Beyond History: Non-Traditional Security Cooperation and the Construction of Northeast Asian International Society

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For
10th International Symposium, “Beyond History: Reconciliation and New Sources of Conflict between China and its Asian Neighbours”
Center for China-US Cooperation, University of Denver, May 4-5, 2012, Denver, US

Introduction:

Northeast Asia is often regarded as ‘weak’ in terms of regional integration and the development of regional international society, not least because historical memories, nationalist sentiments, territorial disputes, and political tensions have proved major obstacles to the smooth development of trusting relationships between regional actors. Then, can such a region move towards a more cooperative spectrum? The underlying assumption is that these negative features including painful historical memories and their resulting animosities, though look insurmountable obstacles to peace and reconciliation among regional actors, they are not necessarily immutable and can be reshaped and reconstructed through the processes of social interaction. In other words, identities are not totally fixed or impossible to change but, as Wendt argues, are processes that need to be socially sustained (Wendt 1999: 36). Then what kind of social interaction would lead to such positive direction? This paper argues that the development of non-traditional security (NTS) cooperation in the region and the emergence of new norms, institutions, and patterns of behaviour may provide a window of opportunity for Northeast Asians to move a more positive future. For the purpose this paper examines the emerging NTS cooperation in Northeast Asia with particular reference to the Sino-Japanese environmental security cooperation. It asks why and how such cooperation emerges; and to what extent such practices have given impact to regional social structural change.

Emerging Sino-Japanese environmental cooperation: A brief overview

Sino-Japanese environmental cooperation began in 1977, when the first Japanese environmental delegations visited China. Since then cooperation has been gradually but steadily expanding and deepening. In the 1980s, the main concern was with ecological degradation. There were two important developments in this period. First, in 1988, Japan provided official development assistance (ODA) to China’s environmental projects, in the form of an environment-related yen-loan. Secondly – and also in 1988 – the Japanese Prime Minister, Noboru Takeshita, proposed the establishment of a Sino-Japan Friendship Centre for Environmental Protection (SJC) to his Chinese counterpart, Li Peng. Despite these important initiatives, however, environmental issues remained marginal in the overall context of Sino-Japanese
It was in the 1990s that environmental protection emerged as a more important area for bilateral co-operation between China and Japan. Perhaps most significant step towards was the conclusion of the Agreement on Environmental Protection and Cooperation (the Agreement) in March 1994. The agreement symbolised a common willingness and commitment to tackle environmental problems. Since then, many agreements have been reached and some practical projects implemented. Among those was the formal establishment of the Sino-Japanese Friendship Centre for Environmental Protection in 1996. The Centre was affiliated to the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) of China, and has since become a central body for environment-related policy research, educational activities, and environmental evaluation and analysis. Furthermore, in 1998, when Chinese President Jiang Zemin made an official visit to Tokyo, the two governments signed the Sino-Japanese Joint Communiqué on Environmental Cooperation in the 21st Century. Following those agreements and institutional developments, some practical cooperative projects have also been implemented. Perhaps the most notable are the Environmental Development Model City Plan, and the Sino-Japanese Greening Communication Fund (or the Obuchi Fund). The Model City Plan was designed to select model cities for priority implementation of environmental control; Chongqing, Guiyang, and Dalian were selected. The Obuchi Fund, established in 1999, provided support to Japanese NGOs engaged in afforestation and other environmental protection projects in China. In addition to bilateral cooperation, Environment Ministers from China, Japan, and South Korea have held annual meetings, known as the Tripartite Environmental Ministers Meeting (TEMM), since 1999.

After the turn of the century, environmental issues attracted ever more attention, not least because the prospect of global warming made cooperation appear imperative. Issues such as technology transfer, clean development mechanism (CDM), as well as energy conservation were central to the policy dialogue between Tokyo and Beijing. These trends have become even more powerful in the last five years. For instance, in December 2007 the first China-Japan high-level economic dialogue was held in Beijing, in which ‘environmental protection and energy-saving’ emerged as the central issue. Environmental protection now occupies such a special and significant position in the Sino-Japanese cooperation process that it seems possible that common environmental concerns could actually become the driving force behind an overall enhancement of Sino-Japanese relations. Yet, question remains as why and how such cooperation emerges between China and Japan?

**Emerging environmental security consensus between China and Japan**

Why has environmental cooperation emerged as such an important area in Sino-Japanese relations? To answer the question it is important to understand the emerging environmental security consensus between China and Japan. By emerging
environmental security consensus, I mean the process by which an environmental issue becomes a security issue. The securitisation theory, one of the main approaches of Copenhagen school approach to security, argues that security is not merely an objective condition or threat, rather it is an outcome of specific social processes. That is to say, the existence of real threat is not sufficient in itself to construct security practice. Security is a particular type of inter-subjective politics. The crucial point in understanding security is to capture the process whereby an issue becomes a security issue – that is, the process of ‘securitisation’. In this sense, the study of security centres on security practices as specific forms of social construction and on securitisation as a particular kind of social accomplishment.¹

The key development in Sino-Japanese environmental cooperation is the common experience of ‘elevating’ the significance of environmental problems by constructing them into security threats – even though this process has been gradual. As noted earlier, there was some environmental cooperation between China and Japan as early as in the 1980s. At that time, however, environmental issues remained in the realm of ‘normalcy’. In other words environmental problems – such as air and water pollution – were just part of general concerns, and cooperation in the environmental area was merely one facet of the interaction between China and Japan. However, from the mid-to late-1990s environmental issues began to be perceived in terms of environmental security. An initial change, obvious in the discourse and language employed in Chinese government statements, was to approach environmental issues from the perspective of national security. At the fourth national environmental protection conference in 1996, President Jiang Zemin formally articulated the phrase ‘environmental security’ and emphasised the importance of controlling overall pollution levels in China. In 1998, the growing importance of environmental issues led the Chinese government to upgrade the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) into the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), that is, from a sub-ministry to ministry.

But why was there such a strong tendency to securitise environmental issues at this time? Clearly the most potent factor was the deterioration in ecological and environmental conditions that resulted from rapid economic growth in China. In many ways the opening and modernisation programmes have been astonishingly successful, yet the correspondent environmental damages are enormous, not least because of the rapidity of development but also because China’s development has largely achieved with extremely high emerge and environmental costs. Problems that took the best part of a century to reveal themselves in countries that experienced earlier – and slower – industrial revolutions, became inescapable in China after a mere 20-30 years. In the course of the 1980s, China rapidly acquired the role of the new ‘workshop of the world’ and hence, by the 1990s, air, water and soil pollution became increasingly

grave concerns. Pollution proved to be no respecter of frontiers. Thus problems of trans-border air pollution – such as yellow dust and sand – were soon effectively securitised by China, Japan and South Korea. The result was establishment of the Tripartite Environmental Ministers Meeting (TEMM) in 1999. The Meeting is held annually and works to promote joint research and appropriate action to combat environmental threats.

By the 2000s, more specifically since 2007, there are clear indications of recognition in the discourses of Sino-Japanese relations that the saliency of environmental issues has reached a critical point: if the two countries do not work together to tackle growing environmental challenges, they will endanger their own survival and even that the planet as a whole. In fact, the repeated and extensive high-level dialogues, the conferences and the readiness to commit resources that might be sufficient to make a real difference are indications of how almost any issue becomes politicised and even securitised.

These developments can be understood in a wider context of the global response to climate change. In the league of the world’s major emitters of greenhouse gases (GhGs), China ranks second behind the US (according to some research outcomes, China has already overtaken the US as the world biggest CO2 emitter), and Japan ranks the fifth behind India and Russia. Inevitably, both countries are being pressed to meet GhG emissions limit. The report on the national “11th Five-Year Plan” (2006-2010) for environmental protection (approved by the State Council in November 2007), shows that China’s environmental situation remained grave, and that environmental protection targets of the “10th Five-Year Plan” period had not been met. Meanwhile, Mitsune Yamaguchi (lead author of the IPCC Third and Fourth Assessment Report and a member of the Japanese government’s climate policy committee) also admitted that although Japan decreased its emissions by 1.3 percent in 2007, it was still below its target.

When faced with such serious challenges both Japan and China determined that environmental protection required clear national strategies. In China the crucial year was surely 2007. After several decades of promoting economic growth – with little thought for its environmental consequences – as the best way of protecting national security, the Chinese authorities revealed a new set of priorities. The 17th CCP Congress decided that the costs of unprecedented economic growth could have been too high. Far from strengthening national security, such growth had led to the depletion of resources and the degradation of the environment to such an extent as to

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2 Human Development Reports (HDR) 2007/08; The Independent, 30 November 2009.
3 The situation was with 27.8% increase of SO2 emissions and 2.1% reduction of COD, as compared with that of 2000, while the targets should be 10% reduction. See, “The National 11th Five-year Plan for Environmental Protection (2006-2010)”, accessed at http://www.chinaenvironmentallaw.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/the-national-eleventh-five-year-plan-for-environmental-protection.doc.
constitute a serious threat to national security. In other words, rapid economic growth – if not balanced with measures to ensure sustainability – was actually undermining the very thing it was supposed to be securing. For the first time too, the Congress identified environmental protection as part of China’s vision of a harmonious world. Henceforth, environmental issues ceased to be the exclusive preserve of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, and became crucial for the Foreign Ministry and for all aspects of China’s relations with other countries, but especially with Japan. In other words, China could barely mention environmental protection without considering the international dimension and possible cooperation.

In the same year, the Japanese government also approved a national strategy entitled “Becoming a Leading Environmental Nation Strategy in the 21st Century – Japan’s strategy for a Sustainable Society”. Clearly, Japan is determined to shift its earlier emphasis of national technology into Environment. The change in Japan is similar, though not quite the same as that in China. Whereas China moved its emphasis from mere economic growth to growth with environmental protection, Japan reduced its earlier stress on technological innovation. Of course China did not abandon economic growth and Japan did not abandon technological change but both countries now wished to be seen as leading environmental nations. Japan has now identified eight strategies to be given top priority in its national strategy – including international leadership in tackling climate change. Thus, it is the processes of institutionalisation of environmental problems as security threats that have led the two governments into a series of cooperative projects. But what has this cooperation achieved and has it really changed relations and mutual identifications between China and Japan?

Environment, ODA, and the cooperative relations between China and Japan?

Environmental cooperation must count as one of the most successful areas in Sino-Japanese relations, and providing to others as a good example of effective bilateral environmental cooperation between developed and developing countries. Both countries certainly have incentives and common interests that point to the wisdom of enhanced cooperation in environmental matters. Thus government initiatives and formal agreements between Tokyo and Beijing have been crucial in forwarding the process, yet it is also necessary to stress the role of Japan’s official development assistance (ODA) in effecting and sustaining cooperation in this important area.

Japan’s ODA to China dates from 1979, seven years after China and Japan established diplomatic relations, and consists of Japanese loan aid or yen loans (yen loans form 5

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the major part of the ODA), grant aid, and technical cooperation. In the 1980s, Japan’s ODA to China was mainly targeted at large-scale economic infrastructure projects. However from the 1990s, ODA support was increasingly directed into areas of environmental protection. For instance, the establishment of the Sino-Japan Friendship Centre for Environmental Protection (SJC) in 1996 was much aided by Japan’s ODA; grant aid of 10.499 billion yen covered the cost of the construction of the building as well as providing research equipment. Over the years, Japan also actively implemented technical cooperation (1.997 billion yen) with SJC, including dispatching experts in wide-ranging environmental fields. Strongly backed by Japan, and also affiliated to China’s State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), the SJC plays an important role as a comprehensive coordinating body in enhancing environmental cooperation between China and Japan.

Japan’s ODA to China peaked in 2000, with 214.4 billion-yen loan aid. Japan devoted about 70 percent of its loan to climate change and environmental issues – such as curbing desertification and soil erosion and promoting afforestation programs – as well as improving public health. With the massive growth of the Chinese economy, the yen loans began to be phased out and ceased in 2008, but Japan continues its technical cooperation with China. Over some thirty years, Japan has lent China a total of about 3.4 trillion yen. With Japanese aid, an environment information network has also been set up across 100 Chinese cities. Moreover, Sino-Japanese environmental cooperation has expanding in the local level. The Environment Model City Project has been operating since 1998 – in which Guiyang, Chongqing, Dalian were selected as model cities, and Japan contributed about 30.7 billion yen loan to the model city programme. Thus, over the years, alongside central governmental cooperation, Sino-Japanese local initiatives in environmental cooperation have been expanding. By 2003, about 193 Chinese cities from 26 provinces were ‘twinned’ with Japanese partners as sister/friendship cities – eg., Dalian / Kitakyushu, Chongqing / Hiroshima, and Shanghai / Yokohama. Environmental protection often centres on the city-to-city (C2C) projects. Of course, outcomes have varied but perhaps the most successful case has been cooperation between Dalian and Kitakyushu, especially under the ‘Kitakyushu Initiatives for a Clean Environment’. As a result, Dalian was given a ‘global 500 environmental city’ award by the UNEP in 2001, and has won many national awards in landscaping, environment improvement, sanitation and housing.

In addition, Sino-Japanese environmental cooperation has involved extensive exchanges of people. For example, in the area of technical cooperation the Japan

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6 ‘Loan aid’ (yen loans), involves the provision of loans under relaxed conditions (low interest, long repayment period) to recipient countries (These are in principle untied loans). ‘Grant aid’, is financial assistance that is extended to recipient countries without imposing an obligation of repayment; and ‘technical cooperation’ involves the technologies being provided to recipient countries to spread the use of technology among people in developing countries and improve technical levels (cf, definitions provided by MOFA, Japan at http://www.mofa.go.jp).

7 For detailed figures of Japan’s ODA to China, see MOFA, Japan at, www.mofa.org.jp.


International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has accepted trainees from China; by FY2003 the total number reached 15,000 trainees. By the same time, the Association for Overseas Technical Scholarship (AOTS) had also accepted more than 22,000 trainees and JICA had sent 5,000 experts to China. There are also many young Japanese volunteers working in China. All these initiatives are impressive in themselves but still some questions and puzzles remain to be investigated. In the first place, Japan’s ODA to China for 30 years (1979-2008), even when times China’s rise generating great concerns regionally and internationally, seems irrational and requires more careful examination. More importantly, to what extent, Japan’s initiatives have led to a changed image of Japan in China and hence to an improved relationship between the two great powers of East Asia?

It is difficult to understand Japan’s ODA to China, especially since the 1990s onwards, from realist perspective. It is often argued that China and Japan are natural rivals (Roy 2004) and hence difficult to arrive in lasting cooperation between the two great powers. The debates between realists and liberals on whether in the international arena states should engage a rising China or contain it have their respective reasons to pursue. Yet as long as Japan is concerned, its foreign and security policy towards China in the 1990s was shifted what Green calls from ‘commercial liberalism to reluctant realism’. Viewing from this trajectory, the continuing ODA support to China looks inconsistent with its overall China policy. Indeed, there were growing contest among Japan’s domestic publics against its government policy towards China especially its continuing ODA projects. This seems quite understandable given the fact that since China’s reform policy initiated in the late 1970s, China achieved rapid economic growth, especially since the 1990s China’s growth often contrasted with Japan’s economic stagnation. Then, why should a country with its own economic difficulties assist another country which looks doing extremely well. The uneasiness reached to the peak in March 2006 (FY 2005), coupled with history issues and faced with deterioration in bilateral ties, Japan decided to withhold its authorization of yen loans to China, even though the freeze did not last long.

However a careful examination of what has happened with the ODA programme, one can find that the components of ODA to China have changed significantly overtime, that is from initial aids towards China’s infrastructures increasing towards tackling environmental problems. Given the nature of the threats and the growing security consensus over the environmental issues made the cooperation possible, and more acceptable by domestic audience within Japan. This is precisely the point of this paper intends to emphasise – NTS cooperation can provide opportunity to reconcile and improve relations between ‘rivals’ even when times of their relations are under strain. In this sense we can see the impact of such practices from both negative and positive senses. From a negative sense, has recent environmental cooperation (or more precisely Japan efforts in environmental assistant to China) reduced historical tensions

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and negative images; and from a positive dimension, has cooperation actively promoted good relationship between China and Japan?

In a more negative sense, environmental cooperation between China and Japan certainly has reduced the negative impact on relations caused by earlier – and to some extent – continuing political tensions. Of course, this does not mean that environmental cooperation was immune to the effects of political ups and downs. Sino-Japanese relations experienced a serious deterioration after Koizumi took office in 2001 and began his annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. Coupled with other history issues such as the highly controversial Japanese history textbook, the relationship reached its modern nadir in 2005, when there were strong anti-Japanese demonstrations in major Chinese cities. As argued earlier, in March 2006, because of the sharp deterioration in bilateral ties, Japan decided to withhold its authorization of yen loans to China for FY2005. Yet the freeze did not last long, and in early June 2006, while Koizumi was still in Office, Tokyo resumed its loans.

Moreover, although there were few significant high-level contacts during the years of icy political relations, the environment remained as a rare and important area where some ties and cooperation continued. Japan continued to receive Chinese trainees, as well as sending experts into China. The yen loan of FY 2005, though 10 billion yen less than in the previous fiscal year, still amounted to 74 billion yen and was sufficient to fund a wide range of environmental improvement projects – such as the Yunnan Kunming Water Environmental Improvement Project (up to 12,700 million yen), and the Inner Mongolia Huhehot Atmospheric Environmental Improvement Project (up to 7,400 million yen). The role of environment as an ‘absorber’ in Sino-Japanese relations is succinctly captured by the Chinese leading environment scholar, Haibin Zhang. He argues that over the years, especially when Sino-Japanese relations were under strain, environmental cooperation really served as an absorber that reduced the shocks and tensions arising in other areas, and hence kept bilateral relations at controllable level (Zhang, Haibin 2008: 7-11,18). I believe that Zhang is right to point out the ‘absorber’ effect produced by environmental cooperation; I would further argue that more positive impacts of the environment on Sino-Japanese relations should also be considered.

This leads to the second point that in a more positive sense, environmental cooperation provided opportunities for people to meet, to work together, and to know each other better. People-to-people ties are clearly crucial to the improvement of Sino-Japanese relations (even today, People to people relations is precisely lack in S-J relations, as demonstrated in the Survey. Historical memory and mutual conception/misconception is the main reason. Thus environmental cooperation can create an opportunity that both sides feeling more comfortable and acceptable). Although their potential has not yet been fully developed, their significance is appreciated both by

leaders and by the public in both countries. For examine, speaking at the Tokyo-Beijing Forum in August 2006, Shinzo Abe the then Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary (Prime Minister in September 2006) blamed ‘misunderstandings’ for the current problems in Sino-Japanese relations. At the same Forum, Wang Yi, then Chinese ambassador to Japan, also emphasised the importance of person-to-person contact in addition to state-to-state relations.\textsuperscript{14} It seems that people from both China and Japan increasingly support this view. In an opinion poll taken in 2009 (supported by China Daily and Genron NPO Japan) about 90 percent of respondents both in China and Japan believed that civil exchanges were either ‘important’ or ‘relatively important’.\textsuperscript{15} In this context, the civil exchanges made in the area of environmental cooperation have proved extremely valuable in assisting greater mutual understanding. Contact with Japanese experts, visits to Japan, or simply understanding how Japan has responded to the environmental challenges that began to appear in the 1950s and 60s have allowed many Chinese to appreciate the magnitude of the Japanese achievement. They have come to admire the striking cleanliness of Japan, the emphasis on recycling and the environmentally friendly behaviour. Returning from a visit to Japan, China’s environmental industry study group reported:

Japan’s environmental governance is far ahead of ours, and in many respects, we should learn from them.... Visiting Japan also gives us hope, since if the Japanese could devote decades to handling their serious industrial pollution problems and achieve such remarkable results, we should also have confidence to tackle the same challenges facing us today.\textsuperscript{16}

This is surely an extremely positive image of Japan. More generally Japan’s image in China seems to be improving, although the change is gradual and has setbacks. This trend is clearly shown in a series of surveys taken annually since 2005 and jointly sponsored by China Daily and Genron NPO Japan. While the 2005 survey revealed that many Chinese had a very negative image of Japan, with more than half (62.9 percent) of the Chinese respondents having a ‘very bad’ or ‘not very good’ impression of Japan. But the image of Japan has since improved; in 2007, the number of Chinese university students who regarded the bilateral relationship as ‘good’ or ‘fairly good’ was 5.3 percentage points higher than previous year, and the increase in Chinese citizens polled was 14.5 percentage points more. This trend continued in 2008 and 2009 – though the number having a ‘good’ impression was still under 50 percent. The change – from very negative to more positive – were summed up in news reports of the surveys. While the 2005 report was summarised as ‘China-Japan ties need mending’, in 2007 it became ‘more Chinese, Japanese positive about bilateral ties’, in 2008 ‘relationship warming up’, and 2009 ‘animosity lessens’.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16} ‘Zhongguo Huanjing Chanyejie Riben Kaocha “Yingchun Zhilv”’, ‘China environment industry visiting Japan: a ‘Spring Festival Tour’, \textit{YueXiang} website, \url{http://www.water111.cn/Article/4894.htm}.
There are many reasons behind these changed perceptions of Japan, although they undoubtedly owe much to the concerted efforts of the two governments, including the resumption of top-level visits, as well as to the work of non-government agencies. As a result, bilateral relations have been repaired and improved. Especially in Chinese context, President Hu Jintao’s ‘warm spring trip’ to Japan in May 2008 and, shortly afterwards, Japanese assistance to China at the time of the Wenchuan earthquake, clearly played a major role. At the same time, however, the long-term effort made by Japan through ODA should not be underestimated. For example, on 20 February 2008, when Japan announced the end of its ODA loans to China, the Nanfang Zhoumo (Southern Weekly) published a report, reprinted in the Global Times next day, examining the effects of the ODA loans to China over a period of thirty years. The Global Times also conducted an online survey asking respondents whether they appreciated the 224.8 billion Yuan (3.4 trillion Japanese Yen) aid given by Japan to China. Surprisingly, the article and survey attracted a good deal of attention and many ‘netizens’ responded. Among 4100 respondents, 1856 (45.27%) said that they appreciated the aid, while 2244 (54.73%) said that they did not. Of course, this survey revealed that more than half of the respondents did not appreciate Japan’s ODA to China. It is important to remember, however, that ‘internet nationalism’, usually directed against Japan, is powerful force in China and so the result should be considered more positive than it appears to be. Indeed, only a few years ago, it would have been astonishing if a survey had revealed that nearly half of the respondents agreed that Japanese aid had contributed to the development of China.

Conclusion: Northeast Asia, beyond history?

What then do these various stories suggest? Has NTS cooperation brought China and Japan into a closer mutual identification, which goes beyond history? There can be no doubt that many Chinese now view Japan more positively than in the past and that, in part, this change can be attributed to cooperation in the area of the environment. Of course, the complete transformation is unlikely to come easily or immediately, and many setbacks would also accompany with improved relationship, as the surveys clearly suggest that anti-Japanese sentiment is still strong. Moreover, as the 2011 survey shows, the number of Chinese people who like Japan dropped from 38.3 percent in 2010 to 28.6 percent; and 62.1 percent of Chinese students believe that the sensitive nature of the territorial disputes has made the situation worse.

This means that once constructed, national stereotypes and images tend to become

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deeply imbedded in the popular memory and are thus exceptionally durable and resistant to revision. In other words, images derived from past experience can continue to affect current behaviour. The experience of the Second World War produced a very negative image of Japan in China; above Japan was the invader and China its victim. This image has been slow to change and has had lasting implications for China’s own identity as well as for Sino-Japanese relations. Two decades after the beginning of environmental cooperation in the 1980s, anti-Japanese sentiments were still strong, especially among Chinese ‘popular nationalists’. This was vividly expressed in the violent scenes at the 2004 Asian Cup Soccer Final in Beijing, and in the anti-Japanese riots of the Spring of 2005. It was clear, therefore, that any attempt to change the discourse or to reconstruct Japan’s image would be extremely difficult.

The attempt by some scholars in 2002/3 to bring a ‘new thinking’ to Sino-Japanese relations – based on the idea that China focus more on its future partnership with Japan and less on past injuries – was faced huge antagonism from mass nationalists. Even in academic circles, the new thinking gained only minority support. Indeed, as revealed by the 2009 and 2011 surveys, the historical issue remains one of the major obstacles to the improvement of bilateral relations.

However, despite the slow progress and difficulty in changing mutual identifications, it would be wrong to think that identities are totally fixed or impossible to change. As Wendt argues, identities and interests are not fixed, but are processes that need to be socially sustained. In other words, we continue to produce and reproduce conceptions of Self and Other through social interactions. Even when processes are so stable that identities appear to be given, they are always subject to subtle modification (Wendt 1999: 36). I believe that Wendt is right in taking identity as socially constructed and hence susceptible to change. This proposition has enormous implications for Sino-Japanese relations. In essence, it means that we should never assume difficulties and animosities as permanent or eternal. In other words, reconciliation and peace between China and Japan may be difficult to achieve but they are not impossible. Hence efforts to ‘deconstruct’ and ‘reconstruct’ of our mutual images and identities are not doomed from the start. In this sense, the implications of joint efforts to combat major environmental challenges must never be dismissed as trivial. On the contrary, they are significant steps in the process of improving mutual understanding and creating more positive images – no matter how little the improvement.

The importance of NTS cooperation, including in the areas of environment, natural disaster and pandemic, are twofold. On the one hand, in the region where historical animosities remain high, NTS issues can avoid some sensitive issues and find common ground for cooperation that other traditional security areas find difficult. On

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21 For detailed discussions on the ‘new thinking’ and its implications for Sino-Japanese relations, see Cui (2008), ‘Problems of Nationalism’.

the other hand, repeated cooperation in the environmental and other NTS areas may lead to the emergence of new norms, institutions, and habits of practices. For instance, in recent years in both government and academic discourses cooperation rather than conflict has become more accepted norm for handling regional problems especially NTS challenges. Also, environmentalism has now been widely accepted by regional actors as an important institution of regional society. The acceptance of environmentalism and cooperation means that some institutions that previously strongly associated with Northeast Asian international society, such as strictly interpreted severity, territoriality and diplomacy may require reinterpretations and modifications. Northeast Asia can no long remain as strictly Westphalian inter-state society, but have to move towards world society direction that involves more people to people relations rather than state to state ones. Thus, it concludes that cooperation in the area of NTS can provide the essential window of opportunity for Northeast Asians to move beyond history.