

INTERVIEW: China-watcher Yabuki says **Senkakus are a diplomatic mistake by Japan**

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[Susumu Yabuki](#)

A professor emeritus of Yokohama City University

Susumu Yabuki is one of Japan's most eminent China watchers and currently a professor emeritus of Yokohama City University.

The cause of the diplomatic flare-up between Japan and China over the uninhabited Senkaku Islands has been a source of much debate and misinterpretation in Japan. China's increasing territorial ambition, mishandling of the issue by the Noda administration or a political standoff incited by the provocative ex-Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara, have all been cited as the cause.



Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka, far left, meets with Chinese Premier Chou En-lai in Beijing's Great Hall of the People on Sept. 25, 1972, prior to the signing of documents to normalize diplomatic relations. (Asahi Shimbun file photo)

But scholar Susumu Yabuki, one of Japan's most eminent China watchers, has a different reason. While many experts say it was an unexpected, accidental event, Yabuki, a professor emeritus of Yokohama City University, says it was rather a matter of course and a result of Japan's anachronistic and self-deceiving way of thinking. In his latest book, titled "*Chimerica – the U.S.-China interdependency and Japan*" and released in May, Yabuki, 74, foretold that the territorial dispute would reach a critical stage, blaming Japan's official stance on the territorial issue as a source of distrust between Tokyo and Beijing. Presenting a larger diplomatic picture, Yabuki said during a recent interview with AJW that Japan's excessive dependence on the Japan-U.S. alliance should also be blamed. It has only hurt

the Japan-China relationship, although the Japan-U.S. pact is no longer relevant in the era of increasing economic interdependency between Beijing and Washington, a situation he describes with the neology “Chimerica.” Excerpts from the interview follow.

Question: What do you believe is the source of distrust between Tokyo and Beijing?

Answer: The current row over the Senkaku Islands traces its roots to the four meetings between Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka and Chinese Premier Zhou En-lai in September 1972, which set the terms for the normalization of diplomatic ties. The Foreign Ministry maintains that the islands are not in dispute, because Japanese leaders have never acknowledged the presence of a diplomatic dispute over the islands in the meetings and subsequent summit talks. According to the ministry’s record, Tanaka raised the Senkaku issue at the third Tanaka-Zhou meeting on Sept. 27. Zhou responded by saying that it should be “shelved,” as the two countries could gain nothing from getting embroiled in the territorial issue in their talks. Tanaka’s response was not on the record, and I believe that the Foreign Ministry intentionally excised it to defend Japan’s territorial claims. However, the memoir of a Chinese diplomat, Zhang Xiangshan, an adviser to Zhou who attended the summit talks, says Tanaka made comments four times and effectively acknowledged the territorial problem and agreed to shelve it. I believe his 1998 memoir is based on China’s official record. Japanese diplomat Hiroshi Hashimoto, then chief of the Foreign Ministry’s China division, also admitted in his memoir in 2000 that Tanaka agreed with Zhou to discuss the Senkaku issue “at a future opportunity.” The Chinese position on the dialogue is that the two sides effectively agreed to defer the contentious issue, and Chinese President Hu Jintao apparently made this point clear to Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda during the 15 minutes they stood together and talked on Sept. 9. On the next day, however, the Cabinet officially made a decision to nationalize the islands, eliciting a furious reaction from Beijing. China cannot compromise in agreeing on whether the two countries agreed to shelve the issue, because to deny it means to deny the good spirit of the normalization talks, which was to overcome Japan’s wartime aggression. I believe there are certain grounds for the Chinese to connect the territorial issue to the historical issue.

Q: How will the two countries reach a compromise?

A: I don’t think China will open a dialogue with the Democratic Party of Japan leadership, which has broken tacitly understood diplomatic rules with China since the 2010 collision incident between a Japanese Coast Guard ship and a Chinese fishing vessel. If a Cabinet headed by Liberal Democratic Party leader Shinzo Abe assumes power, it will try to restart a dialogue. The appointment of the former foreign minister Masahiko Komura, chairman

of the Japan-China parliamentary friendship association, to the LDP's deputy president post, is a good sign. China will agree to reopen the dialogue as there will be no gain for both sides if the territorial row escalates. The only available solution to the territorial dispute is to put it back on the shelf, and Japan should stop refusing to acknowledge the presence of the dispute with China. But I am not optimistic that Japan will reposition itself to improve relations with China in the long run. There is a sentiment in political circles, the media, the academic world and public opinion that the government should take an unyielding stance against China, especially when it comes to the territorial issue. It is much like the situation surrounding the nuclear power issue. The media and academicians tend to pander to the government's claims, even when it is apparent the government's arguments contain a lot of errors and lies. I hope the Senkakus dispute will become an alarming call for the Japanese public to rethink what really serves Japan's national interests.

Q: In your book, you say that Japan cannot rely on the Japan-U.S. alliance to resolve the friction with China. Why?

A: The Japanese government's presumption that the United States would take Japan's side in the event of a military confrontation with China is blind to the reality of the increasing U.S.-China interdependence, which I call the "Chimerica" interdependency. While the Senkakus incident is giving an excuse for the pro-U.S. alliance forces in Japan to strengthen the Japan-U.S. alliance, the United States cannot make a military commitment against China. In late May 2010, then Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama was being backed into a corner to give up his office over diplomatic friction with the United States over the relocation of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma. At that same time, Washington was sending a delegation of 200 State Department officials, led by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, to Beijing for the second Strategic and Economic Dialogue to discuss common global strategies. It was like a sick joke for Japan. While Japan maintains that the Senkakus are Japan's inherent territory, a U.S. Congressional report on Sept. 25 makes it clear again that the United States takes a neutral position over the territorial claim, saying that the reversion of administrative rights over the islands to Japan "did not prejudice any claims."

Q: How do you view the scope of Chimerica interdependency?

The neologism Chimerica was coined by the Harvard historian Niall Ferguson in his 2008 book "The Ascent of Money" and has become a common term to describe the symbiotic relationship between China and the United States. The value of trade in goods between China and the United States has grown to 2.5 times as large as that between Japan and the United States, and China is now the leading holder of U.S. Treasury securities. If bilateral relations sour, it may cost China its assets in the United States, but for the United States, it may mean falling from its perch as the world's top key-currency country. Unlike the Cold

War era, the two superpowers in the Chimerica structure have mutual interests not only economically but also in security issues. It has been proven that the debt-ridden United States alone cannot manage the world and needs cooperation with China in regard to peacekeeping, counter-terrorism and nuclear nonproliferation strategies. China is a junior partner for the United States at this time, but it will have an equal "G-2" partnership in a decade.

Q: How has the Chimerica interdependency affected China's social and diplomatic policies?

A: It is ironic that China worships the dollar and finances U.S. debt by purchasing U.S. Treasury securities, more than Japan, a de facto U.S. client state, does. It means that Beijing is forcibly saving the earnings of its domestic workers in the United States, which could be spent for improving the welfare of its people. China's strategy is to earn foreign currency by keeping its currency exchange rate low to boost the country's global influence, but it should be remembered that the policy sacrifices the standard of living for most of its population. The accumulation of foreign currency has created strong vested interests and two distinctive classes in China. The ruling class can enjoy dividends from the foreign investment, while the subordinate class is still struggling with relatively low purchasing power due to the weak Chinese yuan. This disparity can cause social unrest, and I believe it is part of the reason why China is forced to maintain its oppressive rule and has increased military spending for the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which is the military arm of the Communist Party.

Q: How should Japan protect its national interests in the era of Chimerica interdependency?

A: The fundamental problem of Japan's diplomacy since the end of the Cold War lies in that it kept relying too much on the Japan-U.S. security alliance by setting up China as a hypothetical enemy. This has prevented Japan from rededicating itself to active diplomacy toward China, despite the two countries' increasing economic interdependency. Beijing has also used Japan-U.S. security relations as a justification for increasing military spending, which has already created strong vested interests in the hands of the PLA. It, in turn, pushes China to seek a more hard-line, hawkish diplomatic policy. Unless Japan reduces its blind dependence on its military alliance with the United States and seeks active diplomacy to resolve disputes such as the Senkakus issue, it will be left on the sidelines of the decision-making process by the two superpowers. Even when their decisions affect Japan's fate, Japan will be not informed. Japan needs to develop active diplomatic relations with both countries, in which we have access to critical information and the decision-making process.

(Interview by Hiroshi Matsubara, AJW staff writer)