On Sino-Japanese Tensions and the US Approach

By Jing Huang, The Brookings Institution

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's landslide victory on September 11 was well expected but mysterious. Well expected because it really was predetermined as Koizumi, again, had outmaneuvered his opponents with his masterful ride on voters' anxiety and strong (but unclear) desire for changes. Mysterious because the China factor, a key element in stirring up such anxiety and desire, was hardly mentioned during the entire campaign, despite the unprecedented appearance of five Chinese naval ships in the disputed waters in the East China Sea at the eve of the election.

But the lingering and seemingly escalating tension between the two great Asian powers must be addressed. It is true that the Sino-Japanese tension roots in historical agony caused by a brutal war that was started by the Imperial Army's invasion into China in 1931. It is also true that the tensions are tangled with frictions over territory disputes, energy, security concerns, economic exchanges, intellectual property, illegal immigrants and labors, and so on.

Yet it is bad policies, inept managements, insensitive and even rude behavior by both sides that have poisoned the relationship between the two nations which, with so much shared interests, must cooperate in order to sustain their economic prosperity and political stability. Indeed, how could the Chinese, and peoples in other Asian countries who had suffered from the Imperial Army's invasions, not be reminded of the unbearable pain and unspeakable humiliation when Prime Minister Koizumi habitually visited the Yasukuni Shrine where 14 top war criminals are "honored"? And how could the Japanese not feel threatened by China's rise when Chinese submarines lurked in Japanese territorial waters "by accident" and naval ships conducted "normal exercises" in the disputed waters? Beneath the seemingly insensitive activities and inept maneuvers, however, are turbulent torrents of nationalistic sentiments in both countries.

China's nationalism has roots in both its enormous sufferings caused by western (and particularly Japanese) intrusions in the past and the newly found confidence thanks to China's rapid growth in recent years. The Chinese government, however, conveniently utilized the two elements—bitterness towards the past and confidence in the future—in the post-1989 "patriotic education" campaign, educating people that it was under the CCP's leadership that Chinese people had rid themselves of foreign oppressions, defeated the Japanese invasion, and have hence developed a strong and prosperous new China.

Intended or not, this has instilled an anti-West element in China's surging nationalism, in which the anti-Japanese resentment is especially strong, not only because Japan's invasion had caused tremendous losses to China, but also because Taiwan, China's first territory concession to an imperialist power: Japan, remains

> Nationalistic sentiments have hijacked the leadership in both China and Japan, preventing them from making rational decisions for their nations' best interests.

"unreturned" to the motherland. After China's take-over of Hong Kong and Macau, Taiwan has become a symbol as well as a reminder of not only all the injustice and humiliations China had suffered from imperialist powers, but also of the incompleteness of China's territory integrity, national sovereignty, and ultimately national pride — this is essentially why Beijing felt specifically offended when Tokyo publicly expressed its "concerns" over security in the Taiwan Strait.

Evidently, nationalistic sentiments are also growing in Japan, but for different reasons. Over a decade of economic stagnation has given rise to wide-spread frustration and anxiety in Japan that the nation has peaked, its influence is declining, and its future prosperity depends on China which, with its booming economy and increasing influence, is becoming the center of gravity for economic, political and diplomatic activists in Asia. Consequently, many Japanese feel threatened by China's growing military power under the CCP leadership. On the other hand, Japanese people believe that, after 60 years of being a responsible, peaceful, democratic and generous member of the world community, Japan has earned its right to be seen and treated as a "normal"

Over a decade of economic stagnation has given rise to wide-spread frustration and anxiety in Japan that the nation has peaked, its influence is declining, and its future prosperity depends on China which, with its booming economy and increasing influence, is becoming the center of gravity for economic, political and diplomatic activists in Asia.

state in international affairs. They are irritated by China's endless requests for "apology" and its opposition to Japan's quest for normalcy and a seat in UN Security Council, despite $32 billion in Overseas Development Assistance to China.

Ironically, not only do growing nationalistic sentiments in Japan and China mirror each other, but they are also fueling each other, with identical political consequences: leaders in both countries are trying to ride on the tides of nationalism in order to enhance their popularity (Japan) and legitimacy (China) in domestic politics. This has enabled nationalistic sentiments to hijack both leaderships in Sino-Japanese relations, preventing them from making rational decisions for their nations' best interests. Instead, while growing anxiety over potential threat from a rising China has helped to popularize Koizumi's "stubbornness" and empowered the right-wing groups in political affairs, rising anti-Japanese resentment has translated into Beijing's "tough stance" toward Japan and its condoning, if not connivance, of violent anti-Japan demonstrations.

What comes out of all this is the growing suspicion and distrust between the two great nations. Nowadays Tokyo and Beijing cannot even communicate, let alone cooperate, with each other, not necessarily because they fail to see that reconciliation and cooperation would serve their nations' best interests, but because they are skeptical about the other side's willingness and sincerity to make any meaningful compromises necessary for constructive cooperation. With this backdrop, China's fast development, its

On Sino-Japanese Tensions and the US Approach

increasing clout in Asia, its rising military strength, its opposition to Japan's entrance in the UN Security Council, its leaders' seemingly assertive behavior in dealing with Japan (especially that of former President Jiang Zemin), and their insistence on a "heartfelt (and written)" apology have all helped to convince many Japanese that a hostile China is seeking dominance in Asia at Japan's expenses. Indeed, for the Japanese, what can be more threatening than a dominant power that harbors deep hostility toward Japan?

Meanwhile, with a poisoned Sino-Japanese relationship, Koizumi's habitual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, his tough stance on territory disputes, Japan's effort to "normalize" its statehood, its drive for a seat in the UN Security Council, its openly expressed "concern" about security in the Taiwan Strait, and its text books glossing over war crimes have all raised serious questions among Chinese elite members as well as general public on whether Japan can be responsible and fair in international affairs, and particularly in dealing with China. After all, Japan is the only Asian country that has managed to become a global power twice within one century; and its first time-around was China's unforgettable nightmare.

This deadlock in bilateral relations has caused yet another similarity between the two countries in policy making. That is, both Beijing and Tokyo tend to pin their hopes on their bilateral relations with the United States, thinking that a solid relationship with Americans could help them gain an upper hand in the Sino-Japanese relationship. But this is wishful thinking. Escalating tensions and hostility between the two most important Asian powers do not serve American interests in the Asian-Pacific region, where the ultimate American policy goals are to maintain the region's political stability and economic prosperity through promoting democracy and expanding market economy. Neither can be achieved without cooperation between and with Japan and China.

It is true that there are people who would favor a stronger US-Japan alliance to contain, or at least balance out, China's rise. But such opinion is deemed unrealistic and counterproductive by the mainstreams in American strategic thinking. How can China be contained as its fast development is achieved essentially through integrating itself into the existing global system that is based on market economy and led by democracies? After all, integration has been a critical element in the US China policy in the past two decades.

Contrary to such "containment" thinking, the US wants a good, or at least workable, Sino-Japanese relationship, not vice versa. The reasons are obvious and manifold. At the very least, dynamic economic growth in and exchanges between

> Nowadays Tokyo and Beijing cannot even communicate, let alone cooperate, with each other, not necessarily because they fail to see that reconciliation and cooperation would serve their nations' best interests, but because they are skeptical about the other side's willingness and sincerity to make any meaningful compromises necessary for constructive cooperation.

For Japan to fulfill its quest for normalcy, a mission which the United States fully supports, it will have to require honest, heartfelt, and even spontaneous gestures from Japanese leaders to help reckon with deep-seated pains from the World War II era.

the two leading economies and US trading partners in Asia are crucial for US prosperity – any disruptions in this regard would exert a substantial blow to the American economy. On the security front, cooperation between China and Japan is essential to the final solution of the North Korean nuclear issue and future stability on the peninsula. Should the tension between China and Japan escalate into a real conflict (over Chunxiao oil field or territory disputes, for example), not only would the U.S be put in a extremely awkward position between its closest ally and the biggest power in Asia, but it would also create sharp divisions in Asia, forcing countries to take sides. This would not only imperil the promising future of the region, but also compel American commitment of more military resources to the region when the US military already has extensive deployments elsewhere.

Indeed, as Washington is in the midst of major efforts to improve its bilateral relationships with both China and Japan – fruitful senior-level dialogue with Beijing headed by Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick and a comprehensive upgrading of strategic cooperation with Japan, the United States has an increasing interest in a more positive Sino-Japanese relationship. There is no doubt that the United States has a clear interest in Japan's more honestly reconciling with its past. This is not a favor for China, but to ease antipathy for Tokyo that runs deep in Asia because of Japan's handling of history as well as its more recent moves to reassert itself in the security realm. For Japan to fulfill its quest for normalcy, a mission which the United States fully supports, it will have to require honest, heartfelt, and even spontaneous gestures from Japanese leaders to help reckon with deep-seated pains from the World War II era.

But we must not be held hostage by history. Indeed, the United States has begun to take a more active role in helping to reach Sino-Japanese rapprochement for the sake of future. In his speech at the National Committee of US-China Relations on September 21, Zoellick made it clear that "the United States, Japan, and China will need to cooperate effectively together on both regional and global challenges." Last July, the Brooking Institution and Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the two leading Washington think tanks, initiated a US-Japan-China trilateral project. The first trilateral meeting, cosponsored by Brookings, CSIS, the School of International Studies of Peking University and the Keizai Koho Center, was held in Beijing in July 21-22, 2005. Participants from the US, Japan and China had extensive and candid discussions on various issues including strategic perceptions of the three countries, policies toward the Asia-Pacific region and each other, economic issues, regional points of tension and hot spots, counter-terrorism, and energy. The second trilateral meeting is to be held in Tokyo next spring.

Hopefully, such activities would help to mute the Sino-Japanese tensions of the moment. The long-term objective, however, is to promote high-level communications and coordination, where appropriate, among the three giants in the Asian-Pacific region. Policy makers in Tokyo and Beijing must realize, and behave accordingly, that despite substantial differences on various issues between them, the two great nations do share fundamental interests in and responsibilities for regional stability and prosperity. Sino-Japanese reconciliation is necessary not just for the well-being to the two countries, but for the entire region. A crucial first step is perhaps to resume high-level communications that have been suspended for over four years. More importantly, Tokyo and Beijing need to work together to establish formal institutions and mechanisms to secure regular communications between leaders of the two countries. After all, obstacles to a stable relationship are not differences and disputes, but the lack of understanding and trust achievable only through regular and candid exchanges.

Jiang Huang is a Senior Fellow of Foreign Policy Studies at The Brookings Institution in Washington, DC. Dr Huang can be reached at: jhuang@brookings.edu. ■

Publisher, Keizai Koho Center

Editor, Valerie Ploumpis
vploumpis@keidanren-usa.org

WASHINGTON, DC
1150 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 1050
Washington D.C., 20036
(202) 293-8430

TOKYO
Otemachi Building 7th floor,
6-1 Otemachi 1-chome,
Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 100-0004 Japan
Phone. 81-3-3201-1415
Fax. 81-3-3201-1418

www.keidanren-usa.org/kkc-usa.org
http://www.kkc.or.jp/english/index.html

Keizai Koho Center (KKC) is an independent, non-profit organization designed to promote the understanding of Japan's economy and society at home and abroad. Its financial resources are derived entirely from the private sector.

KKC fosters a deeper understanding of Japan's basic social structure. Furthermore, it conducts public affairs activities to improve the Japanese people's recognition of Japan's global role.