



Abe and China: a new opportunity by You Ji

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Beijing during his first days in office may have a profound impact on Northeast Asia. His trip was a surprise: it underlined the differences between him and his predecessor Koizumi Junichiro, but also between his roles as prime minister and conservative hardliner. It's too early to predict anything certain from his visit, but the fact that he has changed the rules of the game in Northeast Asia itself is significant. Equally important is China's quick and positive response to Abe's initiative. This reflects Chinese President Hu Jintao's new thinking in foreign policy.

Untying the Knots

Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine caused deterioration in Sino-Japanese ties. The leaders of these two key nations could not meet formally for five years. This made other Asian countries increasingly nervous; even Washington expressed concern over the deadlock. Japan's new leader and his Chinese counterpart both viewed a meeting as a matter of urgency and were eager to find a way out of the impasse.

There has been a model to follow in this regard. Over two decades ago, China and Japan encountered a similar problem after then Prime Minister Nakasone's Yasuhiro's visit to Yasukuni. This blocked the scheduled meeting between him and Deng Xiaoping in 1985 in Beijing. To realize the meeting, both sides engaged in difficult negotiations and eventually reached a "gentlemen's agreement": Japan's prime minister and speaker of the Diet would not visit the shrine in exchange for China's silence on visits by other Japanese politicians. This paved the way for the two leaders to meet in Beijing. Although it was just "gentlemen's agreement," it managed to "manage" the issue for the next 15 years. To Hu and Abe, the issue is more about political courage than anything else.

The Nakasone model is useful today. Yet the issue continues to be a huge challenge, as Abe, before becoming prime minister, repeatedly remarked that he would visit the shrine. And he is passionate about it, unlike Koizumi whose visit was motivated more by Machiavellian considerations. A sophisticated solution must be found.

Much remains uncertain about the secret diplomacy prior to Abe's visit. China's former ambassador to Japan Xu Duanxin had said there would not be any summit meeting if the Shrine issue would not be resolved. Yet as late as Sept. 26, a three-day trip by Chinese vice foreign minister Dai Binguo ended in vain. But he returned to Tokyo the next day and secured a tacit understanding with his counterpart on the Shrine issue: both Beijing and Tokyo recognized that the Shrine visit constituted a political obstacle to a summit meeting and both sides intended to remove this obstacle to realize the meeting. Note that the phrase "political obstacles"

substituted for the word "Yasukuni." Abe did not talk about Yasukuni but only about his willingness to remove "political obstacles." For Beijing, "political obstacles" included Yasukuni. Tokyo's intention to remove "obstacles" allowed for an interpretation that could facilitate a summit. Elastic vocabulary was used to break the impasse. The oriental diplomacy is stretched to its limits in the search for a mutually acceptable solution, although it also plants the seeds of potential rift in the process.

Abe's Strategic Consideration

Analysts have been pessimistic about the prospects for China-Japan relations due to Abe's past rightwing tough talk. This may still be the case, as all strategic issues between Beijing and Tokyo remain unresolved. Yet the Yasukuni Shrine is not as strategic for Abe as it was for Koizumi. The latter had no solid factional support within the LDP. To implement difficult reforms at home, he needed to appeal directly to the people. The Shrine visit was thought useful for this purpose. Beijing's anger had to be in this light: Koizumi's visit was for the benefit of domestic politics, but China was being victimized in the process and the foundation of mutual trust was undermined. This explained Beijing's resistance to a summit meeting. For Abe, the Shrine issue may generate more liability than benefits – at the moment. Popular support for the visit was declining after the Showa Emperor's negative view of the Shrine was made known. Koizumi's visit isolated Japan in Northeast Asia and drove Beijing and Seoul closer together.

Abe, the first post – World War II leader, wants to rule for a lengthy period of time. A relative smooth relationship with Beijing is certainly important to realizing this objective. Toward the end of Koizumi's tenure, public opinion exerted more pressure on the government to improve ties with Japan's immediate neighbors. When Abe announced the decision to visit China and South Korea, the social and political response was positive. This helps him consolidate his power. In his speech to the Diet on Oct. 6 he reiterated the statement of repentance by former Prime Minister Murayama Tomoiichi on Aug. 15, 1995 that stated Japan's wartime erroneous policy toward Asia. Abe's predecessors consciously or unconsciously stayed away from that statement. Abe's speech not only eased worries of Japan's neighbors but also set him on a course that is different from that of his predecessor. While in Beijing he formally invited Hu to visit Japan and proposed to meet again at the APEC summit in November. A positive response from Asia to his new policy direction will encourage the Japanese to vote for the LDP in the Upper House elections in 2007. Furthermore, relatively good personal ties with Chinese leaders would help build a conducive environment for his attempts to revise the Constitution and upgrade the Defense Agency into a ministry.

Hu Jintao's New Thinking

The Hu-Abe summit meeting provides another example to evaluate Hu's diplomatic style and his thinking on foreign policy. There is no doubt that Minister Dai could not have flown back to Tokyo one day after returning from there without Hu's personal approval. Tackling a "political obstacle" entailed a political risk for Hu: agreeing to a meeting would risk a backlash against him if Abe were to make a future visit to the Shrine. After all Abe never made a clear pledge not to. Since Chris Patten's Hong Kong reforms and Koizumi's Shrine visit, many Chinese scholars have questioned the wisdom of conducting diplomacy and relying on a "gentlemen's agreement." Beijing's efforts to help others "save face" ends up with it swallowing bitter fruit. Relying on the rule of law and clarity are the best ways to save Beijing from similar situations.

Hu knows this but he does not have many options to get Sino-Japanese relations back on track. Forcing Abe to make open statement on the Shrine is a zero-sum game for both sides. To Beijing, the Shrine issue is both strategic and technical. In terms of domestic politics and China's international prestige, there is no room for concession. However, when considering Beijing's other concerns, such as the Taiwan issue, it is unwise to let it get in the way of long-term Sino-Japanese relations. As a relative weak power in a unipolar world and at a time when there is a good opportunity for development, Beijing has to strike a delicate balance between a principled stance and a tactical choice. Looking at his Taiwan policy, Hu seems to be a master strategist in this regard.

One of the first things Hu did after assuming the top leadership was order a review of China's Japan policy, which showed his concern about Sino-Japanese relations. He has not officially "met" Koizumi since early after he took office, but has sought to break the deadlock. He knew Abe's election presented an opportunity and Japan's effort to initiate a thaw had to be reciprocated. This is the time for maximum ambiguity and simultaneously for an expression of principle. Ambiguity is meant to avoid any unnecessary showdown in the short run and reconstruct a foundation to deal with strategic hurdles in the future. To this end Beijing has to give Abe space and face to move forward. On the other hand, Hu's principle is expressed to Tokyo: the spirit of former Prime Minister Murayama's 1995 statement is China's bottom line for accepting Japan's view on history. As for the Shrine, since both sides have embraced the new principle, the ball is in Tokyo's court: it will take responsibility if the understanding is breached.

A summit meeting is largely symbolic, as strategic differences are deeply embedded. Yet it may be helpful in maintaining a relationship of substance. With a new Japanese leader hoping for improvement in bilateral ties and a Chinese leader sharing the intent Tokyo and Beijing can make a fresh beginning.

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