



## **Coping with Abe: Time for “New Thinking” in China’s Japan Policy** by Wang Liang

The October 2006 visit of newly elected Prime Minister Abe Shinzo to China – his first official trip overseas – was lauded by Beijing as “an important breakthrough” in strained China-Japan relations. After this ice-breaking visit, signs of improvement have become the dominant feature of the bilateral relationship. When meeting Abe on the sidelines of the ASEAN+3 Summit, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao accepted the invitation to make an official visit to Japan this spring, the first state visit to Japan by a top Chinese leader since 1998.

As the relationship has seemingly returned to normalcy, an underlying trend has become increasingly explicit — Japan’s proactive diplomacy and assertive defense policies create a dilemma for China and its “*tingqiyan, guanqixing*” policy (first hear what Japan says and see what Japan does, then act). To deal with this predicament, Beijing must revive “new thinking” in its Japan policy.

### **Abe’s Proactive Diplomacy and Assertive Defense**

Beijing is happy to improve relations with Japan, and has applauded Abe’s efforts. Nonetheless, it has become clear that recreating a normal relationship with China is only part of Abe’s diplomacy and strategic maneuvering. And Abe’s China strategy may not be as pleasing to Beijing as it seems.

Japan’s other diplomatic efforts and defense moves can be interpreted by Beijing as unfriendly or even confrontational. Diplomatically, Abe and Foreign Minister Aso Taro are keen to emphasize values such as democracy and human rights in Japan’s foreign relations, an approach that leaves little common ground with China. This policy led Japan to strengthen its “strategic and global partnership” with India during Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s visit to Tokyo last December. Abe expressed concern over China’s military buildup and urged the European Union to maintain its arms embargo on China when he met with European leaders earlier this month. This revealed more about Abe’s China agenda: he intends to minimize direct confrontation with China by using high-level contacts to push other nations with shared values to strategically constrain China.

Abe’s defense policy also worries Beijing. On Jan. 9, the Japan Defense Agency was formally upgraded to become the Defense Ministry. Together with the upgrade, the Self-Defense Forces’ enhanced military capacity and strengthened alliance with the United States underscore intentions to better project Japan’s military in the Asia-Pacific region. When visiting Brussels, Abe pushed for strengthened military cooperation with NATO. It would not be surprising if Japan and the U.S.

develop a contingency plan for joint operations in response to military escalation in the Taiwan Strait in the upcoming U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee meeting.

### **China’s Dilemma: Coping without the Yasukuni Card?**

Even though Abe has not officially and openly stated his position on the subject of shrine visits since he became prime minister, the fact that he has refrained from fanning the controversy over Yasukuni is viewed by Beijing as a tacit promise of “no visits.” With that in hand, Beijing reduced criticism of Japanese militarism and rightist historical views. The history issue no longer dominates official contacts and statements, creating a friendly environment for the development of China-Japan relations.

Yet, the evaporation of the Yasukuni issue poses other problems for China. Chinese foreign affairs officials have lost their effective and frequently used “history” weapon to pressure or oppose Japan’s strategic moves that have direct security implications for China. When asked to respond to the elevation of the JDA and Japan’s strengthened military ties with the U.S. and NATO, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman’s statement was soft. The spokesman did not mention the history issue when commenting on Japan’s recent efforts to secure a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

China’s flexible policy toward Japan is a sign of Beijing’s appreciation for Abe’s efforts at reconciliation and its intention to create a favorable atmosphere for Wen’s upcoming state visit. But what will follow Wen’s visit? Recent trends demonstrate that, at a strategic level, Abe has created a dilemma for China in dealing with Japan. On one hand, Abe’s silence on the history controversy gives China an opportunity to put the bilateral relationship back on track. Continued obsession with history would be unreasonable and would weaken China’s moral position in dealing with Japan. On the other hand, without the Yasukuni card, China is hard pressed to effectively counter assertive foreign and security policies that unsettle Beijing.

### **Time for New Thinking**

When political analyst Ma Licheng first proposed “new thinking on Japan” in December 2002, the time was not yet ripe. Given Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro’s visits to Yasukuni Shrine and a series of other events that stirred strong nationalistic sentiments against Japan in China, it was too difficult for China to “get over” its Japan problem.

The situation has changed dramatically. Abe’s visit to China and his failure to visit Yasukuni Shrine have made Chinese nationalist sentiment toward Japan more manageable.

But, without the history card, Beijing has fewer tools to affect and constrain Japan's strategic assertiveness.

To resolve this dilemma, Beijing's Japan policy should undergo fundamental changes. As Abe has clearly set his goal to elevate Japan politically and militarily, accepting Japan's return to a "normal" country should be Beijing's first step. While it may be too early to develop a strategic relationship with Japan, it is time for Beijing to reconsider its approach to Japan. Beijing must figure out how to engage an increasingly assertive Japan so that its political and military ascendancy will not be realized at China's expense.

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