China’s Foreign Policy Today vs. Japan’s Foreign Policy in the 1930s:
A Repeat of History in Asia?

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This paper explores whether China’s foreign policy objectives today are similar to Japan’s foreign policy objectives in the 1930s, mainly by looking at the public statements of the political leaders and comparing those statements with the actions each country took to execute its foreign policy. For China, this paper looks at the current Xi Jinping presidency, which started in March 2013 and continues to this day. For Japan, this paper examines Japan’s Early Showa Period between 1932 and 1936, including Japan’s military buildup between the establishment of Manchukuo and the invasion of China in 1931 and 1937, respectively. In both cases, the political leaders utilize rhetoric that gives the impression that their respective countries are peaceful, status quo powers in Asia. However, the execution of the foreign policy objectives at times gives the opposite impression, leading the other countries in the international community to develop sentiments of distrust and suspicion towards Japan in the 1930s and China today.

In looking at the Chinese and Japanese cases, their respective political leaders sought to tackle similar problems, despite the many differences between the international system of the 1930s and the international system today. For Japan in the 1930s, the international community, led by the West, enacted trade barriers on Japanese goods due to their extremely low prices due to the yen’s rapid inflation and in response to Japan’s actions in Manchuria. In response, Japanese leaders undertook public campaigns to emphasize Japan’s desire to coexist in peace with the Western Powers. China faces a similar, though less volatile, dilemma today. Due to China’s position as a major economic power in the international community that provides important goods for the international marketplace, it does not face the same economic situation that Japan faced in the 1930s. Chinese leaders have harnessed this power and sought to increase global and regional economic integration with measures such as the Silk Road Fund, the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) proposal, and now the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In their respective times, both states faced intense scrutiny from the international community and its neighbors, who questioned the intentions behind the foreign policy objectives.

Both Japan and China also expressed mixed signals regarding their aspirations for regional hegemony. In both cases, the actions taken by Japan and China to execute their foreign policies led their neighbors and the Western Powers to become suspicious of their intentions and enact countermeasures. In Japan’s case, the actions it took to attain its objectives of acting as a stabilizing force in the region and playing a major role in regional conflict resolution ultimately led to the international community to view Japan as attempting to become the regional hegemon. Though the Japanese political leaders denied any malicious intent behind Japan’s actions, it was not enough to convince them. They subsequently enacted measures that primarily targeted Japan’s imports and exports to punish it. China faces a similar dilemma today as its military buildup and attempts to create new norms for conflict resolution in Asia with it in the center have led its neighbors and the international community to view its actions as suspicious. It remains to be seen whether China’s efforts will ultimately backfire in the same way Japan’s did in the 1930s.
In comparing the foreign policy objectives of China today with Japan in the 1930s, there are remarkable similarities between the two, despite the difference in time periods and changes in the international norms following World War II and the Cold War. For instance, in terms of their efforts to promote greater economic and international cooperation, both China and Japan undertook actions that reflect the rhetoric of their political leaders. In terms of expanding their influence in the Asia-Pacific, both have had trouble establishing their roles as promoters of regional stability and as conflict resolvers. Japan’s attempts at this ended poorly for them, as the rhetoric of their leaders was not enough to convince the international community and its neighbors that its intentions were benign. China’s attempts have elicited negative reaction from the international community and its neighbors, but so far, the countermeasures have not amounted to the imposition of economic sanctions or trade restrictions. In looking to the future, though similarities do exist in the foreign policies of China today and Japan in the 1930s, China has the benefit of learning from Japan’s mistakes and thus has the potential to succeed in accomplishing its foreign policy objectives where Japan failed.