

# IMPRESSIONS OF HISTORY ON JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

ANUSHREE DUTTA

Contemporary geo-politics in Asia has been determined since the 1980s by China's steady rise, which has constantly challenged the primacy of Japan and other powers in East Asia today. Present day China is seen to be challenging the existing territorial status quo in East Asia on multiple fronts, especially with regard to Japan. Analysts have increasingly commented that China has been flexing its military muscle and intimidating its neighbours into accepting its expanded claims. The impact of the Chinese military modernisation is seen more aggressively in the East China Sea and South China Sea which challenges Japan's interest in the region (especially in the East China Sea). Additionally, the US has been an important partner of Japan since the end of World War II, but the changing US strategy towards Asia has been a matter of concern for Japan.

Under the Trump Administration, a decline of US dominance in the region has been witnessed. The global balance of power has witnessed the interplay of new forces such as the rise of China, an emerging India, a proactive Japan, a belligerent North Korea, the threat of terror and the growing importance of the Indian Ocean—all contributing towards shaping the emerging security and economic environments.<sup>1</sup> However, the primary factor for Japan is the 'China challenge' which is being witnessed in China's

---

Ms **Anushree Dutta** is a Research Associate at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

1. The Squad of the "QUAD" in Indo-Pacific: <http://www.claws.in/1837/the-squad-of-the-%E2%80%9Cquad%E2%80%9D-in-indo-pacific-amrita-jash.html>, December 10, 2017.

**Presently, one of the biggest sources of tension between Japan and China concerns the Senkaku Islands. The Chinese sovereignty claim on the Senkaku Islands has blossomed into a full-fledged territorial dispute with the maritime forces of both countries mobilised in defence. Given such tension with China, Japan is rebalancing its defence budget.**

growing assertiveness and muscle-flexing behaviour in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Japan is said to be growing increasingly nationalistic and militarised in recent times. In order to manage the associated external risks and internal counter-pressures, Japan's policy-makers have sought to safeguard its national security based on its own capabilities. Presently, one of the biggest sources of tension between Japan and China concerns the Senkaku Islands.

The Chinese sovereignty claim on the Senkaku Islands has blossomed into a full-fledged territorial dispute with the maritime forces of both countries mobilised in defence. Given such tension with China, Japan is rebalancing its defence budget that would be useful in military preparedness to deter the most likely security problem the country faces. The time has, therefore, come for Japan to take a much more prominent role in East Asian security issues. Japan's remilitarisation will have a major shift in the geo-political balance in East Asia that could have significant political repercussions for Japan. There is no denying the fact that Japan's past military aggression continues to shape public opinion in many of its neighbouring countries.

Economic relations in particular have been, and will be, a key factor in determining the future scope of Sino-Japanese relations. It is anticipated that the Exchange Promotion Executive Committee, for instance, will promote greater economic ties between the two countries and improve the business performance of Japanese corporations already operating in China, thus, indicating that the economic relationship between the two countries could further improve. While political tensions between Japan and China are a source of fragility for the bilateral relationship, the current movements on the

economic front are by no means the result of political factors.<sup>2</sup>

China has a deep sense of history, which flows from its powerful civilisation which flourished till the West challenged its 'pride'. China considered itself to be the centre of the world—the Middle Kingdom—which represented a civilisational state with no definite boundaries and exercised influence over the peripheral states that accepted its superior culture and accorded to it the place of the head in the family of nations. This worldview, however, received its first shock

post the advent of Western colonialism and the Opium War of 1842, when the West—with superior military forces, entrepreneurial capabilities and missionary zeal—began to establish its supremacy over China.<sup>3</sup> China got another reality check on its Sino-centric world view during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, in which a small country like Japan defeated China and took over Taiwan. In fact, Chinese animosity towards Japan can be directly traced to this defeat. Reunification of Taiwan, thus, became firmly embedded in the Chinese nationalist agenda as it would enable China to once again acquire the great power status it had enjoyed. Japan-China tensions, therefore, simmer on, with the risk that a crisis over Taiwan or some other issue will plunge the East Asian giants into a cold war.<sup>4</sup>

Rooted in this historical controversy are China's avowed aspirations of acquiring the leadership role in international politics and recreating the Sino-centric world order, an order in which it would emerge as a superior power vis-à-vis Japan and the US. In the context of China-Japan relations, the issue of 'history' (between China and Japan) involves three major factors: history

**China got another reality check on its Sino-centric world view during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, in which a small country like Japan defeated China and took over Taiwan. In fact, Chinese animosity towards Japan can be directly traced to this defeat.**

---

2. "Getting Down to Business on Japan-China Relations", <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/08/21/getting-down-to-business-on-japan-china-relations/>, August 21, 2017.

3. "History and Power Shift Fuel Sino-Japanese Rift", [https://idsa.in/idsastrategiccomments/HistoryandPowerShiftFuelSinoJapaneseRift\\_ABhattacharya\\_230805](https://idsa.in/idsastrategiccomments/HistoryandPowerShiftFuelSinoJapaneseRift_ABhattacharya_230805)

4. Denny Roy, "The Sources and Limits of Sino-Japanese Tensions", *Survival*, 47:2, 191-214, DOI: 10.1080/00396330500156495

textbooks, apology by Koizumi, and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the Sino-Japanese friction over history has become inextricably linked with the ongoing repositioning of the two countries in the changing global matrix of power. The key to understanding the deterioration in Japan-China relations, thus, lies in the complex entwining of the issues of history and power shifts, which have fanned the flames of suspicion and enmity. The aim of this paper is to analyse the impressions of history on China and Japan relations.

### **HISTORICAL MEMORIES IN CHINESE PSYCHE**

China's vicious memories about Japan include Manchukuo as the puppet state of Japan, the Nanjing Massacre, comfort women issue and war reparations; all these, and others, contribute to the present 'trust deficit'. China's antagonistic sentiments against Japan are largely witnessed in terms of the revision of history textbooks, Japanese high-level visits to the Yasukuni Shrine and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute, reflecting the 'conditioned reflex' of the Chinese to the Japanese actions.<sup>6</sup> For instance, in September 2012, thousands of Chinese in Beijing marched to the Japanese Embassy to protest against the decision by the Japanese government to buy the islands—known as Diaoyu in Chinese and Senkaku in Japanese—from their private Japanese owners. The emotional crowd chanted anti-Japanese slogans and ransacked Japanese businesses, smashed Japanese cars and pelted stones at the buildings of the embassy compound. The protest soon spread nation-wide, making it the first such large scale anti-Japanese demonstration after the Tiananmen incident of 1989 and the 2005 anti-Japanese protests over the Japanese history textbook revision.<sup>7</sup> The emotional response of the Chinese during this incident conveyed that the Chinese people bridge the current events with historical grievances. Thus, any Japanese action only serves to remind them about the war-time, and the invasion memories, which made their country suffer many years ago, are rekindled. China has reacted strongly—a “knee-jerk response”, as Allen

---

5. Ibid.

6. “Researching Japanese War Crimes”, <https://www.archives.gov/files/iwg/japanese-war-crimes/introductory-essays.pdf>,

7. “Anti-Japan Protests in China”, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2012/09/anti-japan-protests-in-china/100370/>, September 17, 2012.

S. Whiting once put it—to any perceived “revival” of Japanese imperialist ideology or symbols.<sup>8</sup>

China’s historical narrative is a collective memory of defeats, injustices and humiliations, rather than glorification of the Chinese people’s earlier achievements. China maintains the “Century of Humiliation” as the central theme in its quest to restore the country’s lost dignity and power. That is, for China, “victim” over “victor” has been imbibed in the historical conscience.<sup>9</sup> The Chinese victimhood narrative is based on two events: (1) the two Opium Wars (China’s defeat at the hands of the Western imperialist powers); (2) the two Sino-Japanese Wars (the Japanese invasion of China and its subsequent subjection to brutal atrocities).

In this context, it can be argued that China, in its pursuit to discover its “self” identity, considers the Western powers and Japan as “others”.<sup>10</sup> The “self” and “others” approach is derived from social theory, and has gained increasing interest within international relations theory. Social actors cannot know their identities *a priori*, and it is only through social interaction that a sense of the “self” is formed.<sup>11</sup> Let us examine Japan’s role as the “others”. For China, the historical memory of a “victim” has constructed the identity of a “victimsed state” for itself, which plays a crucial role in determining China’s foreign policy towards Japan. In fact, Japan’s identity as the “others” in China’s perception, is the aftermath of China’s attempts to assert its “victimhood” and regain its social and moral legitimacy within an international environment.

Shih argues that in the wake of Japanese imperialism, Japan shared a similar culture with China, and, therefore, could not be opposed on cultural terms, like the Western powers. Japan presented more of a threat to China’s very existence, rather than a menace to the Chinese culture. Further, Shih argues, “China did not adjust its image of Japan by recategorizing Japan as a *waiguoren* [foreigner] state. Rather, it sees itself as an ‘un-Japanese’ state”.<sup>12</sup> Given this identity clash, it can be strongly argued that the present Chinese perception of Japan is strongly

---

8. Shogu Suzuki, “The Importance of ‘Othering’ in China’s National Identity”, in “Sino-Japanese Relations as a Stage of Identity Conflicts,” *The Pacific Review*, 20.1, 2007, p. 26.

9. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

**The Chinese government does not just use history as a card against Japan, but largely as part of patriotic education for domestic consumption. Memories of the negative history are linked to factional politics, as the elites utilise the memories of Japan's imperialist aggression to "coalesce support and weaken opponents".**

shaped by memories which stem from past Japanese aggression. This can be said so, as the prime factor of the deep distrust, misunderstanding and dislike, is triggered by the historical memory creating cognitive biases in China's behaviour towards Japan in the present times.<sup>13</sup> This is the fundamental reason which helps to explain why the bilateral relations have always been fragile even after decades of normalisation.

Why these memories so dominate China's current relations with Japan can be argued by taking three views: primordialist view, instrumentalist view and constructive

view. Here, the instrumentalist view claims that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) strategically and rationally uses the history of the Japanese imperialist aggression to gain political and economic concessions. Gilbert Rozman has used two points to validate this argument in two ways: first, history is used to take advantage of Japan's war guilt and draw out political concessions from Tokyo; second, it is utilised by the Chinese government to take a strong stance against Japan, thus, presenting itself as a patriotic force and enhancing its claim to legitimacy.<sup>14</sup> For instance, China's anti-Japanese protest in the post-1982 textbook controversy is argued on the grounds that the Chinese government found the textbook controversy to be a convenient lever to bring the Japanese government to heel, in which it was largely successful.<sup>15</sup> The Chinese government does not just use history as a card against Japan, but largely as part of patriotic education for domestic consumption. Memories of the negative history are linked to factional politics, as the elites utilise the memories of Japan's imperialist aggression to "coalesce support and weaken opponents". For instance, the historical sites

---

13. Caroline Rose, *Sino-Japanese Relations: Facing the Past, Looking to the Future?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 7.

14. "China's Changing Images of Japan, 1989–2001: The Struggle to Balance Partnership and Rivalry".

15. Chalmers Johnson, "The Patterns of Japanese Relations with China, 1952-1982", *Pacific Affairs*. 59.3, 1986, pp. 402-423.

of Japanese aggression were utilised by the Chinese Communist Party leaders in their “patriotic education campaign” which aimed at strengthening the regime’s claims to power.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, in China, it is common wisdom that patriotism—often in the form of anti-Japanese nationalism—is intrinsically linked to the government’s legitimacy in China.<sup>17</sup>

#### JAPAN: DATSU-A RON AND THE FLYING GEESE MODEL

##### *Datsu-A Ron*

Japan’s behaviour in the 1860s can be seen in the “Datsu-A Ron” concept which was composed by author and educator Fukuzawa Yukichi during the Meiji period. This was an editorial published in the Japanese newspaper *Jiji Shimpō* on March 16, 1885. “Datsu” means ‘to exit’, ‘to get out’, or, ‘to depart’. “A”, is the abbreviated term for “Asia” in the Japanese language. Finally, “Ron” means theory, or hypothesis. Datsu-A Ron, thus, means “the theory of getting out of Asia” or “the theory of departing from Asia.”

Japan was enamoured by the West’s technological advancement and in order to make itself a civilised nation—as compared to the others—it had no choice but to willingly throw itself into the wave of scientific revolution and accept not only its benefits but also its demerits. This was seen as an essential condition that is needed for Japan to survive in the modern civilised society (Japan was a closed door country, living in ‘self-isolation’ till the arrival of the Black Ships of Commodore Perry of the US in 1853).

Then, with this aim successfully achieved, it was believed, Japan would be able to proclaim its right to “assist” the vitalisation of a newer and stronger

**Japan was enamoured by the West’s technological advancement and in order to make itself a civilised nation—as compared to the others—it had no choice but to willingly throw itself into the wave of scientific revolution and accept not only its benefits but also its demerits.**

---

16. Phi Deans, “Contending Nationalisms and the Diayutai/Senkaku Dispute.” *Security Dialogue*, 31.3, 2000, pp. 119-31.

17. Amrita Jash, “The Optics of China-Japan Relations from the Politics of Historical Memories”, *Synergy: The Journal of Contemporary Asian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, Jan 2016.

Asia.<sup>18</sup> Datsu-A Ron, over time, became the classic slogan depicting Japan's war-time sins during the last half of the 20th century and the ultimate symbol of Japanese betrayal of other Asian countries.<sup>19</sup>

In similar terms to what Datsu-A Ron was for Japan during the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the leaders grew increasingly nationalist when observing the East Asian countries, including Japan's giant neighbour China, colonised by the Western countries. To avoid China's and other Asian countries' fate, and in order to be able to compete on equal terms with the Western countries, the Japanese political elite recognised the necessity to overcome what is described as the socio-economic and cultural backwardness of an Asian country.<sup>20</sup> Japan considered two of its very close people (the Koreans and the Chinese) much closer in terms of Asiatic politics, religion and traditions.<sup>21</sup>

The term *toko*, meaning the eastern seas, was often used by the Japanese scholars during that time. The Chinese use this word to denote the island kingdoms of Japan and Ryukyu to the east of China.<sup>22</sup> Basically, *toko* was used by the Japanese to give them a personal as well as a collective identification against Asia. This is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

<b>Asia</b>	<b>Toko</b>
Bad culture	Long history
Bad government	Old, high civilisation
Bad economy	Exquisite cultural elements, including written language
Bad race	Personal identity
	Regional affinity

Source: *Leaving Asia? The Meaning of Datsu-A and Japan's Modern History*.

---

18. A Translation of Datsu-A Ron: Decoding A Prewar Japanese Nationalistic Theory: Dwight Tat Wai Kwok, p. 7.

19. Pekka Korhonen, "Leaving Asia?: The Meaning of Datsu-A and Japan's Modern History", *The Asia Pacific Journal*, Vol. .

20. Fumitaka Furuoka, "Japan and the 'Flying Geese' Pattern of East Asian Integration", *Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (October 2005).

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

*The Flying Geese Model*

Introduced by the Japanese economist, Kaname Akamatsu (1935), the Flying Geese model can be used to analyse how Japan used this model to integrate the East Asian countries. The Flying Geese model is divided into two gaggles: the first started during the Meiji Restoration (1868) till 1945; the second, post 1945 to the end of the East Asian Miracle in the late 1990s. By taking the first gaggle of Flying Geese, it is easy to decipher Japan's "imperialist" nature in history which is a bitter memory in China. It was introduced during the Meiji Restoration (1868) when Japan was modernising its economy and its military power under the slogan *fukoku kyohei*. In order to catch up with the West, Japan began subjugating its East Asian neighbours through the use of military force. Two important characteristics described by Fumitaka Furuoka in *Japan and the Flying Geese Pattern of East Asian Integration* about the first gaggle of Flying Geese are as follows: (1) it was found forcible through the use of military force; (2) Japan aggressively promoted its open ideals and imposed these on the Asian countries.

The formation of the first gaggle of Flying Geese was started by expanding territory. In the first attempt at Asian regional integration, Japan (the first-tier goose) suppressed the people of Taiwan, Korea and Manchuria (second-tier geese) and forced them to accept Japan's leadership as well as Japan's own ideals, values and socio-cultural norms.<sup>23</sup> No doubt, Japan's policy from 1895 to 1945 was ruthless in nature. The first gaggle of Flying Geese came into being when Japan surrendered to the Allied powers in 1945. As Pempel observes, "The only significant collective challenge to Western leadership in Asia, and the only real bid for Asian integration, came from Japan's unsuccessful military attempt during the 1930s to form the 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.'"<sup>24</sup> During this time, the Meiji leaders wanted to compete with the West on equal terms and wanted to remove the stigma of Asia being a socio-economic and culturally backward region. In order to achieve this target, the slogan "Datsu-A Ron" was adopted.

---

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

## IMPORTANT EVENTS SHAPING HISTORY

### *Meiji-Qing*

During this period, both China and Japan were severely exposed to the newly expansionist Western presence. But in the case of China, Japan acted as the foreign antagonist, more dangerous than any Western power, in the Qing's final half-century. Japan's reaction to the Western expansion was more rapid and decisive than China's. China's "century of humiliation" starts with the Qing's humiliation during the two Opium Wars and the Anglo-French occupation of Beijing, which was well known to Japan. The realistic appraisal for this unprecedented threat to national autonomy was a major factor leading to one of the world's most profound revolutionary events: the overthrow of the centuries-old Tokugawa Shogunate and the restoration of direct imperial rule—an event known as the Meiji Restoration of 1868.<sup>25</sup>

When the main forces of the Tokugawa surrendered to the combined "royalist" forces in January 1868, it signalled the end of the Tokugawa era and the beginning of the Meiji Restoration. During the Meiji Restoration era, Japan was "reinventing" itself with two objectives: the first was strengthening Japan to keep it independent; and the second was ridding the nation of the humiliation, represented by the hated unequal treaties.<sup>26</sup> The Meiji Restoration marked Japan's road to modernisation. The 16-year-old Emperor Mutsuhito selected the era name Meiji for his reign.

Meiji Japan adopted two basic national policies: *fukoku* (enrich the country) and *kyohei* (strengthen the military). In order to achieve these goals, Japan had to move southwards, along the Pacific islands, and westwards to Korea and China.<sup>27</sup> Three years after the Meiji Restoration, the Qing and the Japanese signed a treaty in September 1871. This treaty was China's western treaty, concluded on the basis of equality and reciprocity, in which the Qing, for the

---

25. The Flying Geese model is a multi-tier hierarchical model to described how industrialisation spreads from the developed countries to the developing countries. William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 224.

26. Louis G. Perez, *The History of Japan* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998), p. 84.

27. James C. Hsiung, ed., *China and Japan at Odds: Deciphering the Perpetual Conflict* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 24.

first time, acknowledged Japan's status as a sovereign nation and agreed to a formal exchange of ambassadors.<sup>28</sup> Both the Qing and Meiji pledged not to interfere in each other's "states and territories" and to come to each other's aid in the case of any third party's involvement.

But Japan began to assert claims over two states and territories long claimed by the Qing as its tributaries, Liuqiu and Korea, as well as one that was part of the Qing Empire itself—the island of Taiwan. The real festering sore in the Qing-Meiji relations was Korea which resulted in the first Sino-Japanese War.

#### *First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95)*

Japan had been obsessed with the "Hermit Kingdom" for nearly 2,000 years. The Korean peninsula was a very important strategic concern for both China and Japan. Japan views the peninsula as the springboard for a possible invasion by China. Keeping in mind the words of the Chancellor of Germany, Otto von Bismarck that "Korea is a dagger pointing at the heart of Japan",<sup>29</sup> it was feared (by Japan) that some other power might use this natural path. China, on the other hand, sees the Korean peninsula as a critical buffer against Japanese expansion in Manchuria. Korea was part of China's "Tributary Empire" (the Treaty of Tientsin which was signed between China and Japan in the 1880s, ensured that the Korean problems would not lead to an accidental war).

However, in late 1893, a domestic rebellion (the Tonghak rebellion) broke out in Korea (like the Taiping rebellion in China). King Kojong of Korea, backed by his Queen Min, invited the Qing military to suppress the movement; by early June, the Chinese forces had arrived. The Japanese Diet had earlier decided that should the Qing send in troops, Japan would respond with troops of its own. In late June, the two forces confronted one another on the Korean soil. The Japanese forces brutally suppressed the Tonghak rebellion, and in July, occupied the Korean court. On August 1, Japan declared war on the Qing. At the outset, most nations expected a short war, with China as the victor. But the Japanese won virtually every battle and skirmish. The Chinese suffered hundreds of thousands

---

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

**The Sino-Japanese War was a major watershed in the Chinese imperial history—far more than the Opium Wars of 1839-42. The war showed the world for the first time how weak the Qing dyansty—which had been aggressively flexing its muscles around its peripheries for several decades—really was.**

of casualties, and the bloody fighting was marked by gruesome atrocities on both sides. The war ended when China sought peace with Japan, which was achieved with the Treaty of Shimonoseki, signed on April 17, 1895.

With the Treaty of Shimonoseki, China was forced to cede Taiwan to Japan, a huge indemnity to pay for Japan's war costs; Korea renounced its Chinese tributary status and was declared independent; and Japan was given a leasehold over the Liaoning peninsula, the gateway to Manchuria and adjacent to Korea.<sup>30</sup>

However, the Japanese celebration of victory was short-lived: the so-called Triple Intervention (by Russia, Germany and France), on April 23, announced that it would not allow China to be "dismembered." For Japan, Korea had been the cause of the war with China, over Liaoning with Russia in 1904, and, unfortunately, with China again in 1931.

Overall, the Sino-Japanese War was a major watershed in the Chinese imperial history—far more than the Opium Wars of 1839-42. The war showed the world for the first time how weak the Qing dyansty—which had been aggressively flexing its muscles around its peripheries for several decades—really was. S.C.M. Paine has observed, "Ever since the war, the focus of the Chinese foreign policy has been to undo its results, whereas the focus of the Japanese foreign policy has been to confirm them." The war was a shock to the Qing subjects themselves, for most of whom defeat at the hands of Japanese had been inconceivable.<sup>31</sup>

Even among Japanese scholars, opinion is divided on how to interpret Japan's involvement in Korea and the process that led to the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. The commonly accepted theory is that in the time leading up to the war, there were but two paths available to Japan—becoming an

---

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

imperial power or becoming a colony itself—and that, as a result, it was left with no choice but to pursue imperialism. This view also holds that imperialism was a consistent goal throughout Japan's invasion of Korea and the war with China.<sup>32</sup> In China, many historians regard all Japanese incursions since the Meiji era to be in contravention of international law and cast the words and actions of Mutsu Munemitsu in a critical light. Another key point is the issue of when Japan envisioned going to war with the Qing and began preparing for such a war in earnest. In Japan,

this question is debated by taking into account various factors, such as the respective developments in the army and navy and their relationships with the Diet. With respect to the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, most Chinese historians focus on Yamagata Aritomo, arguing that Japan was preparing to go to war from a relatively early date and was pursuing a course of military expansion. As demonstrated by Yamada Akira, Japan placed emphasis on the establishment of a military force under the emperor and the adoption of divisions by the army in 1888. But the focus should rather have been on the fact that the course of military expansion was put into motion only from 1891 in accordance with the path set forth in Prime Minister Yamagata's "spheres of sovereignty and interest" speech at the first session of the Imperial Diet in 1890. The increased militarisation was viewed as being problematic by the Diet, but the Ōtsu Incident, the arrival of a Russian fleet in Nagasaki, and other events that occurred that year provided justification for increasing Japan's sea power, and an imperial edict for the building of warships, issued on February 10, 1893, lent further impetus to the naval expansion. In addition,

**A distinctive feature of the clashes that broke out between Japan and China starting in July 1937 was that until the start of the Pacific War in 1941, both sides avoided declaring war on each other even though the fighting turned into all-out belligerency. The main reason was that a declaration of war was liable to cause them to become subject to the provisions of the US Neutrality Acts, with effects similar to economic sanctions.**

---

32. Japan-China Joint History Research Report: [https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/pdfs/jcjhrr\\_mch\\_en1.pdf](https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/pdfs/jcjhrr_mch_en1.pdf)

in 1893, Yamagata issued a recommendation on military preparedness. This added momentum to the position that Japan's military should be expanded as long as financial resources allowed it, thus, accelerating the course of Japan's military expansion.<sup>33</sup>

### *World War II: Second Sino-Japanese War*

A distinctive feature of the clashes that broke out between Japan and China starting in July 1937 was that until the start of the Pacific War in 1941, both sides avoided declaring war on each other even though the fighting turned into all-out belligerency. The main reason was that a declaration of war was liable to cause them to become subject to the provisions of the US Neutrality Acts, with effects similar to economic sanctions. In Japan, furthermore, the judgment was that elevating the situation to the status of "war" would hinder its early resolution. Prolongation of the Japan-China conflict also needed to be avoided for the sake of readiness for the confrontation with the Soviet Union and with Britain and the United States—the countries originally envisaged as enemies. Japan, thus, initially called this war the "North China Incident" and officially termed it the "China Incident", starting in September 1937, when the hostilities expanded.<sup>34</sup>

At the time of the official beginning of the second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, there were intermittent clashes and engagements between the Japanese and various Chinese forces. These engagements were collectively described by the Japanese government as "incidents" to downplay the conflict. This was primarily to prevent the United States deeming the conflict an actual war, and, thus, placing an embargo upon Japan as per the Neutrality Acts. The incidents collectively put pressure on China to sign various agreements, to Japan's benefit. These included the demilitarisation of Shanghai, the He-Umezumi Agreement, and the Chin-Doihara Agreement. The period was turbulent for the Chinese Nationalists, mired in a civil war with the Chinese Communists; they maintained an uneasy truce with the remnant warlords, who nominally aligned with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, following the Northern Expedition. This period also saw the Chinese Nationalists

---

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

modernising the National Revolutionary Army through the assistance of the Soviet, and later the German, advisers.

In July 1937 the conflict escalated after a significant skirmish with Chinese forces at the Marco Polo bridge. This marked the beginning of the second Sino-Japanese War. The Chinese Nationalist forces retaliated by attacking Shanghai. The Battle of Shanghai lasted for several months, concluding with a Chinese defeat on November 26, 1937.

Following this battle, Japanese advances continued to the south and west. A contentious aspect of these Japanese campaigns comprises the war crimes committed against the Chinese people. The most infamous example was the Rape of Nanking, when Japanese forces subjected the population to looting, mass rape, massacres, and other crimes. Other, less publicised atrocities were committed during the Japanese advances and it is estimated that millions of Chinese civilians were killed. Various attempts to quantify the crimes committed have proved contentious, and, at times, divisive.

The war from 1938 onwards was marked by the Chinese use of guerilla tactics to stall advances, and retreat to the interior where necessary. This eventually limited the Japanese advances because of supply-line limitations—the Japanese were unable to adequately control areas outside of cities, roads and railways. Clearly, Japan was all but defeated by the summer of 1945, yet its government continued to stubbornly insist that Japan could win with “one great decisive battle.” Following the attack on Pearl Harbour and the entry of the US into the war, fighting in the Pacific, Southeast and Southwest Asia, significantly weakened the Japanese. After the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Soviet invasion of Japanese-occupied Manchuria, Japan surrendered.

The Republic of China (ROC) administered Taiwan after Japan’s unconditional surrender in 1945, following a decision by the Allied powers at the Cairo Conference in 1943. The ROC moved its central government to Taiwan in December 1949, following the victory of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the Chinese civil war. Later, no formal transfer of the territorial sovereignty of Taiwan to the PRC was made in the post-war San Francisco Peace Treaty, and these arrangements were confirmed in the Treaty of Taipei concluded by the ROC and Japan in 1952. At the time, the Taiwanese

**Beginning with the unconditional surrender on August 15, 1945, Japan entered a period of political, economic, social, and even psychological revolution. The very fundamentals of Japanese society and culture were called into question as the nation paid for its “crimes against humanity”.**

authorities [the Chinese Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang (KMT)] were recognised by Japan, not Communist China (the PRC). As such, the KMT did not accept the Japanese reparations only in the name of the ROC government. Later, the PRC also refused reparations in the 1970s.

#### *Post World War II Japan*

Post-war Japan was under American occupation. China itself was not in any condition to share the glory of occupying Japan, primarily because it was in the throes of a nasty civil war. The war had

caused many million Japanese deaths. The political repression and war-time hardships made the 15 years a difficult and wrenching period; in many ways, the next seven years would be equally trying for Japan.<sup>35</sup>

Beginning with the unconditional surrender on August 15, 1945, Japan entered a period of political, economic, social, and even psychological revolution. The very fundamentals of Japanese society and culture were called into question as the nation paid for its “crimes against humanity”. Under the American occupation, the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers (SCAP) Gen Douglas MacArthur believed in reforming Japan. He sought a legacy of a democratised country. The necessary steps taken by him for democratisation were demobilisation, demilitarisation, decentralisation, and demythification.<sup>36</sup>

As the United States went ahead to revive Japan, the result was that Japan could get away from the responsibilities for the war atrocities, and the major victims of Japanese imperialism remained uncompensated. Japan’s industrial capability was systematically revived by Washington during the Korean War. Meanwhile, during the war, Washington quickly arranged the San Francisco Peace Treaty. By 1952, Japan’s own post-war government was in full operation:

---

35. Marus B Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

36. Ibid.

Japan's Self Defence Police Force was set up in no time, a mutual Security Treaty was signed with Washington, and, in short, all the legal work was completed. By 1955, the two major pre-war political parties were merged, to be called the Liberal Democratic Party, which has dominated Japanese politics almost all the way into the 21st century.

*The Cold War Years: Normalisation of Sino-Japan Relations*

Sino-Japanese relations remained strained throughout the Cold War. Even the establishment of official relations in 1971 did not truly normalise them in the political sense. Following the US lead, Japan preserved diplomatic ties with Taiwan; China, consequently, conducted diplomacy only with "friendly" Japanese firms and politicians that considered the PRC the legitimate China. Chinese propaganda constantly assailed Japan for "reviving militarism" whenever its military budget rose and its support of US military power was manifest. In fact, in reality, China's leaders were surely content to have Japan remain under the US security umbrella rather than its own. Thus, the two countries were locked in the mindset and behaviour pattern of the Cold War.<sup>37</sup>

In the spring of 1971, President Nixon made a historic visit to Beijing. Japan's Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei took Nixon's China visit as a sign of allowing Japan to reopen its China relationship. From that time on, Japanese exports poured into China. In this environment, in 1978, the Japanese right-wing leaders first relocated the tablets of 14 executed Class A war criminals to the national Heroes Hall of Fame at Yasukuni as war heroes. They then fabricated a new version of the history of the war by omitting the atrocities committed by the Japanese aggression and making the war appear as a lofty drive to liberate Asians from Western imperialism. Besides justifying the aggressions, every move was blamed on the victims. The Chinese blamed,

**Sino-Japanese relations remained strained throughout the Cold War. Even the establishment of official relations in 1971 did not truly normalise them in the political sense. Following the US lead, Japan preserved diplomatic ties with Taiwan.**

---

37. Ibid.

and demanded compensation from, the Japanese government on the “comfort women” issue that happened during the Nanjing Massacre. Apart from China, Korea, Philippines and Malaysia also asked for an apology and compensation on the “comfort women” issue from Japan.<sup>38</sup>

The perverted version of the history of war became a fundamental issue between China and Japan. Against this backdrop, in November 1998, an agreement was reached between Tokyo and Beijing, known as the “Sino-Japanese Joint Declaration in Building a Peaceful and Friendly East Asia.” One of the main projects that emerged as a result of this agreement was to organise a joint committee of both sides that would prepare a version of East Asia’s history acceptable to all. The result was published in 2005, but this has not resolved the problems between the parties involved.

To summarise, history is a complex science, and assembling data, reading original sources and creating plausible narratives regarding the past can help in mitigating and resolving international conflicts such as China-Japan relations. In the overall assessment, China and Japan are entangled with heavy historical memories. On many occasions, Japan has officially apologised for past crimes, but history has become China’s chronic illness which has shaped its attitude towards Japan.

Japan’s historical narrative is more like a game of “hide and seek”, by glorifying the victorious events of Nippon-koku and veiling the crimes committed. For instance, the government has taken steps to remove major parts of its history from textbooks. To justify this, it can be argued that Japan wants to protect the present and future generations.

To answer the question of how long history will continue to be a fundamental factor of divergence between China and Japan, one needs a crystal ball. China’s sense of historical impressions is much stronger than Japan’s. It must be noted that the economic partnership between China and Japan is one of the largest in the world, with the bilateral trade ranking the third largest in the world. However, the trade partnership has failed to stabilise the relations between China and Japan.

---

38. Ibid.