

"The Perspective from Beijing"

Based on a Presentation to the Atlantic Council Seminar on
The 'Japan Factor' in Cross-Strait Relations

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Introduction

The issues I want to take up are:

- What are China's complaints and objective?
- Is there any "resolution" to this issue?

China's complaints

There obviously is a mix of complaints on China's part regarding Japan's approach to "history," its current behavior, and its future course. In terms of the themes of this seminar, they do involve Taiwan, and that has been a particularly prominent feature of PRC commentary recently, perhaps because of the February 24 "2+2" statement between Japan and the United States that touched on Taiwan as an "alliance" issue for the first time. At the same time, one should recall how important the issue of Japan's role in Taiwan was in the conversations among Nixon, Kissinger, Zhou En-lai and Mao thirty odd years ago. So it is not new. Moreover, my belief is that, while the PRC's concerns about Japan's role in Taiwan are real and important, they are not dominant at this time.

There is also, of course, the issue of historical grievance over the unspeakable horrors that Japan committed against the Chinese people in the 1930s and 1940s and for which China believes it has never properly atoned. Whether the number of people murdered in Nanjing was 100,000 or 300,000 or something else is almost a detail. The numbers were huge, the atrocities uncountable, the physical and psychological wounds deep and in many respects still unhealed. And this refers not only to Nanjing, but also the entire experience in those years.

The resultant "textbook issue," where the Japanese government has "approved" for use in schools certain texts that seem to gloss over or even prettify the history of Japan's role in China, is surely a serious one. But while Chinese citizens might not have enough information at hand to make a meaningful judgment about how important those books are, the authorities certainly do. And while there is no denying that some textbooks either ignore or whitewash the atrocities in China, that is certainly not universally true. According to several calculations, the textbook recently in question is used by approximately one tenth of one percent of seventh-grade students in Japan. Of course, the symbolism of the Japanese government's role in "screening" textbooks is really what is at issue even if, as many Japanese assert, the government does not "endorse" or "approve" the content of the texts, only assuring that the content falls *within the range* of normal Japanese discussion and debate on issues.

Prime Minister Koizumi's insistence on going to the Yasukuni Shrine has been the focal point of much of the Chinese anger, due to the enshrinement there not only of those who sacrificed for Japan over the centuries, but fourteen convicted Class A war criminals from World War II. Those who have studied this question in depth would underline both the initial domestic political motivation for Mr. Koizumi's decision and the apparent "I'll be damned if China (or Korea) is going to tell Japan how to behave" attitude that may be part of his ongoing insistence on going. From a Chinese or Korean—or even an American—perspective, those may not be very good reasons for Mr. Koizumi to keep going, but one has to at least understand them. Moreover, I note that his government criticized the 80 politicians who went to the Shrine recently.

This is all overlain by a genuine Chinese concern about what Japan might do in the future, as well as a competition between these two great nations for leadership in the region and globally, including at the United Nations. And, of course, there are territorial disputes and competing claims to certain seabed resources that add another layer. These disagreements have a relationship to history but also very real current-day economic, political and security implications.

China's constant warnings about Japan returning to the path of militarism frankly ring more than a bit hollow in Japanese ears. To Japanese, who have maintained a pacifist approach for the past sixty years, it is more than ironic to be criticized by a country that has attacked its neighbors, sought at time to subvert its neighbors by supporting insurgencies, is a nuclear power, is developing robust power projection capabilities, has been increasing its military spending at double-digit rates for most of the past decade, and has run a nuclear submarine through Japanese territorial waters in recent months. This isn't to totally accept the Japanese view or dismiss China's expressed concerns, only to suggest that we might keep the facts in perspective and understand why the new Japanese generation doesn't find the Chinese arguments particularly persuasive.

As difficult as these issues are, the story is even more complex. Although China denies that it seeks to foster hatred of Japan through its "patriotic education" textbooks, people who have read those texts would dispute this. And, in any event, anyone who has spoken with Chinese over the past several decades about Sino-Japanese relations knows that an attitude of grievance and suspicion is indeed inculcated in succeeding generations, both formally and informally. Japan will no doubt follow up on PRC State Counselor Tang Jiaxuan's invitation to Japanese Foreign Minister Machimura to examine Chinese texts and report back on any biases and distortions that are detected.

Finally, to get back to Taiwan, perhaps the complex intertwining of Japan with that question is crystallized in the historical recollection that Koxinga, the Ming loyalist "Founding Father of Taiwan" who defeated the Dutch in the 17th century, was born in Japan of a father who was a Chinese pirate and a mother who was the daughter of a Japanese samurai.

Referring to more recent history, Japan's seizure and colonization of Taiwan over a century ago, the strong ties maintained with the island since World War II, and, as noted, the recent inclusion of peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues as one of the U.S.-Japan alliance's "common strategic objectives," have all rankled. As one Chinese official put it: "This is closely linked to the issue of history." In Chinese minds it is also tied up with suspicions that the United States wants to constrain and

even contain Chinese power, but it is evident that the emotion over Japan's role is far higher. And over time, this could be more than a matter of "principle" and history, but one that could have real-world implications for any military confrontation in the Strait.

So, what are China's objectives?

I would put China's objectives into two basic categories.

The first is to get some sense of "satisfaction" if not "closure" on the past. But it is unclear, to me at least, how many and what kinds of Japanese apologies would meet the Chinese standard. We shall have to see how Prime Minister Koizumi's latest reiteration of Japan's apology at the Jakarta conference of Asian states is handled. (I would note, by the way, that Mr. Koizumi's statement made clear the apology was on behalf of "Japan," whereas the very similar statements made by Prime Minister Murayama a decade ago were expressed as his personal apology. Whether there is great significance to be attached to this difference is for others to judge.)

The second Chinese objective is to keep Japan on the defensive as much as possible, both with regard to handling of the Taiwan issue, specifically, and regarding disputes over territory and resources, especially energy resources.

In a broader sense, I suspect that China remains, as in the past, of two minds about the U.S.-Japan alliance. On the one hand, that alliance could at some point pose real challenges to China's interests. On the other, a strong alliance is the best assurance that Japan will see no need to take its emergence as a "normal" nation too far, including into the nuclear weapons realm.

There are two other, broader objectives that are quite important.

One is to maintain constructive relations with Japan, especially but not only economic relations. Not only is the over \$200 billion annual two-way trade of great importance to China, as is Japan's massive investment, but maintaining a peaceful environment around China is critical to achievement of the PRC's overriding economic modernization goals over the next several decades. Continuing or, especially, growing tensions with Japan would seriously detract from that effort.

The other is to avoid letting the kinds of demonstrations we have seen recently get out of hand, perhaps turning their focus—and grievances—elsewhere, closer to home. Although I think Beijing cannot escape all responsibility for having let the situation rise to the level where the demonstrations were called—and I disagree with the assertion that China does not owe Japan any apology, especially for their violent nature—basically I think the decision to allow them to proceed was a matter of calculating the costs and benefits of trying to quash them.

China could, of course, have clamped down from the beginning, as they did later in the process. My guess is that the leadership saw this as even riskier than allowing them to go forward. But what they failed to do for, I would argue, far too long, was to take more effective steps to contain the violence.

Is there any real “resolution” to this problem?

Clearly there is a temporary resolution, including not only the call by Beijing to quiet things down but the steps taken by each side to facilitate what we can presume will indeed be a meeting between Hu Jintao and Koizumi tomorrow in Jakarta.¹ China has also apparently taken the step of forming teams of Japan experts who are being dispatched to various places in the country to make clear to Chinese citizens that, while Japan does need to atone for its various sins, a positive relationship is in China’s interests and so everything must be kept in perspective—and order. And China has shown interest in forming a joint committee with Japan to look at the handling of history.

On the Japanese side, we shall have to see if Mr. Koizumi can finally bring himself to cease his visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, just as we shall have to see if Japan can find some way to handle the textbook issue with more sensitivity to the feelings of its neighbors. These would be important steps, I believe, in facilitating a more constructive approach to the relationship with China.

Whether the mutual resentments can be “permanently” dealt with is, in my mind, a far less certain proposition. At a personal level, it strikes me that there is a fair amount of mutual admiration for each other’s culture, food, economic achievements and the like. And of course a growing economic interdependence.

But at the national level, my sense is that there is a certain “rawness” in feelings about each other, a sense of mutual grievance overlain by some mixture of fear and disdain. So it will take hard work to try to ease these feelings, and it will take some time. But this is important to work on not only to maintain peace and stability, but also because even economic relations, as important as they are to both sides, could be damaged if political disagreements are allowed to erupt in the future.

On the Taiwan dimension specifically, despite a growing tide of pro-Taiwan sentiment in Japan, I do not expect that Japan will in any way support Taiwan independence or some kind of anti-PRC coalition with the island. That said, the real-world security implications of China’s military modernization and of any PRC use of force against Taiwan are not only in Japan’s consciousness but increasingly openly discussed, as is the Alliance’s interest in meeting those challenges. So, while, an occasional visit to Japan by a pro-Taiwan independence figure aside, I think the issue can be managed pretty well on a political level, at the level of national security I think this issue will be with us for some time to come.

Indeed, in considering how to handle all of these dimensions of a very complex relationship, we should not lose sight of the fact that there is an important competition going on for power and influence. While neither side is likely to put it that way, the competition is quite real. In trying to deal with the tensions, it is not clear to me how well either side will do in disentangling the historical and related issues from the national rivalry. But I think it is important that both governments try, because a failure to do so will mean that natural and otherwise-manageable tensions could be infused with growing emotion, likely leading to unintended, and unhappy, consequences.

¹ They did meet. On April 22, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan said that China appreciated Koizumi’s words but added: “[W]e need to see deeds.”