

# **Chapter 10**

## **Changes in China-Japan Relations and East Asian Security**

**Zhang Tuosheng**

China-Japan relations have been turbulent for over a decade and endured a sustained deterioration in the political and security fields, especially from 2001 to 2006. The bilateral relationship finally made a major turn towards a new stage of development, marked by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's ice-breaking visit to China and Premier Wen Jiabao's ice-melting journey to Japan. Changes and developments in China-Japan relations will exert a profound and far-reaching influence over East Asian security.

China-Japan relations have actually witnessed remarkable growth since their normalisation in 1972. However, due to deep changes in the international situation and within both countries, China-Japan relations entered a prolonged period of turbulence in the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup> During that period, frictions increased and intensified continuously. With complete suspension of high-level contact at the end of 2005, bilateral relations fell to rock bottom. Serious deterioration of China-Japan relations not only directly undermined the strategic interests of both countries, but also caused serious international concern.

With efforts from both sides, Abe visited China in October 2006. The two sides reached important common understandings, including (1) working together to overcome political barriers and comprehensively promoting bilateral relations; (2) resuming exchanges and dialogue between leaders; (3) correctly appraising the other's path to development; (4) accelerating consultation on the joint development of disputed territories in the East China Sea; and (5) constructing a mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests. The visit served to break the political stalemate between the two countries, thus opening the gate to further improvement and development of bilateral relations.

Premier Wen Jiabao visited Japan in April 2007, the first visit by a Chinese premier in seven years. The two sides agreed further on properly handling major differences and reached a consensus on the basic spirit and content of a mutually beneficial strategic relationship as well as on some measures to begin to develop this new relationship. Premier Wen's speech at the Japanese Diet was widely welcomed. The visit also opened the 35th anniversary celebration of normalisation

of relations and instituted the China-Japan Culture and Sports Exchange Year. The successful visit by Premier Wen consolidated the improvements in bilateral relations since October 2006, registering a solid step towards establishing strategic mutually beneficial relations. The major turn in China-Japan relations is manifested in three areas.

First, the two sides agreed on resolving the question of the Yasukuni Shrine and found a pragmatic solution.<sup>2</sup> This was a key step in breaking the political stalemate that had been formed because of the then Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visits to the Shrine during the previous five years. Many people find the agreement still rather fragile. However, I believe it was a decision made after careful thought on both sides rather than an act of expediency. Given that differences over history are hard to resolve definitively in the short term, it serves the interests of both sides to prevent them damaging the wider bilateral relationship. Furthermore, China has already demonstrated to Japan, and continues to show, that it has no intention of playing the history card. Facts will gradually dispel misgivings on the part of the Japanese public.<sup>3</sup> The possibility that Abe would resume visits to the Shrine to reverse adverse political developments ahead of lower House elections in July 2007 was remote.<sup>4</sup> Improved relations with China represented one of Abe's major achievements and enjoyed extensive domestic support. Why would he have made such a self-defeating move?

Second, the two sides agreed to resume and strengthen high-level exchanges, and remarkable progress has been made in this regard. In today's world, particularly where major countries are concerned, high-level exchanges are a basic condition for the development of normal state-to-state relations. On this basis, certain mutual trust between major leaders may play a uniquely positive role in facilitating the improvement and development of relations between their countries. However, for quite some time, the steady worsening of China-Japan relations seriously obstructed high-level contact, which became the weakest link in bilateral ties. Remarkable changes took place after October 2006. Major leaders met on three international occasions and realised the first exchange of visits. Then an exchange of visits between Prime Minister Abe and President Hu Jintao was placed on the agenda. Resumption and strengthening of high-level contact is a substantive part of the major turn in the relationship and will play a key role in consolidating improvements and preventing any reversal.

Third, the two sides reached common understandings on establishing a mutually beneficial strategic relationship, which reset the baseline of bilateral relations on common interest. About four years ago, this author analysed the reasons for the worsening of relations between China and Japan and found that, apart from the direct causes of disputes over history, Taiwan and the East China Sea, this deterioration had more profound roots: the end of the Cold War and

the appearance of a relationship between two major Asian powers. Neither side was prepared or accustomed to such a situation, which led to increasing friction and a relationship dominated by differences.<sup>5</sup> The idea of jointly establishing a mutually beneficial strategic relationship marked a major change in mindset and a new starting point in establishing political mutual trust. It indicates the determination of both sides to seek common ground while shelving differences and placing common interests at the top of their agenda. By so doing, the two major powers are abandoning the old idea of 'no two rival tigers on the same mountain' and starting to work together for cooperation and a 'win-win' situation.

With these three changes, China-Japan exchanges and cooperation turned warmer, growing and strengthening in many fields. The two sides strengthened cooperation on resolving the North Korean nuclear issue and maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula. China also expressed a willingness to offer possible assistance to Japan on the kidnapping question, which was welcomed by Japan. Negotiations on the joint development of the East China Sea sped up and entered into the stage of discussing detailed schemes for joint development. Japan expressed its understanding of China's serious concern over the question of Taiwan, reaffirmed its commitment to the three political documents, and to its undertaking not to support Taiwan independence. A joint research program on the history question, guided by both governments, was formally launched and two workshops were held. Military relations achieved a new momentum with the Chinese Defence Minister visiting Japan and an exchange of naval visits was planned. Exchanges between political parties of the two countries as well as between the Chinese National People's Congress and the Japanese Diet became more active. The two sides also launched high-level economic dialogue and energy policy dialogue mechanisms. Together with the 35th anniversary celebrations and the launch of a series of events under the Year of Cultural and Sport Exchanges, non-governmental exchanges also gained momentum.

This major turning point in China-Japan relations has not been accidental, but rather is driven by a sense of necessity.

First, the continued worsening of relations had seriously damaged the strategic interests of both countries. Over the previous seven years, various disputes had surfaced, public sentiments had become increasingly confrontational and mutual strategic suspicions had grown strong.<sup>6</sup> With the outbreak of large-scale anti-Japan demonstrations in some Chinese cities in 2005, people began to worry that the situation of 'cold politics and warm economy'<sup>7</sup> between China and Japan could move towards 'cold politics and cold economy', which would lead to unthinkable prospects. To break the political stalemate and to guide bilateral relations towards stability and improvement gradually became a desire of both countries.

Furthermore, the worsening of China-Japan relations caused much concern in the international community. Poor China-Japan relations not only weakened their cooperation in establishing regional multilateral cooperation mechanisms such as the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), but also increased difficulty in reforming the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and led to a serious imbalance in the China-US-Japan triangle. No country in East Asia wishes to be forced to make a choice between China and Japan. Although the United States has never wanted to see the level of the China-Japan relationship approaching or even exceeding that of the US-China or US-Japan relationships, worsening China-Japan relations embody the danger of confrontation between the US-Japan alliance and China and of increased difficulty in coordination and cooperation between the US-South Korea alliance and the US-Japan alliance, with both Koreas holding a historical view of Japan similar to that of China. Moreover, although the United States Government has long been reluctant to publicly criticise the revisionist historical view in Japan, the growing salience of the Yasukuni Shrine problem and consequent rising criticism from the US Congress and the strategic studies community pushed the Bush Administration into an awkward position. The international community, including the United States, had become eager to see stability and improvement in China-Japan relations at an early date.

Additionally, ever since 2005, the two governments (China in particular) had been attempting to break the political stalemate and improve bilateral relations. A meeting between Chinese President Hu Jintao and the then Japanese Prime Minister, Junichiro Koizumi, in Indonesia in April 2005,<sup>8</sup> which led to the start of strategic dialogue and the resumption of negotiations over the East China Sea in the following month, had sparked hope. The Chinese Government gave a positive comment on Koizumi's statement in commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the Second World War. Even after the two sides' efforts were once again stalled by Koizumi's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, contacts continued in the most difficult circumstances in 2006, with exchanges between the two ruling parties, a Foreign Ministers' meeting, strategic dialogue,<sup>9</sup> East China Sea negotiations, people-to-people dialogue and Track 2 dialogue. At the same time, China began to release positive signals<sup>10</sup> towards future Japanese leaders. The most likely next Prime Minister, Abe, then Chief Cabinet Minister, began to adopt ambiguity over Yasukuni Shrine.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the two sides seized the opportunity of a Japanese leadership change and agreed (through arduous negotiation) on overcoming political barriers and promoting healthy development of friendly and cooperative relations, leading to the long-awaited turn in bilateral relations.

However, the foundation for the turn is still rather fragile. The three major friction points (Taiwan, history, and the East China Sea) remain. The serious

confrontation in public sentiments that have formed during the continuous worsening of bilateral relations will remain difficult to manage, and take time to reverse. At a more profound level, the mutual strategic suspicion will not disappear overnight.<sup>12</sup>

In this situation, in order that progress can be made in building a mutually beneficial strategic relationship, it should be a paramount task for China and Japan to fully consolidate and expand the opening that has been created and strive to make the turn for the better irreversible. The two sides must stick unswervingly to the common understanding of jointly eliminating political barriers, and to properly handling the history issue and placing it appropriately so as to prevent it from becoming, yet again, a major barrier to the development of bilateral relations. At the same time, efforts should be made to maintain and further develop high-level exchanges on a regular and institutionalised basis and in diversified forms, making it among the most important mechanisms to promote bilateral relations and to control and handle bilateral differences.

The two sides must be aware that it will not be smooth sailing in the quest to improve bilateral relations. Problems may arise from time to time and frictions may resurface in various forms. Some questions, if not properly handled, may even incur serious damage to bilateral relations. With the March 2008 'presidential' election in Taiwan drawing near, the question of Taiwan may well gain prominence and should attract serious attention from both sides.<sup>13</sup> All in all, at present and in the coming one to two years, it is essential to properly and prudently handle various differences between the countries, including possible new differences.<sup>14</sup>

While continuing to control and narrow differences and consolidate existing gains and benefits, the two sides must seize the opportunity to rapidly expand cooperation and promote development of mutually beneficial strategic relations. This will be the key to whether China-Japan relations may have a new future. Since October 2006, through repeated discussions, China and Japan have already reached three very important points of common understanding in this regard.

First, the basic spirit of mutually beneficial strategic relations has been set; that is, jointly making constructive contribution to peace, stability and development in Asia and the whole world through bilateral, regional and international cooperation, and in that process benefiting each other, expanding common interest and pushing bilateral relations to a new high.<sup>15</sup> This basic spirit goes beyond differences and places mutual benefit and expanded common interest in a paramount position. It also goes beyond bilateral cooperation and expands the foundation of bilateral relations to broader areas of regional and international cooperation. Such a spirit will be of long-term significance in guiding the effort to construct a mutually beneficial strategic relationship.

Second, the basic contents of a mutually beneficial strategic relationship have been clarified. They include: (1) supporting each other's peaceful development and increasing mutual political trust; (2) deepening mutually beneficial cooperation and realising common development; (3) strengthening defence dialogue and exchanges and working together for regional stability; (4) increasing cultural and personnel exchanges and promoting mutual understanding and friendly sentiments between the two peoples; and (5) enhancing coordination and cooperation in a joint effort to deal with regional and global issues.<sup>16</sup> The basic contents touch upon varying levels of China-Japan relations, provide a clearly drawn blueprint for the construction of a mutually beneficial strategic relationship and identify the direction in which the many dimensions of the relationship must move. Among all these contents, the first one is of guiding significance and constitutes a foundation for mutually beneficial strategic relations.

Third, practical steps have been identified, such as comprehensively improving and strengthening various bilateral dialogue and exchange mechanisms including high-level contacts, strengthening mutually beneficial cooperation in nine areas (including areas such as energy, environmental protection, information and communication technology, and finance), and focusing on strengthened cooperation on regional and international affairs (including, in particular, reform of the United Nations and the Six-Party Talks).<sup>17</sup> Many of these steps are in the nature of recovering a badly depleted relationship. However, there are also specific cooperation measures, such as the launch of high-level economic dialogue, exchange of naval visits, strengthened defence liaison, increased energy and intellectual property rights cooperation and more dialogue on UN reform, which are of ground-breaking significance for bilateral relations. Furthermore, China made it clear that it is 'ready to see a greater and constructive role played by Japan in international affairs'.<sup>18</sup> This is another important sign, which will have a far-reaching influence over future China-Japan cooperation in international relations.

Constructing a mutually beneficial strategic relationship is an arduous task that will take time to accomplish. The two sides need to translate their common understanding into action. Culturally, China values the overall situation and principles while Japan treasures details and tangible benefits. The two sides should be aware of their cultural differences and make the effort to adapt to and complement each other. They need to set their eyes on the long-term and overall interests but start with minor actions and with a flexible and pragmatic attitude, thereby promoting bilateral relations in a step-by-step and stable manner. So long as the two sides honour their commitment, act in line with their common understanding and work conscientiously together, the vision of a mutually beneficial strategic relationship between China and Japan can finally be realised.

Continued improvement and development of China-Japan relations will have a positive influence on East Asian security. First of all, it facilitates cooperation on the Six-Party Talks. With the continuous escalation of the North Korean nuclear crisis in 2006, people were worried about greater difficulty in coordination between China on the one hand and the United States and Japan on the other due to poor China-Japan relations and the more intense situation on the Korean Peninsula once North Korea carried out its first nuclear test. However, major changes in China-Japan relations exerted a positive influence over the development of the North Korean nuclear issue. After North Korea's nuclear test, the UNSC quickly adopted a resolution to impose sanctions on North Korea and the Six-Party Talks resumed shortly thereafter to register important progress. Admittedly, the positive developments on the North Korean nuclear issue had multiple causes, but improved China-Japan relations and strengthened cooperation between China, South Korea and Japan were certainly among them. Some people even believed that Japan sought to improve its relations with China partly out of its serious concern over the Korean Peninsula. This analysis makes sense. In the future, with China and Japan giving priority to the Six-Party Talks in their effort to develop regional and international cooperation, the positive effects of improved China-Japan relations will become more apparent.

Improved China-Japan relations have also helped to relax tensions over the East China Sea and to facilitate a peaceful resolution of the outstanding territorial and maritime disputes that are still widespread in East Asia. When state-to-state relations worsen, disputes over territory or maritime interests are not only difficult to resolve but may also trigger military conflict. In 2005, frictions over rival claims in the East China Sea developed to a dangerous level, with a marked increase in military surveillance by both China and Japan, more radical opinions in the confrontational national sentiments, and the appearance of the view that there would definitely be a war between China and Japan. Later, following negotiations, the two sides reached initial understandings on the common development of these disputed territories and the situation relaxed to some extent. Nonetheless, against the backdrop of a generally tense bilateral relationship, registering further progress will be very difficult and the risk of reversal is ever-present. Improvement in bilateral relations has created the necessary condition for common development of the East China Sea, allowing the two governments to gradually dispel disruptive nationalistic sentiments and find practical ways forward through sustained and serious dialogue and mutual compromise. After late 2006, the two sides increased their contact over the East China Sea issue. Their common understanding grew and they agreed to strive for a specific scheme of common development to be reported to leaders of the two countries in the fall of 2007.<sup>19</sup> If China and Japan are successful in jointly developing their claims in the East China Sea, they will not only create conditions

for the two sides to resolve their maritime boundary dispute and the Diaoyutai Islands dispute in the future, but also set a positive example for other countries in the region in relaxing tension and resolving disputes over territory or maritime interests.

Moreover, improved China-Japan relations are conducive to maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, which serves the interests of the Mainland, Taiwan and others in East Asia (including Japan), as well as those nations outside the region (such as the United States). However, the development of pro-independence forces in Taiwan constitutes a huge challenge to peace and stability in the region. In recent years, with the sustained stable development of China-US relations, their cooperation to prevent Taiwan-independence sentiments disrupting the status quo has increased and their friction over the Taiwan question has decreased. However, frictions between China and Japan over Taiwan have been on the rise due to the worsening relationship. Pro-Taiwan forces in Japan have gained influence, official contacts with Taiwan have increased, and Japan's Taiwan policy has moved from one of ambiguity to more clarity.<sup>20</sup> This has been exploited by Taiwan's independence forces. They even publicly called for the establishment of a quasi-military alliance with Japan against China. The worsening of China-Japan relations added complexity and risk to the situation in the Taiwan Strait. Any improvement and development in China-Japan relations may lead to increased cooperation between the two countries in maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, thus containing the expansion of the Taiwan independence force and leaving China, the United States and Japan more space in which to manoeuvre in the event that the pro-independence forces provoke a crisis. The May 2007 US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (2 plus 2) meeting did not again list the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait among its common strategic objectives, giving a positive signal<sup>21</sup> and helping to restrict the capacity of the pro-independence forces to disrupt the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.

Further, improved China-Japan relations will facilitate the establishment and development of a regional multilateral security cooperation mechanism. At present, East Asian security mechanisms are mainly composed of two parts: the US-led bilateral military alliances; and the rapidly developing bilateral and multilateral security dialogues in which coordination and cooperation among major powers play an important role. As time passes, the role of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the APT, the EAS and the Six-Party Talks will increase and that of bilateral military alliances will gradually decrease. In this process, improvement and development of China-Japan relations and strengthened military relations and defence dialogue will not only facilitate the formation of a relatively stable and coordinated triangular relationship between China, the United States and Japan; it will also create the conditions necessary for dialogue between China and the US-Japan alliance. Continued development of China-Japan



relations will inject vigour into, and lay down the foundation for, the development of multilateral security mechanisms in East Asia. History will prove that only once China and Japan achieve a genuine reconciliation, and are able to cooperate comprehensively, can East Asia establish an effective multilateral security cooperation mechanism.

Finally, the continued improvement and development of China-Japan relations will also greatly enhance their cooperation in the fields of non-traditional security, such as counter-terrorism, guarding against financial and energy crises, treatment of environmental pollution and ecological destruction, prevention and treatment of international infectious diseases, combating transnational crime, and supplying international humanitarian assistance. Since the end of the Cold War, an important trend in the international situation has been the rise of non-traditional security challenges. Strengthened cooperation in this regard will be a necessary choice for China, Japan and other East Asian countries.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> With the end of the Cold War, both China-US relations and China-Japan relations experienced turbulence. China-US relations moved out of the 12-year turbulent period (1989–2001) and entered into a stage of relatively stable development, while the turbulent period of China-Japan relations, started in 1994, had (by 2006) also lasted for 12 years.

<sup>2</sup> Japan was to adopt a policy of ambiguity, while China was to drop its insistence on Japanese leaders' public commitment of not paying tribute to the Yasukuni Shrine. The Joint Press Communiqué issued on 8 October 2006 vowed to 'properly handle issues that affect development of bilateral relations and enable strong movement of both political and economic wheels'.

<sup>3</sup> The long-held opinion in Japan has been that China always plays the history card with Japan and that, even when the Yasukuni Shrine problem is resolved, China will take on other historical issues. Influenced by such a school of thought, many Japanese people, although not in favour of Koizumi visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, were either silent or supportive of his visit against the backdrop of an intense China-Japan dispute.

<sup>4</sup> Shinzo Abe resigned on 12 September 2007, barely one year after becoming Japan's Prime Minister.

<sup>5</sup> Zhang Tuosheng, 'Ruhe Fazhan Zhong Ri Changqi Youhao Hezuo Guanxi (How to development a long-term friendly and cooperative relationship between China and Japan)', *Zhongguo Pinglun (China Review)*, vol. 1, 2006, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> In Japan, the Chinese military threat school of thought was prevalent. In China, the public was seriously concerned about the possibility of Japan pursuing a path to military power or even reviving militarism.

<sup>7</sup> Since 2001, even with continued tension in the political and security fields, economic relations between China and Japan had maintained fairly good growth. This was called 'cold politics and warm economy'.

<sup>8</sup> President Hu Jintao proposed a five-point proposal on improving and developing China-Japan relations. See *Xinhuanet Jakarta* report on 23 April 2005.

<sup>9</sup> The three rounds of strategic dialogues in February, July and September 2006 played an important role in the two sides' effort to break the political stalemate.

<sup>10</sup> In February 2006, while meeting seven friendly organisations from Japan, President Hu Jintao made it clear that 'so long as Japanese leaders clearly make a decision not to visit again the Yasukuni Shrine hosting Class A War Criminals, I would like to have dialogue and meeting with Japanese leaders on improving and developing China-Japan relations'. In August 2006, he made a similar statement to the new Japanese Ambassador Yuji Miyamoto on the occasion of the latter's presentation of credentials.

<sup>11</sup> It was rather eye-catching that, in the summer of 2006, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe adopted an attitude of neither confirming nor denying media reports about his visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in the previous Spring.

<sup>12</sup> An outstanding example in this regard is the then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's public request during his visit to Europe in Spring 2007 that the European Union should not lift its arms embargo over China.

<sup>13</sup> On 22 March 2008, Nationalist Party candidate Ma Ying-jeou was elected President of Taiwan.

<sup>14</sup> The prospect of Japan revising its Constitution has already caused deep concern in China.

<sup>15</sup> China–Japan Joint Press Communiqué, 11 April 2007, available at <<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/2649/t311005.htm>>, accessed 17 June 2009.

<sup>16</sup> China–Japan Joint Press Communiqué, 11 April 2007.

<sup>17</sup> China–Japan Joint Press Communiqué, 11 April 2007.

<sup>18</sup> China–Japan Joint Press Communiqué, 11 April 2007.

<sup>19</sup> China–Japan Joint Press Communiqué, 11 April 2007.

<sup>20</sup> In the past, Japan had long been reluctant to make a public statement about whether it would intervene in the event of a military conflict in the Taiwan Strait. However, with the worsening of China–Japan relations, voices publicly arguing for intervention, together with some voices within the United States, have been on the rise.

<sup>21</sup> China believes that the relevant countries should jointly maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, but firmly opposes armed intervention by the US–Japan alliance in a Taiwan Strait conflict on any ground. The complete text of the 1 May 2007 Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee, 'Alliance Transformation: Advancing United States–Japan Security and Defense Cooperation' can be found at <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/scc/joint0705.html>>, accessed 17 June 2009.