



## **Better Japan-China Ties Depend on Beijing**

by Masashi Nishihara

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On Sept. 2 when newly elected Japanese Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko, stated that Japanese-Chinese relations should become "win-win" relations, he expressed his strong intention to improve the countries' bilateral ties. Since the ugly conflicts over the Senkaku Islands in September last year, Tokyo-Beijing relations have remained strained. The Japanese, however, were heartened by China's swift offer in March to help the people displaced by the huge earthquake and tsunami, as well as by Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to the devastated site. Nevertheless, according to a recent joint survey by Genron NPO and *China Daily*, the percentage of Japanese who feel unfavorably toward China has increased from 72 percent in 2010 to 80 percent in 2011.

What factors are hindering the improvement of bilateral ties? Many Japanese were dismayed by the Chinese government's reaction to the Senkaku incident last September. It claimed, falsely, that its fishing vessel had been struck by the Japanese Coast Guard vessel, when in fact the reverse was the case, as videotapes leaked to the Internet clearly showed.

Many Japanese felt even betrayed by China. Although Beijing had talked about building "strategically mutual relations," it then went back on its word when it suddenly suspended its exports of rare earths, a strategically vital material, to Japan. This apparently was a way to gain the immediate release of the Chinese fishermen taken into custody by the Japanese Coast Guard. In addition, to achieve the same purpose, approximately 10,000 Chinese "voluntarily" canceled planned vacation trips to Japan. These events have helped create the Japanese people's distrust of China.

China's military, particularly naval, expansion also worries Japan and its like-minded partners such as the United States, Australia, and ASEAN countries. The PLAN fleet now has a noticeable presence in the East China Sea, sailing through Japan's southeast islands in the Pacific and conducting exercises near Japanese territorial waters and near Guam. The Chinese fleet in the South China Sea already has had skirmishes with the fishing and naval vessels of those ASEAN nations with claims to small islands there. The prevailing view in Japan, and the region, is that China has begun to flex its muscles unnecessarily. China seems to be trying to control the Western Pacific on its own terms rather than trying to build mutually respectful relations through diplomatic channels. China's first, refurbished, Soviet-made aircraft carrier, which was tested in August, reportedly will be

followed by a half dozen Chinese-made carriers in the next 10 years or so. What kind of country does China really want to build?

Another source of Japan's distrust of China is its lack of military transparency. Can the Noda government have "win-win" relations with such an opaque and hegemonic China?

Prime Minister Noda's outlook on Japan's defense is conservative but reasonable. In an article in the October issue of the monthly magazine *Voice*, he stresses the importance of the Japanese people's defense of their own nation as well as the alliance with the United States. Unlike Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio, who was in office for less than a year, Noda places low priority on building an East Asian community. Rather, his concern is protecting Japan's territorial integrity.

In order to limit China's military activities in the East China Sea, Japan finds it strategically important to seek a stronger alliance with the United States. Indeed, one of the fortunate outcomes of the earthquake and tsunami in March was that it brought together the Japanese and US armed forces, which worked together to clean up the devastation and, in the process, strengthened their alliance.

Many Chinese may assume that Prime Minister Noda will visit Japan's Yasukuni Shrine, where 14 wartime leaders sentenced by the international military tribunal as war criminals are enshrined. Visiting the shrine has been a source of severe tension between the two countries. But Noda already has indicated that he will not visit the shrine.

Thus, whether Japan can improve ties with China depends mainly on China. We should remember our joint communiqué of 1972, which urged us—among others—to respect the principle of noninterference in our relations. Unfortunately, however, China has constantly violated this principle, by dictating how Japan should honor its war dead and how its school textbooks should teach history. These are Japan's internal affairs. "Win-win" relations between Japan and China can be achieved only when our nations truly respect each other.

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