



Wanted: a healthy national mentality by Fan Li

The fate of the Six-Party Talks has been the center of attention in East Asia since Pyongyang's Feb. 10 announcement that it was suspending participation in the talks and that it had nuclear weapons. The world holds high expectations for China and sees it as an indispensable player in helping to solve the North Korean nuclear crisis.

Spreading anti-Japanese demonstrations and a boycott of Japanese products in China suggest China may have other priorities. Two weeks ago, a Chinese student online community launched a survey of the younger generation's thinking about the world. When asked which country is least trustworthy, 73 percent of the 27,000 respondents named Japan, followed by the United States, Russia, and India. North Korea was not even on the list.

Nuclear bombs may be hidden in Kim Jong-il's backyard, but a revised textbook that "whitewashes" Japan's wartime crimes in Asia, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's annual visits to Yasukuni Shrine, and a defense program that identifies China as a potential threat are visible. So why shouldn't Chinese be more concerned about the "Japan threat," especially if, judging from the old friendship between China and North Korea, it's very unlikely that North Korea would use nuclear weapons against China?

One can argue that anti-Japanese sentiment in China is not news. But the backward moves between Japan and South Korea caused by territorial conflicts over the Takeshima islands (Tokdo in Korean) is a big blow to the honeymoon in relations since the two nations co-hosted the 2002 World Cup soccer final and appear to have undone the goodwill created by the culture boom known as "Han-Ryu" in Japan. If the deadlock over the sovereignty of the Northern Territories, occupied by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II, is added, it looks like Japan is taking the lead in a fight with three members of the Six-Party Talks.

It's not fair to force Japan to take all the blame. But Japan's recent behavior has complicated the atmosphere surrounding the multilateral talks on North Korea, which is unfortunate for Japan and the region. In Northeast Asia, history is not just about the past. Unresolved issues, some going back more than a century, cast giant shadows over the continent at a time of rapid economic change and shifting power balances.

Among all the conflicts, the Sino-Japanese rift is most important, and as a result can threaten the peace and security of the entire world. As Deng Xiaoping pointed out 30 years ago, the most important bilateral relationship for China is Sino-Japan relations.

The term "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*) put forward by the Hu Jintao administration sums up Beijing's goal of good neighborliness and global responsibility. However, there are doubts and concerns in Japan about how the terms "peaceful" and "rise" relate to each other, especially given China's exploratory drilling in the East China Sea, submarine incursions, and the exclusionary nationalism in China. At the same time, China considers Japan's hard work to become a "normal country" and obtain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council an excuse for failing to seriously address its historical disputes with its neighbors.

In fact, these two countries are looking in the same direction: toward a peaceful rise. China has achieved dramatic development in recent years, and as it comes to play an increasing role on the international scene, as in the Six-Party Talks, it is only natural for the Chinese to desire to make China both rich and strong, as well as to reunite the "lost territories" with the motherland.

As for Japan, it is now represented by the Koizumi administration, which is backed by a new generation that does not feel it should be judged by misbehavior in the past. Many feel the time has come for Japan to play a more active role as the world's second largest economy, the main sponsor of the UN and other international institutions, and Japan deserves a permanent seat on the UN Security Council to justify and encourage its contribution to international peacekeeping.

So what is the obstacle? For a win-win peaceful rise, both countries need to nurture a healthy national mentality. There is no greater threat to peace than the emergence of a major power with a "victim mentality."

Traditionally, the Chinese take the 100-plus years beginning in the mid-19th century as a period of national humiliation. It was a time when the once-powerful kingdom was invaded and bullied by Western powers and Japan. It was also the time when China realized, for the first time in its 5,000-year history, that it was no longer a strong nation.

These deep wounds to China's pride take time to heal. The fundamental reason lies in the Chinese belief that it was "the Middle Kingdom" for many centuries before it declined. A sense of cultural superiority has been bred in the Chinese people that makes it still harder for them to suffer the humiliations of backwardness in modern times. It seems that the Chinese care about their sensibilities and dignity more than anyone else.

As China takes a greater role in global affairs, abandoning the victim complex is a must. Shaking off that complex does not mean that the Chinese should divorce themselves from history. It only means they ought to perform on the world stage as a normal partner, and in a more open and forward-looking mode.

Japan must rid itself of this mental illness as well. Japan has accused China of harboring a victim mentality, but Japan itself is hiding in the shadows of the U.S. nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is true that Japan was a victim as well as an aggressor, but this does not justify Japan turning its back on its history of aggression. There appears to be a trend in which all history textbooks delete facts about “comfort women” while ensuring that they include the name of Yokota Megumi, the missing hostage kidnapped by North Korea. As a great power in Asia, Japan needs courage to face a complete version of its history and it must make concrete efforts to improve relations with its neighbors.

Nobody can tell if the Six-Party Talks are the best way to solve North Korea’s nuclear crisis. But it is important to recognize that this is not only a process of negotiating with North Korea, but also a process of communicating among the five other countries. China, Japan, and South Korea should use this opportunity to build a stronger coalition in East Asia.

Key to this process is greater grassroots exchanges. Seeing is believing. It may seem overly simple, but one of the reasons that anti-Chinese sentiment in Japan is not as strong as anti-Japanese feeling in China is that more Japanese have chances to visit China than Chinese can visit Japan. The Chinese government began a Japanese visa waiver program in 2003, but it’s very difficult for Chinese to come to Japan. This is something that could be worked on and improved by both governments.

A nation that forgets its past has no future. However, that nation can hardly move forward if it puts itself in the throes of past humiliations forever. Maybe the best way to remember the past is to learn to forgive and move on, and that would require a real “great power mentality.”

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