



Creative Partnership Needs Creative Approaches

by Fan Li and Qinghong Wang

“When Fukuda comes, Fuku (or “fortune” in Japanese and Chinese) has arrived!”

With this humorous remark, Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda began his speech at Peking University during his year-end visit to China. Fukuda then offered the audience a new way to look at the Sino-Japanese relationship. He called it a “Creative Partnership.” Beijing responded well, giving him a reception of the highest level and revealing plans for the first visit of a Chinese president to Japan since 1998.

Welcome though this new thinking is, it isn’t enough. A rejuvenated Sino-Japanese partnership needs creative approaches to deepen understanding and build trust. But rather than a top-down approach, the two countries need stronger links between their civil societies that can spread ideas further and faster than can government efforts. This bottom-up approach will simultaneously build independent bases of support for the bilateral relationship that are insulated from changing political winds. Critical to the success of this effort is cooperation between governments and civil societies within AND between the two countries.

Fukuda’s new thinking

In his formulation of the China-Japan relationship, Fukuda made clear his desire to recognize China as a partner, not as a threat. Since the notion of Sino-Japan competition dominates the thinking of politicians and media, Fukuda has stressed the need for a “creative” approach to steer Sino-Japanese relations in a new and positive direction.

To do so, Fukuda provides new thinking in three ways:

First, he emphasizes the shared historical and cultural connections between the two countries. This is a departure from the old approach that pushes China to accept Western values such as human rights and democracy. His visit to Confucius’ hometown was a powerful symbol of the recognition of Chinese influence on Japanese culture.

Second, Fukuda advocates comprehensive cooperation between the two countries in areas in which Japan has great experience and technology to meet China’s desperate needs, such as environmental protection, increasing energy efficiency, intellectual property rights protection, and others.

Third, he promotes communication between younger generations, especially young elites, in both countries. One such initiative will increase Peking University faculty and students’ understanding of Japan by inviting them to study in Japan and join their Japanese colleagues in research programs on global issues. Less burdened by history and possessed of a new outlook, it is easier for young generations to communicate

and understand each other; with more common experiences and time to build on contacts, communication between young elites can have a huge impact on bilateral relations. *[Editor’s note: The Pacific Forum’s Young Leaders Program is another vehicle for promoting contact among the next generation. See <http://www.csis.org/pacfor/youngleaders/> for details on the program.]*

Acknowledging the historical link between China and Japan is a smart idea. When it comes to Japan’s relations with the rest of the world, however, ‘values-oriented diplomacy’ still seems to dominate. At a recent ‘East Asian Community Youth Forum’ in Tokyo sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the main speaker from Japan referred several times to value-oriented diplomacy as a basis for an East Asian Community in which Japan is willing to take a leading role. This rhetoric made very clear the proverbial “elephant in the room,” present but not acknowledged. The contradiction between these two approaches must be resolved.

The second and third elements of Fukuda’s new thinking aim at mutual understanding and partnership. Cooperation in some of these areas is not new. Japanese government-affiliated organizations and hundreds of small-scale NGOs and volunteer groups have been working for years on the desertification problem in China. And youth exchange is a staple of bilateral relations: In 2005, Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched the ¥10 billion ‘21st Century Japan-China Exchange Fund.’ Operated by the Japan Foundation, its main task is supporting visits and home stays for high school students.

Civil society to the rescue

Those efforts are laudable but they – and others like them – will likely fail, since they are top-down, driven by governments and as a result, remain susceptible to the politics of the bilateral relationship. A “Creative Partnership” between the two countries requires a solid foundation of mutual understanding and trust between the two peoples. To achieve that goal, Chinese and Japanese leaders should abandon old thinking that overemphasizes government influence on, and underemphasizes the roles of, civil societies in the bilateral relationship. With their feet firmly on the ground, civil society organizations can help use government resources more efficiently by matching them with the right people and right projects; this could lead to better understanding and an enduring relationship.

Doing so requires a rethinking of the relationship between the government and the nonprofit sector in each country, and a rethinking of how the Chinese and Japanese nonprofit sectors relate to each other. While this may sound like a radical step, both governments have already acknowledged the need for progress in this direction. At the beginning of the 21st century, both governments sought to move away from ‘Big

Government, Small Society.’ Japan passed a Nonprofit Organization (NPO) Law in 1998 and over 30,000 organizations have officially registered since then. Their capacity is limited, however: over half the registered NPOs have an annual budget of less than \$50,000.

In the bilateral context, hundreds of Japanese environmental NGOs with excellent skills and knowledge have worked in China, but most of them are too small to offer financial aid to Chinese NPOs or to establish a presence in China. The lack of contact and exchange with NGOs in China, both international and domestic, have rendered their work virtually invisible. This is a lost opportunity to build better bilateral relations.

China has also experienced rapid growth of grassroots activities in the past decade, especially in the areas of migrant support, education, environmental protection, and gender. Today there are over 350,000 registered nonprofits in China. However, the lack of a supportive legal framework and poor public understanding of their work and how NGOs operate have meant that most grassroots organizations rely on support from international NGOs to survive.

Japan could be a vital source of support for these organizations, but information in Japan about Chinese NPOs is scarce. In 2001, a team of three Chinese and Japanese scholars wrote a book in Japanese on China’s civil society. Six years later, it is still the only Japanese book available on the subject. Not surprisingly, there is limited support for China-Japan exchanges that are operated by NPOs.

Facilitating bilateral communication and cooperation and empowering civil society can pay huge dividends. Putting like-minded organizations – those working on the same problems – together would reveal the shared concerns of the two countries. As organizations, they would spread that understanding to members and constituents – this “seeding” process would spread the benefits of bilateral cooperation much further than mere exchanges. Moreover, bilateral programs to solve genuine problems serve as “shock absorbers” during downturns in the political relationship. Participants would not be inclined to let top-level issues interfere with their work at the grassroots and they would press for the continuation of relations despite problems.

Social entrepreneurs are vital

Prime Minister Fukuda is right. More creativity is needed when thinking about ways to integrate civil society into the bilateral relationship. An especially critical element is ensuring these organizations are self sustaining and are recognized and supported by people from various sectors. One possible answer – and a potential focus of Japan-China cooperation – is social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurship is a powerful tool that uses business skills to solve social problems that government and traditional charities have failed to address, such as health care, global warming, unemployment, and underprivileged communities.

The value of social entrepreneurship and the importance of networking and creating platforms for social entrepreneurs are slowly being recognized in Japan and China. Global Links Initiative (with which the authors are affiliated) and ETIC (a

Japanese social entrepreneur incubating organization) co-organized the first exchange visits by social entrepreneurs from the two countries last year. At an overflow seminar in Tokyo last month, a Japanese businessman showed the impact such networks can have, noting that “knowing that there are social entrepreneurs in China who are addressing social problems that Japan is also suffering really changed the way we see China.”

By acknowledging, supporting, and collaborating with NPOs to build a better bilateral relationship, both governments can play a critical role by bringing positive stimulation to the development of civil society in its own country. That will be the best model for community building in East Asia.

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