



China's Official Views Adrift

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One of the topics at a meeting of Sinologists held towards the end of 2013, at what could be called a year-end party, was the recent strangeness of the *People's Daily*. The *People's Daily* is normally a very straitlaced newspaper that publishes the Chinese Communist Party's official views. Sinologists in Japan and overseas read it, take notes, and try to analyze changes in Chinese politics based on changes in expressions and in tone.



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How has the *People's Daily* been odd? It has published views that obviously contradict each other. Editorials have been inconsistent with other articles. Views that cannot be considered official have been published. Some Sinologists have analyzed the factors behind this. Some say that the *People's Daily's* governance has weakened. Others say that the oddness simply reflects a diversification in government.

Chinese politics has definitely changed significantly. Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao were appointed by Deng Xiaoping, while Xi Jinping is the first president in modern Chinese history to have been elected through China's electoral system. Xi Jinping's presidency could thus be said to be legitimate, but he needs to act as a conciliator. He needs to reconcile opposing forces: progressives and conservatives, different interest groups, the central and local governments, and the nation and society.

The more conciliatory he is, the more difficult it is to make bold decisions. If he evades reconciliation, some groups' views will be obviously reflected in policies, which will provoke the disapproval of opposing forces.

This applies also to China's diplomatic policies and affects its policies towards Japan, the most sensitive subject. There was reportedly a meeting in October 2013 to discuss diplomatic maneuvers for neighboring countries, and a policy to emphasize and strengthen ties with neighboring countries was adopted. Japan is included among these neighboring countries. In China's diplomatic policy, Japan is a key country and a neighbor. There were positive signs in economic and cultural relations between Japan and China, and the meeting appeared to signal



an appeasement policy towards Japan. However, China then announced the creation of an air defense identification zone in November.

Chinese bureaucrats say that the creation of an air defense identification zone to defend China's territorial integrity is not inconsistent with the strengthening of diplomatic ties with neighboring countries and does not focus on Japan. They argue that the strengthening of diplomatic ties does not mean any concession in terms of sovereignty and there are air defense identification zones in areas other than the East China Sea. However, the creation of an air defense identification zone appears to be a threat to neighboring countries because of its announcement at a time when there is a territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands. China's approach is also at variance with international rules.

Chinese bureaucrats argue that the forces in the Nanjing Military Region and the government, including the Foreign Ministry, had long considered the creation of an air defense identification zone, and it just happened to be announced in November. They say that the creation of an air defense identification zone is compliant with international law and that a number of countries have their own zones. The creation of an air defense identification zone does, however, seem odd given the timing of the announcement and the setting of the zone to expand China's territorial waters and airspace. Moreover, other countries do not demand prior notification for flights as China does.

China is facing a host of challenges. These challenges involve a diversified array of stakeholders, and the government has become consensus-oriented. In this environment, the government has announced a number of policies that appear to be inconsistent with each other. Years ago, China could have said that it has its own affairs and that foreign countries should not meddle. We do not live in that age any more. Countries surrounding China see it as a country that has its own will and ability and could pose a threat. The lack of clarity in Chinese policies exacerbates that fear.

The change in the *People's Daily* shows that China's dull official views, regular views shared by the public, have ceased to be commonplace. Official views have diversified and become changeable. This gigantic neighbor has become even more confusing and harder to understand.

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