

China and Japan: A Rupture Unhealed

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The recent Sino-Japanese dispute has not been brought to an end with Prime Minister Koizumi's apology for Tokyo's war record and his subsequent meeting with China's head of state, Hu Jintao. Rather than concerning historical issues, the background to the dispute concerns Japan's attempts to adopt a higher regional and international security profile and the inclusion of Taiwan in US-Japanese alliance planning. Whereas economic logic would favour cooperative solutions, nationalist trends on both sides have increasingly assumed dynamics of their own.

On 22 April, Japan's prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi, addressing more than 100 Asian and African heads of state and government assembled in Jakarta, expressed "deep remorse" over the suffering inflicted on Asian nations during the 1941–45 Pacific War and earlier in China. The following day, Koizumi met with China's head of party and state, Hu Jintao, on the fringes of the Second Afro-Asian conference. On this occasion, Hu called on his counterpart to live up to his words through deeds and, specifically, to actively oppose Taiwanese aspirations for independence.

The meeting had been preceded by week-long anti-Japanese demonstrations in China that had exposed the relationship to strains unprecedented since mutual diplomatic recognition in 1972.

Peking Unleashes Nationalism

The recent wave of anti-Japanese protests in China began in mid-February with demonstrations held in front of the Japanese embassy against the takeover by the Tokyo government of a lighthouse erected by right-wing activists on one of the disputed Senkaku (Chin. Diaoyu-) islands in the East China Sea. At the same time, Chinese overseas students had launched an internet campaign against Japan's candidature for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council that in late March was joined by domestic PRC (People's Republic of China) websites. In a couple of weeks, and benefiting from the attention of China's state-controlled media, these "patriotic" groups had collected some 22 million signatures. Shortly afterwards, the PRC's prime minister, Wen Jiabao, for the first time publicly opposed the awarding of a permanent Security Council seat to Japan.

In early April, there were demonstrations in several Chinese cities that, in a few cases, led to attacks against subsidiaries of Japanese companies. At the same time, Tokyo authorised the publishing of two revisionist history books for use in secondary schools. In China, the biggest retailers' organisation responded by calling for a boycott of Japanese products. Shortly afterwards, demonstrations reached a climax amidst the backdrop of a visit to Peking by Japan's foreign minister. At this point, the number of protesters had grown to several tens of thousands including not only students but also representatives of the PRC's new middle classes. The minister's visit did not result in any relaxation of tensions.

In mid-April, the PRC's security forces brought the protests to an end. At this point, a Shanghai newspaper described the campaign as being the result of a "conspiracy" and thus a consequence of a domestic or intra-party power struggle.

The Historical Dispute

Taiwan and territorial issues apart, Sino-Japanese rows have for a couple of years fed on the schoolbook and Yasukuni shrine issues. Every four years, Japan's publishing houses present new or revised history books, some of which ignore the atrocities committed by the imperial army in China and other regional states (such books are only being used by less than one per cent of all Japanese schools). The Tokyo government has for some time suggested the creation of a joint Japan-China historical commission along the lines of an existing Japan-South Korea body. The proposal was accepted in May 2005.

Peking has not only regularly protested the publishing of revisionist schoolbooks, but also annual visits to the Yasukuni shrine by Japan's head of government and leading cabinet members since Koizumi's 2001 assumption of office. In the late 1970s, the names of individuals convicted of war crimes in 1946 had been added to the (privately run) memorial's lists. A first confron-

tation with the PRC over the issue had been witnessed in 1985 when then Prime Minister Nakasone officially visited the shrine. Eleven years went by before Ryutaro Hashimoto followed Nakasone's example. Koizumi has explained his regular visits with an interest towards promoting peace and reconciliation. The prime minister had postponed this year's visit following a meeting with Hu Jintao in November 2004.

In recent years, criticism of the Yasukuni visits has also been coming from Japan itself. Thus far, seven suits have been brought against Koizumi evoking the constitutional separation of religion and state (only one of the suits was successful but did not produce any political consequences). One of the associations running the shrine is among the most important supporters of the governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

The National Dimension

Japan's new nationalism is centred on the LDP's right fringe and elder members. It has not been openly advocated by the party's mainstream or any of the big business federations. At the same time, the previously widespread Japanese pacifism, while remaining characteristic for academic elites, has been on the retreat in the society at large. It is thus and amongst signs of a further differentiation of the political landscape into a true two-party system in which politicians could be increasingly tempted to make use of "national" issues.

China's new nationalism is concentrated on cities along the prospering eastern seaboard and thus the expression of a grown social self-consciousness. Participants in recent demonstrations were far too young to have any personal or indirect recollections of the Pacific War. They are nevertheless receptive to an officially promoted discourse on "historical humiliations" inflicted on the Middle Kingdom by outside powers—an instrument that was reactivated by the political leadership in the mid-1990s. This can be explained, on the one hand, with the one-party state's loss of Marxist

legitimacy, and on the other, with a growing number of losers due to modernisation whose discontent has expressed itself annually in several tens of thousands of medium-to large-scale demonstrations, sit-ins, and other kinds of confrontations with the security forces.

At the same time, Peking remains inferior to Tokyo in both economic and military terms and would not be able, for example, to solve the territorial dispute by force. Furthermore, nationalist movements of the past have in several instances turned against a Chinese leadership that was in no position to back up its anti-Japanese propaganda with deeds.

Regional and International Dimensions

Whereas the anti-Japanese campaign was obviously sanctioned and encouraged by PRC authorities, the timing points to a tactical rather than historical motive. Peking was driven by concerns of a Japanese military power blocking the realisation of its own regional ambitions (including the exploration of new energy sources). In 2001, the Bush administration had promoted Tokyo to “cornerstone” its Pacific strategy while urging Japan to revise its 1947 “peace constitution”. Koizumi has since then prepared the ground by dispatching warships to the Arabian Sea and soldiers to Iraq. Japan is due to deploy a missile defence system in the near future, and a regional shield to be jointly developed with the United States could cover Taiwan as well. In December 2004, Tokyo’s National Defence Programme Outline for the first time named the PRC as a military challenger. Earlier, a nuclear powered Chinese submarine had entered Japan’s territorial waters, prompting Koizumi to order the redeployment of fighter planes from Okinawa to Shimoji island which is closer to Taiwan.

In February 2005, Washington and Tokyo described maintenance of the stability in the Taiwan Strait as a common strategic

objective. Had the US-Japan alliance from Peking’s perspective until the mid-1990s prevented the neighbour from military unilateralism, it would since then have encouraged such moves. In that respect, China’s anti-Japanese campaign was also directed against Washington.

The PRC has for some time been trying to lure South Korea out of the US embrace while joining forces with Seoul against Tokyo. In early 2005, South Korea, too, witnessed a campaign against Japan’s Security Council plans that was in turn intensified by a historical controversy and a dispute over the Dokdo (Jap. Takeshima) group of islands in the Sea of Japan. At the same time, the Roh Moo-hyun administration launched an initiative to emancipate itself from Washington not only through intra-Korean policies of détente but also through the broadening of its political and military relationship with China. In so doing, it intended to respond to a growing nationalism at home. Since then, Peking has tried to coordinate its own antirevisionist campaign with Seoul while signalling its support on the Dokdo issue through the PRC’s state-controlled media.

Much as in the Senkaku case, the Dokdo dispute has been linked to supposed oil and gas deposits. In August 2003, China had awarded gas drilling concessions to domestic and foreign firms in the vicinity of the Senkakus. After Peking repeatedly refused to supply Tokyo with information on its activities, Japan, in April 2004, threatened to award concessions of its own in the disputed maritime area.

At the international level, China has not done itself a favour by launching the anti-Japan campaign only a few days after having passed a so-called “Anti-Secessionist Law” directed against Taiwan. Within the European Union, for example, the nationalist experiment has vindicated all those who had earlier referred to the law on Taiwan when calling to postpone a decision on lifting the 1989 arms embargo against the PRC.

Perspectives and Recommendations

By quietly encouraging the anti-Japanese campaign, Peking has run a double risk. On the one hand, the nationalism unleashed has exposed new weaknesses of one-party rule. On the other hand, Japanese investor confidence in the Chinese market may have been negatively affected. As a consequence, China's first conciliatory gestures in late April were directed at Japanese business-people.

Since 2004, Japan has been the PRC's leading trading partner and number three investor. At the same time, Tokyo still ranks among Peking's most important sources of economic assistance. However, developmental aid is to be cut following a reassessment of the neighbour's economic and military capabilities.

As far as the political relationship is concerned, high-ranking bilateral contacts remain unlikely in the short term, given the extent of emotional outbursts on both sides (since Hu Jintao's coming into power, China and Japan have refrained from exchanging high-ranking visitors). And whereas arrangements remain conceivable for joint gas exploration in the East China Sea and guidelines for the publishing of teaching materials, they would still fail to address the core issue of a new strategic competition. At the same time, China's media have wrongly presented Koizumi's apology as a precedence and a vindication of Peking's determined stance. It is probable that the Japanese prime minister will resume his visits to the Yasukuni shrine after some time. Obviously, nationalism cannot be switched on and off at the discretion of either an authoritarian China or a democratic Japan.

At the regional level, a lingering Sino-Japanese dispute could negatively impact attempts at stabilising the situation in the Taiwan Strait (Taiwan's independence movement has felt encouraged by the opening of this new front) or solving the North Korean nuclear problem through Six Party Talks.

Therefore, and given their economic and

international interests, Germany and Europe in their dialogues with Peking and Washington should not limit discussions of East Asian security to the North Korean issue and should broaden their security dialogue with Japan. In this context, Tokyo could be encouraged to respond more sensibly to historical criticism from neighbouring countries. As far as Security Council reform is concerned, it is rather unlikely that other important players would adopt Peking's antirevisionist polemics, and by resorting to such polemics, China itself seems to be focused on bilateral problems. With a view to preventing the PRC's propaganda from negatively impacting on Security Council reform, Germany should nevertheless offer Tokyo to share in its experiences with schoolbook commissions. As a matter of principle, both Germany and its European partners should guard against any attempts at stigmatising Japan.

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