

# Civil Diplomacy's Role in the East China Sea

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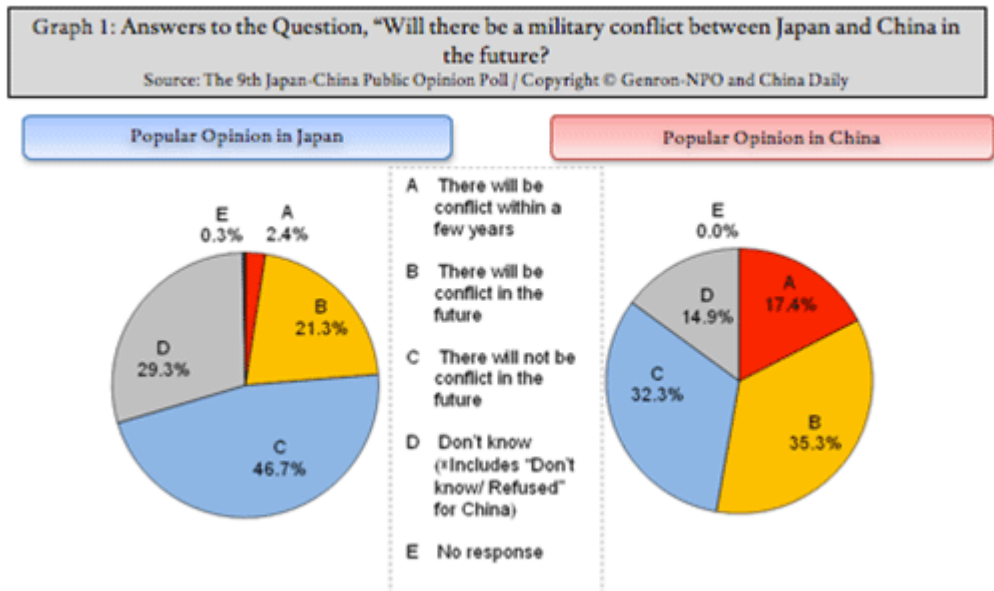
*[Editor's note: This brief is a feature of [the Council of Councils initiative](#), gathering opinions from global experts on major international developments.]*

The instability in East Asia has the potential to undermine global security. In the waters around the disputed Senkaku Islands (known in China as Diaoyu) in the East China Sea, vessels of Japanese and Chinese law enforcement authorities confront each other almost every day. However, despite an agreement to open a channel of crisis communications, no hotline exists between the governments of Japan and China to defuse this explosive situation.



Since the Japanese government's purchase of three of the islets in September 2012, diplomatic efforts have remained at a virtual standstill. Admittedly, both governments are overtly and covertly searching for an opening for a dialogue, but currently there are no prospects for realizing a Japan-China summit meeting between the top government leaders.

The severity of the confrontation between the two neighbors over the Senkaku Islands is evident in the findings of [the Japan-China joint public-opinion poll](#), which the Genron NPO released in August 2013. More than 90 percent of the Japanese and Chinese citizens polled replied with unfavorable impressions of each other's country. Moreover, more than half of the Chinese polled, or 52.7 percent, predicted that military conflict will erupt between Japan and China in the vicinity of the disputed islands in the near future (see Graph 1).



The worsening public sentiment is making it more difficult for the governments to improve bilateral relations. Against such a backdrop, the role of civil diplomacy is increasingly important. Specifically, civil diplomacy involves citizens of one country engaging influential opinion leaders of another, including former government officials, scholars, and policy experts, on a voluntary basis to solve immediate challenges. Such initiatives would be closely linked to conventional diplomatic efforts and could help facilitate government action—although they would not necessarily conform to official positions.

### Seeking Unofficial Channels

In Asia, there are diverse channels of Track II diplomacy, a type of informal diplomacy that engages government officials in dialogues organized by private-sector groups. However, such channels of communication are quite limited when it comes to Japan's dialogue with China. For instance, the vast majority of citizen-exchange programs between Japan and China were government-led activities designed to create friendship between the two countries. Other activities have been initiated by Japan's leading business organizations. Japan and China also have academic exchange programs between universities and sister-city relationships between local municipalities.

There are two reasons to advocate for civil diplomacy between Japan and China. First, governmental efforts alone have been insufficient to solve politically volatile issues, such as territorial disputes. The complexity of the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute lies in the fact that the governments of Japan and China have dealt with this sensitive matter by promoting different public narratives. For instance, the Chinese people have not been informed that the islands have been effectively controlled by Japan for many years. In Japan, the government has insisted that it never agreed to shelve the territorial dispute

during negotiations on the 1978 Treaty of Peace and Friendship.

This diplomatic ambiguity was the "wisdom" of our predecessors. Deng Xiaoping, then Chinese vice premier, acknowledged "shelving" the territorial dispute by [stating](#) in the fall of 1978 that "people of the next generation will probably be wiser than us. At that time, a solution that everyone can agree on will probably be found."

Last fall, the government of Japan purchased the islands from their owner, a private citizen, thereby opening Pandora's Box. In the Genron NPO's 2013 public-opinion survey, almost half of the Chinese people polled viewed Japan as an "expansionist country," apparently because they felt Japan had seized previously untouched territory. Chinese government leaders also no longer mince words. For instance, in September 2013 Foreign Minister Wang Yi was [quoted in media reports](#) as saying that "China is ready to sit down in a dialogue with the Japanese to work out jointly a way to manage the current situation. But Japan needs first to recognize that there is such a dispute. The whole world knows there is."

Meanwhile, 62.7 percent of the Japanese polled in the above opinion survey acknowledge the "existence of a territorial dispute between China and Japan." In addition, 49.1 percent say that "the two countries should promptly proceed toward negotiations with the view to resolving their issues through peaceful means," followed by 42.4 percent who favor the "submission of the case to the International Court of Justice for a legal resolution of the issue."

A second reason for pressing civil diplomacy is that the sovereignty of the disputed territories can leave countries boxed in<sup>3/4</sup>with little to no concession made by parties involved. In the case of Japan-China relations, the development of a broad consensus on peaceful resolution among the public might be the only way to break the deadlock. Civil society<sup>3/4</sup>including private-sector think tanks, not-for-profit organizations, and various other forums<sup>3/4</sup>could be more effective in shifting the dialogue to conflict prevention.

### **Peaceful Resolution of Conflicts in East Asia**

The Genron NPO has begun its own effort at civil diplomacy, analyzing public-opinion trends and instituting a regular channel of dialogue, the Tokyo-Beijing Forum, to discuss these trends and potential avenues to inform the Chinese and Japanese public on difficult issues between the two governments.

The Tokyo-Beijing Forum has already demonstrated success in reducing tensions. In 2005 new initiatives were explored to overcome Japan-China tensions through dialogue and the forum helped set

the stage for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's sudden visit to China in October 2006. That visit helped mend Japan-China relations after a prolonged chill brought on by former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine. In less than ten years, the forum has developed into an important channel of dialogue between Japan and China involving government officials, opinion leaders, and media representatives.

A public-opinion survey component complements this dialogue process, and provides the level of public feedback necessary to help shape government policies.

A top priority for the forum is the "peaceful solution of conflicts." The year 2013 marks the thirty-fifth anniversary of the signing of the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship, and the forum is preparing to adopt a "no war" declaration at its next meeting in Beijing on October 26–27. The forum is also planning to inaugurate Japan-China joint research in the private sector on the history of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and the prospects for their future use.

In the aforementioned survey, approximately 50 percent of the Japanese respondents (49.1 percent) say that both countries should promptly proceed toward negotiations. The corresponding figure for the Chinese respondents is 43.6 percent. If calls for a peaceful solution should mount among the peoples of the two countries, that might create pressure for a new approach to resolving their disputes.

The idea of solving problems between Japan and China without recourse to arms or threats is not new. Looking beyond the UN Charter, the same idea is contained in [\*\*Article I of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship\*\*](#). By applying this principle in Japan-China relations, the present tensions could be contained. And if intergovernmental dialogue should commence under such a guiding principle, we could foresee a settling of the territorial dispute.