

## **The Sino-Japanese Relations after 3.11**

GUI Yongtao

By the time the 3.11 Earthquake occurred the Sino-Japanese relationship soured by the 2010 ship collision incident in the East China Sea had yet to be restored. The disaster relief diplomacy that followed the earthquake and tsunami, however, led to a re-warming of the bilateral relations.

The Chinese government immediately dispatched a rescue party to Japan. One hundred Chinese scholars, in an open letter published on March 16, called on the Chinese people to extend their warm hands toward the victims of the disasters. The Chinese media provided a comprehensive coverage of various aspects of the rescue work, and repeatedly reported a moving story about a Japanese manager sacrificing his own life to rescue Chinese trainees when the tsunami came. All these created a deep feeling of compassion and sympathy among the Chinese public, who recalled the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake in China and the assistance that Japan gave to China at that time. The image of the Japanese people in China also improved greatly. Many Chinese people were impressed by the calmness, unity, endurance and self-restraint of the Japanese people, and admired the highly sophisticated disaster reduction training and work in Japan. The soft power of Japan, in short, was recognized by many Chinese.

The Chinese leadership apparently saw the disaster relief as an opportunity to bring the Sino-Japanese relationship back to the right track. President Hu Jintao went to the Japanese Embassy in Beijing on March 18 to express his condolence to the Japanese people. Premier Wen Jiabao visited Natori city of Miyagi prefecture in Japan on May 21, having a warm exchange with the victims there. The Japanese leadership responded positively. Prime Minister Kan Naoto's letters of thanks were presented to President Hu and published in major newspapers in China. In the summit between Wen and Kan held on May 22, the two leaders discussed a wide range of issues such as reconstruction, trade, investment, tourism, clean energy cooperation, youth exchanges, etc. There was a bit constraint in disaster relief cooperation though, when Japan only agreed to receive 15 Chinese rescue team members, a far smaller number compared to the over-100-member Russian, American, French and South Korean teams. But generally speaking the bilateral relationship at that time appeared to be moving out of the shadow of the ship collision incident and heading toward a new direction. This indeed should have been the natural trend when the two giant economies became so deeply interdependent.

However, the re-warming proved to be short-lived. In 2012 the relationship plummeted as a result of the Japanese government's "nationalization" of the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands and the Chinese unprecedentedly strong counter measures. Disagreement on the territorial question, which has been put aside for nearly four decades since the diplomatic normalization, has now occupied the center of the relationship. This is a most unfortunate situation for both countries because disputes related to territory are usually viewed in a zero-sum context and tend to arouse

nationalistic sentiment that is hard to control in an information era.

Mutual suspicions run deep in both countries. Many Japanese suspect that the Chinese government is stirring up anti-Japanese nationalism among its people, and that China is going to use its growing power to intimidate Japan in various areas. Some Japanese strategists are also worrying about the relative decline of the U.S. influence in the Asia-Pacific region and the likelihood of U.S. abandoning Japan.

On the Chinese side, many people are concerned about the impact of emerging right-wing forces and the nationalist and populist trends in current Japanese politics. In the past one decade the Sino-Japanese relationship has suffered from such problems as the repeated visits to the Yasukuni shrine by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, the Japanese government's approval of the revisionist history textbooks, Japanese politicians' denial of the Nanjing Massacre and other wartime atrocities, and the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue, all of which were partly or directly triggered by the right-wing forces. In the Chinese eyes some Japanese media also contribute to this trend by making sentimental and biased reports about contemporary China and creating a "China threat" perception among the Japanese public. Regarding elite opinions, many Chinese analysts find that the younger generation of Japanese politicians has already abandoned the tradition of Sino-Japanese friendship and shifted to an emphasis on pursuing concrete interests in dealing with China. Under such circumstances, views in favor of a balanced and sober policy towards China have been virtually silenced in the Japanese politics. A case in point is the change or dismissing of the Japanese ambassador to China Niwa Uichiro after he publicly criticized Ishihara Shintaro's islands purchasing plan.

Turning eyes to China's strategic environment in general and the Sino-U.S. relations in particular, many Chinese observers believe that the United States is taking advantage of the Sino-Japanese territorial dispute for its own purposes, namely to rebalance its military posture towards Asia and to address the perceived 'China threat.' It is also acknowledged, however, that although the United States may find some degree of tension between China and Japan useful, it does not desire a military conflict between them and would even try to calm down the storm when the situation becomes really tense. Given the more fluid relations between China and the United States in recent years, any new development in the U.S.-Japan alliance will become a grave concern to the Chinese.

China also concerns the American and Japanese involvement in the South China Sea. By insisting on its interest in the freedom of navigation around the area and criticizing China for its assertive actions in territorial disputes, the United States clearly took the side of the Philippines and Vietnam, and attempted to align ASEAN against China. Japan, similarly, has conducted joint military exercises with Vietnam, and planned to provide the Philippines with patrol ships to reinforce their coast guard. In fact Japan has in recent years signed a series of new security pacts with such Asian countries as Singapore, India, Vietnam and the Philippines to booster its regional defense relations. In the newly approved defense guidelines, Japan for the first time raised the notion of fostering security ties with its Asian neighbors. In the eyes of many Chinese observers these movements are nothing but an antagonistic policy

aimed at encircling or containing China.

Difficulties notwithstanding, China will still pursue a stable and cooperative relationship with Japan because it is definitely in China's long-term national interest. As Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping articulated in a speech in July 2012, China will continue to promote peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, and will continue to appropriately handle differences and frictions with relevant countries. Regarding the Sino-Japanese relations Chinese leaders have on various occasions stressed the importance of peace, friendship and cooperation between the two countries. Even in the recent vehement criticism of the Japan government for its islands "purchase," Chinese official denunciation of Japan all ended with a call on the Japanese side to return to the track of dialogue and negotiation and to work together with China to maintain the overall situation of the bilateral ties. It is clear that the Chinese leadership and government are committed to building a cooperative relationship with Japan from a strategic and mutually beneficial perspective. The question for China is how to translate these general principles into concrete policies. Several points should be emphasized in this regard.

Firstly, China needs to search for a new model in its foreign policy making that can properly incorporate public opinion and thereby rationalize the national aspiration of its people. Nationalistic sentiment, admittedly, remains high among the Chinese public and can flame up into radical actions on certain occasions. The Chinese nationalism is deeply rooted in history and cannot be tamed in a short period of time. But it should be guided towards a healthier direction. At the moment the question for the public is how to express their views and feelings in a more rational and effective way; and the question for the government is how to pursue national interest from a longer-term perspective. In fact the public response to the recent islands dispute with Japan has indicated a more open approach in this respect. People debate, for instance, on whether boycotting Japanese products is an appropriate way to express their opinions and whether it serves China's own interest. And when the incident occurred that the official car of the Japanese ambassador to Beijing was forced to halt by two vehicles and the Japanese flag being ripped off from the car, both high officials and average people denounced the act as irrational and illegal. The Chinese government needs to engage the public by more actively exchanging views with average people when making its foreign policy. This can be realized through online discussion, public hearings, policy transparency, etc. Only in this way can China develop a more rational public response on foreign policy issues; and only in this way can China's Japan policy win support from the people.

Secondly China needs to be patient in solving differences with Japan and looking forward to its long term strategic interests. It is true that the national power of China is rapidly growing and has surpassed that of Japan in terms of GDP. But China still lags far behind Japan in high technology, service sector, social welfare and many other aspects. The per capita GDP of China remains one tenth that of Japan. More importantly the economies of the two countries are becoming increasingly interdependent. The trade volume between the two countries reached 344.9 billion dollars in 2011, hitting another historical high; and Japan's direct investment in China

grew 49.6 % in the same year. A deteriorating Sino-Japanese relationship is therefore not the interest of China. In the security field, Japan is currently seeking assistance from its American ally and aligning with other Asian countries to counterbalance China's influence. Such movements are perceived negatively by people in China. But if China chooses to respond in a confrontational manner, the United States, Japan and some other Asian countries are likely to further reinforce their security ties, which will only result in a vicious circle in regional security affairs. Hence, establishing trilateral security dialogues among Japan, the United States and China and regional multilateral security mechanism that includes all concerned parties are advisable.

Thirdly China needs to learn more about the changing politics in Japan and its implications for the Sino-Japanese relations. During the first two decades after the diplomatic normalization, there were in Japan a strong impetus to provide China with economic aid among political and economic pragmatists and a sincere reflection of Japan's wartime history by liberal intellectuals and politicians, both supported by the general public. Since the 1990s, however, the above situation has changed. With both pragmatists and liberals losing their influence, Japan has been heading towards a more conservative political direction. Given all the economic and social problems that Japan is facing, this trend might not be reversed in the short and medium term. In addition, with a weak and frequently changing government, Japanese political leaders are more likely to resort to populism and nationalism. All these will raise risks in the management of the Sino-Japan relations. In this light China can no longer rely upon the friendship of the older generations and needs to look for new approaches to engage a "less friendly" Japan in the coming decades.

Finally, China should work toward building a stable and cooperative relationship with the United States in order to create a better environment for managing the relations with Japan and other neighboring countries. If the U.S.-China strategic distrust cannot be properly addressed, other countries in the Asia-Pacific region will have to take side between the United States and China. And under the current circumstances most countries will try to enhance economic relations with China while strengthen security ties with the United States, known as hedging strategy. This will inevitably cause frictions and confrontations in the region. Only a new arrangement of the U.S.-China relationship based on common interests and mutual trust can change this situation.

In sum, the Chinese domestic politics, especially the interaction between the government and the general public, the Japanese domestic politics, and the overall strategic structure in the Asia-Pacific region are all fundamentally changing. In such a transitional period, tensions among relative countries will inevitably rise from time to time. What China and other countries must do is to avoid short-sighted and emotional responses and look into the long term future. Everyone must calm down and think what is really good to the people and to the overall development of the region.