3

BROKEN TIES

Japan’s semi-official diplomacy towards China under the DPJ government

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When the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) came to power in September 2009, it seemed that a new era of Sino-Japanese reconciliation would begin. The new ruling party not only boasted a more moderate stance on history issues than the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), but it also explicitly called for rapprochement with Beijing. Yet, under the DPJ government Japan experienced two severe crises in relations with China. The incidents in the East China Sea in 2010 and 2012 triggered a wave of anti-Japanese protests in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and contributed to a dramatic decrease in mutual trust between the two governments. The paper analyzes to what degree the escalation of Sino-Japanese crises was influenced by the weakening of connections between the statespersons of both countries. It argues that the DPJ neglected semi-official channels of communication with China whose skillful use could have limited cognitive dissonance between Tokyo and Beijing.

Defining semi-official diplomacy

The notion that the governments are not the only actors behind foreign policy making has been an object of many studies. In the realm of conflict resolution, diplomacy has been usually divided into two tracks. While “track-one diplomacy” signifies the official channels of communication, the term of “track-two diplomacy” is used when referring to diplomatic activities maintained by non-state actors (McDonald & Bendahmane 1987, Montville 2006). It is interesting to note, however, that distinction between various channels of communication within track-one diplomacy has not drawn much attention from researchers.

Semi-official diplomacy can be defined as contacts maintained in close relationship, yet in parallel with the official governmental channels by individual lawmakers (especially the backbenchers of the ruling parties), retired politicians, parliamentary leagues, policy groups, factions and political parties. Semi-official contacts involve elements of parliamentary diplomacy, party-to-party diplomacy and back-channel diplomacy. As such, they are similar to “track one-and-a-half” diplomacy as defined by Allen Nan (2003), that is: “unofficial interactions between official representatives of states,” which draw “on the strengths of track-one diplomacy (the authority and resources) and the strengths of track-two diplomacy (the creativity of unofficial discussions).” In order to better explain their nature, it is helpful to analyze four dimensions (or
channels) of Japan’s diplomacy. Table 3.1 compares the top-level, semi-official, bureaucratic and track-two channels in terms of power of negotiators, their flexibility, and swiftness of decisions.

Table 3.1 Dimensions of Japan’s diplomacy

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<th>Track-One</th>
<th>Track-Two</th>
<th>Semi-Official</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Top-Level</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bureaucratic</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Swiftness</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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Source: By author.

Top-level contacts refer to the diplomacy conducted directly by the prime minister or the minister of foreign affairs. Although in Japan these two decision-makers enjoyed broad prerogatives in formulating and implementing foreign policy, they were subject to numerous constraints that often rendered their posture inflexible. After all, as the highest representatives of their country, government members were bound to follow the official stance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). Additionally, Japanese prime ministers rarely ruled in a top-down manner. Due to institutional constraints, such as strong inter-ministerial sectionalism and factionalism in the ruling party, instead of setting forth policy agendas, they usually felt comfortable with just supervising the enactment of the issues submitted to them by subgovernments (Hayao 1993: 184–210). Only under special circumstances could the premier and foreign minister lead sudden breakthroughs in policy towards the PRC. For instance, a strong determination and favorable international moods after the Nixon shock enabled the Tanaka Kakuei – Ōhira Masayoshi tandem to play a crucial role in normalization of Sino-Japanese relations in 1972. Additionally, mutual trust between top leaders of Japan and China sometimes facilitated rapprochement between both countries. For example, Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo’s pro-Beijing posture contributed to the signing of the East China Sea gas field joint development agreement in 2008. Even in such cases, however, in order to discuss the most delicate matters, statespersons often supplemented the official channels of communication with China with less formal contacts.

Japan’s China diplomacy on the bureaucratic level, in turn, focused on handling everyday routine tasks. In MOFA many decisions were hammered out in a bottom-up fashion among the members of the “China school” – an informal group of diplomats who specialized in China issues. A lot of bilateral problems were discussed exclusively in the China Bureau, and the conclusions were only subsequently reported to the foreign minister. The bureaucrats were taught to apply rigid precedents to new international problems, which inhibited sudden policy shifts (Yakushiji 2003: 125–146). Former Administrative Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Yabunaka (2010: 51) stressed that the bureaucrats’ main goal was to maintain the prior stance of their ministry. Civil servants were reluctant to admit any mistakes they had committed in the past or to adapt their policies to new situations. This rigid approach made bureaucracy-led decision-making process extremely time-consuming and thus unfit for making backstage deals or achieving breakthroughs in diplomacy. The extent of power possessed by MOFA bureaucrats depended on their proximity to main decision-makers: the prime minister and minister of foreign affairs. For example, Administrative Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Yachi Shōtarō was able to exert much influence on Tokyo’s policy towards Beijing in 2005–2007 thanks to the fact that his initiatives closely fitted ideological leaning and political interests of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and Foreign Minister Asō Tarō.1
Unlike the official channels, track-two diplomacy towards China was conducted by separate NGOs, universities, local authorities, foundations or private-sector companies. As track-two contacts focused on changing approach towards the other country of whole societies or social groups, they were extremely time-consuming, and the flexibility of parties depended on individual approach of the involved institutions and persons. A large part of this dimension of bilateral contacts was institutionalized in 2003, when the New Sino-Japanese Committee of Friendship in the 21st Century was created by an initiative of President Hu Jintao.2 Succeeding meetings of the Committee contributed, to some extent, to intensification of exchange and building mutual trust between opinion leaders from both countries. The role of track-two diplomacy, however, was to create favorable moods in bilateral relations rather than lead serious talks. In the end, this method of bilateral communication was overly remote from the centers of power to serve as a place for negotiating any binding agreements. Moreover, due to large number of participants it was not a suitable channel for making backstage deals on controversial issues.

In the light of the three above-mentioned dimensions of diplomacy, semi-official contacts can be treated as a special kind of track-one diplomacy. As they are maintained by the politicians, they may be instrumental in finding compromises sanctioned by the leaders of both countries. On the other hand, just as track-two diplomacy, they enable frank exchange of opinions and create the moods for negotiations. As such, semi-official diplomacy comprises two types of activities: mere personal exchange and behind-the-scenes talks. The former plays an important role in strengthening mutual trust between the politicians of both countries, which is a prerequisite for the latter to function properly.

Miyamoto Yuji, who was Japanese ambassador to China from 2006 to 2010, emphasized that personal connections and ties of trust with Chinese decision-makers were essential in conducting diplomacy towards that country. In order to influence Beijing’s policy it was crucial to act as swiftly as possible, because after having made a final decision Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders were extremely reluctant to change their mind. As stressed by Miyamoto, frank exchange of opinions between the statespersons of both countries was a prerequisite for diplomatic breakthroughs. After all, the result of negotiations often depended more on the credibility of the negotiators than on the arguments they used (Miyamoto 2011: 143–179).

Behind-the-scenes talks enabled exchanges of opinion, communication of intentions and explanation of internal determinants of foreign policy. As the negotiators involved in semi-official contacts were not governmental officials, they could more freely talk with the CCP leadership and make backstage deals that would have been unthinkable through strictly official channels. Some problems, such as the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, were especially difficult to discuss on official forums, because Japan did not even admit the existence of a territorial dispute with China. Under these circumstances, only backstage negotiations constituted a viable option to seek secret agreements, such as shelving the problem. However, for such diplomacy to be effective, the involved politicians had to enjoy the trust both from the Chinese authorities and Japanese prime ministers.

None of the prime ministers from the DPJ possessed comparable personal connections with China as Fukuda Yasuo. Distrust with the bureaucrats under the banner of politician-led government, in turn, to a great extent prevented the DPJ from using the knowledge of the “China school” in MOFA.3 Under these circumstances, semi-official diplomacy towards the PRC should have become even more important. This chapter argues, however, that the DPJ was much less skillful in using semi-official channels of communication with China than the LDP. Despite several attempts at establishing a regular framework for contacts with the CCP, the DPJ failed to form a reliable group of pro-Beijing politicians. After having assumed power,
the DPJ tried to take the lead in key parliamentary leagues engaged in diplomacy towards China, but without success. Moreover, the Ozawa faction – an initiator of DPJ’s budding exchange with the CCP – became an anti-mainstream group from June 2010, and eventually split from the party in July 2012.

Although semi-official diplomacy cannot replace formal channels, it can be instrumental in supplementing them whenever the lack of mutual trust impedes rational judgment. While top-level and bureaucratic contacts lack flexibility, and track-two diplomacy is overly remote from the center of power to be effective, semi-official contacts provide a viable method for seeking backstage compromises on difficult issues. Lack of their use during the 2010 and 2012 crises explains the reasons for escalation and prolongation of both diplomatic clashes.

**Semi-official contacts with China under the LDP administration**

Until the 1980s the LDP had at its disposal powerful groups of pro-Beijing politicians with strong connections with the CCP. Most of them belonged to the former Tanaka and Ōhira factions, which was related to the fact that a tandem of Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei and Foreign Minister Ōhira Masayoshi had established diplomatic relations between Japan and the PRC in 1972. It was the representatives of these two powerful factions – Itoh Masayoshi and Okuda Keiwa – who led the first two significant Japanese delegations to China after the Tiananmen crackdown, in September and October 1989.

Nevertheless, since the 1990s the international situation had stopped favoring maintaining a friendly atmosphere in bilateral relations. Together with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. and the PRC lost their common enemy, and China started being perceived as a challenger against American dominance in East Asia. The impression of “China threat” was amplified by the PRC’s increasing military expenses, “missile diplomacy” towards Taiwan in 1995–1996, incidents in the East China and South China Seas, as well as growing assertiveness regarding history issues. At the same time, the percentage of Japanese who felt sympathy towards China kept decreasing – from nearly 70 percent in the 1980s to about 50 percent after the Tiananmen crackdown, and to about 30 percent after the large-scale anti-Japanese protests in the PRC in 2005 (Amako 2006: 11–12, Mōri 2006: 193–196).

Due to these changes, the pro-Beijing group in the LDP kept shrinking. Many older politicians retired (Nonaka Hiromu and Hayashi Yoshirō in 2003, Kōno Yōhei in 2009), and many of them passed away (Takeshita Noboru in 2000; Itoh Masayoshi – retired in 1993, died in 1994; Gotōda Masaharu – retired in 1996, died in 2005; Miyazawa Kiichi – retired in 2003, died in 2007). Nevertheless, the LDP still had enough high-ranking politicians with strong connections with China to maintain a regular cooperation on semi-official level. Such experienced statespersons as Fukuda Yasuo, Katō Kōichi, Kōmura Masahiko, Koga Makoto, Noda Takeshi or Nikai Toshihiro used their personal contacts with the CCP whenever official channels were exacerbated.

Until 2009 the LDP had at its disposal such groups as the Sino-Japanese Friendship Parliamentary League to alleviate the problems in relations with China. As emphasized by the Head of the League’s Secretariat Hayashi Yoshimasa, whenever a diplomatic crisis occurred, the CCP leaders at least knew to whom they could address their concerns to rest assured that there was no change in Tokyo’s basic stance towards Beijing (personal interview, November 2, 2012). These connections proved especially important under the Koizumi administration (2001–2006), when the prime minister’s visits to the Yasukuni Shrine provoked anti-Japanese demonstrations in the PRC. For example in August 2001 Katō Kōichi and Yamasaki Taku used their personal contacts in China to make sure that the PRC would alleviate its reaction to
Koizumi’s visit to Yasukuni, only if the Japanese prime minister avoided visiting the shrine on August 15 – anniversary of Japan’s surrender in 1945. Thanks to these efforts Kato managed to convince Koizumi to pay homage to the shrine two days earlier than had been planned. It did not stop harsh criticism from the PRC, but at least partly assuaged China’s reaction (Yamasaki 2016: 225–227).

Even when China suspended all exchanges with Japan on the highest level after Koizumi’s succeeding visits to Yasukuni, pro-Beijing LDP politicians were welcome to meet with the PRC authorities. For example in September 2002 a series of Japanese delegations took part in the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of normalization of Sino-Japanese relations. Former Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryūtarō led the largest group composed of an astounding number of 13,000 supporters and 85 members of coalition parties from the Parliamentary Association for the Success and Development of the 30th Anniversary of Sino-Japanese Relations Restoration (Nicchū Kokkō Kaifuku 30 Shūnen o Seikō Hatten Saseru Giin no Kai). Concurrently, another influential member of the former Tanaka faction, Aoki Mikio, visited China together with 20 politicians from the House of Councilors, Hayashi Yoshirō led 16 parliamentarians belonging to the Sino-Japanese Friendship Parliamentary League, and LDP Secretary General Yamasaki Taku, who was entrusted by Prime Minister Koizumi a letter to Jiang Zemin, formed a separate delegation. There were so many Japanese Diet members in Beijing that Hashimoto Ryūtarō even joked they could open a session of the parliament (Yomiuri Shinbun 2002, September 23). Also to commemorate the 25th anniversary of signing the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship in August 2003 China invited the representatives of the LDP pro-Beijing faction, such as Hashimoto Ryūtarō, Fukuda Yasuo and Sonoda Hiroyuki.

Despite a temporary disturbance in Sino-Japanese relations under the Koizumi government, the LDP still had much stronger personal connections with China than the DPJ. It was symbolized by the fact that in 2009 LDP politicians were chairpersons in five among the so-called “seven Sino-Japanese friendship organizations”: Sino-Japanese Friendship Association (Nicchū Yūkō Kyōkai) was led by Katō Kōichi, Sino-Japanese Association (Nicchū Kyōkai) by Noda Takeshi, Japanese Association for Promotion of International Trade (Nihon Kokusai Bōeki Sokushin Kyōkai) by Kōno Yohei, Sino-Japanese Friendship Parliamentary League (Nicchū Yūkō Giin Renmei) by Kōmura Masahiko, and Sino-Japanese Friendship Hall (Nicchū Yūkō Kaikan) by Hayashi Yoshirō. Until 2010, when Hayashi was replaced with Eda Satsuki, the DPJ had no politician in this prestigious group.

The DPJ’s cooperation with the CCP

Unlike the LDP, the DPJ maintained only occasional exchange with the CCP. Soon after the foundation of the original DPJ, in the autumn 1996, Hatoyama Yukio visited China together with a group of politicians from his party to meet such representatives of the fourth generation of CCP leaders as Hu Jintao and Wu Bangguo. Asked about the weakening of the pro-Beijing group in Japan he emphasized: “It is because the connections cannot be formed suddenly. The relations of confidence between Japan and China will be born through cultivation of trust over five, ten, twenty years” (Asahi Shinbun 1998, May 18). The DPJ continued maintaining exchange with the CCP within the framework of the Sino-Japanese Association of the 21st Century (Nicchū 21 Seiki no Kai), established to strengthen ties between both parties. Nevertheless, according to former Speaker of House of Councilors Eda Satsuki, this initiative did not bring expected results (personal interview, February 20, 2013). As underscored in 1998 by Kaieda Banri, chair of the DPJ International Department, instead of exhibiting affinity to
Japan’s diplomacy towards China

China, younger parliamentarians preferred to focus on promoting friendship with the United States (*Asahi Shinbun* 1998, May 18).

One of the impediments for the DPJ in conducting an active exchange with China was financial constraint. The number of official visits abroad by lawmakers was very limited – in all parliamentary committees, including the Committee of Foreign Affairs, politicians were allowed to plan only one visit in three years. In case of additional visits, they had to cover the expenses by themselves (personal interview with LDP lawmaker Kōno Taro, June 12, 2013). While Japanese lawmakers’ salaries were very high, this fact still constituted a great burden for the young DPJ politicians. According to Sino-Japanese Friendship Parliamentary League Secretary General Kondō Shōichi, unlike LDP parliamentarians, who often originated from rich families and inherited constituencies from their parents, DPJ politicians had to invest much money, often taking loans, to be elected. For that reason, they could not afford going abroad as often as their LDP counterparts (personal interview, February 7, 2013).

In addition, good relations between the DPJ and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in Taiwan initially were one of the reasons why it was so difficult to establish connections based on mutual trust between the DPJ and the CCP. While in the 1990s the LDP used to stay in close relationship with the Kuomintang (KMT), the DPJ cooperated with the biggest Taiwanese opposition party. In 1997 the DPJ established the Japan–Taiwan Friendship Parliamentary League (Nikka Yūkō Giin Renmei, in 2000 renamed Nittai Yūkō Giin Renmei), which in 2002 counted as many as 50 parliamentarians. When in 2000 Chen Shuibian from the DPP became president of the Republic of China, the DPJ actively supported the new government. In May 2002 Kan Naoto even mentioned during a symposium in Shanghai that Taiwan should join the United Nations (*Asahi Shinbun* 2002, October 3). As the DPP sought independence of Taiwan, it was a much more dangerous party for the PRC than the KMT, which at least agreed on the “one China” policy. The fact that many of DPJ politicians who wanted to promote relations with the CCP at the same time remained in good relationship with the DPP made them less credible in the eyes of Beijing.

The same could be said about Ozawa Ichirō who gradually became one of the main promoters of parliamentary diplomacy towards China in the DPJ. In 1993 Ozawa left the LDP and appealed for a general revision of Japan’s post-war policy. He claimed that Japan should become a “normal country” able to dispatch Self-Defense Forces abroad (Ozawa 1993: 102–126). Not only the slogans of remilitarization of Japan were dangerous for China. Ozawa stated that Tokyo should not exclude seeking some kind of official relations with Taiwan, and he supported Li Denghui’s efforts to visit Japan. It is not surprising that in the 1990s China perceived Ozawa as a right-wing extremist who denied the principle of “one China” (Matsuda 2012: 226–227).

Nevertheless, when Ozawa Ichirō became DPJ leader in 2006, he started working actively for the establishment of regular contacts between the DPJ and the CCP. During his visit to Beijing in July 2006, Ozawa proposed to President Hu Jintao foundation of Consultative Organization of Exchange (Kōryū Kyōgi Kikō) between the two parties, which was accepted by the PRC. Just as the LDP’s and Kōmeitō’s Sino-Japanese Conference of Exchange between Ruling Parties, the new institution was linked with the CCP’s International Department of the Central Committee headed by Wang Jiarui. As emphasized by Ozawa: “The relations based solely on economic interests are fragile. True Sino-Japanese relations cannot be built without a foundation of ties of confidence between the nations and leaders of both countries” (*Asahi Shinbun* 2006, July 5).

If Ozawa’s aim was to emphasize the differences between DPJ’s moderate stance on history issues and LDP’s problems with visits to the Yasukuni Shrine under the Koizumi administration,
it ended in a failure due to a sudden amelioration in Sino-Japanese relations after Prime Minister Abe Shinzō’s visit to China in 2006. Nevertheless, the institutionalized cooperation between the DPJ and the CCP seemed to thrive. In January 2007 Ozawa welcomed a CCP delegation led by Wang Jiarui, which participated in the first meeting of the Consultative Organization of Exchange in DPJ headquarters in Tokyo (Asahi Shinbun 2007, January 17). The DPJ leader revisited China in December 2007 together with a group of 45 parliamentarians and about 400 DPJ supporters to commemorate the 35th anniversary of normalization of Sino-Japanese relations. In fact, the visit was a continuation of the “Great Wall Project,” started in 1989 by the Takeshita faction in the LDP as a forum of exchange with the CCP (Yomiuri Shinbun 2007, December 7). It is probable that one of the reasons for forming this large-scale delegation was to show to the Japanese public that the DPJ, which after the victory in the upper house election in July 2007 started being considered as a viable alternative to the LDP, was reliable enough to take the lead of Japan’s diplomacy.

When the DPJ assumed power in 2009, it seemed that Sino-Japanese relations would flourish. During a summit between China, Japan and South Korea in Beijing in October 2009 Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio promised to amend an excessively pro-American foreign policy and put more emphasis on diplomacy towards Asian countries (Sneider 2013: 394). Moreover, he announced his plans of promoting regional integration and establishing the East Asian Community.

Hatoyama’s pro-Beijing posture was supported by DPJ Secretary General Ozawa Ichirō who led the biggest faction in the ruling party. Ozawa continued maintaining a close cooperation with the CCP. In November 2009 CCP delegation visited Japan to take part in the third conference of the Consultative Organization of Exchange in Tokyo. During a meeting with Japanese Diet members, the Chinese side expressed approval for Hatoyama’s vision of East Asian Community (Mainichi Shinbun 2009, November 11). At the end of November 2009 Ozawa even exerted pressure on Emperor Akihito to force him to a meeting with PRC Vice-President Xi Jinping. He evidently wanted to strengthen the ties between the DPJ and the fifth generation of CCP leaders. Xi indeed met Akihito in December 2009, but Ozawa exposed himself to criticism from conservative politicians for violating an unofficial principle of arranging appointments with the emperor with one month’s notice (Asahi Shinbun Seiken Shuzai Sentā 2010: 226–248).

DPJ’s parliamentary diplomacy towards China reached its peak in December 2009, when Ozawa visited Beijing together with a group of more than 600 Japanese, including 143 parliamentarians. His aim was to introduce to Hu Jintao 80 new DPJ members of the House of Representatives, elected only three months earlier. The PRC president emphasized his gratitude to Ozawa for acting as a “bridge” between both countries and displayed an exceptional hospitality by shaking hands with all DPJ politicians (Mainichi Shinbun 2009, December 11). In addition to promoting Sino-Japanese friendship, by organizing such a large delegation to China Ozawa probably wanted to demonstrate his power in the ruling party.

When Ozawa became DPJ secretary general, he dominated the decision-making on all party affairs, which met with opposition from a large group of backbenchers. He also tried to assume the leadership in the most important parliamentary leagues involved in diplomacy, including those engaged in relations with China. Ozawa was convinced that after alternation of power the LDP should cede the posts of parliamentary league chairpersons to DPJ politicians. Otherwise, DPJ Diet members were ordered to establish their own groups in place of the old ones. As emphasized in November 2009 by Banno Yutaka, head of the DPJ Parliamentary Leagues Examination Team (Giin Renmei no Arikata Kenitchi Chu), the domination of opposition politicians on executive posts in parliamentary leagues might impede policy coordination
between these groups and the government (Yomiuri Shinbun 2009, November 19). The same applied to the Sino-Japanese Friendship Parliamentary League, which was led by Kōmura Masahiko from the LDP. The DPJ failed, however, to force Kōmura to resign from his post. Blackmailing the LDP by the possibility of establishing a new parliamentary group was not effective, because the Sino-Japanese Friendship Parliamentary League enjoyed the status of one of the “seven Sino-Japanese friendship organizations” and could not be easily replaced. Eventually, only the post of secretary general of the League was ceded to DPJ lawmaker Kondo Shoichi. As emphasized by Kondō, however, after alternation of power in 2009 not too many new DPJ parliamentarians became members of the League, and just as before the group was dominated by LDP politicians (personal interview, February 7, 2013).

As shown in Figure 3.1, under the LDP administration the ruling parties were very active in sending delegations to China. Their number peaked under the Abe (2006–2007) and Fukuda (2007–2008) administrations. Until 2006 opposition parties, including the DPJ, sent many delegations to China as well. Their aim probably was to gain political capital by contrasting their moderate stance on history issues against Koizumi’s right-wing policy. When Koizumi stepped down from office in 2006, however, the opposition parties lost their interest in visiting China. After all, due to sudden rapprochement with Beijing under the Abe cabinet they could no longer use the China issue to criticize the LDP.

When Hatoyama Yukio became prime minister in 2009, the number of visits by the parliamentarians of the ruling parties diminished abruptly. To a certain degree they were replaced by the delegations led by cabinet members, which was consistent with the policy of unification of decision-making under the government pursued by the DPJ. Nevertheless, while the official channels seemed to be adequate to ensure a smooth bilateral cooperation under the Hatoyama cabinet, they proved insufficient when diplomatic crises emerged during the premierships of Kan Naoto and Noda Yoshihiko.

Figure 3.1 Number of Japanese delegations to China led by politicians of ruling parties (including cabinet members) and opposition parties who met with members of Standing Committee of the CCP Political Bureau

Source: Based on data retrieved from articles in Renmin Ribao, Asahi Shinbun, Yomiuri Shinbun, Mainichi Shinbun, Nihon Keizai Shinbun, as well as the websites of the Japanese and Chinese Ministries of Foreign Affairs.
Role of semi-official contacts during the 2010 East China Sea collision crisis

Both Prime Minister Hatoyama and DPJ Secretary General Ozawa stepped down from offices in June 2009. They were replaced by Kan Naoto and Edano Yukio who harshly criticized the corruption scandals of their predecessors. Due to this change, Ozawa and Hatoyama factions were downgraded to the status of anti-mainstream groups in the ruling party. Nevertheless, nothing indicated that intraparty tensions would hinder a friendly atmosphere in Sino-Japanese relations. Kan Naoto was a moderate politician who in order not to provoke a reemergence of historic issues with neighboring countries even prohibited the members of his cabinet from visiting the Yasukuni Shrine.

Nevertheless, an incident in the East China Sea that occurred only three months after Hatoyama’s resignation proved that despite a superficial friendship, Sino-Japanese relations were prone to sudden deterioration during crisis situations. It was especially true whenever bilateral contacts were not supported by a dense network of semi-official connections. After a collision between a Chinese trawler and Japanese patrol vessels near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea on September 7, 2010, the Japanese Coast Guard detained the Chinese captain. The incident triggered a surprisingly fast escalation of the Sino-Japanese dispute. The DPJ government, while denying expertise from the “China school” in MOFA, was also not skillful in using semi-official diplomacy towards Beijing. As a result, Japan failed to fully predict Chinese reaction, which led to a series of decisions that provoked Beijing to employ measures unexpected by Tokyo.

Initially, the PRC’s reaction was rather moderate – Beijing demanded that Japan release the captain and postponed the talks on joint development of natural resources in the disputed waters. More assertive measures were employed 12 days after the incident, as a response to the Ishigaki court’s decision to extend the custody of the arrested captain. Chinese authorities let anti-Japanese demonstrations sweep all over the country, suspended all high-level political and cultural exchange with Japan, and even halted export to Japan of rare earth metals. Moreover, four Japanese citizens were detained and accused of espionage in Hebei Province – allegedly for video recording military facilities (Shimizu 2011: 213).

In such crisis situations it is vital to maintain a stable channel of contacts and work out a solution acceptable by both parties. China’s relatively mild reaction during the first week after the accident indicated that Beijing expected a release of the arrested captain, just as it had been a case during similar incidents in the past. Nevertheless, Tokyo failed to correctly read China’s intentions. Prime Minister Kan Naoto, preoccupied with an electoral race for the post of DPJ leader, entrusted decision-making on this matter to his cabinet members. After long discussions, on September 8 in the early morning, Chief Cabinet Secretary Sengoku Yoshito and Foreign Minister Okada Katsuya (who was visiting Germany at that time) were convinced by the Coast Guard’s supervisor, Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Maehara Seiji, to display a firm stance in the dispute (Shimizu 2011: 210–211).

Detainment of the trawler’s captain infuriated Beijing, because it was a violation of an unwritten code of conduct between both countries. Tokyo had allegedly vowed to refrain from arresting Chinese citizens in the disputed waters, and Beijing in exchange promised to prevent expeditions to Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Because the agreement had been concluded by the LDP government, Maehara probably did not even know about its existence (Tiberghien 2010: 77). Beijing, in turn, was not aware of this complicated situation in the Japanese government and became convinced that Japan purposely challenged the status quo in order to gain a better bargaining position in the territorial issue (personal interview with Hayashi Yoshimasa, November 2, 2012).
Misperception regarding intentions of both sides was a result of the lack of a stable channel of semi-official contacts with China. By using backstage diplomacy the Kan government probably could have better predicted China’s reaction. Nevertheless, it was difficult for Kan to ask Ozawa – the main initiator of DPJ’s cooperation with the CCP – to act as an intermediary between Tokyo and Beijing. After all, at that moment Prime Minister Kan faced the challenge from Ozawa in the DPJ presidential election. During the electoral campaign, which coincided with the detainment of the Chinese captain, Kan vehemently criticized Ozawa for the illegal donations scandal, and Ozawa reciprocated by opposing Kan’s plans of revision of the 2009 electoral manifesto. It is also probable that Kan wanted to avoid showing a weak-kneed diplomacy towards China not to give Ozawa a reason to criticize the government.

After defeating Ozawa and forming a new government in mid-September 2010, Kan was determined to put an end to the diplomatic clash with China. Nevertheless, he had limited ways of expressing his intentions to Beijing, because the crisis had already escalated to the point that China suspended high-level meetings with Japan. For example, Wen Jiabao refused to meet Kan Naoto during the session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York on September 21, 2010. Without a reliable channel for backstage negotiations with CCP leadership, Japan had no choice but to unilaterally concede to Chinese demands. The captain of the trawler was released on September 24, 2010. Despite the government’s insistence that the decision on his extradition to China was made independently by the Naha prosecutor, in reality it was Tokyo that exerted pressure on the local court (Shimizu 2011: 212–213).

Kan hoped that the release of the Chinese captain would terminate the crisis, but Beijing not only continued criticizing Tokyo, but also demanded that Japan apologize and pay indemnity for the damaged trawler. Such conditions were unacceptable for Tokyo, as their realization would call into question Japanese sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. It became evident that it would be difficult to put an end to the crisis by using solely the official diplomatic channels. The fact that since mid-September 2010 Maehara Seiji was in charge of Japanese diplomacy constituted yet another constraint in normalizing contacts with China. By appointing him as foreign minister, Kan wanted to reward him for the support provided by the Maehara faction in electoral competition against Ozawa, but this decision backfired in relations with the PRC. Beijing treated Maehara’s promotion as an approval for his decision to arrest the trawler’s captain. Moreover, the CCP had perceived Maehara as a dangerous hawkish politician at least since 2005, when he had referred to China’s rise as a threat (Iokibe, Ito & Yakushiji 2008: 277–279). After Maehara became foreign minister, Chinese diplomats seemed to become even less willing to communicate with Japanese MOFA, and they did not trust Chief Cabinet Secretary Sengoku either, because he belonged to the Maehara faction. Moreover, one of the most urgent tasks for Tokyo was to negotiate the conditions of release of four Japanese citizens accused of espionage, but this could hardly be realized through formal channels. After all, Beijing denied any linkage between the detainment of the alleged spies and the custody of trawler’s captain.

Aware of the importance of establishing semi-official contacts with China, Kan Naoto tried to communicate with former Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Tang Jiaxuan through pro-Beijing politicians in the LDP, but to no avail (Mainichi Shinbun 2012, October 10). Eventually, Sengoku Yoshito entrusted mediation with China to Shinohara Tsukasa, an expert on investments in the PRC. Shinohara used his connections with the CCP to arrange a visit to Beijing at the end of September 2010 by a DPJ backbencher, Hosono Gōshi. A backstage meeting between Hosono and State Councilor Dai Bingguo was a way to bypass the ineffective contacts through MOFA. Dai presumably made two demands. First, Japan would not disclose to the public a movie that showed the moment of collision between the Chinese trawler and
the Japanese patrol vessel. Second, Tokyo would not allow a visit to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands by Okinawa Governor Nakaima Hirokazu. Chief Cabinet Secretary Sengoku presumably accepted these conditions (*Mainichi Shinbun* 2010, November 8).

Probably thanks to this backstage deal the four alleged spies were soon released, but anti-Japanese protests in the PRC did not end immediately. What once again ignited the dispute was the fact that Tokyo failed to conceal the collision video from the public. Despite pressure from the media and opposition parties, the Kan cabinet was determined not to disclose the movie. Nevertheless, at the beginning of November 2010, the video was uploaded to YouTube by a Coast Guard functionary who could not stand the government’s soft posture towards Beijing (*Isshiki* 2011). The movie proved that it was the Chinese trawler that had rammed Coast Guard vessel, not vice versa, but the PRC continued blaming Japan for the collision. Bilateral relations started finally going back to normal after Hu Jintao’s visit to Yokohama during the APEC summit in mid-November 2010.

The East China Sea crisis revealed the limits of official diplomatic contacts during emergency situations and proved the value of maintaining stable semi-official channels of communication with China. It was Hosono Gōshi, a DPJ backbencher, not the members of government, who managed to achieve a backstage deal with the CCP that gradually led to the mitigation of the crisis.

### Semi-official diplomacy during the 2012 Senkaku/Diaoyu nationalization crisis

Although the 2010 East China Sea crisis showed the need for strengthening semi-official diplomacy towards Beijing, it also impaired the eagerness of DPJ politicians to actively promote Sino-Japanese relations. The delegation of the ruling party to Beijing within the framework of the Consultative Organization of Exchange in March 2012 was organized on a much smaller scale than previous ones. This time, only ten DPJ executives, such as Secretary General Koshiishi Azuma, participated in the visit. Unlike the delegations led by Ozawa Ichirō in 2007 and 2009, there were no politicians from the younger generation. In order to avoid crises similar to the one in 2010, both parties agreed to establish a hotline between Vice-Chair of the International Department of the CCP Central Committee Liu Jieyi and DPJ Deputy Secretary General Tarutoko Shinji. This decision, however, was overshadowed by the fact that concurrently with the meeting of the Consultative Organization of Exchange, China was visited by DPJ Supreme Councilor on Foreign Affairs Hatoyama Yukio. Former Prime Minister Hatoyama separately met Xi Jinping, giving him a letter from Ozawa. Both visits were not coordinated, and Koshiishi did not even know the exact schedule of Hatoyama. This incident amplified an impression of incoherence by Japanese ruling party’s diplomacy towards the CCP (*Asahi Shinbun* 2012, March 25).

CCP leaders grew more and more concerned with the lack of strong connections with the DPJ. When in May 2012 Speaker of the House of Representatives Yokomichi Takahiro visited Beijing together with DPJ lawmaker Matsuno Yorihisa, the Chinese side emphasized the importance of parliamentary diplomacy in maintaining stable contacts between both countries. In response to these concerns, soon after returning to Japan Matsuno proposed increasing the budget for lawmakers’ visits abroad by 4.5 times to 2 billion yen ($20 million) per year (*Asahi Shinbun* 2012, May 11).

The budding exchange between the DPJ and the CCP was weakened by a series of splits from the ruling party. When Noda Yoshihiko became prime minister in September 2011, he announced his determination to increase the consumption tax and promote Japan’s membership in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). This major revision of electoral promises from 2009 aroused protests from the Ozawa faction. In January 2012 nine former DPJ politicians created
the Kizuna Party (KP, Shintō Kizuna). In July 2012 Ozawa Ichirō himself defected from the DPJ together with a group of almost 50 parliamentarians and established his own party – People’s Life First (PLF, Kokumin no Seikatsu ga Daiichi). Due to these changes, as many as 19 out of 45 former members of the delegation to China in December 2007, and 61 out of 143 members of the delegation in December 2009, had left the DPJ by October 2012.5

The next incident in the East China Sea showed that the DPJ had only partly learnt its lesson from 2010. When in mid-August 2012 a group of activists from Hong Kong landed on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the Japanese authorities quickly decided about their extradition to China. In addition, Prime Minister Noda did not allow a fl otilla of Japanese right-wing parliamentarians, regional politicians and nationalist activists, who came to the disputed waters several days later, to land on the disputed archipelago. Nevertheless, Japanese government’s cautious posture did not stop an escalation of the crisis. A much more serious issue than the excursions to the disputed waters by patriotic activists from both countries was the Noda administration’s decision to buy three of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands from a private landowner on September 11, 2012. China immediately demanded that Japan cancel this transaction. To put pressure on Tokyo, Beijing gave a tacit approval for violent anti-Japanese demonstrations. Furious mobs ravaged Japanese shops, restaurants and factories (Zakowski 2015: 188–190).

The decision to purchase the islands was a result of pressure from Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō who announced his plans to buy the archipelago in April 2012. Because in the summer of 2012 Ishihara entered into a final stage of negotiations with the landowner, Noda Yoshihiko wanted to forestall the Tokyo governor’s move. In July 2012 the prime minister stated that the purchase of the islands by the government would be better to maintain a peaceful and stable administration over the archipelago (Itō & Takahara 2012: 497). Taking into account the fact that Ishihara Shintarō was a well-known right-wing radical who publicly expressed his anti-Chinese feelings, Noda probably just wanted to avoid escalation of the problem.

There are signs indicating, however, that the Japanese government underestimated China’s reaction. Most importantly, just as in 2010, Japan neglected semi-official diplomacy towards Beijing. This time it was even harder to use Ozawa’s connections with China, because he had already left the DPJ, and the ruling party did not build any new channels of backstage contacts with the CCP from 2010. Under these circumstances, Noda had limited ways to sincerely explain his intentions to Beijing. Neither was he interested in using the connections of the opposition parties with China. Former LDP President Kōno Yohei visited Beijing at the end of April 2012, soon after the announcement by Ishihara of his controversial plans. During a meeting with Vice-President Xi Jinping, Kōno felt that China would react more mildly to the purchase by Tokyo than to nationalization. By letting Tokyo buy the archipelago, Japan could explain to the PRC it was only an initiative of one right-wing politician without the support from the central government. Nevertheless, the Noda administration did not try to ask senior pro-Beijing politicians for mediation with China (personal interview with Kōno Yohei, June 20, 2013).

Instead, the prime minister was determined to rely on his own judgment and on the expertise of the bureaucrats. While MOFA officials were not unanimous on what policy to employ after the announcement of Ishihara’s plans, they gradually came to think that nationalization would be more palatable to China that the purchase by the right-wing governor. The PRC’s relatively moderate reaction to the statements by such top-level politicians as Chief Cabinet Secretary Fujimura Osamu or DPJ Policy Research Committee Chairperson Maehara Seiji, who called for the nationalization of the archipelago, seemed to confirm this supposition. In May 2012 China increased its criticism of Japan, but this appeared to be a backlash against the issuance of a Japanese visa to Rebiya Kadeer, leader of an Uyghur separatist movement, rather than against the Senkaku/Diaoyu nationalization plans (Zakowski 2015: 186–187).
Due to miscalculation of China’s intentions, the Noda administration decided to proceed with the nationalization of the archipelago. As emphasized by Prime Minister’s Special Advisor Nagashima Akihisa, Japan consulted China on this plan through bureaucratic channels and even gained some kind of understanding from Beijing. However, communication on this level proved insufficient to reach a backstage deal with CCP top leaders (personal interview, March 25, 2013). Lacking personal connections with President Hu Jintao or his closest entourage, MOFA failed to predict the gravity of the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue just before leadership transition in the CCP. At the beginning of September 2012 Hu Jintao strengthened his criticism of Japan in order to maintain a better bargaining position in the competition with the other CCP factions (Shinoda 2013: 207–208).

Without sufficient negotiations between Japanese and Chinese top leaders, Beijing interpreted the purchase of the archipelago as an intentional violation of the status quo. During the APEC summit in Vladivostok on September 9, 2012, just before the purchase of the disputed islands, Noda Yoshihiko held a brief meeting with Hu Jintao. President Hu warned Prime Minister Noda that nationalization of the archipelago was “absolutely unacceptable” and that Japan “would regret” that move (Yamaguchi & Nakakita 2014: 235). Nevertheless, just as two years earlier, the crisis occurred at the time of DPJ presidential campaign, and Noda could not make any far-going concessions to China not to be accused of being too soft towards Beijing.

The weakening of Sino-Japanese ties was symbolized by the failure to properly commemorate the 40th anniversary of the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations. Due to a tense atmosphere in mutual relations China cancelled official ceremonies in Beijing, which were to take place at the end of September 2012. This was a substantial difference in comparison with the situation ten years earlier, when despite Koizumi’s visits to Yasukuni, LDP’s semi-official diplomacy towards China thrived. Instead of the planned ceremonies, China only held a dinner for the representatives of the “seven Sino-Japanese friendship organizations.” It was attended by Chairperson of National Committee of the People’s Political Consultative Conference Jia Qinglin, but not by President Hu Jintao nor Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. Eda Satsuki, who was the only DPJ politician at the dinner, admitted that even Sino-Japanese Friendship Association Chairperson Tang Jiaxuan treated guests with reserve (personal interview, February 20, 2013). This event indicated how much harm the insufficient use of semi-official diplomacy had done to Sino-Japanese relations.

Conclusions

Semi-official diplomacy can be instrumental in maintaining bilateral contacts whenever official channels are broken. Backstage contacts are important to ensure exchange of opinions, predict possible reaction of the other side, and seek a solution acceptable by both parties. Stable personal ties between the statespersons of different countries facilitates making secret arrangements even when the governments do not trust each other.

The insufficiency of DPJ’s personal relations with the CCP explains the prolongation and escalation of the crises in 2010 and 2012. Compared to the LDP that had worked hard for many decades to establish a dense network of relations with the CCP, the DPJ had just started a process of building ties of trust with China when it assumed power in 2009. Moreover, the main initiators of DPJ’s budding cooperation with the CCP – Ozawa Ichirō and Hatoyama Yukio – became anti-mainstream politicians from June 2010. For these reasons, the Japanese government was not ready to use semi-official channels to mitigate the repercussions of the incidents in the East China Sea in 2010 and 2012. Only when the crises had escalated to
dangerous levels did the government start desperately seeking DPJ or even LDP politicians with personal connections with the CCP.

Taking into account the gradual waning of the pro-Beijing group in the LDP, it is impossible to stipulate whether the LDP would have been more successful in limiting the cognitive dissonance with Beijing had it ruled over Japan. Nevertheless, the East China Sea crises showed the importance of maintaining semi-official channels of communication in case of lack of trust in the top-level and bureaucratic-level diplomacy.

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Notes

2 The New Sino-Japanese Committee of Friendship in the 21st century was initially co-chaired by Fuji Xerox Chairperson Kobayashi Yōtarō and Hu Jintao’s chief advisor, Zheng Bijian. Until the end of 2008 it organized eight meetings on promotion of mutual trust in all fields of Sino-Japanese relations. See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.
3 When the DPJ assumed power in 2009, it proclaimed it would deprive the bureaucrats of any influence on decision-making process. See: Zakowski (2015).
4 This and the following sections are partly based on the author’s previous book (Zakowski 2015: 134–139, 185–191).
5 Author’s estimates based on the lists of DPJ politicians who visited China (Democratic Party of Japan 2007, Democratic Party of Japan 2009).

References


