



The Inevitable Rivalry of China and Japan in Southeast Asia

By

Adelia Rahmawati

International Relations, Universitas Indonesia
adeliaarhm@gmail.com

Introduction

As two of the most promising economies in East Asia, the relationship between Japan and China has become one of the most highlighted issues in contemporary international relations. Numerous frameworks involving one or the two countries could become an opportunity for the surrounding countries to get investment, build infrastructure, increase trade volume, and accelerate development.¹ Yet, any strain or tension in the relationship of both countries can also be a source of threat to smaller countries. This situation is especially important in Southeast Asia, where the presence of Japan and China has become an influential political reality over the last few decades. For example, Japan has consistently sought to enhance its role as one of the main partners in driving Southeast Asian economy through political, security, and economic cooperation. Even Japan was only second to the United States as ASEAN's largest trading partner for five years until 2008.²

On the other hand, economic power and initiatives have always been the primary means for China to increase its positive influence in Southeast Asian countries. Short-term financial incentives, foreign investment, low lending rates, and low trade tariffs are several examples of economic advantage that China offers to its Southeast Asian counterpart. Thus, by looking at what the Southeast Asian region has been through over the past decade, it becomes clear that two different powers are trying to increase their influence and position on the same playing field—or “two tigers sharing one mountain” as dubbed by Judah.³



However, there has been a growing debate about whether the rivalry between the two countries will last or whether the relationship between the two countries can be categorized as competition at all. It actually depends on how the power comparison between Japan and China is perceived. Despite the first impression that Japan gives as a counterweight to China in Southeast Asia, it is potentially a fallacy as well to assume that Japan is able to balance China's growth as an ever-growing power.⁴ In this case, if Japan does not have the speed of growth like China has, their relationship could not even be categorized as rivalry. For example, Japan's top position as a regional trading partner has been displaced by China's economic growth since 2009—which has tripled by 2021.⁵ Even worse, Japan could be assumed only as a United States' ally, such as South Korea, to balance Chinese influence and domination in the region. However, the current literature on the dynamics of relations between China and Japan almost always view Japan as China's main competitor in Southeast Asia—or often referred to as the Sino-Japanese Rivalry. That is due to China's position as the largest trading partner of ASEAN countries, and Japan is actually the second largest investor after the US.⁶ Among other countries in Asia-Pacific, Japan is also capable of playing a role as an actor that takes a stand against China in the South China Sea dispute through its policies, actions, and positions.⁷

Taking into consideration the previously elaborated debate, the author sees that the topic of the projection of the Japan-China rivalry in Southeast Asia in the future is still largely undiscussed. In addition to the potential or risk of rivalry in the Southeast Asia region, the question should also arise whether the rivalry can be ended or not. With this question in mind, this paper argues that competition cannot be prevented or avoided, despite the potential risks of the competition may entail. There are two contributing factors, the domestic variable of the two countries and the tendency of ASEAN countries to hedge amidst the constant uncertainty surrounding the rivalry and ultimately, the region. In outlining the main argument, this paper will be divided into three major parts consisting of introduction, analysis, and conclusion.

Two Factors Contributing to Sino-Japanese Rivalry

The first argument on the inevitability of this competition for Japan and China is closely related to the domestic context of each country, which is shaped by the historical background of each country. This specifically refers to how the nation-building history of Japanese and Chinese nations creates sentiment and orientation in looking at each other. This distrust then developed further throughout the years due to the political journey of Japan and China.





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To explain why this premise is important, it is imperative to evaluate the existing issues through a more general perspective. China and Japan are two countries with a very high level of dependence and economic relations. In 2018, China became Japan's largest trading partner and Japan surpassed all foreign investors in China with investments of up to 101 billion dollars between 1995 and 2017.⁸ In traditional liberal logic, competition or conflict between the two is almost impossible because it will only harm the economies of the two countries. Meanwhile, from the realist's logic, given China's leverage and differing capabilities over Japan, Beijing should not view its relationship with Japan as a significant competition. However, despite these considerations and logics, the Sino-Japanese rivalry is undeniably one of the most prominent issues in the contemporary East Asian political constellation. By considering this fact, it has become a signal for the writer to observe the dynamics and variables at the lower level—the domestic level.

No words other than fluctuations can describe the relationship between China and Japan throughout history. This is due to a series of long historical processes. The historical process between the two countries can even be traced up to the previous three thousand years.⁹ However, from all parts of history, there was a critical moment where distrust between the two countries (especially from China to Japan) began to take root, namely when the second Sino-Japanese War took place in 1937. At that time Japan invaded China and took over the capital Nanking by committing massive and cruel war crimes. The International Military Tribunal for the Far East or the Nanking War Crimes Tribunal stated that the death toll from the incident exceeded 200,000 people, while another 20,000 were subjected to the crime of rape.¹⁰

What makes it worse, Japan often does not see that incident as something to regret. They even created a 'myth' that perceived Japanese war actions as a heroic thing instead.¹¹ In 2021, a survey indicated that 77.5% of Chinese respondents saw the Japanese's failure to apologize and their memories on the history of the aggression as a very concrete reason to explain their negative view of Japan.¹² On the other hand, the perception of Japanese respondents about China in recent years has also worsened at around 84.7%.¹³ However, their unfavorable views are mostly motivated by political reasons such as the US-China Trade War and China's expansionist policies abroad rather than historical aspects.

Furthermore, another issue that is important to highlight in the context of domestic factors is the dispute over the Senkaku/Diayou Islands which has been going on for almost 70 years. Senkaku/Diayou Islands are a group of inhabited rocks located about 170 km northwest Japan's Ishigaki Island/ Okinawa Prefecture and about 330 km off the coast of mainland China.¹⁴ The seizure of the territory has sparked much anger from the public in both countries throughout its era—especially when Japan decided to buy





the islands from private owners and nationalize them in 2012. Japan's decision to nationalize the island had sparked a large-scale anti-Japanese national movement in China. The Chinese government then issued an official statement expressing their disappointment which was followed by the publication of a white paper entitled 'Diayou Dao, an inherent territory of China'. Ever since, China has often increased its presence by sending naval units to the area.

Although a decade has passed, the issue of the Senkaku/Diayou maritime dispute is still relevant in contemporary discussions about each country's domestic climate. In 2021, a public survey conducted by one of think-tanks in Japan, Genron NPO, showed that this maritime dispute remained one of the main influences on the bad reputation of Japan among the Chinese in general.¹⁵ However, the feeling is also mutual for the Japanese as they see China's active policy of increasing patrols and presence in the area as a form of their sovereignty's breach. Thus, the relationship between the two remains filled with tension and mistrust.

Meanwhile, the second reason why Japan and China's rivalry in Southeast Asia is inevitable is the tendency of ASEAN member countries to hedge in relation to the great powers in the Asia-Pacific region. Hedging is a concept in the study of international relations that describes the decisions of international actors to neither balance nor bandwagon. In other words, States neither avoid taking sides nor pursuing actions against competing powers. The behavior is described as a reassurance-seeking attitude that is usually associated with high-risk situations.¹⁶ Considering how the geopolitics in the Asia-Pacific (consequently Southeast Asia) is dominated by the existence of superpowers as well as the nature of the Southeast Asian countries that are small power or middle power at best, the concept of hedging has been particularly abundant in discussions pertaining to the region.

However, in the context of the Sino-Japanese rivalry, such a trend is best described as a reproductive cycle rather than a linear causal relationship. That is, the more intense involvement of Japan and/or China in Southeast Asia, the more intense their rivalry in the future. Therefore, despite a strong motivation to increase their international engagement from domestic level, China and Japan also cannot take an overly aggressive approach to their Southeast Asian counterparts. If one major power is deemed to be too interfering in regional dynamics, Southeast Asian countries are likely to increase their ties with other major powers to maintain balance.¹⁷





Thus, Japan and China will only be able to compete openly in Southeast Asia. In other words, increased participation from one party will only encourage further hedging behavior. This is why the competitive relationship between China-Japan and the hedging strategies of Southeast Asian countries would be better described as a self-maintained cycle rather than a linear cause-and-effect relationship.

Conclusion

In the discussion of Asian geopolitics, China and Japan are the two most prominent actors that deserve strong attention. However, despite the massive opportunities that can be harnessed from their position, the relationship between the two, which is filled with tension is something that needs to be watched out for. This idea is very important especially for Southeast Asian countries because of their geographical position and political situation towards the two countries. However, regardless of the debate about the characteristics, prospects, or possibilities of competition, this will still be an unavoidable political reality and must be acknowledged.

This necessity is driven by two factors, namely domestic variables and the tendency of Southeast Asian countries to hedge in the midst of great powers. For the first one, it refers to the history of each country's nation-building process that involved each other as well as a long-standing maritime dispute. The horrific war crimes committed by Japan still leave scars on most Chinese people, while the maritime dispute over the Senkaku/Diayou islands has continued to ignite the flames of conflict and mistrust for years. The second one, the tendency of Southeast Asian countries to hedge also forced both China and Japan into a deeper competition and engagement scheme. At a certain point, they may have no other choice but to cooperate in front of Southeast Asian countries. Thus, by taking these two factors into account, the rivalry between Japan and China will become a geopolitical occurrence to witness in the future.





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Contact:

The Habibie Center
Jl. Kemang Selatan No. 98, Jakarta 12560
Tel: +62 21 781 7211 | Fax: +62 21 781 7212
Email: thc@habibiecenter.or.id
Website: www.habibiecenter.or.id