



## **China's 'new diplomacy' goes to Tokyo**

by Jianwei Wang

In the last few years, China has significantly adjusted its strategy toward neighboring countries and greatly improved relations with most of them. But until very recently, Japan was the only holdout in Beijing's otherwise successful "peripheral diplomacy." The political ties between the two nations were almost frozen during Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's tenure. The relationship, however, has experienced a dramatic turn in the last six months. With Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's short but highly successful visit to Japan, China's "new diplomacy" finally reached Tokyo.

Wen took his visit as "the most important assignment since taking office." Before his departure, Wen told Japanese reporters that he looked at his visit with "a sense of mission" and defined his goal as "ice-thawing." After 52 hours in Japan, Wen declared his mission accomplished. His rare self-congratulation was supported by the largely positive media coverage from Japan to the United States. Wen has reason to feel good.

Wen's visit can be characterized by three "Cs." The first "C" stands for "creative." The highlight of Wen's visit was his speech to the joint session of the Japanese Diet, described by media as "historic." The speech indicates important conceptual changes in Chinese thinking on Japan. Never before have China's leaders used such explicit language in such a public fashion to praise Japanese politicians' remorse and apology for the war of aggression against China and other Asian countries, to acknowledge Japan's assistance and contribution to China's economic modernization, and to affirm Japan's postwar path of peaceful development.

These new positions are something the Japanese public and politicians waited a long time to hear. Wen uttered them with feeling and sincerity and many Japanese were touched by his words. This line of "new thinking" on Japan was long suggested by China's more open-minded Japan scholars and analysts. To their credit, these modifications have become formal positions of the Chinese government. Wen's speech was also broadcast live in China, indicating that the leadership wants the public to absorb this new discourse and reduce its hostility toward Japan.

The second "C" is "constructive." Wen's trip featured a very positive and upbeat tone and posture regarding the relationship. He hailed the 2,000 years of China-Japan "friendly exchanges" whose length, scale, and influence are "rarely seen in the course of world civilization." He talked about the "bright future of the eternal friendship between the Chinese and Japanese peoples" and asserted that despite twists and turns, "the foundation of such friendship

remains as unshakable as Mount Tai and the Fuji Mountain." He argued that compared to their common interests, the differences between the two countries are of secondary importance and if both sides work together, the East China Sea could become "a sea of peace, friendship and cooperation." On the most thorny issue of war history, he subtly reminded his host of "the untold sufferings" Japan inflicted on China, while he emphasized that China is taking a forward-looking approach on the history issue and that remembering history does not mean to "perpetuate hatred" but to "secure a better future" for the relationship.

Wen made it very clear that Beijing wants to "lift China-Japan relations to a new historical stage." For that purpose, Chinese leaders accepted Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's idea of building a "strategic relationship with mutual benefits." This is another important cognitive change on China's part. Starting from the Jiang Zemin era, China has established all kinds of "strategic partnerships" with major powers except Japan. Just as the Bush administration has been reluctant to use the term "strategic" to define U.S.-China relations, China shied away from recognizing the "strategic" aspect of relations with Japan. By accepting this framework of "strategic reciprocity," China and Japan pledge to "support each other's peaceful development," implying that neither side should seek hegemony in the region.

The third "C" is "charming." While taking his mission to elevate China-Japan relations to a strategic level, Wen wanted to cultivate it at the grassroots' level with personal charisma. From the very beginning, Wen was eager to put his personal imprint on the relationship. He told the Japanese that he was visiting Japan to "contribute my share to improving and growing China's relations with Japan." He revealed that he personally wrote the speech to the Diet. He even disclosed that the first thing he did after his speech to the Diet was call his elderly mother to find out how he did.

This attempt to personalize a major diplomatic event is remarkable for Chinese leaders, who usually emphasize the collective nature of their dealings with foreign countries. While this demonstrates Chinese leaders' increasing confidence in dealing with the outside world, it also reflects Wen's personal belief that diplomacy is not just the relationship between states, but also between people. He has extended his "down-to-the-earth" style in domestic politics to foreign affairs. His trademark grin and cordial interactions with ordinary Japanese, from jogging in a public park to visiting a farmer's family to reading an ancient Chinese poem to elementary school pupils and playing baseball with college students, apparently won hearts and minds in Japan, diluting the growing image of a "China threat" in Japan.

All three "Cs" are laudable and reflect the Chinese leadership's realization that in order for the two Asian giants

to co-exist peacefully in the Asia-Pacific, old thinking and practice will no longer work. As one Chinese newspaper put it, “both need to rethink their strategy in dealing with each other.” In this regard, Wen’s successful visit is a fruition of the “new thinking” toward Japan that emerged among the Chinese elite a few years ago, but which was soon put on the defensive because of the political chill during the Koizumi period. With the change in the political atmosphere between the two nations, China’s policy toward Japan is able to “progress with time.”

The three “Cs” alone, however, cannot sustain the relationship. The challenge for Chinese and Japanese leaders is to determine how to transform their long-term and strategic vision of the relationship into a 4<sup>th</sup> “C”: concrete problem-solving. The China-Japan joint press communiqué provides a roadmap for confidence building and for cooperation on many issues that China and Japan share interests. But for a stable relationship, more than nice words are needed. Key issues that might derail the relationship remain outstanding. It is disappointing that a breakthrough on the East China Sea issue did not occur at the summit. The Yasakuni Shrine issue, although temporarily off the agenda, could disrupt the relationship again. Additionally, Wen and Abe evidently did not get what they wanted from each other on the issue of Taiwan and Japan’s bid for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Deep-rooted mutual suspicion is unlikely to melt in three days. In this context, Wen Jiaobao’s “ice-thawing” diplomacy toward Japan was only the first step.

*Jianwei Wang is a Professor of Political Science at University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and Senior Research Associate, Shanghai Institute of American Studies. He can be reached at [j2wang@uwsp.edu](mailto:j2wang@uwsp.edu).*

Pacific Forum seeks a full-time program officer. Primary responsibility is overseeing production of Comparative Connections (editing skills are critical), but will also have program responsibilities. Start date is July 1; salary will depend on experience. Please send CV and details to [pacforum@hawaii.rr.com](mailto:pacforum@hawaii.rr.com)