

MENDING SINO-JAPANESE RELATIONS

Lars Vargö

The meeting between Xi Jinping and Abe Shinzō on the sidelines of the APEC Summit—the first between the two leaders—represents a tentative step forward for Sino-Japanese relations. In spite of this, Lars Vargö cautions against seeing any substantive improvement in bilateral ties. Yet, as the second- and third-largest economies in the world, such a situation benefits neither country.

Three-and-a-half decades after the signing of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between China and Japan, the new generation of leaders in both countries are failing to live up to the spirit of the treaty. In spite of the recent meeting between Abe Shinzō and Xi Jinping, historical grievances, ongoing territorial disputes, and hostile domestic constituencies continue to bedevil bilateral relations. Instead of redressing perceived past historical injustices by tools other than negotiation, both sides should use this meeting as a stepping stone to build trust, realizing that they have more to lose than gain by failing to talk.

Uneasy Encounter

The strained bilateral relations between China and Japan potentially took a turn for the better at the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) Summit in Beijing, held on November 10-11. At least, a bilateral meeting between the two political leaders, President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, was realized, something which, so far, had been avoided by President Xi, but eagerly sought after by Prime Minister Abe. The meeting was the first since between the two leaders since they came to power in 2012.

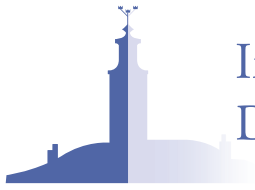
The realization of the meeting on November 10 was clearly facilitated by the fact that it was not a bilateral summit per se, but a side event, held on the fringes of a larger multilateral forum. The body language of President Xi in the official photograph of the two leaders' handshake also signaled an emotional distance. The Japanese media noted this, but they also eagerly published a smiling picture of Xi, when he welcomed Mr. and Mrs. Abe to the evening banquet. Whatever the body language, the meeting itself was of quite some importance. Not perhaps because of the substance—the focus seems to have been on the economy

and economic cooperation—but rather that it took place at all.

Mending Relations?

There are reasons why China and Japan need to improve bilateral relations. The present strained relations have clearly resulted in a situation which has been unfavourable for both countries. Direct investments from Japan to China have dropped dramatically, and Japanese industry has lost some of its enthusiasm for China as a market. China will suffer unnecessarily if Japanese investors leave, or avoid taking strategic decisions to enter with new projects. At the same time, Japan and the Japanese economy will suffer if strained political relations result in a myriad of lost opportunities. The simple truth is that the two countries, as the world's second- and third-largest economies, are already dependent on each other in many ways. Furthermore, their actions have not only regional and global implications, but they are geographically close neighbors enriched by thousands of years of historic and cultural ties.

Now both sides have an opportunity to carefully mend ties in a sustainable way. It will not be easy, since Chinese ships keep entering the waters around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, and there will probably be more Japanese visits to the Yasukuni shrine and more controversial statements on historical issues. Accordingly, the prospect in the short term of Beijing issuing an invitation to Abe to hold a bilateral summit would appear remote. Similarly, it will be very difficult at this stage for Tokyo to get Chinese acceptance of an invitation to visit Japan. While Japanese public opinion would likely be in favor of such, the mood in China is, for the moment, still one of resentment over Japanese statements and actions concerning its history.



Looking Back to the Future

History is obviously important for modern political East Asian decision makers. Political leaders in Japan have consistently expressed frustration over what they claim is an unfair way of describing Japan's actions during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. In their view, Japan's behavior was simply a response to Western aggression in Asia, an aggression expressed not least through the Opium wars and the competition for territories and special privileges in China. Japan, they say, entered the Western playing field and beat the West at its own colonial game, in order to defend itself and its weak Asian neighbors.

This is not a view subscribed to by China, which claims that there is an ongoing campaign within political circles in Japan to whitewash history: Japanese statements about being misunderstood, or that accusations of massacres and other atrocities are exaggerated, means that Japan does not understand what it has done and that history might repeat itself.

The present territorial dispute between China and Japan, over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, is very much rooted in the Japanese victory over China in 1895. Although Japan claims that the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands were seized because they were *terra nullius* and had nothing to do with the war, China claims that they were taken at the same time as the humiliating Treaty of Shimonoseki was signed, a treaty which forced China to pay a huge war indemnity. It was impossible for China at the time to direct its attention to the islands, especially not militarily.

Japan, for its part, has had reasons to be alarmed by the activities of Chinese ships in the waters around Senkaku/Diaoyu during the last few years. Not only this but Chinese ambitions and the strengthening of Chinese military capacity has long been of concern to the Japanese government. The ambitions of China today are seen as rather opaque, especially when treaties signed 120 years ago are brought into the picture amid Japanese fears that China may try and redress such by military means.

From Enmity to Friendship

Today, two historical curves seem to meet. Both sides are energized by the wish to correct injustices perceived as having occurred in the past, and both are using methods not found at the negotiating table. China has repeatedly sent

ships without prior warning into waters which are claimed by Japan, and Japanese political leaders have repeatedly downplayed responsibility for such issues as the Nanjing massacre, women forced into prostitution, and the real ambitions behind earlier military aggressions. Both have failed to sit down to discuss solutions to their differences and have opted for actions which further provoke the other side. For things to go forward in a constructive manner, this has to stop.

In 1978 the Treaty of Peace and Friendship was signed between China and Japan. The then Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping was widely quoted as saying that “by-gones are by-gones” and that remaining bilateral issues should be solved by later, wiser generations. The important thing was to build trust and healthy bilateral relations. This will by no means an easy task in the current climate of distrust. But the recent meeting between President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Abe Shinzô has at least the potential of being the starting point of a return to the spirit of that treaty.

Dr. Lars Vargö is Distinguished Fellow at ISDP and is former Swedish Ambassador to Japan.

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