



How Japan Imagines China and Sees Itself

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Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations are at their worst since the 1970s. The cabinet that Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi assembled this past November confirms the continued rise of foreign policy hawks, boding ill for any swift improvement in Japan's relations with China. Yet, what evolves between Tokyo and Beijing will certainly affect the global balance of capitalism and geopolitics, of integration and conflict. "Japan alienates Asia," writes Hugo Restall, editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. "Japan is isolated," echoes Christoph Bertram, former director of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. Japan watchers increasingly blame the deterioration on Japan, describing its China policies as mindless and provocative, self-righteous and gratuitous.

Official pronouncements in Beijing strike the same chord. *China Daily*, the Communist Party newspaper, has remarked sharply about Japan's resurgent military expansionism and its lack of guilt about its militaristic past. Recent demonstrations on the streets of Beijing, Shanghai, and across China attest to the depth of Chinese anxiety—and these demonstrations are no longer officially orchestrated.

Even in the United States, Japan's "only friend," there is growing concern over Japan's estrangement from the rest of Northeast Asia. Washington, which has long extolled the U.S.-Japan alliance, is beginning to express annoyance. The United States is wary of an embattled and isolated Japan, a nationalist Japan gratuitously provoking China. And the world is wary of a clash of

Japanese and Chinese nationalism. But in the country itself, there is scant awareness that Japan is perceived as being nationalistic, militaristic, hawkish, or provocative. Japanese officials are unable to satisfactorily respond to the many accusations. Seen from within, the new mood in Japan has its sources in nationalism and history, economic rise and relative decline, pride and recognition; it derives from two societies in the midst of remaking themselves, from the historical difficulty of forging a *modus vivendi*, and from a tangled web of forces.

Seeing Two Chinas

In Japan today, it is as if there are two Chinas. Economic relations are thriving. China has become Japan's major investment and largest trading partner, accounting for a fifth of total Japanese trade. China's remarkable economic growth is contributing significantly to the recovery of Japan's long-stagnant economy. There is widespread recognition that China's developing economy and Japan's more mature economy are complementary, even though diplomatic relations are cold. Separating economics and politics had been Japan's working rule with China during the Cold War, but it is a rule that is no longer tenable. However, Japan's foreign policy establishment seems to be in no hurry to arrive at a new strategy.

Behind Japan's hawkish attitude lies a concern that Asian affairs are now propelled by China. The rivalry is evident in the race to conclude free trade agreements with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in which there is not a whisper of

Sino-Japanese consensus. Instead, there is a simmering competition between Japanese and Chinese pride. But then, capitalism works in such a way that two discriminatory sets of free trade agreements will tend to reinforce each other and bestow economic benefits not only on Southeast Asia but on Japan and China as well.

“China is a threat, because it is China.” This seems to be the underlying assumption prevailing in Japan’s national security circles. There is concern over the double-digit growth in Chinese military expenditure. Does China intend to seek parity with the United States? Japan lately has been redefining its security posture with a boldness not seen before. But then, amid signs that Japan is awakening to the Chinese threat, the Japanese government reduced its military expenditure for 2005, as part of a general fiscal reduction plan.

There is an almost schizophrenic mix of Japanese emotions at play. A Chinese purchase of a Russian submarine is a security threat, a defense official may declare. Yet, the next day the same official may dismiss the import of such a purchase, declaring that it is a Chinese-operated submarine after all and the Chinese navy manages to lose at least one submarine a year at sea. Anyone familiar with the history of modern Japan will readily recognize in such a remark the unstable mix of respect and condescension that is an enduring characteristic of how the Japanese have imagined China.

Japanese Nationalism Revived?

When anti-Japanese demonstrations broke out in major cities across China last May, the Japanese were not pleased. In a Jiji Press public opinion poll published last summer, over 40 percent responded that they did not like China, while less than 5 percent said they did. The number expressing dislike of China soared in reaction to the surge of anti-Japanese demonstrations. During the last 15 years, the previous time dislike of China spiked was in 1989, in reaction to the

Tiananmen Square crackdown. While many pundits tend to focus on the negative surges, between 1990 and 2004 the proportion of Japanese who said they liked or disliked China was approximately equal, and the sum total of those who expressed any opinion about China hovered around 30 percent. In other words, a large majority of Japanese do not normally harbor any distinct feelings toward China. At the same time, China is the third favorite foreign destination for Japanese tourists after the United States and South Korea. When Chinese demonstrations subside, so very probably will Japanese dislike of China. There is no significant core of Japanese nationalism based on anti-Chinese sentiment.

Of course, the expression of Japanese nationalism is not simple. Attitudes among the young toward the Chinese demonstrations are telling. As with their parents, the young found the demonstrations distasteful. Yet most of the young, who are said to be increasingly nationalistic, had a difficult time recognizing the “Japan” toward which the Chinese expressed so much anger. The Japanese Empire and the Second World War are not only distant in their imagination, but most younger Japanese lack a sense of identification with a collective called Japan. “Are you glad to have been born Japanese?” people have been asked in opinion polls over the years. The response among the young has been overwhelmingly positive, but not for reasons normally associated with nationalism. The common response is because life here is better than elsewhere, at least for now.

The dominant Japanese political class today is unhappy with so amorphous a national identity. Its goal is to instill a rooted love of country in the citizenry. On this point, foreign criticism of a Japanese nationalist revival touches a nerve. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party is in the process of writing a new Japanese constitution, and there was talk of adopting a clause that would make patriotism a duty. But when

the party disclosed its draft constitution last fall, the patriotism clause had been dropped. The party leaders astutely calculated that patriotism could not be sold to the public (constitutional revision requires a plebiscite). The proposal went against the grain of a people satisfied with the “postmodern bliss” of not having to think about such a duty between citizen and state. With only a tenth of the people polled agreeing that their government reflected popular will, patriotism was clearly going to be a hard sell. (In contrast, 40 percent of the Chinese respondents in an opinion poll felt that their government reflected popular will.)

The indifference among the Japanese to China is akin to the proportion of Japanese who say they have no strong feelings toward their emperor, “the symbol of the unity of the nation.” (The imperial family attracts warmer public attention during the infrequent celebration of royal births and marriages.)

In Search of Normal Statehood

Japan is in the process of rethinking the threat of force as an instrument of policy for the first time since its defeat in the Second World War. The dominant voices in the foreign policy establishment feel that Japan has been crippled and needs to become “normal” again. Their normal state is, in essence, synonymous with having a legitimate military. At issue is the revision of the constitution imposed upon the Japanese by the U.S. occupation some 60 years ago, which declares that the Japanese people forever renounce the possession of military forces. Japan already has a sizeable Self-Defense Force, and the advocates of “normality” want to legally recognize its right to engage in collective security actions beyond Japanese territorial boundaries.

While formal constitutional revision will take some years, Prime Minister Koizumi has, de facto, altered the constitution in critical ways. After September 11, 2001, he dispatched naval vessels to the Indian Ocean

in support of the American-led operation against Afghanistan; he later dispatched ground forces to Iraq. This was the first time since 1945 that the Japanese military had ventured abroad as a Japanese force (Japan has been providing United Nations peacekeepers since the mid-1990s). Given the constitutional restriction, Koizumi claimed that the ships were there to refuel allied warships and the troops were deployed on a humanitarian and reconstruction mission, not to engage in battle. About the same time, Koizumi entered into another collective security agreement with the United States to develop jointly a missile defense system—the potential threats being North Korean and Chinese missiles. In February 2005, Japan made it explicit for the first time that Taiwan was a common strategic interest of the U.S.-Japan alliance, encouraging “the peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait through dialogue.” This seemingly benign statement reversed the previous policy of not officially mentioning Taiwan as falling within the terms of the U.S.-Japan alliance. To be sure, this can be presented as a prudent and non-threatening security policy, which the “normal state” advocates indeed do.

The Chinese response to the enhanced U.S.-Japan alliance has been mixed. China was silent about Japan’s Afghanistan and Iraq operations, but hypersensitive to the mention of Taiwan, which was seen as an affront to Chinese sovereignty. The enhancement of the U.S.-Japan alliance runs contrary to an understanding with Washington and Tokyo at the time of the 1972 Sino-Japanese rapprochement—that the United States would gain a forward military base while keeping a lid on Japanese military expansionism. China now sounds alarms about Japanese nationalism being again on the rise.

There is a certain overlap between “normal state” advocacy and hawkish nationalism. Those Japanese who had hoped to instill patriotism as a constitutional duty of

citizenship are in the former category—a country that is able to go to war needs citizens willing to die for their country. Hawkish nationalism goes much further, carrying with it emotional baggage and disjointed claims: the annexation of Korea in 1910 was a legitimate agreement between willing parties and was recognized by international law; there was no massacre in Nanjing by the Japanese army; Japan fought the Great East Asian War to liberate Asia from Western imperialism; the Tokyo war crimes tribunal was victor's justice, therefore illegitimate; youthful decadence today is a result of the warped educational system imposed upon Japan by the American army of occupation, and so on. Of course, not all “normal state” advocates are hawkish nationalists, but it is hard to differentiate clearly between them. And their strident voices make hawkish nationalists seem more numerous than is actually the case. Still, it is clear that the pursuit of normal statehood has provided the impetus for hawkish nationalism.

The Bush administration weighed in by seeking to turn Japan into “Asia's Britain.” Over the last five years, Washington got what it sought. But the enhanced alliance has contributed to Japan's estranged position in Northeast Asia; the Japanese search for normal statehood could not have proceeded without American encouragement. But Japan, unlike Britain, does not face a friendly continent. Furthermore, America's Japan handlers had wishfully chosen to ignore the nationalist baggage that comes with “normal state” advocacy. The United States is the only country possessing leverage over both Japan and China, and Washington has arguably squandered its advantage.

While Japan lives comfortably with the American pursuit of supremacy, it is unwilling to countenance any similar quest by China. There is a newfound diplomatic boldness on the part of the Chinese leadership, reflecting the euphoria of unimagined

economic achievement. The more China asserts its claims, the more Japan will be driven toward the United States as a foil. Japan's problematic relation with China is rooted in its historical inability to regard China or other Asian nations as equals.

A Crisis of Governance

Behind Japanese suspicion of China there lies a society unsure of itself. The long economic slide that began in 1991 not only stunted growth but also resulted in a deflationary plunge, and deflation exacts a tremendous psychological toll. Today's youths constitute the first generation of postwar Japanese bereft of the sense that tomorrow will be a better day. Deflation warps normal reflexes. The zero-interest economy has lasted so long that young money managers need to be reminded that there is a cost to money. Japanese social critics uniformly note a tendency to youthful self-absorption; they see a generation isolated and disengaged from society.

The bureaucratic, political, economic machine that delivered post-1945 prosperity and created “Japan Inc.” has become dysfunctional and is in need of major overhaul. The young cannot be blamed for their self-absorption when society seems to offer little in return. The older generations do not have this luxury. The 30 percent jump in the suicide rate among middle-aged men attests to the sense of betrayal in a society that used to promise security through a system of lifetime employment.

Across generations, and markedly among the young, the “law-abiding and authority-respecting” Japanese are now refusing to make the compulsory national social security payment. Excluding corporate and public sector employees, for whom deductions are automatic, just over half of those eligible pay into social security. More than 11 million people do not, and the payment rate has steadily declined by 20 percent in the past decade. These figures do not include the estimated 600,000

who refuse even to register with the system. Waste and incompetence, verging on the criminal, pervade the government's management of social security and other public funds. And the failing economy has helped expose the depth of this irresponsibility. People are fed up, and showing their anger.

It was in 2001 that the concern with the Chinese economic threat first showed itself in the Japanese media and among the political class. This occurred amid the rise of middle-age suicide and as the Japanese began speaking of the "lost decade" of the 1990s. For most of that decade, Japanese authorities had laid low, waiting for a cyclical upturn, hoping to return to business as usual. It was only around 1997–98, when major bank and corporate failures could no longer be avoided, as public and corporate debt piled higher, that those in power faced up to the economic structural problem: collusive business behavior, abetted by an overregulated and thus protected economy, persisted in a world of accelerated global capitalism.

The "lost decade" came to be seen for what it was: paralysis of leadership. Government grudgingly began to deregulate, and corporations stripped of regulatory protection began to restructure. For workers, job security waned. Japan embarked on a painful transformation, from regulation to competition, affecting myriad aspects of everyday life. Economic growth based on consensus became a thing of the past. The rising talk about China's economic threat, thus, was as much about a Japan finally, albeit timidly, admitting to its relative decline.

It was also in 2001, amid continuing political muddling, that Koizumi rose to power. By the traditional rules of party politics, Koizumi could not have become prime minister. He was propelled by popular eagerness for clear and bold direction, and widespread disgust with political floundering. Koizumi promised to remake Japan.

He declared that if his own long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party got in his way, he would destroy it.

Last year, Koizumi dissolved parliament, calling a snap general election in September. His party won by an unprecedented margin. Koizumi's single-issue stance won cheers for its simplicity: he promised to privatize the postal system. At issue was its savings and insurance arm, which makes the Japanese post office the world's largest financial institution. And the money thus gathered indirectly finds its way into the government's special budget, its use rarely scrutinized by parliament. The special budget is six times the general budget, and it provides the meat for pork barrel politics. In this campaign, Koizumi's fight was with those in his party who stood against reform, who had long dominated Japanese politics. He essentially routed them. He deposed the old guard, coincidentally including most of the party's doves on China.

Recapturing History

It is under Koizumi's leadership that Japan's diplomatic relations with China have noticeably deteriorated. The most provocative issue has been the prime minister's insistence on making an annual visit to Yasukuni, a Shinto shrine in central Tokyo at which the spirits of Japan's 2.5 million war dead are enshrined (including 14 convicted as class-A war criminals by the Allied powers). In response, Beijing has canceled summit visits between China and Japan.

There were a few earlier nationalistic prime ministers who also tried to revive the cult of Yasukuni, but they quickly backed down following strong protests from China and South Korea. Last spring, so badly had Sino-Japanese relations soured, even Yasuhiro Nakasone, the self-proclaimed nationalist who as prime minister in the 1980s first made the Yasukuni visit into a political sensation, publicly cautioned Koizumi to temper his gesture.

In Beijing's eyes, Japan had reneged on a deal with the Koizumi visits. As part of the 1972 Sino-Japanese rapprochement, Chairman Mao Zedong offered Japan a way out of historical guilt. He declared that the Chinese and Japanese peoples had equally been victims of a handful of Japanese militarist leaders. And he renounced all Chinese claims to war reparations. Taking the cue, Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka offered a generous package of development assistance. China today is not officially concerned about Japanese leaders paying their respects to the country's war dead, even at Yasukuni. At issue is the enshrinement of the 14 militarist leaders, the class-A war criminals. Koizumi insists that he is not visiting Yasukuni to pay respect to them, but adds that how a country honors its war dead is an internal matter.

The 14 were quietly enshrined in 1978, the same year the Sino-Japanese peace treaty was formally concluded. That they were enshrined became public knowledge only a few years later, as exposed by an opposition newspaper. Shinto is no longer the state religion, and by virtue of the constitutional separation of state and religion, the Yasukuni priests are ostensibly free to do what they wish—though some plausibly suspect political machination.

Critics see in Koizumi's stance on Yasukuni a lack of repentance for past imperial aggression in Asia, about which Japan has long been silent. The Japanese memory of the Second World War selectively focuses on the war's last year and a half, dominated by macabre images of indiscriminate American incendiary bombings of most Japanese cities, of burning bodies, charred flatlands, and hunger—on one night in Tokyo, nearly 120,000 people perished. Forgotten is what the Japanese military had done in China, and that it was the 1937 Japanese invasion of China that led to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

After Japan's defeat, a dominant national narrative describing the Japanese as vic-

tims emerged, and stuck. This narrative of victimhood—of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of popular fear and hatred of war—was the key to forging a pacific consensus, which tended to denounce all war. But judging all wars as bad, and absolutely so, ignores history and its causation. In the Japanese imagination, thus, people were victims of war abstractly conceived, rather than American bombs. This ahistorical imagination, coupled with the narrative of victimhood left little room for recalling Japan's aggression. This also helps explain why there is so little anti-Americanism in Japan. Critics from abroad have found the mixture of Japanese amnesia and pacifism enigmatic. But now the Koizumi visits to Yasukuni strike many as willfully malicious and blameworthy.

The "normal state" advocates and hawkish nationalists are, in effect, seeking to rid Japan of this ahistorical imagination, for they wish to revive the connection between sovereign statehood and the right to belligerency and thus to "reactivate" history. The post-1945 ahistorical imagination is marked by a certain discontinuity between the prewar and postwar Japanese state; amnesia has not been selectively about a moment of aggression in Asia but about the pre-1945 state in toto. The revival of the cult of Yasukuni serves as a mechanism to make history continuous, to make historical time flow again. The "normal state" advocates and hawkish nationalists do not quite explain their position this way. They talk instead about the need to revive tradition and instill in the people a sense of reverence for those who gave their lives for their country.

Opinion polls show the public equally split for and against Koizumi's Yasukuni visits. Those in favor say that China should not dictate what Koizumi should do. Those against say that Koizumi should not upset China. Apart from registering reactions to the Chinese protests, what is curiously missing in the popular discussion is the signifi-

cance of Yasukuni itself. The great majority of Japanese today have no personal memories of a Japan that could and did go to war and in which Yasukuni was a central symbol of nationalism. Many simply do not know the significance of the shrine. Bookstores are now lined with titles on Yasukuni, and a few of them are best-sellers, because their readers want to know what all the fuss is about.

The shrine was originally built to honor the dead in the civil war that brought about the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which set Japan on the path of modernity, and only the dead of the victorious army were enshrined. The Meiji state was almost continually embroiled in war, and until 1945 it was always victorious. The Imperial Army and Navy administered Yasukuni, and there enshrined the spirits of the successive wars. Of the 2.5 million spirits enshrined, 2.2 million are from the 1941–45 war that began at Pearl Harbor. After 1945, the shrine to honor the dead of the victorious could not finally remain what it was meant to be. And, when in 1945 the Meiji state transformed into a state that renounced war, the significance of Yasukuni began to dissipate in the Japanese consciousness.

While hawkish nationalists like to speak of reviving history, tradition, and culture, the Yasukuni shrine is a distinctly modern construct, with a brief cultural life. Before the onslaught of modernity, it was common practice in Shinto religious tradition to honor the dead of both victor and vanquished. Arguably, Yasukuni is thus a novel tradition.

“Normal state” advocates and hawkish nationalists are seeking to revive the cult of Yasukuni and, by so doing, recapture history. To China, this seems a lack of guilt and repentance for the past war. Yet, for the Japanese to cure their amnesia, to grasp why Asia is so suspicious of them, it is also necessary for them to recapture their history, to connect the present with the past. Paradoxically, the Yasukuni controversy, if not the

shrine itself, may serve as a catalyst for Japan to identify with its own past.

Pride and Recognition

Japan enjoyed enviable momentum during the 1980s. Its economy was thriving, and a cottage industry sprang up around the world to decipher the secrets of the Japanese miracle. This was the moment when Japan looked to the outside world for recognition of its achievements, for affirmation of its status as a first-class country. Japan was a country that wanted to be liked, but much of the world began to imagine a “Japanese threat,” and in the United States, whose recognition Japan coveted the most, there rose a tide of Japan-bashing. The secret of the Japanese miracle turned out to be an excessively loose monetary policy, and the economic bubble burst in 1991. (In a way, China today is also looking for recognition of its achievements, a desire the Japanese should be the first to understand.)

Japan’s economic decline led America to turn its attention elsewhere; China, not Japan, now seemed to be the future. Japan of the “lost decade” also lost coherence and direction. The Japanese themselves could no longer recognize their country. This was the emergent moment of hawkish nationalists. Unlike recognition, which needs acknowledgment by another, pride is inward-looking and isolated: Japan became a country that wanted to feel better. The tendency toward self-absorption among the young and the hawkish nationalism of the “lost decade” had in common an inability to deal with others.

The nationalists were not seeking to pick a fight with China. Their fight was with the post-1945 Japanese order—decadent and corrupt, spiritless and materialistic, corseted by a constitution written by a foreign conqueror, reduced to an existence of crippled sovereignty, and living a life of self-deprecation (and not even knowing it). If their lament upset China, that could not be helped, for the nationalists were addressing

their enfeebled countrymen and no one else. They spoke of reviving respect for culture, history, and tradition. And, because their fight was against the post-1945 order, their thoughts returned to the distinctly modern, pre-1945 world of statehood defined in terms of sovereignty and the right of belligerency.

Yet the post-1945 Japanese state had become in many ways postmodern: sovereignty was divisible and ought to be shared; *raison d'état* no longer had to do with the right of belligerency. This Japan would fit nicely in Europe, but interstate relations in Asia remain distinctly modern. Rather than making a concerted effort to move Asia toward postmodernity, the "normal state" advocates are tending to turn Japan back toward the modern, to adjust Japan to the ways of Asia, and this, ironically, is the cause for friction with China.

The Japanese people want normalcy, but not necessarily in the way "normal state" advocates imagine. They want to know what the state is going to look like internally. They accept that the protective practice of lifetime employment and equality of result has become too costly. Though life will become more competitive and harsher, a new consensus is emerging. While the Japanese can no longer wish for the security and comforts that "Japan Inc." provided, they want to know what the new rules are. They want predictability. Under Prime Minister Koizumi, corporate profits are finally up, employment has begun to improve, and the central bank is seeking to end its zero-interest policy. The rules are becoming clearer.

As for normal statehood, the public will likely go along with a constitutional revision recognizing the military, but exercising the right of belligerency is another matter. Among the general public, flag-waving is limited to the realm of international sporting events and is likely to remain there. A significant proportion of the political class also remains skeptical of wading into such murky waters. Even the "normal state" advocates are unsure about what a Japan repossessing the right of belligerency will actually do. For now, they are concerned with reforming the legal definition of Japan.

If how the normalizers want to see themselves creates friction with neighboring countries, if what they say for domestic consumption is understood very differently abroad, they seem not to care. We may soon be hearing talk of Japan's diplomatic lost decade. However, as Japan becomes more isolated and alienated from the rest of Northeast Asia, and as the cost of this isolation to the national interest becomes evident, calmer political forces should come to the fore.

With the rise of an economically streamlined and politically reformed Japan, the Japanese should begin to see that they have much to offer the world in terms of "soft power"—beyond manufactures and organizational technique. But so long as Yasukuni remains a diplomatic sore spot, so long as Japan is trapped in the confusion of the meaning of 1945, the acceptance of any Japanese political ideas abroad is unlikely. ●