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Interview with Professor Yabuki on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Crisis and U.S.-China-Japan Relations

Yabuki Susumu (矢吹晋), professor emeritus of Yokohama City University, is one of Japan's most eminent and thoughtful, as well as prolific, China scholars. For over 40 years, Professor Yabuki has been remarkably prescient in his analysis of China's rise, and of challenges and opportunities presented thereby for Japan and the United States.

In a [June 5 post](#) on this blog, titled “**Japanese Scholar Says Scrap U.S.-Japan Alliance; Recognize U.S.-China Co-Dependency**,” I summarized Yabuki's new book 『チャイナ-米中結託と日本の進路』 (*Chimerica – U.S.-China Interdependence and the Way Forward for Japan*).

With typically prescience, in that book Yabuki foretold of a likely Japan-China crisis over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, as well as why—withstanding the U.S.-Japan alliance—Japan cannot and should not rely upon the backing of military power to resolve it. Yabuki's views is that the U.S.-Japan alliance no longer serves, but rather is damaging to Japan's interests. The U.S. is too interdependent with China to make credible a commitment to use military power. Moreover, the U.S.-Japan alliance has been and continues as to be seen in China as justification for vastly increased military spending, which has created worryingly strong vested interests.

Yabuki's prescription is for Japan to abrogate the military alliance with the U.S. and to rededicated itself to active diplomacy to resolve or manage disputes like Senkakus/Diaoyudao.

This week I caught up with Yabuki-sensei again. My questions and his answers (edited) follow.

Q. Harner: Have your analysis/opinions/conclusions changed since you wrote *Chimerica—U.S. China Interdependence and the Way Forward for Japan*?

A. Yabuki: I think that what I advocated and foretold have been validated. In particular, in Part III of the book, I presented in detail the source of mistrust between China and Japan relating first to Japan contrition for aggressive war and, second, over the Senkaku/Diaoyudao dispute. It goes back to four meetings between Prime Minister Tanaka Kakue and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai on September 26-28, 1972 that decided the terms for restoring diplomatic relations. At a second meeting, Tanaka solemnly apologized “in all sincerity” (誠心誠意の謝罪) for Japanese aggression. But the record of this apology was excised by Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) officials from the meeting transcript later released the Japanese government.

Similarly falsified was the record of the dialogue between Tanaka and Zhou during meetings on the 27th and 28th. Tanaka raised the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue, soliciting from Zhou a comment. Zhou first declined to address the issue, saying nothing was to be gained by doing so. At a second meeting, Zhou again refused to discuss the islands.

The Chinese position was one of “shelving” the matter, not seeking resolution, because “resolution” required one side to lose. This exchange was similarly removed from MOFA-prepared transcripts.

As a result, the Japanese official position (and record) has been that the issue was never raised during the Tanaka-Zhou meetings. This situation allowed that the Noda government (and previous governments) to maintain that the islands “are not disputed,” i.e., the Chinese side had accepted Japanese sovereignty and control. The Chinese position on Tanaka-Zhou dialogue has been, on the contrary, that China “implicitly agreed” (默契) to defer contention (搁置争议) over the issue. The

Chinese position is clearly the valid one. The Japanese understanding is clearly fanciful and contradictory.

At the extraordinary 15 minute Chinese President Hu Jintao-PM Noda “standing summit” that took place on the edge of the APEC meeting in Vladivostok on September 9, this was the point made by Hu to Noda. The next day, the Noda government implemented the “nationalization” of the contested islands, delivering a massive loss of face to President Hu. This crude abnegation of the Zhou-Tanaka “understanding” incited anti-Japanese government statements and acts, included some that got out of hand.

Mistrust in Japan-China relations is owed in some cases to “chicken and egg” situations, where cause and effect are hard to assign. The current case of the abnegation of the “implicit agreement” was clearly an error by the Noda government, responsibility for which also belongs to past MOFA officials who falsified transcripts.

It can be said that mistrust in Japan-China relations has been building over the past 40 years. It burst out into the open during the first half of 2012 during a void in Japan’s foreign policy governance. This is very much as I predicted. Six months before the publication of *Chimerica*, in a March 16 speech to the Kokusai Zenrin Kyokai, I expressed fears and gave warning of a dreadful deterioration in Japan-China relations this fall. To me what has happened has been completely expected.

*More questions for and answers from Professor Yabuki in my next post.*

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Continuing the Interview with Japanese China Scholar Yabuki on the Senkaku/Diaoyudao Crisis and Japan-China-U.S. Relations

Continuing yesterday’s interview with Professor Yabuki Susumu (矢吹晋), one of Japan’s most eminent China scholars, author of 『チャイメリカー米中結託と日本の進路』



[Tanzan Ishibashi \(1884-1973\)](#) (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

*(Chimerica – U.S.-China Interdependence and the Way Forward for Japan).*

**Q. Harner: You advocated in your book that Japan should abrogate the mutual defense treaty with the United States, saying that it does not serve Japan’s interests. Are you still of this view?**

A. Yabuki: A former Japanese Prime Minister whom I deeply respect and admire, Ishibashi Tanzan (石橋湛山) [note: (b. 1884-d. 1973) elected PM December 23, 1956 but compelled to resign just three months later after suffering a mild stroke], visited China in September 1959 and met with Premier Zhou Enlai. At that meeting Ishibashi proposed that China and Japan join with each other to construct a compact for peace in East Asia. This was the Cold War period Ishibashi “Japan-China-U.S.-Soviet Peace Alliance” (日中米ソ平和同盟) initiative.

Earlier, in June of 1959, Ishibashi had written to Zhou, as follows:

“When, as Prime Minister, I was composing my Cabinet, one of my strong desires was to find a way to join hands with your Honorable Country, and to leverage our combined strength to realize world peace.... The People’s Republic of China and Japan, acting as if one country, uniting to defend peace in East Asia, pursuing common policies to promote global peace.... Toward this goal, eliminating territorial barriers to free exchange in economics, politics, and culture.... Doing this in such a way that respects our two countries’ existing relationships with the Soviet Union and the United States and other countries, and not demanding abrupt change; but to the extent practicable, activating these relationships so that they work toward the aforementioned goal.”

In October 1963 Ishibashi visited China a second time and also met with Mao Zedong. At the time I was a junior staffer at the *Toyo Keizai* and was honored to be invited to Ishibashi’s home and to his vacation bungalow at Yamanaka Lake.

My advocacy of abrogating the U.S.-Japan security treaty is not just my idea. It is an idea whose genealogy traces to Ishibashi’s “Japan-China-U.S.-Soviet Peace Alliance” initiative. The current Japan-China conflict has only deepened my conviction that it is the right choice for Japan.

**Q. Harner: Do you see any signs that the Japanese government is rethinking the value or utility of the alliance with the U.S.? Has the U.S.-Japan alliance been a factor influencing the current Senkaku/Diaoyudao crisis?**

A. Yabuki: The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has traditionally embraced the U.S.-Japan security treaty. The first two leaders of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), Hatoyama Yukio and Kan Naoto, advocated changing Japan’s defense strategy. After both men failed in office, the policy of PM Noda’s inner circle –called the “Noda LDP faction”– has essentially been the LDP policy. In other words, while the change in government from the LDP to the DPJ was informed by a policy position of changing the U.S.-Japan security relationship, that position has now been abandoned. In this context, abrogating the mutual defense treaty is a very weak position politically. While people in Okinawa are clamoring opposition to the Osprey aircraft, they cannot call for the withdrawal of U.S. forces on which they rely for their livelihoods. Which is to say, very few people think “Okinawa is safe because it is protected by U.S. forces”; rather, the feeling is that “we are in danger because China will target us.” Okinawa paid tribute to China under the Imperial tribute system. They have an understanding of *Pax Sinica*.

**Q. Harner: Has the crisis produced any new thinking, or doubts, within the Japanese government about Japan’s relations (economic, defense, or other) with China or the U.S.?**

A. Yabuki: For a part of the anti-China faction, the crisis has confirmed their view that China is a barbaric country, a dictatorship, with which Japan should not continue to interact. But the reality is that economic and cultural exchange has been steadily deepening. This trend will continue. Shifting some activity from China to Myanmar may happen, but this do not mean a decline in China’s share. China and Japan are united by an inescapable, though troubled relationship (腐れ縁). Like it or not, it cannot be severed. It is like a marriage that has entered the stage of ennui (倦怠期). At the time of the Tiananmen Incident, there was a similar debate. Compared with then, the mutually dependent and complementary relationship has vastly deepened. It doesn’t matter that some Japanese dislike China, they will unable to live without “made in China.”

Q. Harner: **Can you see any possible resolution of the Senkaku/Diaoyudao dispute?**

A. Yabuki: It is either recognize the Chinese territorial claim, affirm a shared interest (or “possession”) relationship (共有関係), jointly develop the resources; or defer indefinitely any development (開発棚上げ). These are the only alternatives. Until now, China has asserted that the islands are its sovereign territory, while Japan has been in effective control. Through the current crisis, China is effectively gaining international recognition of its sovereignty. China will refuse to negotiate with the DPJ. If a cabinet headed Abe Shinzo comes into being, he can be expected to head immediately to Beijing to restart a dialogue. Previously when Abe was elected Prime Minister, one of his first acts was to go to China to unfreeze the relationship frozen by Koizumi. It would be a replay of that. The newly elected deputy leader of the LDP Komura Masahiko (高村正彦), chairman of the Japan-China Parliamentarian Committee, can handle the liaison.

Harner: *Thank you Professor Yabuki.*