

Stability and Fragility in Japan-China Relations: China's Pivotal Power and Japan's Strategic Leverage

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Abstract

Japan's foreign policy on China has generally been successful in handling the delicate balance between the United States and China. Yet, closer analysis shows that Japan's China policy is no weaker than Australia's on issues such as the South China Sea, human rights, and policies on Taiwan. This therefore raises two questions. First, why haven't relations between Japan and China deteriorated as much as they have between China and Australia? And second, why is the Japan-China relationship a stable but fragile one? By modifying the standard strategic triangle model, this article argues that China is pivotal in determining the balance of power in the strategic triangle made up of the United States, Japan, and China. At the same time, the asymmetry of threat perceptions—Japan perceives China as its most significant security concern, while China perceives its greatest security threat as emanating from the United States—gives Japan strategic leverage over China. As a result of China's strategic policies and these asymmetric threat perceptions, relations between Japan and China are ostensibly stable but substantially fragile.

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