



Japan – China Relations: A Search for Understanding

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The last quarter of 1999 featured a series of high-level visits between Tokyo and Beijing, aimed at managing this critical, but difficult, bilateral relationship. Diplomats and defense officials met to exchange views on foreign and security policy issues. Invariably, Chinese concerns over missile defenses and the U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines and Japan's focus on China's military modernization framed the official dialogue. Similar discussions took place between political leaders and representatives of public policy associations.

Over the period, the Japanese press reported on China's foreign policy and national security objectives toward Japan and its position in China's strategy toward the United States. Despite agreement between Washington and Beijing over China's WTO accession, the Japanese press viewed China's policy toward the U.S. as marked by continuing suspicions of U.S. intentions and efforts to constrain Washington's unipolar activism. One element in this perceived strategy involved a consequent turning toward Japan as a way of exerting leverage on the United States. At the same time, China's military modernization continued to receive the media's attention -- in particular the prominent display of military muscle at the PRC's 50th anniversary on October 1.

Toward the Korean Peninsula and North Korea, a mutuality of interests continued to support diplomatic cooperation. Less successful were efforts to bring into effect the 1997 Japan-China fishing accord. Meanwhile, statements by the Defense Agency's Director General about nuclear weapons and remarks made by the Governor of Tokyo during a visit to Taiwan drew Beijing's ire. Japan, China, along with South Korea, also participated in multilateral diplomacy at the ASEAN Plus Three dialogue.

Perception's of Chinese Strategy

During the October-December quarter, the Japanese press noted a shift in China's approach toward Japan. Faced with troubled relations with the U.S. (Taiwan and human rights), heightened by suspicions of U.S. unilateral activism (NATO bombing of the Belgrad embassy) and the adverse effects of Jiang Zemin's November 1998 visit to Japan, Beijing reportedly made a decision to improve relations with Tokyo. References in the Chinese media to the need to improve relations with Tokyo drew Japanese press attention.

However, press analysis suggested that Beijing's softening toward Tokyo -- downplaying "history" and at times subtly moderating the force of its anti-TMD and anti-Defense Guidelines campaign -- was part of a larger Chinese strategy to involve Japan in efforts to foster multipolarity and constrain the United States. Reporting on Chinese diplomacy at the

UN -- and during both Jiang's October visit to Europe and Boris Yeltsin's December visit to China -- consistently defined Beijing's objectives as fostering opposition to missile defenses and building support for a multipolar world as a means of constraining the U.S. *Asahi Shimbun* columnist Yoichi Funabashi cautioned Japanese readers that China's multipolarity was nothing more than a balance of power strategy, one that Japan should reject in favor of multilateralism.

Bilateral Dialogue

The Japan-China security dialogue resumed in Tokyo on October 7 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with representation at the Director General level.

The Chinese raised the issue of Taiwan, again underscoring the domestic nature of the problem and opposition to any external interference. In this context, the ambiguity of the laws implementing the revised Japan-U.S. Defense Guidelines continued to be a matter of concern as did the development of missile defenses. With respect to missile defense, the Japanese explained the matter as simply research on a defensive system, while emphasizing Japan's adherence to the 1972 Japan-China Joint Communique. At the same time, the Japanese raised the issue of China's growing defense expenditures and the need for Beijing to increase transparency in defense budgeting. The Chinese asserted that the increases were largely for personnel-related matters.

Xinhua commentary on the meeting found the Japanese explanations "still unconvincing." In December, the PLA's *Liberation Daily* review of the top ten news stories of 1999 included the Defense Guidelines implementing legislation which, it argued, marked a significant change in Japan's defense policy.

On November 22-23, after a hiatus of two years, the dialogue between defense officials resumed in Beijing, with Japan's delegation led by the Vice Minister of the Defense Agency Seiji Ema and the Chinese side led by Xiong Guangkai, PLA Deputy Chief of Staff.

The Chinese focused on missile defense, Japan's Defense Guidelines, and the potential implications for Taiwan. The Japanese delegation, in turn, raised issues related to China's build-up of air and naval capabilities, the presence of Chinese research ships in seas near Japan, transparency, and overall defense policy, including the development of China's next generation of ICBM, the DF-31. It was also reported that the Japanese communicated the growing concerns about China now present in Japan. On TMD, the Chinese argued that it was not simply a defensive system, while claiming that China's missiles were for defensive purposes. As for transparency, the Chinese asserted that it now existed on defense matters.

Both sides recognized the importance of the defense dialogue and agreed to expand it, starting with a visit to Japan next year by the PLA Chief of Staff. Also discussed were arrangements for the previously agreed to reciprocal port visits. The Japanese side found their Chinese counterparts, while not disregarding history, polite, cooperative, and focused on the future. China's Defense Minister Chi Haotian was quoted as saying that as a result of his visit to Japan he was able to confirm for himself that contemporary Japan was not militaristic.

Against this background of official dialogue, Japanese and Chinese political figures also engaged in a series of high level visits and contacts.

Attending the PRC's 50th anniversary celebration, former Finance Minister Yoshiro Hayashi, chairman of the LDP's 235 member Japan-China Friendship Association, met with China's Foreign Minister Tang Jiabao. Tang asked about a weakening of Japan's relations with China. Hayashi replied that even with its problems, the relationship was progressing and not all that bad. However, he did point to a difference among the generations and to the reality that Japan's younger generation is not inclined to respond to Chinese requests for apologies over the past.

Other political figures also expressed their views on relations with China. Former Minister of Cultural Affairs, Nobutaka Machimura, Chief Secretary of the Japan-China Friendship League, observed that the way to build an equal relationship is not to start with the assumption that China is always right. To build a normal relationship, both sides should say what should be said. As for the past, he noted that opinion is divided – those who believe no further apologies are necessary and those who believe that apologies thus far are not sufficient. Among the latter, Naoto Kan of Japan's Democratic Party emphasized the necessity of Japan's own efforts to surmount the problems of history as early as possible in the new century. Within this context, the former Vice Minister for Political Affairs, Keizo Takemi, called for deepening ties through private and non-government channels as the easiest route to stabilizing relations at a time when not many members of the Diet were inclined to keep pace.

In late October, Koichi Kato, former Chief Cabinet Secretary, visited Beijing and met with Vice President Hu Jintao, Vice Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, and other high level leaders. In his discussions, Kato was reminded that it is impossible for China to disregard the fact that even in the Diet there are members who think of the war as a war of liberation; in this context, Nishimura's remarks on nuclear weapons were referenced. (See below: Bumps in the Road.) Also in October, a delegation with members from the Japan Communist Party's Japan-China Friendship Association, labor organizations, and youth groups traveled to Beijing, Nanjing, and Shanghai and met with their counterparts

From December 8-16, Li Ruihan, Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and fourth ranking figure in China's Communist Party, visited Japan. Li was received in audience by the Emperor and met with senior political leaders including Prime Minister Obuchi, Foreign Minister Kono, and representatives of economic and friendship associations. There were also rumors at year's end that Premier Zhu Ronji might visit Japan next autumn.

Korean Peninsula

Mutually supportive diplomacy toward North Korea continued during this period. In October, Foreign Minister Kono met with his Chinese counterpart to exchange views on North Korea. Tang informed Kono that he had told the North Korean Foreign Minister that China welcomed Pyongyang's efforts to improve relations with both the U.S. and Japan, in effect signaling Beijing's support for such efforts. In early December, Beijing welcomed Tokyo's announcement to reopen negotiations on the normalization of relations with Pyongyang.

Likewise, Li Peng told a visiting Japanese delegation that China strongly supports the normalization of Japan-North Korean relations as an important contribution to stability on the Peninsula and in turn to China's economic development and security. The Japanese press reported that, from Beijing's perspective, to the extent that normal relations prevail between Japan and North Korea, the rationale for Japan's development of missile defenses is weakened. At the same time, for China, Japan's progress in improving relations with Pyongyang would also serve to constrain the expansion of the U.S. lead negotiating role.

Economic Issues

Japan welcomed the conclusion of China's WTO accession agreement with the U.S. on November 15. Exposing the world's seventh largest economy to the discipline of the WTO and expanding opportunities for Japanese business have been consistent objectives of Tokyo's policy toward China. WTO accession was viewed as locking in the market-oriented reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping as well as promoting the rule of law and advancing transparency in China's economic system.

Tokyo's efforts to bring into effect the fishing accord signed with China in November 1997 continued to prove elusive. Indiscriminate Chinese fishing activities in areas near to but outside Japan's territorial waters have adversely affected Japanese fishing interests in Nagasaki and Yamaguchi prefectures and resulted in calls for termination of the accord. The agreement, if brought fully into effect, would govern natural resources in the South China Sea and constrain indiscriminate Chinese fishing activities. Talks in Beijing, October 15-16, proved unavailing. To deal with the impasse, Tokyo has proposed that the talks be raised from the working level to the Ministerial level.

Bumps in the Road

In an October magazine article, Shingo Nishimura, Parliamentary Vice Minister of Defense, suggested that Japan should consider the issue of nuclear weapons in its defense strategy. Though not advocating the adoption of nuclear weapons, the article provoked a public outcry, underscoring Japan's continuing sensitivity to nuclear issues and costing Nishimura his job.

In Beijing, the issue resurfaced long-held concerns about Japan. The Foreign Ministry cautioned Japan that the world would closely watch the response of the Japanese government and requested that Japan reaffirm its Three Non-Nuclear Principles. The PLA's *Liberation Daily* warned against those who, like Nishimura, schemed to develop nuclear weapons. In Tokyo, Shizuka Kamei, Director of the Policy Affairs Research Council, met with the Chinese ambassador at LDP headquarters and assured him that the Japanese public remained anti-nuclear and reaffirmed as unchanging Japan's Three Non-Nuclear Principles. Meanwhile Chief Cabinet Secretary Aoki characterized Nishimura's remarks as inappropriate and offered the government's apologies to the Japanese public and the Diet.

Also in October, Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara visited Taiwan. During a three-day stay, Ishihara repeatedly used the word "state" in referring to Taiwan. In Beijing, Deputy

Foreign Minister Wan Yi called in the Japanese ambassador and expressed his deep indignation over the Governor's actions. The ambassador responded by pointing out that Ishihara did not represent the diplomatic positions of the government. In Tokyo, the Foreign Ministry reiterated Japan's adherence to the principles of the 1972 Joint Communiqué.

Multilateralism

Multilateral diplomatic efforts are an essential element of Japan's strategy toward the Asia-Pacific region. Thus, Japan participated in the ASEAN Plus Three dialogue, with China and South Korea, in Manila at the end of November. On November 28, the Plus Three -- Prime Minister Obuchi, Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, and President Kim Dae-jung -- met together at the conclusion of the dialogue, a first for the three leaders. The Trilateral interaction is the result, in large part, of a series of bilateral efforts at cooperation with respect to North Korea. How far this cooperation will develop structurally will be related to how the three parties are able successfully to pursue complementary policies toward Pyongyang and to Chinese concerns about not isolating or pressuring North Korea.

Policy Implications for the United States

A stable relationship between Japan, the central U.S. ally in the Asia-Pacific region, and China, the emerging power in the region, is in the foreign policy and national security interest of the United States. Efforts made over the October-December period to address key diplomatic and defense issues, while not dissipating mutual concerns, are regarded in both Tokyo and Beijing as making a positive contribution to stabilizing this sensitive and dynamic relationship. Both governments are committed to deepening and broadening the dialogue. This is in the interest of the United States.

Chronology of Japan-China Relations October - December 1999

Oct 7: Japan-China foreign policy/security dialogue resumes in Tokyo at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Representation is at the Director General level.

Oct 7: Parliamentary Vice Minister of Defense Shingo Nishimura raises issue of nuclear weapons in magazine article. Beijing calls on Tokyo to reaffirm Japan's commitment to its Three Non-Nuclear principles.

Oct 12-15: Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara visits Taiwan. His reference to Taiwan as a "state" draws protests from Beijing.

Oct 15-16: Talks in Beijing over Japan-China Fishing Agreement fail to reach conclusion.

Nov 15: China and the U.S. conclude China's WTO accession agreement.

Nov 22-23: Security Dialogue among Chinese and Japanese Defense officials resumes in Beijing after a two-year hiatus. Representation is at the Vice Ministerial level.

Nov 28: Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi, Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, and Korean President Kim Dae-jung meet together after the ASEAN Plus Three dialogue.

Dec 8-16: Li Ruihan, Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference visits Japan. Li is received by the emperor and meets with Prime Minister Obuchi, Foreign Minister Kono as well as representatives of Japan's political and business communities.