

Principles Without Consensus:

Setting the Record Straight on the 2014 Sino-Japanese ‘Agreement to Improve Bilateral Relations’¹

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OVERVIEW:

The governments of China and Japan made global headlines on November 7, 2014 when they simultaneously released carefully crafted statements on “improving Japan-China relations.” Announced days before Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s scheduled visit to Beijing to attend the APEC 2014 conference, these statements come in the context of a two-year period during which Sino-Japanese relations have arguably reached a post-war nadir. Recent tensions derive in large part from disputes over history and what each side sees as the other’s provocative behavior vis-à-vis contested islands in the East China— islands effectively administered by Japan but claimed by Beijing as its own.

International observers have hailed the November 7 “joint statement” as a breakthrough in bilateral ties. Such celebratory claims, however, are at best premature. A close sentence-by-sentence trilingual analysis (see below) of the actual content of both the official Chinese- and Japanese-language statements and what appear to be each government’s respective English-language translation provides significant grounds for skepticism that a major breakthrough was achieved. Three issues stand out.

First, widespread claims to the contrary, what were released yesterday by Beijing and Tokyo constitute *not* a two-sided agreement or consensus, but are effectively separate and distinct statements issued independently by each party. For this reason, numerous reports and other analyses referring to “a *joint* statement” or based exclusively on a reading of either the Japanese-language statement or the Chinese-language statement—or their respective English translations—are incomplete and misleading.

Second, the two governments have achieved no public consensus on a way out of the current impasse or a solution to what many consider to be the major irritants in bilateral relations. In their actual content, the Chinese and Japanese statements differ in subtle, but very significant ways. In this regard, what was *not* said is arguably more important than what was said. Points #2 and #3 are especially significant.

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Third, the scope of both statements is carefully circumscribed. Perhaps most importantly, Japan’s statement appears to meet neither of the conditions the leadership in Beijing has for months stated are necessary for a resumption of normal high-level dialogue—including a possible summit next week between Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

In short, while the spirit of these declarations may convey consensus, their letter does not.

To be sure, Sino-Japanese political relations are so troubled today that bilateral talks and the release of any statements by both sides calling for an “improvement” in bilateral relations and crisis management is a positive development. The same is true for the relatively high-level diplomacy that led to their creation. And in some important areas, the statements agree and overlap.

Nevertheless, the language in the statements reveals that subtle, but major, differences on the most important and contentious issues persist. For starters, Beijing made no commitment to reduce, much less cease, what Tokyo sees as extremely provocative and dangerous maneuvers of Chinese vessels and planes into waters and airspace around the Senkaku (Diaoyu in Chinese) islands under Japan’s effective administrative control. Meanwhile, Tokyo did not meet—at least publicly—Beijing’s two conditions for a resumption of high-level political ties: that Abe’s government acknowledge that sovereignty over the islands is in dispute and that he vow not to again visit Yasukuni Shrine as prime minister. Accordingly, unless more substantive fruits are announced at a *possible* summit meeting between Abe and Xi in Beijing early next week, it is unlikely that the November 7 statements portend a fundamental, long-term, and sustainable break through the current impasse plaguing relations between the world’s second- and third-largest economies.

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The text excerpts below come from the [official Japanese statement \(English translation\)](#) and the [official Chinese statement \(English translation\)](#). They include the initial language framing of each side’s four-point statement, followed by the language of the four points themselves. In each table, the first row contains the text from the original (Japanese- or Chinese-language) statements, followed by what at present appear to be the respective governments’ official English translations. The second row contains my preliminary analysis.²

FRAMING

Japan’s Statement	People’s Republic of China’s Statement
<p>日中関係の改善に向け、これまで両国政府間で静かな話し合いを続けてきたが、今般、以下の諸点につき<u>意見の一致</u>をみた。</p>	<p>双方就处理和改善中日关系达成以下<u>四点原则共识</u>：</p>
<p>Toward the improvement of the Japan-China relations, quiet discussions have been held between the Governments of Japan and China. Both sides have <u>come to share views</u> on the following points:</p>	<p>The two sides reached a <u>four-point principled agreement</u> on handling and improving the bilateral relations:</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">LIFF NOTE:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The statements appear basically consistent across languages. The Japanese version refers to a “consensus of opinion” (as opposed to “come to share views” in the English translation). The Chinese version conspicuously refers to a “four-point principled <u>consensus</u>” [共识] which seems to be watered down in the English translation as a “four-point principled <u>agreement</u>.”</i></p>	

² An important caveat: What follows is a preliminary analysis based off an initial reading of the actual text of the official statements released by the respective governments. It is not informed by inside knowledge about what, if any, tacit agreements were reached between Beijing and Tokyo behind closed doors.

POINT ONE

Japan’s Statement	People’s Republic of China’s Statement
<p>1 双方は、日中間の四つの基本文書の諸原則と精神を遵守し、日中の戦略的互惠関係を引き続き発展させていくことを確認した。</p> <p>1. Both sides confirmed that they would observe the principles and spirit of the four basic documents between Japan and China and that they would continue to develop a mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests.</p>	<p>一、双方确认将遵守中日四个政治文件的各项原则和精神，继续发展中日战略互惠关系。</p> <p>First, the two sides have affirmed that they will follow the principles and spirit of the four political documents between China and Japan and continue to develop the China-Japan strategic relationship of mutual benefit.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">LIFF NOTE:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The statements appear basically consistent across languages.</i></p>	

POINT TWO

Japan’s Statement	People’s Republic of China’s Statement
<p>2 双方は、歴史を直視し、未来に向かうという精神に従い、両国関係に影響する<u>政治的困難</u>を克服することで<u>若干の認識の一致</u>をみた。</p> <p>2. Both sides shared some recognition that, following the spirit of squarely facing history and advancing toward the future, they would overcome political difficulties that affect their bilateral relations.</p>	<p>二、双方本着“正视历史、面向未来”的精神，就克服影响两国关系<u>政治障碍</u>达成<u>一些共识</u>。</p> <p>Second, in the spirit of "facing history squarely and looking forward to the future", the two sides have reached some agreement on overcoming political obstacles in the bilateral relations.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">LIFF NOTE:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Use of the term “some” (Japanese: 若干/ Chinese: 一些) as a qualifier on “recognition” and “agreement,” respectively, belies the reality that no true consensus was reached on the most fundamental issues. Beijing probably used the term “political obstacle” (政治障碍) in reference to what it has repeatedly stated are the main obstacles to normalized ties: above all, the possibility that Prime Minister Abe will visit the controversial Yasukuni Shrine again. The Japanese version does not use the term “obstacle,” and neither statement refers to Yasukuni Shrine. This is particularly significant, since Beijing has long stated that Tokyo making such a promise was one of two conditions for a resumption of high-level political dialogue—beginning with a possible summit next week at the APEC meeting in Beijing. Yet Japan appears not to have met this condition. It is possible that Abe empowered his negotiator to effectively grant Beijing a tacit commitment not to visit the Shrine as long as he is prime minister; however, that remains to be seen.</i></p>	

POINT THREE

Japan’s Statement

3 双方は、尖閣諸島等東シナ海の海域において近年緊張状態が生じていることについて異なる見解を有していると認識し、対話と協議を通じて、情勢の悪化を防ぐとともに、危機管理メカニズムを構築し、不測の事態の発生を回避することで意見の一致をみた。

3. Both sides recognized that they had **different views as to the emergence of tense situations in the waters of the East China Sea**, including those around the Senkaku Islands, and shared the view that, through dialogue and consultation, they would prevent the deterioration of **the situation**, establish a crisis management mechanism and avert the rise of unforeseen circumstances.

People’s Republic of China’s Statement

三、双方认识到围绕钓鱼岛等东海海域近年来出现的紧张局势存在不同主张，同意通过对话磋商防止局势恶化，建立危机管控机制，避免发生不测事态。

Third, the two sides **have acknowledged** that **different positions** exist between them **regarding the tensions** which have emerged in recent years **over the Diaoyu Islands and some waters in the East China Sea**, and agreed to prevent the situation from aggravating through dialogue and consultation and establish crisis management mechanisms to avoid contingencies.

LIFF NOTE:

This is arguably the most important point in the respective statements, as over the past four years issues surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea have emerged as the most potentially explosive flashpoints in Sino-Japanese relations. Four significant differences exist between the two statements on this third point:

- 1) *Japan’s statement refers only to “different views” [異なる見解]. In contrast, the Chinese version refers to “different positions” [不同主张]. Beijing’s use of the term “positions” connotes something far more official. Nowhere in its statement does Tokyo refer to the existence of a Chinese “position” on any issue concerning the islands themselves, not least of all the question of sovereignty. Tokyo doing so had been the second of two conditions given by Beijing for a resumption of high-level political dialogue—beginning with a possible summit meeting at next week’s APEC conference in Beijing. Yet Japan appears not to have met this condition, either.*
- 2) *Tokyo does not acknowledge the existence of a territorial dispute, or even that Beijing has a different “position” vis-a-vis the islands. In fact, it makes no direct reference to the islands at all. Instead, Japan’s statement refers only to different views over the waters around them. This is crucial. Japan’s statement refers only to differing views concerning the origins of the “tense situations...in the waters of the East China Sea” and “[waters] around the Senkaku Islands” [尖閣諸島等東シナ海の海域において近年緊張状態が生じていることについて異なる見解を有している].*
- 3) *Whereas Japan’s statement focuses exclusively on tense situations in waters, only mentioning the islands in reference to the waters around them, the Chinese version treats the word “islands” as primary and the “East China Sea waters” around them as secondary [钓鱼岛等东海海域]. Beijing’s statement refers directly to “tensions [...] over the Diaoyu Islands” [围绕钓鱼岛[...]的紧张局势].*
- 4) *The word “sovereignty” is not only absent from the Japanese version. In fact, it appears nowhere in the Chinese version or Beijing’s English translation. Remarkably, although referring explicitly to the islands themselves, even Beijing’s statement only goes so far as to refer to different positions concerning tensions over them. Beijing does not refer explicitly to different positions over sovereignty of the islands, much less to the existence of a sovereignty dispute. Though Beijing’s statement does conspicuously use the word “position” (as opposed to Tokyo’s use of “views”), even Beijing stops short of claiming that a territorial dispute exists.*

POINT FOUR

Japan's Statement	People's Republic of China's Statement
<p>4 双方は、様々な多国間・二国間のチャンネルを活用して、政治・外交・安保対話を<u>徐々に</u>再開し、政治的相互信頼関係の構築に努めることにつき意見の一致をみた。</p> <p>4. Both sides shared the view that, by utilizing various multilateral and bilateral channels, they would <u>gradually resume</u> dialogue in political, diplomatic and security fields and make an effort to build a political relationship of mutual trust.</p>	<p>四、双方同意利用各种多双边渠道<u>逐步</u>重启政治、外交和安全对话，努力构建政治互信。</p> <p>Fourth, the two sides have agreed to <u>gradually resume</u> political, diplomatic and security dialogue through various multilateral and bilateral channels and to make efforts to build political mutual trust.</p>
<p>LIFF NOTE:</p> <p><i>The fact that both sides emphasize that a return to normalcy will occur only "gradually" is a telling commentary on the unhealthy state in which Sino-Japanese relations continue to exist. Not only is a long-term solution to core disputes in bilateral ties unlikely in the near term, much work remains to be done merely to manage core disputes and prevent crisis escalation. The statements released yesterday are a step in the right direction. Yet major obstacles to a true reduction of bilateral tensions, much less a sustainable political modus vivendi, remain.</i></p>	