

## Redefining Sino-Japanese Relations after Koizumi

China's diplomatic relations with Japan are an important part of its diplomacy in the Asian arena and on the world stage. Because of their special geopolitical relationship, the cooperative or antagonistic nature of Sino-Japanese relations will directly affect China's peaceful rise. Japan's economic and geopolitical influence, as well as its role in shaping China's image, was the reason Beijing adopted its current policy of "develop[ing] a long-term stable and harmonious relationship with Japan."<sup>1</sup>

Because China and Japan are rising simultaneously, they will face similar problems: uncertainty over one another's strategy and development as well as concerns that one will rise more rapidly than predicted, leaving the other ill prepared. Yet, given the fundamental changes in its diplomacy, Beijing is open minded about Tokyo gaining more international influence, even in the security realm, with the precondition that Japan properly handle sensitive Sino-Japanese history issues.

Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi's five-year term has been a "lost half-decade" for Sino-Japanese relations.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to judge whether Koizumi's diplomacy toward China has succeeded or failed because he has not employed a clear or systematic strategy to manage Japan's relations with China or Asia as a whole. The question now is, will the next Japanese prime minister have a strategy that improves Japan's relations with China and the wider region?

### Japan's Place on China's Diplomatic Chessboard

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Post-Cold War Chinese diplomacy is rooted in China's worldview and development agenda. From China's perspective, the current era of globalization

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Yang Bojiang is a professor and director of the Institute for Japanese Studies at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) in Beijing.

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differs from the Cold War in three primary ways. First, common threats for countries are increasing. Such challenges can only be managed through international cooperation, rather than by individual-country efforts or those of small coalitions. Second, states share many common political, economic, and security interests, all of which create symbiotic relationships. The prosperity or downfall of one state may bring others the same. It is thus increasingly unre-

**The nature of Sino-Japanese relations will directly affect China's peaceful rise.**

alistic to envision the international arena as a zero-sum game and more possible to develop non-zero-sum scenarios. Finally, this new era brings with it a larger role and influence for international norms and organizations, both of which now have greater bearing on state relations.

Based on these principles, China has committed itself to realizing a peaceful rise and to developing positive and cooperative relations with other powers. The U.S. challenge to British oceanic hegemony 100 years ago and the German and Japanese challenge to the U.S., British, and French domination of the post-World War I international order are prime examples of how rising powers have historically thrown off the existing balance of power while the "defending powers" were trying to contain or pacify them, which in most cases led to war.

China, however, does not aim to challenge the existing international structure but desires to engage in strategic dialogue and cooperation with current powers. Its accession to the World Trade Organization represents its entrance into this discourse. China is no longer a challenger to the international regime but instead is becoming a cooperative constructor, defender, and responsible stakeholder, promoting dialogue on issues such as antiterrorism, nonproliferation, the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, and the foreign trade imbalance and exchange regime. Even in dealing with Taiwan, its most sensitive issue, China, while insisting on the principle that this is a domestic matter, has been engaging in dialogue on the track-two level with the United States, Japan, and the European Union for several years.

Although Chinese economic development is in its initial stages and remains far from its long-term goals, China's rise has attracted worldwide attention, both positive and negative, hopeful and concerned. China's next strategic diplomatic task will be to improve its soft power and moral image within the international community to avoid unnecessary obstacles to its continued development. Japan may be helpful to China in this regard because neighboring countries will use China's relationship with Japan as an important index by which to gauge how China will treat its neighbors during its rise.

## Koizumi's Legacy in China

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Given this weighty comparison, it is important to evaluate how the current and future Japanese leadership will handle the relationship, especially considering the election for Japan's next prime minister in September 2006. Although he has strengthened the alliance with Washington, Koizumi will leave a mess for Japan regarding relations with its Asian neighbors. He failed with China not because he has applied a broad anti-China policy but because he does not have a clear, comprehensive strategy of any kind. During a visit to Canada in late June 2006, Koizumi reiterated that "Chinese development is no threat" to Japan.<sup>3</sup> Yet, he has attempted to gain domestic political benefits at the expense of Sino-Japanese relations. Because of his stubborn attitude on history issues, Sino-Japanese tensions on this topic have risen, making the relationship much more difficult to handle.

China does not necessarily assess Japanese military development as a realistic threat to national security, but it is concerned about the recent conduct of Tokyo's foreign policy and its attitude on history issues, especially when these two concerns overlap. In the spring of 2005, for example, anti-Japanese demonstrations took place in several Chinese cities in response to Japan's UN Security Council membership bid and the Koizumi cabinet's approval of history textbooks that failed to discuss the Japanese invasion of neighboring countries during World War II. Koizumi's four visits during his term to the Yasukuni Shrine, which honors Japan's war dead, including 14 Class A war criminals, have rapidly accelerated the Chinese population's rage over history issues, including Japanese exploitation of China in the Treaty of Versailles and during its World War II aggression.

According to Chinese state councilor Tang Jiaxuan, "the Chinese population could not understand how a country, who failed to reflect its invasion history or rightly understand the victims' feeling, could compete for the permanent membership in the UN [Security Council]. This is not only Chinese populations' psychology, but also a common feeling of Japanese neighboring countries."<sup>4</sup> Chinese minister of commerce Bo Xilai similarly and correctly pointed out in a June 2006 interview that, "for China, history is an issue concerning both principle and national feeling."<sup>5</sup> The shrine controversy has become a main or perhaps even the only obstacle to Sino-Japanese engagement and cooperation at the moment, like a fish bone stuck in the throat. Only if this problem is appropriately resolved will China further discuss potential cooperation programs with Japan and specify its policy on Japan's role in international and regional security.

Koizumi's tenure did not merely harm China's relations with Japan; Tokyo's relations with the wider region have also been damaged. The history issue shuts the door of dialogue between Japan and its neighbors, and the subse-

quent lack of communication raises suspicions in Asian eyes about Japan's ambition in the international political and military realm. Meanwhile, Koizumi's diplomacy currently emphasizes Japan's military force to realize its strategic aims, a tactic that has increased Japan's international clout in some circles but, along with its behavior on history issues, has also eroded its moral influence and soft power. Until the 1990s, Japan's rapid economic growth was perceived by the international community as a miracle. Today, however, inter-

**Koizumi has not employed a strategy to manage Japan's relations with China or Asia.**

national media reports on Japan usually focus on its diplomatic troubles with its neighbors, particularly South Korea and China. Although Japan's commercial brands remain commonly recognizable, the Yasukuni Shrine is now also famous and frequently associated with Japan's image. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which Japan has regarded as its backyard for many years, now has few countries that support Japan on important issues, such as its bid for UN Security Council permanent

membership, which implies the faltering of Japanese diplomacy in Asia.

In the international arena, Koizumi has made himself out to be an innocent held captive by a nationalist domestic population, a tactic that harms Japan's long-term strategic interests. Koizumi has united the Japanese people through moral confrontation instead of cooperation with its neighbors, misusing Japan's diplomatic resources to serve his short-term political interests. Whereas other Asian countries are patient and eager to resolve historical and territorial issues through negotiation, with China's handling of its disputes with Russia as an example, Koizumi's actions have increased tensions, adding to Japan's reputation as an emotional and unreasonable country. Anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea, for example, was recently enflamed by a dispute over the Tokto (in Japanese, Takeshima) islets. Koizumi's cabinet requested that the disputed territory be claimed as Japanese in high school history textbooks and once threatened to send reconnaissance ships to the surrounding waters.

Koizumi's diplomacy has led post-World War II Japanese conservative politics toward deterioration. A pro-United States orientation may be Japan's realistic choice, but if it slides into a pro-United States and anti-China approach, it will lose its realism. In fact, even the report "Japanese Basic Diplomatic Strategy in the 21st Century," set forth by Koizumi's personal consultation unit in November 2002, argues that Japan needs to comprehensively reevaluate U.S.-Japanese relations.<sup>6</sup> While seeking common goals with the United States, Japan needs to improve its other bilateral relationships to pursue its interests.

Koizumi's diplomacy has exacerbated the structural contradiction in Japanese foreign policy. Facing China's rise, Japan's nationalism prevents the country from perceiving itself as a second-rate power. Subsequently, it uses the U.S.-Japanese alliance to balance out Chinese development while defending or promoting Tokyo's own international status. Yet, this strategy has its own inherent problem. To become a normal state, Japan has to eliminate two obstacles: its existing constitutional prohibition on the use of force to settle international disputes and the limitations placed on it by the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

### **The Paradox of the U.S.-Japanese Alliance**

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The U.S.-Japanese alliance, as one of the main forces in Asia, plays a positive role in maintaining regional security but does concern other Asian countries, including China. Beijing's responses to the strengthening of the U.S.-Japanese alliance in the late 1990s are worth noting. China has never opposed the alliance outright; its criticism focuses on the way that the United States and Japan use the alliance to intervene in other countries and dominate regional affairs. Specifically, China opposes the infinite expansion of the alliance and argues that security relations between Washington and Tokyo should be limited to a bilateral spectrum.

The Chinese academic community is somewhat conflicted about the future of the U.S.-Japanese alliance. On one hand, although it does not expect the alliance to become stronger, an invigorated U.S.-Japanese alliance may join hands against China. On the other hand, a looser U.S.-Japanese alliance may lead to its ultimate collapse, leaving a Tokyo unbound by Washington. It remains uncertain whether an independent Japan would employ a friendly China policy. The direction and future of the alliance, however, is ultimately up to Washington and Tokyo.

From a long-term perspective, Washington has several options for forming its future East Asia strategy: maintain the status quo, i.e., continue to ally with Japan and South Korea while maintaining benign relations with China; choose to strengthen its alliance with Japan to contain China jointly; more actively promote regional multilateral security cooperation and make a greater contribution to permanent regional peace; or adopt neo-isolationism, end its domination in the region, and retreat. For Washington, the alliance has an important historical legacy that, along with the Chinese rise and power transition in the Asia-Pacific region, formed the basis for its Asian strategy and relationships. Specifically, the U.S.-Japanese alliance aims to preempt uncertainty caused by China's rise, a Taiwan Strait or Korean peninsula crisis, and the overthrow of the post-World War II regional security structure. It also permanently binds Japan to its strategic track by strengthening the

two countries' military relations and eliminating the possibility that Japan would use Chinese containment as an excuse to develop an independent military force.

Japan, eager to balance China and improve its own regional status, is valuable to Washington's Asian strategy. Koizumi's behavior on sensitive history issues, however, will undoubtedly strain U.S. moral leadership in Asia, reduce Japan's value in the U.S. regional strategy, and eventually incapacitate the Washington-Tokyo alliance vis-à-vis China. This also puts Washington in the position of having to defend and manage its ally at the expense of its relations with the rest of the region. Thus, when Japan is trapped in a stalemate with South Korea and China, the United States seems to increase its attention to the history disputes and Japan's Asia diplomacy. In May 2005, for example, when Yasuo

**Both China and Japan have mixed superiority and inferiority complexes.**

Fukuda, who is more moderate than his political rivals, visited Washington, he was treated with the highest protocol and ceremony. This is a sign that the United States had started to intervene in Japanese politics, implicitly pushing Japan to adjust its hawkish Asia policy.

The alliance also sets the precedent for Japan's actions regarding Taiwan. In February 2005, the United States and Japan issued a joint statement after their Two-Plus-Two meeting in Washington that listed 12 joint strategic objectives in the Asia-Pacific region, one of which was to place the Taiwan Strait under U.S.-Japanese joint defense.<sup>7</sup> This initiative makes Japan's Taiwan policy more explicit: Japan will actively intervene in the Taiwan issue to contain China.

Although Japan now employs a more aggressive Taiwan policy and expresses more willingness to get involved, from a Chinese strategic perspective, Japanese influence on this issue is still limited. Japan, whether on political or security issues, is not and will not in the foreseeable future be an independent actor. Despite Tokyo's desire to become a political power and its consistent increases to its military forces, it is still dependent on Washington in the political and security realms. Regarding Taiwan specifically, Japan's involvement is being accelerated by the United States, but its operation is greatly constrained by the baseline of Washington's Taiwan policy. The U.S. and Japanese measures exercised when Taiwan sought a referendum in late 2003 illustrate that when Washington thinks Chen Shui-bian, the political leader of Taiwan, has ventured too far, Japan follows the U.S. lead.<sup>8</sup>

Other issues besides Taiwan, however, have contributed to the recent deterioration in Sino-Japanese relations. For example, when Japanese diplomatic efforts to obtain UN Security Council permanent membership failed,

China naturally became the scapegoat. The Chinese objection was intentionally exaggerated by Tokyo to cover the failures of the Japanese bureaucracy, but Japan would not have become a permanent Security Council member even without the Chinese objection. The Japanese failure was due in fact to the U.S. objection, which was implemented in a much more skillful way.

In fact, at least in the initial stages, when Japan made clear its intention to seek permanent membership, the Chinese attitude was not negative. In September 2004, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, after discussing China's basic positions on UN Security Council reform, said, "We understand the will of [the] Japanese to play a greater role in international affairs."<sup>9</sup> The problem is that Japan declared its intention suddenly, before its population had reached a consensus. When Koizumi first visited Washington in 2001, he did not even bring the UN reform plan drafted by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, indicating that even the prime minister was not interested in this issue.

Regardless of recent trends in Sino-Japanese relations, the U.S.-Japanese alliance will continue to play an important role in regional security; but it must avoid isolationism, exclusivity, and monopolization in maintaining it. East Asia needs a security structure that is stable, reasonable, and adapted to the region's circumstances, as well as inclusive of the whole region. The United States needs to continue to provide public goods such as sea-lane security for the region and at the same time provide long-term regional development ideas and plans with a broad and open-minded strategic horizon. Considering the status quo, a U.S. retreat from East Asia could increase frictions and instability in the region.

From the Chinese perspective then, the best choice for the United States would be to continue its alliance with Japan and South Korea and keep benign relations with China but also to transition to active promotion of multilateral cooperation throughout the region. Looking forward, the only way to resolve the regional security dilemma in East Asia completely is to promote multilateral security structures. Countries in this region need not only to promote multilateral cooperation mechanisms but also to cultivate a regional identity. This common ground would create a proper place for Japan in the international structure and eliminate the concept of the "China threat."

### **Untying the Sino-Japanese Knot**

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Sino-Japanese cooperation on trade, investment, environmental pollution management, and energy efficiency are important for China's social and economic development. Japanese Official Development Assistance projects in China started in the late 1970s, around the same time that China began its economic opening and reform policies, and played an important role in

China's initial success. Although Japan's importance in Chinese foreign trade has decreased in recent years, Japan, as the second-largest economic power in the world, is still an important long-term international strategic resource for China's peaceful rise.

China, based on its development strategy, hopes to cooperate with Japan. Since the 2005 demonstrations, the Chinese government has repeatedly stated

**An official dialogue could help both countries manage these pressures.**

that it will not change its mutually beneficial and cooperative policy toward Japan and that it hopes to return to a healthy Sino-Japanese relationship soon. Yet, Chinese support for a Japanese role in international affairs hinges on a better understanding of Japan's future strategy. An official Beijing-Tokyo dialogue would help each one understand the other's positions. China and Japan have mixed histories regarding being the most powerful East

Asian countries and also being humiliated and marginalized, which has left both with superiority and inferiority complexes. As a result, nationalism has a stronger influence on Sino-Japanese relations than Chinese relations with other countries. Furthermore, as Chinese society has become increasingly open, Beijing's diplomatic decisionmakers have paid closer attention to public opinion. An official dialogue could help both countries manage these conflicting pressures by clarifying the problems and potential solutions.

With Koizumi's resignation date quickly approaching, Japan urgently needs a new leader with the ability to promote Sino-Japanese relations and put forward positive diplomacy with neighboring countries. Yet, Japan may elect someone who will "combine support for a so-called special relationship with the [United States], in a poorly thought-through effort to make Japan a Britain of the Pacific, with a defensive nationalistic posture toward its Asian neighbors."<sup>10</sup> If such a scenario unfolds, Sino-Japanese relations, as well as Japan's relations with the rest of East Asia, will probably have to wait for the end of another lost half-decade.

## Notes

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