

## Slightly Less Fear and Loathing in Sino-Japanese Relations?

Hugo Dobson  
*School for East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield*

*International Media Centre – G20 Hangzhou Summit.* With Japan hosting the forty-second G7 summit in early summer and China hosting the eleventh G20 summit a few months later, 2016 held the promise of being an important year both for Asia's two superpowers and the region's overall presence in global summitry. However, the recent poor relations between China and Japan threatened to scupper any chances of a coordinated approach to global summitry, let alone any resulting bilateral or regional benefits. These poor relations resulted from competing interpretations of World War 2 through to conflicting territorial claims in neighbouring waters, as well as diametrically opposed leadership aspirations in the Asian region and further afield in Africa. It seemed that these issues of national interests would trump any incentives on the part of both countries to

demonstrate global leadership in finding solutions to collection action problems through the G7 and G20.

Equally concerning was the fact that [global summitry was under threat](#) of becoming embroiled in this Sino-Japanese rivalry with each alphanumeric group little more than a weapon of choice on each side. In the blue corner, the G7 represents the old world order of 'great powers' that Japan seeks to preserve as a small and effective forum of discussion among like-minded leaders but China regards as irrelevant and illegitimate. In the red corner, the G20 captures the post-crisis reality of developed and developing countries sitting together equally in a more legitimate and representative forum with China as 'first among equals' but which Japan regards as unwieldy and ineffective.

Prime Minister Abe Shinzo set the scene for this ‘Battle of the Gs’ at the G7 Ise Shima Summit [in a number of ways](#) that dovetailed neatly with an emerging and eponymous Japanese foreign policy doctrine. This ‘Abe Doctrine’ seeks to arrest Japan’s decline relative to China, remove various perceived ‘shackles’ that prevent it playing a proactive role in the world, engage in historical revisionism of established postwar norms, and create an economically strong Japan through the three-pronged approach of ‘Abenomics’.

First of all, the choice of venue was no accident. Ise-Shima was partly chosen because of Ise Shrine, which occupies a central position within Shintoism, has connections to the Japanese imperial household and represents values perceived by the government as inherently Japanese. Victims of Japan’s wartime aggression inevitably regard this differently and having the G7 leaders visit the shrine was controversial to say the least. Japan also invited a number of regional outreach guests including Vietnam at a time when Abe is seeking to build a positive coalition with Southeast

Asia with one eye on China. Finally, in terms of agenda items, the G7 foreign ministers meeting had already made statements on the importance of the ‘rule of law’ in territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The leaders’ [final declaration](#) reaffirmed these specific previous statements and in addition made numerous references to the G7’s shared values of ‘freedom, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights’, which obviously exclude and isolate China. Similarly veiled criticisms of China were made in terms of Chinese over-production of steel and the importance of quality investment and infrastructure.

China reacted to all this in predictable fashion. On the first day of the Japanese-hosted G7 (which fell coincidentally 100 days ahead of the Chinese-hosted G20), Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that the appropriate venue for discussing the global economy is the G20 not the G7. Thus, the scene appeared to be set for a ‘G’ standoff throughout 2016 that simultaneously contributed to the deterioration in Sino-Japanese relations and was in turn shaped by this.

## After Ise Shima

Events after the G7 leaders departed Japan appeared to amplify this development and the increasingly lost opportunity that 2016 was coming to represent for Asia's position in global summitry.

On 12 July, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague supported the Philippines and ruled against China's historic claims in the South China Sea (see Annemie Zimmerman's policy brief from Hangzhou on this topic. Although not a party to the South China Sea dispute, Japan expressed support for the Philippines and urged China to respect the ruling. In response, [China warned Japan](#) against interfering in the South China Sea dispute.

Tensions spread to the East China Sea in early August when a spike was observed in the number of official Chinese vessels entering waters close to the [disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands](#). Even the release of the game [Pokemon Go](#) became a site of contestation between Chinese and Japanese gamers over the virtual

possession of the controversial Yasukuni Shrine.

However, despite this apparently increasing turmoil, glimmers of hope emerged. In mid-August, despite the earlier 'swarm' of Chinese vessels around the disputed Islands, the Japanese Coast Guard rescued a number of Chinese fishermen after their vessel collided with a Greek merchant ship near the disputed islands resulting in an expression of ['appreciation'](#) from the Chinese authorities to Japanese.

The perennial issues of North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes presented opportunities for Sino-Japanese dialogue within [the trilateral meeting of China, Japan and Korea's foreign ministers](#) in Tokyo that took place towards the end of August. Despite concerns as to whether it would even go ahead, this represented the first ministerial visit to Japan by a Chinese foreign minister since Xi's assumption of power. This provided further opportunity to escape the apparent deterioration in regional relations and lay the ground for a [possible](#)

[trilateral meeting of the leaders](#) later in the year.

Senior politicians Kawamura Takeo and Chinese Yu Zhengsheng met a few weeks before the G20 and stressed the need for both sides to [cooperate and dialogue](#) with each other. These discussions fed into the activities of Yachi Shotaro, Abe's longstanding foreign and security policy consigliere, and Chinese State Councillor Yang Jiechi, who explored the possibility of setting up [an Abe-Xi bilateral meeting](#), the first since April 2015 and their third ever, on the sidelines of the G20. In the run-up to the Hangzhou Summit, it appeared as if China and Japan's leaders might grab a small victory from the jaws of defeat.

### **Hangzhou and a partial reset in Sino-Japanese relations**

In the end, confounding considerable speculation, the Xi-Abe bilateral took place for thirty minutes on the afternoon of 5 September after the G20 had officially ended. Although it may not prove to represent a full-blown reset in Sino-Japanese relations, it is a welcome

development and natural continuation of the positive efforts that took place immediately prior to Hangzhou.

It appears as if the language on both sides became more emollient. The Chinese side turned much more towards engagement in an attempt to get Japan on board with the G20 and ensure its success. In his pre-summit discussions with Yachi, Yang called on Japan to play a ['constructive role'](#) and this cooperative tone continued at the Abe-Xi meeting when Xi called for the two countries to ['put aside disruptions'](#) and re-establish normal relations as soon as possible. In response, Abe stressed the need to build stable relations taking into account the bigger picture of a [strategically and mutually beneficial relationship](#).

However, what stood out in this meeting was that the willingness to compromise could sit alongside a readiness to discuss difficult issues, such as territorial disputes, in a frank way rather than whitewash and shelve them. It was [reported prior to the meeting](#) that Abe would raise the issues of both the South and East China Seas and in particular the construction of military

facilities in the former and the incursions of Chinese vessels in the latter. After the meeting it was reported that Xi called on Japan to [exhibit restraint](#) in its responses to the South China Sea. So, these hard issues were indeed addressed and in an open fashion but also constructively as part of an ongoing collective effort to improve communication mechanisms between the two countries' naval and air forces as quickly as possible so as to successfully manage unpredictable situations in the East China Sea. In addition, reopening negotiations surrounding the joint development of gas fields in the East China Sea was discussed alongside various kinds of exchange focused on both countries' experiences of hosting the Olympic Games.

A number of further opportunities for the two sides to meet on the edges of multilateral meetings can be seen in the

ASEAN and East Asian Summits that immediately followed the G20. In addition, holding a trilateral meeting of the Chinese, Japanese and Korean leaders beyond the end of the year remains a concrete and realizable goal. Of course, this may just be one more false dawn in Sino-Japanese relations but there are genuine reasons to be positive about the role regional and global summits can play in improving bilateral relations between countries, rather than becoming mere pawns in their rivalry.

*Hugo Dobson is Professor of Japan's International Relations in the School for East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield*