourses in China and Japan so sharply highlight.

Chinese and Japanese leaders alike believe they are peaceful and defensive, and thus expect others to see them as such. They show genuine bafflement that the other side sees them otherwise, which indicates a lack of empathy. Empathy, understood as the capacity to see the world through somebody else's eyes, plays a major role in the formation of perceptions. Although it may not always be politically convenient, leaders who make an effort to understand their opponent's fears and world view (without necessarily agreeing with them) are less likely to make rash and misguided decisions. In the case at hand, both the Japanese and Chinese sides have demonstrated little effort, willingness, or even capacity to see the world as their rival sees it.<sup>10</sup> Compounding this issue, even if leaders on both sides were to acknowledge the need for more empathy, understanding the views of their opponent

7 Author's interviews with MOFA officials and Japanese academics, December 2014 and January 2015, Tokyo.

8 For more on the process of securitization, see Buzan, Waever and de Wilde (1998).

9 Author's interview with MOFA official, January 2015, Tokyo.

10 For a discussion of empathy and its effects on crisis management mechanisms, see Welch (2014).

is not a given. The British historian Herbert Butterfield explained that the psychological dynamics of interactions made it difficult for leaders to understand the counter-fears of their opponents and understand why they might be fearful (Butterfield 1951). These dynamics can only work to exacerbate conflict (Wheeler 2012).

Nevertheless, despite the inherent difficulty with demonstrating empathy, it remains a decision and emotional belief that can shift over time and is closely related to historical and interpersonal narratives (Head 2012). Problematically, the heavy historical baggage carried by Japan and China predisposes them to antipathy, mistrust and a lack of empathy. Moreover, the leaders of the CPC have deliberately chosen a national historical narrative that places heavy emphasis on past suffering and humiliation endured at the hands of Japan, which is not conducive to fruitful efforts toward trust building and mutual understanding. Japan plays a predominant role in the formation of the Chinese population's understanding of their past and present (Gries 2005).

With an antagonistic relationship dating back more than a century and a Japanese prime minister who has, at times, expressed revisionist views of history, Japan plays a convenient role as the villain. Anti-Japan rhetoric is highly prevalent in the Chinese media, as are exhortations to remember the historical crimes committed by Japan. For instance, a September 2011 editorial in China's leading newspaper was entitled "Never Forget National Humiliation, Join up for National Rejuvenation" (Xinhua 2011). The "War of Resistance against Japan," which is what the Chinese call the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), occupies a central place in patriotic education, with the CPC stressing the importance of the "national shame" (Gustaffson 2014). As Japan features prominently in China's narrative of its twentieth-century history, Beijing cannot go down the road of history without painting Japan in a negative light. Studies show that negative media coverage leads to negative public image (Wanta, Golan and Lee 2004), which highlights the risks that this approach holds for mutual views, understandings and perceptions. Public levels of mutual sympathy in China and Japan reached record lows in 2013 and 2014, with approximately nine out of 10 people holding unfavourable views of the other country (The Genron NPO 2015). Although mutual perceptions improved slightly in 2015, they remain overwhelmingly negative (ibid.).

## CONCLUSION

Threat inflation and misperceptions of intentions, actions and world views have had an adverse effect on bilateral relations between China and Japan. The perception of a worsening security environment — in large part due to the perceived Chinese threat — directly contributed to Tokyo's decision to reinterpret its constitution and allow the exercise of collective self-

defence, which in turn elicited a strong reaction from Beijing. However, the perception of an immediate threat from China, while understandable in light of Beijing's growing power and increasingly proactive foreign policy, remains largely unwarranted. Barring a few episodes of heightened tensions, China has not directly threatened Japan and has not demonstrated intent to use force, despite a posture that has at times appeared uncompromising. Conversely, the Chinese perception of a Japan that is embracing militarism and is intent on altering the international order does not stand up to scrutiny. Moreover, many in Japan perceive these views as insincere and being used for political purposes, which is detrimental to trust building.

Whether the result of misperceptions, wilful threat inflation, or a combination of both, inaccurate portrayals of rival countries must be countered for there to be any hope of a sustainable rapprochement. The foregoing study has shed light on the precise themes and rhetorical tools used by China and Japan to describe each other. Understanding these mutual views and descriptions allows leaders to devise communication tools and public diplomacy strategies to specifically counter the inaccurate statements that are most damaging.

If China is to avoid backlash for the way it conducts its foreign policy, it must seek to present a more coherent message. Too often, Beijing's conciliatory calls for more regional cooperation and a peaceful neighbourhood are mixed with harsh criticisms and discourse that is couched in absolutist terms. It must also address the legitimate fears of Japan and other neighbouring countries. The present study has shown that the main reason behind Japan's view of China as a threat is Beijing's territorial ambitions. It is also widely perceived as having a disposition to using force and aggression to support its national interests, which has made Japan, as well as other countries, uneasy. China's actions in the East and South China Seas have contributed to this view. Therefore, in order to assuage the fears of its neighbour and encounter less resistance, Beijing should look at taking specific measures to address these legitimate concerns.

Japan should focus its public diplomacy efforts on countering Chinese accusations that it is altering the international environment and is prone to using aggression (militarism), which have formed the backbone of China's anti-Japan discourse. The idea of Japan as a threat is often linked to the history issue, with Beijing arguing that Japan's lack of repentance for its historical crimes makes it a threat. This implies that a resolution of the history issue, or at the very least a better treatment of history, would undercut that line of argument. However, history has been at the centre of Sino-Japanese disputes for decades, and cannot be resolved without major changes in China to domestic propaganda, which focuses heavily on the

history. This does not bode well for an early resolution of this contentious matter.

Understanding how threat is perceived and communicated is an avenue that holds promise for devising ways to directly address false narratives and de-escalate tensions. Misperceptions, threat inflation and mistrust have long been hallmarks of Sino-Japanese relations, as they are for many other contentious relationships around the globe. These features, however, should not be seen as the unavoidable results of a rivalry. While they constitute serious impediments to the improvement of bilateral relations, they are largely the result of cognitive biases — notwithstanding the use of threat discourse as a political tool — that can be overcome with the right approach. Despite the potency of these biases, it is useful to remember that neither China nor Japan desires conflict, and that although negative discourses often overshadow their common interests, they both understand that they stand to gain from a stable and peaceful relationship.

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## APPENDIX 1

Coding categories:

### 1. THREAT

1A: Threats to territory, maritime space, airspace  
(possession goals)

1B: Altering order, domination, hegemony, etc.  
(milieu goals)

1C: Aggressiveness, use of force, militarism  
(disposition, deliberate)

1D: Dangerous, reckless, or irresponsible behaviour  
(disposition, not deliberate)

1E: Generic (not further classifiable)

### 2. HISTORY

2A: Lack of repentance or atonement

2B: Inability to move on from the past

2C: Failure to learn from the past

2D: Generic (not further classifiable)

### 3. TRUST (untrustworthiness; could also be indicated by reference to hypocrisy, deception, slander, lack of transparency, failure to keep commitments, etc.)

### 4. CONFLICT PATHWAY

4A: Choice (rational calculation)

4B: Stumble (misperception, misjudgment, accident, inadvertence (including miscalculation — i.e., an attempt at rational calculation done badly)

4C: Push (domestic politics)

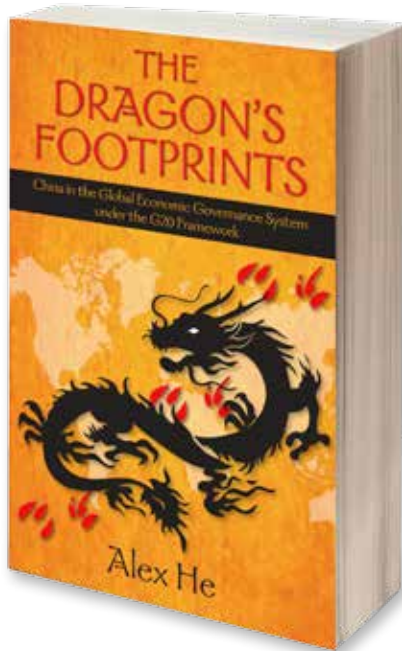
4D: Pull (horizontal escalation, dragged in by client or ally)

### 5. EMPATHY (i.e., the statement indicates an attempt, whether successful or not, to see the world through the adversary's eyes)

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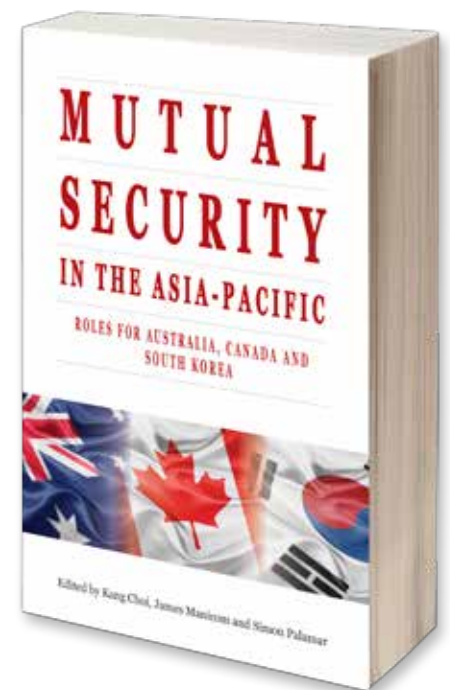
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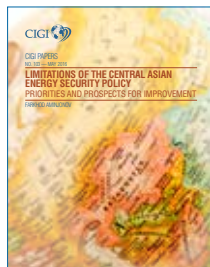
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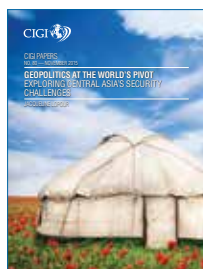
Central Asia is strategically important to the West because of its neighbours, but not immediately. Western governments need to engage in Central Asia precisely to ensure that it does *not* become a hot spot and instead becomes, over time, more firmly embedded in the community of responsible nations.



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CIGI was founded in 2001 by Jim Balsillie, then co-CEO of Research In Motion (BlackBerry), and collaborates with and gratefully acknowledges support from a number of strategic partners, in particular the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario.

Le CIGI a été fondé en 2001 par Jim Balsillie, qui était alors co-chef de la direction de Research In Motion (BlackBerry). Il collabore avec de nombreux partenaires stratégiques et exprime sa reconnaissance du soutien reçu de ceux-ci, notamment de l'appui reçu du gouvernement du Canada et de celui du gouvernement de l'Ontario.

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