

China-Japan Talk the 'CBM Way' to Settle the Diaoyu/Senkaku Crisis

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In the increasing acrimony between China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, after an interregnum of two years diplomatic negotiation resumed in 2015 with the working-level talks held on January 12. Officials from China's Defence Ministry and Japan's Defence Ministry and Maritime Self-Defence Force, met in Tokyo to discuss ways to avoid any confrontational maritime crisis in the region's waters. Though low-key, this dialogue process opened a new window of reconciliation between China and Japan based on their common agreement to reach a maritime crisis management mechanism to prevent the outbreak of conflict in the East China Sea.

These working-level talks are a result of the groundwork laid during the Chinese President Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's first face-to-face encounter at the APEC Summit, held in Beijing, in November 2014. The leadership on both sides reached the 'four-point agreement'- which entails: improving bilateral ties, agreeing to resume political, diplomatic and security dialogues while acknowledging different positions on the Diaoyu Islands. One of the primary objectives was to ease the tensions over the sovereignty of the disputed islets in the East China Sea. At present Japan controls the Senkaku Islands and claims it as an inherent part of the territory, while China claims it as Diaoyu which it repeatedly asserts through air and maritime patrols.

Having the joint goal to adopt a maritime consultative mechanism designed to avert confrontations, China and Japan with the present working-level talks in Tokyo entered the third round of the inter-governmental talks. The first round of these talks was held in May 2012 where both parties had in principle agreed to use a

common radio frequency for ships and planes around the Diaoyu Islands. The second round was held in Qingdao, Shandong province-China, in September 2014 where both China and Japan agreed in principle to resume liaisons between their maritime departments, with the goal of adopting a maritime communication mechanism. The immediate objective behind the third China-Japan working-level talks was to make a steadfast progress on the details of a hotline that will allow Chinese and Japanese defence authorities to directly contact each other in case of an emergency.

Though the talks have succeeded in getting the two hostile parties at the same table but there still remains deep uncertainty and a severe trust deficit embedded in historical grievances. The beefing up of the Japanese defence capabilities and military budget on January 13, 2015 in the aftermath of the working-level talks calls for serious evaluation. This measure is clearly directed against the assertive posture of China. It is in the best interest of both China and Japan to take advantage of the opportunity and work towards attaining a maritime consultative mechanism to ensure that no armed confrontation between the two is likely to be imminent.

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