



It Takes Two to have “Win-Win” Relations

by Mihoko Matsubara

Mihoko Matsubara [Mihoko@pacforum.org] is a resident Sasakawa Peace Foundation fellow and Fulbright Scholar at the Pacific Forum CSIS.

Japan wants “win-win relations” with Asia, declared newly elected Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko on Aug. 30. While he is known for his conservative views, he has toned down his hawkishness toward China and tried to bury the hatchet. Now, it is up to Beijing to decide whether it wants to dig up discontents of the past.

Noda is the first conservative prime minister from the DPJ, a party considered to be more liberal than the Liberal Democratic Party. When the DPJ took power in 2009, it promised to improve relations with China by pursuing “an East Asia Community.” This ill-defined project was deflated when the Senkaku incident occurred in 2010, proving that once again historical and territorial issues can worsen bilateral relations despite the intentions of the Japanese leadership.

Xinhua newspaper reacted harshly to Noda’s election. It accused Japan of “threatening the peace and stability of the region,” and demanded that his administration “carefully craft and implement a proper policy in treating Japan’s war past to soothe the resentment among the Chinese public toward Japan.”

The response by the Chinese media to Noda’s election has been to pin an anti-Chinese identity on the new prime minister and fan nationalist sentiment within China. For China, Prime Minister Noda’s attitude toward the Yasukuni Shrine is a litmus test of his China policy. The Chinese media, especially *Xinhua*, attempted to corner the new leader and push him to react.

Previously, Noda had a clear-cut hardline stance on the Yasukuni issue and territorial disputes. In 2005, he claimed in a written inquiry that then Prime Minister Koizumi’s visit to Yasukuni should not be a problem since the San Francisco Peace Treaty and four Diet resolutions restored the honor of all war criminals.

Noda also took an assertive approach toward the Senkakus in the past. In March 2004, following the arrest by the Japanese authorities of seven Chinese activists who had landed on the islands, he proposed a resolution to the Lower House that would declare the Senkaku Islands to be a part of Japanese territory. Noda argued that China has no justification for its Senkaku claim and that the Japanese Diet should thus clarify its stance of the islands’ sovereignty for the first time.

Noda has taken a softer line toward China since he began aspiring to the prime minister’s office. He did not visit Yasukuni on Aug. 15 this year. During the presidential

campaign debate, he did not refer to the intrusion of two Chinese ships into Japanese territorial waters off the Senkaku Islands on Aug. 24.

Answering questions on the Chinese and Korean media’s backlash on Yasukuni in a press conference on Aug. 30, Noda avoided clarifying his view on the shrine. He stated that he wants to be consistent with government statements as a representative of the government. On Sept. 2, Noda declared that neither he nor his Cabinet members would visit Yasukuni while he is in office. He explained that comprehensive consideration is needed in international politics, which indicates his priority is avoiding frictions with China.

While the Chinese media might claim that their harsh tone forced the change in views, that isn’t the case. The change in his stance started before the editorial offensive. There seems to be three reasons for this change of heart.

First, Noda’s sense of responsibility changed as he contemplated the role of a national leader. Second, his priorities turned to domestic issues such as post-3/11 reconstruction and recovery. Finally, the new administration needs to produce results domestically and maintain high support rates for the DPJ to win the next general election. The last two DPJ administrations lasted only one year, and disappointed the public. Thus, Noda apparently prefers to avoid trouble and remain ambiguous on China-related issues rather than getting bogged down in a fight with Beijing.

In fact, China should be aware that an antagonistic approach will worsen the bilateral relationship. Not only will this posture force Japanese conservatives to adopt a hardline policy of their own toward China, but it could fuel anti-China sentiments among the Japanese public more generally. Although the Yasukuni and territorial issues are controversial in Japan, the Japanese public does not welcome vocal instructions from overseas.

‘Win-win relations’ must be future-minded to address mutual interests, which should not be limited to the Yasukuni and Senkaku issues. Over the last few decades, the bilateral relationship has been past-oriented and rather negative.

China is absolutely right: Tokyo must “carefully craft and implement a proper policy” to make relations better. But Beijing has to play its part as well. If Noda and Beijing truly wish win-win relations, the both sides need to take the initiative and make suggestions for mutual gains. Bilateral negotiations will be still challenging but more rewarding.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.