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Article 1.

The Guardian

## **Israel: Washington calling**

Editorial

10 February 2013 -- It seems the first foreign visit of Barack Obama's second term will be to Israel. In making that choice, the president sends an important signal and one that is long overdue. What is optimistically still referred to as the peace process has been stalled for several years. There is plenty of blame to go around for that. But a small part of it rests with Mr Obama himself.

In his first term he didn't visit Israel once, not even, Israelis

complain, when he was in the neighbourhood. That was a mistake, limiting the influence he could exert over Israel's government and, more importantly perhaps, its people. As Bill Clinton, the last US president to come close to a Middle East breakthrough, advises today's diplomats: Israelis need to know that if the tanks were ever to start rolling in from across the Jordan, you'd be there in the trenches with them. An unlikely scenario these days perhaps, but the emotion is real.

Still, an Obama visit can do more than offer reassurance of US solidarity. The mere announcement of the trip, scheduled for 21 March but liable to slip if there are delays in the formation of a new Israeli government, can itself have an impact. Some have argued that the White House published its travel plans now, earlier than necessary, in order to remind the parties to ongoing coalition talks in Israel that peace should be a factor in their negotiations. With Mr Obama coming, perhaps Binyamin Netanyahu and his potential partners will be obliged to think not only of currently dominant domestic issues but also of relations with their most immediate neighbours. If that was indeed the motive, it may be paying off. Israel's outgoing deputy foreign minister, the hawkish Danny Ayalon, now says Israel should accept the UN's recent upgrade of the Palestinians' status – a move he and his government fiercely rejected last November.

For Palestinians too, an Obama visit should be a boost – especially if he visits the West Bank cities of Ramallah or, as has been mooted, Jericho. The message will be that, for all the talk of a Washington foreign policy pivot to Asia, the Middle East is still a US priority and the Palestinian issue has not been forgotten. The prestige of a presidential visit will strengthen those Palestinians who advocate the path of diplomacy over the

path of violence – welcome, given that events in recent months have tended to have the reverse effect.

Bitter experience suggests no one should expect too much of a single visit, even if the speculation is right and Mr Obama chairs a mini-summit, perhaps in Jordan, between Mr Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas. But the fact that the president is coming, and that he has in John Kerry a new secretary of state long engaged in the issue and bitten, says one colleague, by "the peace bug", are small grounds for hope in a region that does not have many.

Article 2.

Bloomberg

## **The Silence of the Drones**

Fouad Ajami

Feb 10, 2013 -- In times of war, the law is not silent. War is not a moral wilderness: At the Second Lateran Council in 1139, the use of the crossbow was banned among European knights. Throughout history, there have been codes that even the hell of war could not override.

I own up to being conflicted about the use of drone strikes. Those 19 young Arabs who struck the U.S. on Sept. 11, 2001, shredded the old notions and rules of war, erased the line

between combatants and noncombatants, brought soot and ruin onto American soil. Our country had to be made ready for this new kind of war.

We waged big military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, but the terrorists waged a twilight war of their own, bereft of scruples and limits. There would be no treaty of surrender we could enforce, no capital city to be subdued. Chased from Afghanistan, they turned up in Yemen and Somalia. They were soldiers of the catacombs, and they thrived in ungoverned spaces.

Targeted killing was the response of a great military power to the frustrations of this “asymmetrical” war. We didn’t know that larger world of Islam from which this war arose. We were sandbagged by regimes and rulers that feigned friendship with us as they winked at the terror that came our way.

What was one to make of the New Mexico-born radical imam Anwar al-Awlaki inciting his devotees to a holy war -- all in good Americanese? He wore no uniform, slipped into the badlands of his ancestral Yemen and mastered the new means of communication.

### Awlaki’s Fate

In the strict legalism of things he was an American citizen, but he bore this country a deadly animus. No tears need be shed for him. The strike that killed him, in Yemen in September 2011, was a deed of just retribution. Presidential spokesman Jay Carney’s defense of the drone strikes as legal, ethical and wise can stand in the case of Awlaki. The executive had been granted broad powers under the Authorization for Use of Military Force

in the aftermath of Sept. 11, and two presidents were given the leeway to prosecute this war on terrorism.

In truth, the public didn't want to look too closely into the doings of our government. We left it to our intelligence agencies and our military to keep us safe. But there came a time -- after the doings of the night shift at Abu Ghraib became public -- when the writ granted our officials was withdrawn. Liberals declared an all-out ideological war against the administration of George W. Bush.

The horror, the horror: The renditions and the enhanced interrogation techniques and, yes, the 50 or so drone strikes used during the Bush years became, to the liberals, a matter of national shame. A rising politician in the Democratic Party, a former teacher of constitutional law at the University of Chicago at that, rode this sense of outrage to the pinnacle of political power. He posed as a moralist.

Barack Obama was certain that rendition and waterboarding and the prison at Guantanamo Bay were recruiting tools of the jihadis. We had sullied America's reputation in lands beyond, and he would heal the damage. Our practices had run afoul of time-tested traditions and institutions, and in his stewardship, he promised, our values would again be a compass for our deeds abroad.

In hindsight, the great reckoning for Obama came at the end of the first year of his presidency. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a young Nigerian, a disciple of Awlaki, came close to bringing down an airliner over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009. It was farewell to Kumbaya foreign policy: The world was a menacing place.

Against the background of the stirring Obama oratory, and the euphoric claim that the president's personal biography was a bridge to the world of Islam, the young Nigerian could have snuffed out the promise of the Obama presidency. From that close call, the president emerged a determined leader in the war on terrorism.

## Stealth War

He had his trusted aide, John Brennan, in a windowless office in the White House, and Brennan knew the world of intelligence and terrorism. He knew the Arabian Peninsula, as he had served as an intelligence officer in Saudi Arabia -- a country where secrets and things unacknowledged are the coin of the realm.

Together the president and the spook oversaw a stealth war, and the president became his own targeting officer. (Obama going over kill lists recalls President Lyndon Johnson's poring over the map of Khe Sanh in search of bombing targets in Vietnam; the marked difference is the anguish of LBJ, and by the telling, the serene confidence of Obama that this is a war of necessity and a just campaign.)

The drone strikes were the choice of a president who had given up on winning "hearts and minds" in the North-West Frontier of Pakistan. Secure in the knowledge that he can't be outflanked from the right by the Republicans, Obama served up a policy that was economical -- and remote. Congress didn't intrude, and save for the purists at the American Civil Liberties Union, there was no powerful intellectual lobby calling for accountability.

The passion had drained out of the progressives who had hounded Bush, Dick Cheney and Scooter Libby. Brennan had to

step aside once when he was put up to head the Central Intelligence Agency, as a man tainted with the Bush legacy. His confirmation is certain this time around.

There remains the discrepancy between an extensive campaign of drones and a passive foreign policy that maintains -- the president's very words -- that an era of war is ending. Forgive those Syrians left at the mercy of their dictator's cruel war: It is hard to explain to them why those drones don't somehow find their way to Bashar al-Assad's bunker. We do anti- terrorism. Wars of rescue are not an American specialty nowadays.

*Fouad Ajami is a senior fellow at the Stanford University's Hoover Institution and author of "The Syrian Rebellion."*

Article 3.

The Wall Street Journal

## **Obama's Gift to Iran**

Editorial

February 10, 2013 -- President Obama has with rare exceptions shunned even modest U.S. intervention abroad, and last week we learned more details of his aversion: His chief military advisers confirmed that last year the President personally killed a plan supported by his main security advisers to arm the Syrian

rebels.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Martin Dempsey didn't elaborate on the President's reasons for killing the proposal. But the two senior officials acknowledged under questioning on Thursday from Senator John McCain that they had supported the Petraeus-Clinton plan.

On Friday White House spokesman Jay Carney was typically dodgy and wouldn't confirm the news. But he did volunteer a roundabout justification, claiming that "a lack of weapons is not the problem in Syria right now." He added that "we don't want any weapons to fall into the wrong hands and potentially further endanger the Syrian people, our ally, Israel, or the United States."

But if the rebels are flush with weapons, aren't those weapons already in danger of falling into the wrong hands? One point of U.S. military aid is to have some influence on rebel behavior, while increasing the clout of more moderate factions. By doing nothing, Mr. Obama has guaranteed that the rebels will be supplied by Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and the Saudis who don't mind arming Sunni Salafists. That's one of the lessons of "leading from behind" in Libya, but in Syria we aren't even following from behind.

Syria is Iran's main regional ally, and the longer the Syrian civil war rages the more disorder spreads in the region. Late last month Israel bombed a convoy carrying heavy weapons into Lebanon to help Israel's enemy and Iran's Shiite proxy, Hezbollah. A quicker victory for the rebels backed by the U.S.

two years ago might have cut off Syria as a conduit for Iranian arms to Hezbollah and thus reduced the threat to Israel.

The Petraeus-Clinton proposal speaks well of Mr. Obama's first-term security team but also raises more alarm about his second-term choices. John Kerry, Chuck Hagel and John Brennan all lack the independent standing of Mrs. Clinton, Mr. Panetta and former General Petraeus. They aren't likely to challenge Mr. Obama with views he doesn't want to hear.

U.S. military action other than drone warfare isn't in favor these days, but Syria is showing how doing nothing has costs of its own. In overruling his advisers, Mr. Obama has prolonged Syria's civil war, increased regional instability, and delivered a strategic gift to Iran, the main enemy of Israel and the U.S.

Article 4.

The Wall Street Journal

## **The Pharaoh Fell, but His Poisonous Legacy Lingers**

Fouad Ajami

February 10, 2013 -- Two years ago, on Feb. 11, 2011, the Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak stepped aside, overwhelmed by 18 days of protests. Silent and remote, he had ruled for three decades. He had offered his countrymen—and powers

beyond—the sole gift of stability. He was a gendarme on the banks of the Nile. Now his country was done with him, and the vaunted stability of his near 30-year reign was torn asunder.

Yet it is only against the backdrop of the sordid political landscape of today's Egypt—the hooliganism of the young, the lawlessness, the fault line between a feeble secular camp and a cynical Muslim Brotherhood bent on monopolizing political power—that the true work of the Mubarak tyranny can be fully appreciated. The "deep state" he presided over—a Ministry of Interior with nearly two million functionaries, a police force that ran amok—is Mubarak's true legacy.

The disorder today in Egypt's streets is taken by some as proof that the despot knew what he was doing, and that Egyptians are innately given to tyranny. But that view misses the damage that this man and his greedy family and retainers inflicted on a nation of more than 80 million people that once had nobler ideas of its place in the world.

Grant the Egyptian people credit for their mercy and forbearance. The Pharaoh was deposed and his two sons, who sat astride the country's economy and politics, were hauled off to prison, but they were spared the gruesome end that was meted out next door to Moammar Gadhafi. A sickly Mubarak was humbled, wheeled into court on a gurney. But he was not sent to the gallows. True, some of the families of victims struck down during the upheaval howled for his blood. But the day of his reckoning was deferred as the judiciary let the matter run in the hope that the aged former ruler would succumb to a natural death.

It was odd, this tale of Hosni Mubarak. He had started out as a modest officer who had risen to power through the patronage and will of his predecessor, Anwar Sadat. Mubarak had not been imaginative or brave—and that was what recommended him to the flamboyant Sadat. Where Sadat had been unabashedly open in his identification with American power, the new man would be more discreet. Where Sadat had been a trailblazer who had made that celebrated journey to Jerusalem, Mubarak would keep the peace with the Israelis, but keep them at arm's length.

Throughout his reign, a toxic brew poisoned the life of Egypt—a mix of anti-modernism, anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism. That trinity ran rampant in the universities and the professional syndicates and the official media. As pillage had become the obsession of the ruling family and its retainers, the underclass was left to the rule of darkness and to a culture of conspiracy. The middle class was tentative and timid, unsure of itself. It knew the defects of the regime but could not contest its power.

More important, with the Muslim Brotherhood quietly toiling in the shadows, broad segments of the middle class succumbed to the theocratic temptation. Wealth accumulated in the Arab states and the Gulf had remade the Brotherhood. Its members were sly: They accepted the subtle accommodation offered them by the regime.

The historical role of the centralized state in Egypt as the principal agent of social change was abandoned. No wonder the Brotherhood sat out the early and decisive phase of the 2011 protests in Tahrir Square. Courage was not the hallmark of the Brotherhood. Its theorists were still maintaining that the ruler was due deference and obedience while a new generation of

activists was battling the security forces.

Yet the Brotherhood had no scruples about "hijacking" a revolution that was not theirs. The annals of revolutions the world over bear testimony to the truth that the rule of the moderates in times of revolutions is always undone by the ascendancy of the extremists. (Think of the liberals who rode with Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979—so many of them were cut down by firing squads.)

It was no surprise that the Egyptian liberals and secularists quarreled among themselves and were feckless and divided. The dictatorship had not allowed them political space and experience. In hindsight, the tipping point in the ruin of Egypt came in 2005. The dictator rigged yet another presidential election, his fifth in a row, and he ordered a decent young rival, Ayman Nour, to prison on trumped up charges. The administration of George W. Bush grasped the importance of the moment, but Mubarak brushed their entreaties aside.

President Obama and his advisers had two years on their watch before the upheaval. But they lacked the interest and the determination—and the knowledge of matters Egyptian. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described Mubarak as a friend of her family, and Vice President Joe Biden opined that the regime was stable even as millions of Egyptians had gone out to push it into its grave.

Today, a stalemate paralyzes Egypt: The Brotherhood won a plurality in parliamentary elections that began in 2011, but an activist judiciary declared the elections unconstitutional and ordered parliament dissolved in June 2012. The Brotherhood

drafted and secured the passage of a new constitution by referendum in December, but those unreconciled to the reign of the Brotherhood wanted nothing to do with it.

Mohammed Morsi has the presidency, but he was defied some days ago when he ordered a curfew in the cities of Ismailia, Suez and Port Said. Thousands went into the streets to sing and dance and play soccer in the night. From afar, those with a superficial knowledge of Egypt think of it as a country willing to slip under the yoke of the Brotherhood. But Egypt is a skeptical, weary country; it wears its faith lightly, and its people have an innate suspicion of those who overdo their religious zeal.

The economy is wrecked and the government has run down its foreign reserves as it attempts to maintain a system of costly subsidies. A \$4.8 billion International Monetary Fund loan was tentatively agreed on, but the government was unwilling to put through the austerity measures required by the loan. Only the remittances of Egyptians abroad, an impressive total of \$19 billion in 2012, averted catastrophe. The ruling bargain that had the Egyptians give up their freedom for bread, and for the handouts of the state, still obtains. The old regime fell, but its ways endure.

Nowadays freedom is out of fashion in American official thinking, and the tumult in Arab lands serves as an alibi for abdication. But we should know that the bargain with the Arab dictatorships brought our way the jihadists. Two products of Mubarak's Egypt must be figured into an audit of that regime: the Cairene al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and the psychopath Mohammad Atta, who led the death pilots of 9/11. It was folly and naiveté to think that we really knew and could

befriend the tyrants.

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Article 5.

The Washington Post

## **Asian tensions add urgency to Obama's 'pivot'**

Fred Hiatt

February 10, 2013 -- As President Obama ponders his second-term foreign policy, he faces jihadists spreading across North Africa, Syria dissolving into chaos, Israelis and Palestinians further apart than ever, Iraq trending toward civil war, Afghanistan mired in corruption and Iran relentlessly accelerating its nuclear program.

That may turn out to be the easy stuff.

In Asia, things could get really scary.

Since he entered the White House, Obama has wanted to shift

attention and resources to the Pacific. The biggest opportunities are there: economic growth, innovation, potential for cross-border investment and trade. That the 21st century will be a Pacific century has become a cliché.

The cliché may still prove out. But rather suddenly, the region of economic miracles has become a zone of frightening confrontation. The North Koreans are turning out videos depicting New York in flames. Chinese warships have fixed their weapon-targeting radar on a Japanese ship and helicopter. Quarrels have intensified between South Korea and Japan, North Korea and South Korea, China and the Philippines, India and China. Taiwan is always a possible flashpoint. Any one of these could drag the United States in.

The scariest development may be in North Korea, the world's only hereditary prison camp, where the young leader — the third-generation Kim — seems determined to expand and improve his nuclear arsenal until he becomes a genuine threat not only to South Korea and Japan but to the United States as well. Chinese officials are said to be alarmed by his intransigence but unwilling to try to rein him in, fearing even more the instability that might result. Obama in his first term adopted a reasonable policy of ignoring North Korea as much as possible, while making clear that he would reciprocate if it became more accommodating. Kim Jong Eun, who is thought to be in his late 20s, could find ways to make that stance untenable.

Meanwhile, China's increasing assertiveness discomfits neighbors throughout Southeast and East Asia. China has claimed pretty much the whole South China Sea, though its coastline is farther from much of it than that of Vietnam,

Malaysia or the Philippines. It has sent planes and ships to challenge Japan over a few rocky outcroppings that Japan calls the Senkakus and China the Diaoyu Islands. It has been steadily increasing the size and capability of its military forces; for the first time in many years, a neighbor, Japan, is following suit.

If all this seems decidedly last century, maybe it's because new leaders in every key country are second- or third-generation, bearing the burdens of their past. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is the grandson of a leader of imperial Japan—including in occupied China — who remade himself as a pro-American prime minister after World War II. South Korea's president-elect, Park Geun-hye, is the daughter of a longtime president; her mother was killed by a devotee of North Korea. (The bullet was intended for her father, who was later assassinated by his intelligence chief.) Xi Jinping, China's new president, is the son of a revolutionary colleague of Mao Tsetung who helped battle the Japanese during World War II. North Korea's Kim Jong Eun is the grandson of Kim Il-sung, who according to North Korean mythology fought the Japanese in the 1930s and 1940s and the Americans and South Koreans in the 1950s.

It's intriguing to speculate on the ghostly whisperings these leaders may hear. It may be more useful, though, to focus on the national weaknesses that may propel them to act. North Korea is a failed and hungry state for which blackmail and bluster have long been the only survival strategy. China is a rising power and a growing economy — but led by a one-party regime that may be tempted to use nationalism to distract a restive population from domestic troubles. Japan has discarded one prime minister after another, pretty much on an annual basis, for most of the

past decade, an instability that leaves it punching below its economic and military weight.

All of this makes the region hungry for U.S. presence and leadership, which Obama understood with his first-term promise of a “pivot” to Asia. Regional leaders hope he can make good on that promise in a second term but wonder whether U.S. policy, too, will be shaped by political weakness. They notice when the Navy announces that it is, again, reducing its planned number of ships or Defense Secretary Leon Panetta orders an aircraft carrier kept in port because of budgetary constraints. They wonder who will inherit the Asia focus of former secretary of state Hillary Rodham Clinton and departing assistant secretary Kurt Campbell. They see the dangers, from Mali to Kandahar, that pull Obama’s attention. They hope it won’t take a more dangerous crisis in their region to make the pivot a reality.

Article 6.

The Diplomat

## **7 Reasons China and Japan Won’t Go To War**

Trefor Moss

The sequel seldom improves on the original. Yet Shinzo Abe, Japan's newly re-elected prime minister, has already displayed more conviction during his second spell at the Kantei than in the entire year of his first, unhappy premiership.

Political energy is a plus only when it's wisely deployed however, and some fear that Abe is picking a fight he can't win when it comes to his hardline stance on China.

Rather than attempting to soothe the tensions that built between Beijing and Tokyo in 2012, Abe has struck a combative tone, especially concerning their dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands – a keystone for nationalists in both countries. Each time fighter aircraft are scrambled or ships are sent to survey the likely flashpoint, we hear more warnings about the approach of a war that China and Japan now seem almost eager to wage. The Economist, for example, recently observed that, “China and Japan are sliding towards war,” while Hugh White of the Australian National University warned his readers: “Don't be too surprised if the U.S. and Japan go to war with China [in 2013].” News this week of another reckless act of escalation – Chinese naval vessels twice training their radars on their Japanese counterparts – will only have ratcheted up their concerns.

These doomful predictions came as Abe set out his vision of a more hard-nosed Japan that will no longer be pushed around when it comes to sovereignty issues. In his December op-ed on Project Syndicate Abe accused Beijing of performing “daily exercises in coercion” and advocated a “democratic security

diamond” comprising Australia, India, Japan and the U.S. (rehashing a concept from the 2007 Quadrilateral Security Dialogue). He then proposed defense spending increases – Japan’s first in a decade – and strengthened security relations with the Philippines and Vietnam, which both share Tokyo’s misgivings about China’s intentions. An alliance-affirming trip to the U.S. is expected soon, and there is talk of Japan stationing F-15s on Shimojijima, close to the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

However, Abe would argue that he is acting to strengthen Japan in order to balance a rising China and prevent a conflict, rather than creating the conditions for one. And he undoubtedly has a more sanguine view of the future of Sino-Japanese relations than those who see war as an ever more likely outcome. Of course, there is a chance that Chinese and Japanese ships or aircraft will clash as the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands rumbles on; and, if they do, there is a chance that a skirmish could snowball unpredictably into a wider conflict.

But if Shinzo Abe is gambling with the region’s security, he is at least playing the odds. He is calculating that Japan can pursue a more muscular foreign policy without triggering a catastrophic backlash from China, based on the numerous constraints that shape Chinese actions, as well as the interlocking structure of the globalized environment which the two countries co-inhabit. Specifically, there are seven reasons to think that war is a very unlikely prospect, even with a more hawkish prime minister running Japan:

1. Beijing’s nightmare scenario. China might well win a war against Japan, but defeat would also be a very real possibility.

As China closes the book on its “century of humiliation” and looks ahead to prouder times, the prospect of a new, avoidable humiliation at the hands of its most bitter enemy is enough to persuade Beijing to do everything it can to prevent that outcome (the surest way being not to have a war at all). Certainly, China’s new leader, Xi Jinping, does not want to go down in history as the man who led China into a disastrous conflict with the Japanese. In that scenario, Xi would be doomed politically, and, as China’s angry nationalism turned inward, the Communist Party probably wouldn’t survive either.

2. Economic interdependence. Win or lose, a Sino-Japanese war would be disastrous for both participants. The flagging economy that Abe is trying to breathe life into with a \$117 billion stimulus package would take a battering as the lucrative China market was closed off to Japanese business. China would suffer, too, as Japanese companies pulled out of a now-hostile market, depriving up to 5 million Chinese workers of their jobs, even as Xi Jinping looks to double per capita income by 2020. Panic in the globalized economy would further depress both economies, and potentially destroy the programs of both countries’ new leaders.

3. Question marks over the PLA’s operational effectiveness. The People’s Liberation Army is rapidly modernizing, but there are concerns about how effective it would prove if pressed into combat today – not least within China’s own military hierarchy. New Central Military Commission Vice-Chairman Xu Qiliang recently told the PLA Daily that too many PLA exercises are merely for show, and that new elite units had to be formed if China wanted to protect its interests. CMC Chairman Xi Jinping has also called on the PLA to improve its readiness for “real

combat.” Other weaknesses within the PLA, such as endemic corruption, would similarly undermine the leadership’s confidence in committing it to a risky war with a peer adversary.

4. Unsettled politics. China’s civil and military leaderships remain in a state of flux, with the handover initiated in November not yet complete. As the new leaders find their feet and jockey for position amongst themselves, they will want to avoid big foreign-policy distractions – war with Japan and possibly the U.S. being the biggest of them all.

5. The unknown quantity of U.S. intervention. China has its hawks, such as Dai Xu, who think that the U.S. would never intervene in an Asian conflict on behalf of Japan or any other regional ally. But this view is far too casual. U.S. involvement is a real enough possibility to give China pause, should the chances of conflict increase.

6. China’s policy of avoiding military confrontation. China has always said that it favors peaceful solutions to disputes, and its actions have tended to bear this out. In particular, it continues to usually dispatch unarmed or only lightly armed law enforcement ships to maritime flashpoints, rather than naval ships. There have been calls for a more aggressive policy in the nationalist media, and from some military figures; but Beijing has not shown much sign of heeding them. The PLA Navy made a more active intervention in the dispute this week when one of its frigates trained its radar on a Japanese naval vessel. This was a dangerous and provocative act of escalation, but once again the Chinese action was kept within bounds that made violence unlikely (albeit, needlessly, more likely than before).

7. China's socialization. China has spent too long telling the world that it poses no threat to peace to turn around and fulfill all the China-bashers' prophecies. Already, China's reputation in Southeast Asia has taken a hit over its handling of territorial disputes there. If it were cast as the guilty party in a conflict with Japan –which already has the sympathy of many East Asian countries where tensions China are concerned – China would see regional opinion harden against it further still. This is not what Beijing wants: It seeks to influence regional affairs diplomatically from within, and to realize “win-win” opportunities with its international partners.

In light of these constraints, Abe should be able to push back against China – so long as he doesn't go too far. He was of course dealt a rotten hand by his predecessor, Yoshihiko Noda, whose bungled nationalization of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands triggered last year's plunge in relations. Noda's misjudgments raised the political temperature to the point where neither side feels able to make concessions, at least for now, in an attempt to repair relations.

However, Abe can make the toxic Noda legacy work in his favor. Domestically, he can play the role of the man elected to untangle the wreckage, empowered by his democratic mandate to seek a new normal in Sino-Japanese relations. Chinese assertiveness would be met with a newfound Japanese assertiveness, restoring balance to the relationship. It is also timely for Japan to push back now, while its military is still a match for China's. Five or ten years down the line this may no longer be the case, even if Abe finally grows the stagnant defense budget.

Meanwhile, Abe is also pursuing diplomatic avenues. It was Abe who mended Japan's ties with China after the Koizumi years, and he is now trying to reprise his role as peacemaker, having dispatched his coalition partner, Natsuo Yamaguchi, to Beijing reportedly to convey his desire for a new dialogue. It is hardly surprising, given his daunting domestic laundry list, that Xi Jinping should have responded encouragingly to the Japanese olive branch.

In the end, Abe and Xi are balancing the same equation: They will not give ground on sovereignty issues, but they have no interest in a war – in fact, they must dread it. Even if a small skirmish between Chinese and Japanese ships or aircraft occurs, the leaders will not order additional forces to join the battle unless they are boxed in by a very specific set of circumstances that makes escalation the only face-saving option. The escalatory spiral into all-out war that some envisage once the first shot is fired is certainly not the likeliest outcome, as recurrent skirmishes elsewhere – such as in Kashmir, or along the Thai-Cambodian border – have demonstrated.

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