

# **INTERVIEW**

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## **THE POLITICS OF (MIS)PERCEPTION**

*Interview with Benoit Hardy-Chartrand*

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## *Interview with Benoit Hardy-Chartrand*

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*The Journal's own junior staff editor, Alexandra Stephenson, conducted the following interview, which discusses research from Mr. Hardy-Chartrand's recent publication, *Misperceptions, Threat Inflation and Mistrust in China-Japan Relations*. The paper discusses relations between East Asia's two pre-eminent powers, China and Japan, from 2012 to 2014, when they reached their lowest point since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1972. The bitter territorial dispute in the East China Sea, as well as contrasting views of their shared history, have been the primary drivers of tensions. The discord at the official level has also been reflected in public opinion, with mutual perceptions between the Japanese and Chinese populations reaching unprecedented levels of negativity in 2013 and 2014. The rhetoric of threat has permeated the media and official discourse in both countries. Through an analysis of these discourses, this paper explores mutual perceptions in China and Japan, in the end arguing that each side overestimates the level of threat that the other poses. This systematic overestimation leads to consequences for bilateral relations and regional stability.*

**Y: How will the coming presidency of Donald Trump affect issues such as Japan-US relations as well as Japan-China relations?**

There's a lot of uncertainty surrounding his policy toward Asia. Now, although we don't know exactly what direction or orientation he will take with his Asia policy, Asia and foreign policy, overall, figured very little into any of his policy pronouncements during the campaign, and still to this day, a few weeks after the election, we still don't know that much about it.

However, the few things that he has let on about his ideas on Asia make it seem as though he could be more or less an isolationist when it comes to international affairs. Not an old school pre-WWII isolationist, but a lot less committed to America's traditional role in the world. When I say traditional role, I'm talking about its security commitments everywhere, and especially in Asia since WWII, where it has been very, very present. We have to remember that it has treaty commitments with five allies, five partners in the region. Therefore, if there was any sort of lack of commitment, or even a slight turnaround from United States' commitment to Asia, it might change quite a lot of things.

Let's remember his campaign pronouncements regarding the fact that Japan and South Korea needed to pay more for their security, despite the fact that they're already paying approximately half of the costs of hosting American bases. Even if South Korea and Japan were paying for everything, which is about five billion a year, it still would be just a drop, just a small drop in the grand scheme of things considering that the American yearly defense budget is about five hundred thirty billion dollars.

But regardless, he's talking about forcing or asking these two allies to pay more. He also suggested that perhaps these two countries would need to be armed with nuclear weapons, as well, which would be a sea change in the region. I don't think it will happen because there's little appetite for this in both Japan and South Korea. Obviously the hawks in both countries, in both South Korea and Japan, were happy to hear that because there's always been a faction in politics in both places that favor the acquisition of nuclear weapons, but the reality is that there's still a lot of resistance. It would be very unwise for both of them to do that, but that doesn't matter because the fact that he made these pronouncements, the fact that he showed less than enthusiastic commitment to these two alliances, has made these two countries very worried about Trump's administration. That was very clearly illustrated by the fact that Abe was one of the first people to call him, and the very first one to meet him. We have to remember that this was a completely impromptu meeting. He was going to South America

for the APEC Summit, and on the way to Peru, and I arranged to meet Trump in New York. And although Abe made it seem as if everything went well, and according to what we have heard, it seemed like the meeting did go well, it's still a very clear illustration of deep worries in the region among American allies regarding the future of their relations with the United States.

**Y: What do you think about the increase in rhetoric from President Duterte in the Philippines?**

Duterte is very much a loose cannon. His antipathy towards the United States goes back to when he was the mayor of Davao in the southern island of Mindanao. In a way, this so-called separation, or this decline in the relationship between United States and the Philippines was almost to be foreseen when he was elected, based on how he has always viewed the United States. He's viewed them as an unwelcome presence in the Philippines. Again, a lot of things that he has said cannot be taken seriously because he often goes back on his own words. On October 21, after he had said he would separate from the United States, he turned around and said, "No, we're only separating in terms of foreign policy."

The reality is that ever since he came to power in June, there have been clear moves to distance the Philippines from the United States and bring it closer to the orbit of China. For instance, he has decided to cancel, starting next year, some military joint exercises, and he said that he would expel US troops from the south of the country, where they have been for a while. There's a lot of uncertainty regarding the future of the alliance because we have to remember that in 2014, when it was Benigno Aquino, the predecessor of Duterte, the alliance between the United States and the Philippines was actually enhanced and was looking up at that time.

And now, so not only has he drifted a little bit away from the US, but gotten closer to China, and that's certainly grounds for worry on the part of the United States. It's not a complete separation, and he's completely committed to China. Sure, he's gotten close to China, but what I feel will probably happen is he will probably try, to a certain extent, to play both powers against one another, to try to extract things from both. But there's no doubt that, regardless of what has been said about his fickleness and his lack of seriousness in his policy pronouncements, there's a real drift in the Philippine's foreign policy that has been undertaken since June, and that cannot be denied, no matter what officials in Manila say.

**Y: Are there some similarities with this case and the situation in Japan**

## and China?

I'd be wary of comparison between Duterte and US and Japan, China, with regards to threat perception. Are you referring to the South China Sea, for instance, or just the way that Duterte perceives China or the US?

**Y: One thing of note in your article is that Japan doesn't actually see China as a real threat. They just read what China's doing as rhetoric. So China says really angry things, but Japan kind of sees behind that and realizes that they don't actually mean war, for example.**

Yes, you're right, but at the same time, they are worried about Chinese moves. They are worried about Chinese actions around the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, which is an important point in the paper. In its yearly white defense paper, what Japan says it's worried about is the China, North Korea, and their actions in their surroundings. Whenever I speak to Japanese officials about that, Chinese moves come to the forefront of their security concerns, with North Korea. The fact that they believe the Chinese are not really worried about the Japanese threat doesn't mean that they don't see Chinese actions as threatening or worrying.

But to go back to your question about comparing the situation with Duterte with Japan and China, I'm not sure if there's any comparison that I can make. In this case, for the last two or three years before Duterte came to power, Benigno Aquino and his administration were very worried and saw China as a threat to its interests in the South China Sea. So that threat perception seems to have completely changed now that they have gotten closer to China and agreed to settle this dispute bilaterally. There's no doubt that there's a very different threat perception in the two most recent administrations in Manila.

**Y: How do you think particular issues (US withdrawal from the TPP, for example) could affect threat misperception in the region?**

The TPP is a very interesting issue because although the TPP does not affect misperception or perception related to threat, specifically, it does really affect perception of US intent and US commitment to the region. An important thing to remember here is that when the US announced its pivot to Asia, it had several different spheres or areas, if you will. One is the defense pivot, reinforcing US defense commitment to the region, and its military presence in the region, which it has done to a certain extent. There's the political pivot, which meant reinforcing its alliance with traditional partners like Japan and

South Korea, which it has also done. And the third important leg of the pivot was the economic pivot, and the TPP was going to be a very large part of that.

So now it's very likely that the US is going out of the TPP, as that's actually one thing Trump promised he would follow through with. Exiting the TPP is a big deal because the TPP would have increased the US economic presence and made the US a more important economic partner for pretty much all countries in Asia that are a part of the TPP. At the same time, it would have helped to make countries in the region less dependent economically on China because almost all countries in the region have China as their first trading partner. So the TPP would have really reduced this dependency on China, and by the same token, made the United States a more important partner for these countries. Now that it's gone, it's one of the most important aspects of the pivot that is basically dead. That does make a big difference, obviously.

Regarding the pivot, the main way that this will affect threat perception or misperception in the region is that, if Trump is indeed less committed to alliances with Japan and South Korea, the way that Seoul and Tokyo react to a Trump administration will very likely affect threat perception in the region, especially in China. It's quite possible that South Korea and Japan will feel compelled to increase their armaments, defense commitments or defense budgets, and that will undoubtedly make China a little more wary of Japanese and South Korean intentions. So I would say that what will mostly affect threat perception really hinges on how Japan and South Korea react, or how they go forward under the Trump administration.

**Y: Can you tell me more about how these same issues play out between different countries either in Asia or around the world?**

There are other examples in other parts of the world, and in Asia, as well. I think one of the issues is that threat perception or misperception affects bilateral relations to a much greater extent than is often recognized. We think that actual capabilities from countries are the main factor here, but capabilities do not always matter, it's the perception of these capabilities that really matter. That's what drives foreign policy of states in the vast majority of cases.

If we look at Asia, one of the best examples of that are North Korea and South Korea relations, and the way that threat perceptions affect North Korea's foreign policy. North Korea has always, ever since it was founded in 1948, felt hugely threatened by its neighbors and always believed that it lives in a very hostile environment surrounded by countries that want nothing but its collapse, like Japan, South Korea, and the United States.

And this threat perception has been the main, if not the only, driver of the North Korean initiative to acquire nuclear weapons since the 1980s, which is when its nuclear program started. There were various factors that motivated the acquisition of nuclear weapons in North Korea, and one of them was prestige, which has always played an important part for internal propaganda, among other reasons. But if it had not been for the real perception that it was threatened by its neighbors, there is very little chance that North Korea would have gone ahead and acquired nuclear weapons.

So I think North Korea is a very, very interesting case, and threat perception has also driven a lot of its actions internally. The securitization theory, from the Copenhagen School of international relations helps understand the case. It just goes to show, basically, that the fact North Korea felt it was in a very hostile environment has forced it to take measures that go outside of the realm of normal policies, and that has allowed it to justify very drastic measures, such as nuclear weapons, but also very repressive policies, internally. It was a lot easier to justify these drastic measures using the threat that it felt it was under. That's why North Korea is a very interesting example.

If we look outside of Asia, as you asked, I think one of the main countries that come to mind when we talk about threat perception and how it affects relations in other parts of the world, to me, is Israel. Israel is in a very particular environment, it's been threatened by a lot of its neighbors ever since it was founded in 1948. Israel fought two wars with its neighbors and has been under constant threat internally and externally. Its relations with Iran, for instance, have been driven, to a large extent, by how they both perceive each other as an existential threat. We've heard, in the last few years, that at some point it seemed relatively likely that Israel was actually going to strike the nuclear facilities in Iran. At the same time, this threat from Israel was also affecting the way that the Revolutionary Guard and the Iranian leader - especially under the very conservative leadership of Ahmadinejad, the was conducting his foreign policy.

But we have to remember here that Israel is one of the nine nuclear states in the world. Although it has never come out and admitted to its nuclear weapons, everybody knows that it does have them. The only reason why it went forward with such a program was the idea that it felt existentially threatened by its Arab neighbors, and history has tended to validate that view because of the fact that on two occasions it was attacked in a sudden fashion by its neighbors. When we look at the way that threat perception affects a country's foreign policy, I think Israel is a very potent example of this.

Y: Can you talk more about the role of certain individuals in this situation? How do Xi Jinping or Shinzo Abe in particular play into this? Is the situation depend on them, in particular, or is it more about the nation? Will the situation change when they are replaced?

It's both a national thing and a personality thing. When I say a 'national thing,' due to the nature of geopolitics if you will, there's always going to be a certain level of, maybe not antipathy, but basic tension or rivalry between China and Japan. As much as South Korea and Japan should be natural allies, and I say 'should' here because of the fact that they have very similar security interests, they have similar cultures and similar ecosystems, Japan and China are, to a certain extent, natural rivals. They are both giant players in the region and they have very contradictory, opposing objectives in the region. They have different systems that make it difficult to not see each other as rivals and because of that, regardless of who is in power - and we've seen this historically ever since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 although they have not been at war, there has almost always been a certain basic level of tension. That's because of geopolitics, and also because of their very torturous history, the fact that they've fought two wars - the First Sino-Japanese War and the Japanese Invasion of Manchuria. History features very prominently in the national psyche in China. For these reasons, it would hard, regardless of the leaders, for these countries to be completely comfortable with the others' policies or proximity.

With that being said, I strongly think that leaders play an important role, especially, I would say, in democracies like Japan. As you know, in China, it's traditionally more of a collective leadership in the form of a Standing Politoburo. Due to that tradition, the personalities of the leaders have been more diluted, except Mao who was a very strong leader, and Deng Xiaoping as well. And now Xi Jinping is coming back to that style of very strong leadership. A couple weeks ago, he was named - and it's not an official title - but he was named 'the Core.' Although 'the Core' is nothing official, it sends a very clear signal that Xi Jinping is the one leader among leaders, and while he's always been the President and the General Secretary, as a core leader it sends an even stronger signal that he's not to be messed with. Due to that, I think his personality has a greater influence on the conduct of Chinese policy. Overall, though, before Xi Jinping, with the last few leaders, especially with Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, I think their personalities were maybe a little less central, or their policy leanings as individuals, may have been a little less important because of the collective leadership.



In Japan, however, I think it's very clear that personalities have an important impact on bilateral relations. Look at Abe - he is a staunch nationalist and he has revisionist leanings, although recently he has calmed down a little bit when it comes to incendiary comments about the past. It's clear that after he was elected he said a lot of things that were rather revisionist, such as when he said that it wasn't clear that Japan had committed aggression during WWII. Specifically he said that there was not an agreed upon definition of aggression, which meant that, 'Well, we can't say we committed aggression because there's no set definition of aggression,' which obviously made Japan's neighbors very unhappy.

Also, there's the fact that Shinzo Abe has named quite a few prominent revisionists to important positions, such as the head of NHK, the national broadcasting corporation. These are people that have made moves to portray Japan or Japan's history in a certain light and in a way that made it seem as though certain past transgressions or crimes were less important than they really were. This has made Japan's neighbors, China and to a lesser extent South Korea, very wary of Japanese politics. It made it a lot harder for South Korea, but mostly China, to trust Shinzo Abe and feel like he was a leader that they could work with. And his actions, the fact that he's very nationalistic and is a revisionist, has made his moves on the defense front even harder to or swallow for Japan's neighbors.

Right now, there's a lot of talk about the decision to reinterpret the constitution so that Japan could exercise their right to collective self-defense, and that move, specifically, because of the past and the way that Abe has treated history, has been perceived very negatively by its neighbors. We have to remember here that most political parties, especially those that are outside of the ruling coalition, were completely opposed to this. I would say that even if it was another leader from the Liberal Democratic Party, I'm not sure that Japan would have gone ahead with that much steam to reinterpret the constitution, and hence my assertion that him as a leader or as an individual has made a big difference on Japan-China relations, and Japan-South Korea relations. That has increased, of course, threat perception among neighbors. In a nutshell, that's what I would have to say about the role of individuals. I think in a democracy like Japan it's easier for leaders to shape the direction of politics.

**Y: That's all the questions that I have, but was there anything else that you had to say regarding the topics we've discussed today?**

There was something else that I wanted to say about Abe that I was thinking of while I was talking about the perception of Japan's moves on the defense side. If you look at, and I mention this in my paper, but a lot of the declarations, if you read Chinese pronouncements, whether they be official pronouncements or coming from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or national or private media, the way they portrayed Abe's moves often link these moves to history or link these moves to Abe's revisionist tendencies. So they've very clearly pinpointed Abe himself as one of the main reasons, one of the chief reasons for perceiving Japan as a threat and painting it as a dangerous country. You see that very clearly in the rhetoric and the discourse coming from China. So that's one thing that I wanted to say.

One last thing relates to the common idea in Japan that the Chinese are willingly exaggerating the level of threat that Japan poses. There are many reasons for doing that. For instance, they want to put Japan on the defensive, as it's always good for a one party dictatorship like they have in China to have a clear enemy, if you will, to galvanize support for the Communist Party. That's one of the reasons they do that. But as a result, it makes it very hard for Japan to trust its neighbor. I talked about the lack of trust coming from China with regards to Japan, but when a country like Japan feels like its neighbor is constantly, willingly portraying it in a very negative light, or portraying it in a way that it is not, it makes it a lot harder for both countries to reach out to each other. There's basically no trust that would build a foundation for a real partnership between the two countries. They're able to cooperate on various levels, but it's very hard to create deeper trust between the two because of the extent of the threat discourse emanating from both countries. **Y**