

## **Identity Security Dilemmas in East Asia**

*PRC and Taiwan, Japan and Article 9*

Leif-Eric Easley, Harvard University Department of Government  
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The People's Republic of China (PRC) claim over Taiwan and Japan's claim to the right of normal military status are often cited by security specialists as potential flashpoints for international conflict. Studies of East Asian security tend to address both situations empirically, but rarely compare the two on theoretical grounds. This is understandable given important distinctions concerning the number/autonomy of actors, constraints on the government because of political system/public opinion, and the role of external players such as the United States. This paper however, argues that the two issues in fact share important similarities. In both cases, the state asserts its claim is a domestic matter within its sovereign right. Relations with Taiwan in large part define the military posture of the PRC, as wrestling with Article 9 does for Japan. Both situations are intimately wrapped up with each state's nationalism and historical memory. And given that these issues are in fact interactive – PRC claims over Taiwan having some effect on Japan's military posture and visa-versa – it is useful to consider the two issues side by side. This paper does so by adapting a well-known model from international relations theory: the security dilemma. The concept of an identity security dilemma is presented below, and the cases of China and Japan are considered. The paper concludes with implications for managing US-Japan-China relations.

### **Identity Security Dilemmas**

The standard security dilemma says that a state's efforts to make itself secure tragically cause other states to feel less secure. States are naturally sensitive to changes in perceived threat, and a combination of uncertainty and fear of being exploited lead a state to assume the worst about the intentions behind the actions of others. Increase in one state's military capabilities thus encourages an increase in the capabilities of its neighbors. The dilemma is that even if the states involved are simply security seeking without aggressive intentions, an arms race ensues, raising the stakes and likelihood of military conflict. The process behind a standard security dilemma looks something like this:

state security seeking → increase military capabilities → neighbors feel less secure

States, of course, are more than security seeking. They also aim for what I call a *target identity*: the status a nation believes its state should have in the international system. In an identity security dilemma, a state asserts sovereign right to realize some aspect of its target identity. Such assertions are made by the PRC regarding unification with Taiwan, and by Japan concerning normal military status. The dilemma is that by taking steps toward the target identity, a state motivates feelings of distrust among its neighbors. An identity seeking state sees itself as acting on a domestic matter to achieve its sovereign claim; neighbors meanwhile see a revisionist

state dangerously dissatisfied with the status quo. The basic chain behind an identity security dilemma can be mapped as follows:

state identity seeking → sovereign claim over target identity → neighbors feel distrust

Whereas the standard security dilemma focuses on the defense of territory already controlled by the government, the identity security dilemma involves nationalist claims and strategic mistrust between nations. Both dilemmas can incite unintended arms races; unintended because states generally do not want to engage in dangerous and costly escalations of military build-up and counter build-up. For both dilemmas, escalation is the tragic outcome of states working to meet their own goals. In the standard security dilemma, the goal is to make the state safe from external aggression. In an identity security dilemma, the state's goal is rather to attain what it considers its rightful national condition. The PRC claim to Taiwan and Japan's claim to normal military status appear to be driving identity security dilemmas in East Asia.

### **The Cases of Taiwan and Article 9**

In the case of the PRC, the people and government are one in the position that Taiwan must be unified with the mainland. What is more, Taiwan's status is not only a test for the domestic legitimacy of the PRC government and at the center of nationalist political debates; it is more deeply an issue of Chinese national identity. The Taiwan matter goes to the heart of how Chinese define their state and how the PRC relates to other countries, particularly Japan and the United States. When Chinese people speak passionately about Taiwan belonging to the PRC, it is not because of a strategic calculus for maximizing state security. It involves deeply held beliefs about the Chinese nation and its status in the international system. As a result of these beliefs, the PRC makes sovereign claim over its target identity: a unified China, prosperous in the world and recovered from the legacies of foreign imperialism and civil war. The dilemma is that while the PRC government and citizens see this target identity as their sovereign right, the steps for making it a reality motivate distrust among other states. Missile deployments in the south of China and measures such as the Taiwan Anti-Secession Law are considered provocative internationally. The identity security dilemma ultimately strains relations and encourages an arms race because Chinese national identity is for Chinese to decide – it is not negotiable like some security arrangements, and other actors cannot help but hedge against a conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

In the case of Japan, there is no broad domestic consensus about Japan's military status. It is clear however, that Article 9 has been stretched further and further over time. Japan is once again a military power, despite constitutional prohibitions. What is more, Japan is taking on a more active international security role as Japanese shape their post-Cold War, post-economic miracle national identity. Some Japanese (many in the present government included) believe that Japan should revise Article 9 and restore Japan's normal military status. Of course, there is more to this than protecting Japanese security and having doctrine match institutional reality. Article 9 is very much a point of contention for Japanese identity, involving the state's international orientation (active as opposed to passive), source of pride (military, economic, cultural), and putting to rest legacies of war and occupation. Japan maintains, as does the PRC concerning Taiwan, that Article 9 revision is a domestic matter to be addressed under Japanese sovereign right. But as in the China case, an identity dilemma arises because Japanese steps toward their target identity incite mistrust among neighboring countries. In Beijing, Seoul and elsewhere,

expanding the status and role of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces is seen as provocative and unnecessary. But there is no authoritative international body to certify that Japan has atoned for past aggression and is now cleared to assume normal military status. This is a matter of Japanese identity for Japanese to decide. But other states can certainly be expected to respond.

## **Implications**

The circumstances of an identity security dilemma appear to paint a grim picture indeed. What makes these dilemmas so intractable is that they involve much more than state security seeking behavior; they are actually motivated by what nations believe their states should be. The identity seeking state sees objections to its pursuit of the target identity as affronts to its sovereignty. Meanwhile, outsiders do not fully understand or appreciate the target identity and are naturally suspicious. Each side sees the other's actions as unreasonable. A dilemma arises because there are obvious dangers in trusting too much. States hedge with increased military capabilities, nationalist diplomacy and the like. But there is also danger in trusting too little. Arms races are in themselves costly and nationalist diplomacy can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies of conflict. So what can we learn from considering the China and Japan cases as identity security dilemmas?

1. *Once an issue has been out in the international for some time, it is difficult to reel back in.* Identity security dilemmas blur the already thin line between domestic and international politics. Although the identity seeking state maintains it is acting within its sovereign right, such actions have serious international consequences. Japanese leaders must be aware of this as they draw up revisions for Article 9.

2. *States can be willing to fight even if they are secure.* States are not simply security seeking, they are identity seeking as well. Even if the state is safe from external threat by traditional security standards, leaders may be willing to confront other states and their populations willing to endure significant costs for meeting the target identity. Recognizing this, other actors should not underestimate PRC willingness to fight for Taiwan.

3. *The Taiwan and Article 9 issues are dynamic and interactive.* Identities are constantly being contested and reconstructed. Herein lies both opportunity and danger. Target identities can be framed in ways that are more or less a source of concern for other actors. They can also interact with one another via diplomatic competition, military or even identity arms races. One state, in reacting to the claims of another, may revise its claims upwards, set artificial stipulations or deadlines, etc. Identity seeking states should therefore manage their claims to avoid brinkmanship and painting themselves into a corner. For the United States, which could also be examined as identity seeking, understanding China and Japan's target identities is necessary to wage effective diplomacy in the trilateral relationship.

4. *The need to reduce misperception between populations.* Standard security dilemmas stem from misperception between governments. In addressing identity security dilemmas, it is necessary to deal with misperceptions between populations. Remedies for the standard security dilemma include alternate means for increasing security, such as arms control treaties and collective security agreements, that produce less misperception than

military build-up. In addressing an identity security dilemma however, it is extremely difficult for states to back away from their sovereign claims. But there is promise in developing mechanisms of greater transparency, exchange and mutually beneficial interdependence. Through these means, we may be able to reduce misperception between populations in East Asia. This will by no means be easy, but it surely helps to know what kind of dilemma we face.