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# Indirect Support from Japan Is Key to China's Reform

By **KOKUBUN Ryosei**

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao described Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to China last October was an "ice-breaking visit." This time, he described his own trip to Japan as an "ice-melting visit." The two countries may still be harboring deep suspicions about each other, but the ice has definitely begun to thaw. We can praise Wen's visit to Japan was a success in the sense that it propelled bi-lateral relations forward.

The highlight of Wen's visit was the speech he gave at the Diet. And the most dramatic part of his address was when he stated: "Ever since normalization of diplomatic ties between China and Japan took place, the Japanese government and Japanese leaders have stated on many occasions their stance on history-related problems, publicly acknowledged their invasion and expressed their deep remorse and regret to victimized nations. That is something that the Chinese government and people recognize positively."

In recent years a sense of dissatisfaction had been spreading throughout the Japanese side: "How many times must Japan apologize?" With Wen's words China has now publicly acknowledged that Japan's handling of the historical issues has been basically correct-though he did remind Japan that it was important to continue to act on the words made so far.

Another notable development was the contents of the "mutually beneficial strategic relationship" that the two countries aim to build. Specific key points were revealed in a joint press release issued after the summit meeting took place.

The first is to promote dialogue. It was agreed that leaders of both countries will continue to visit and meet with each other; the two countries will maintain high-level economic and diplomatic dialogue; and further it was agreed that China will send its naval vessel to Japan for a visit, and Japan will send its Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) vessel to China for a visit.

Secondly, Japan and China will strengthen mutually beneficial cooperation in areas such as energy, environmental protection, agriculture and finance. Thirdly, the two countries agreed to work together in the international front, in relation to U.N. reform and issues concerning North Korea.

Apart from these goals, the leaders touched on the issue of the East China Sea. How will the two countries turn the disputed waters into a "sea of cooperation" -that will be the initial test for the strategic relationship to prove itself.

In recent years, there has been a great progress in Japan-China exchanges on the people level, and there has been an increasing amount of cultural contact. On the economic side, mutual interdependence has deepened significantly. Japan's economic recovery has come to rely heavily on the Chinese market. Despite such realities, or rather, depending on such realities, the political world did nothing to mend the strained Japan-China relations for many years.

In both countries, historical issues became intertwined with domestic politics that bogged them down, rendering both sides immobile. The world watched the standstill. There were news reports that almost made it sound as if a Japan-China war would soon break out. Some went as far as claiming that Japan and China lacked the ability to solve the problem on their own. The United States, European countries and South Korea made a move to volunteer to serve as mediator.

Actually it was Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who managed a breakthrough in the stifling situation, by making a surprise visit to China. His diplomatic action to put national interest at the foremost putting personal beliefs aside pushed up his support ratings. Up until then, China had maintained that visits to the Yasukuni Shrine where Class-A war criminals are honored along with Japan's war dead, must be halted, if summit meetings were to take place. However, China's President Hu Jintao chose to turn a blind eye to this resolution, managed to reign in the discontent arising from the party, and decided to place priority on normalization of bilateral relations. The rapprochement was thus brought about owing much to the trust and resolution made by the two leaders.

Is it all right to say that Japan-China relations are now going to be safe and secure? The answer to that question is no. The relationship between the two countries soured over many long years, and that has left the people of the two countries harboring extremely negative images against each other. Just because their leaders resume relations, that won't be enough to change everything. Deep-rooted resentment remains among some people and political forces that do not welcome the compromise shown by the two countries towards improving relations. The Chinese government is actually suppressing such resentment from surfacing.

There is a school of thought that claims normal bi-lateral ties with China will never be realized unless the country becomes fully democratized. Indeed, China is not a democratic entity. And I am one of those people who have long hoped to see a democratized China. As an academic, I have been seeking the possibility of that actually taking place. Having said that, I do not think it is impossible to interact with the China as it is now. The United States and European countries are now trying to curtail demands against China regarding human rights and democracy. These countries are rather at pains to strengthen ties with the real China before them, a country with ever-increasing presence.

To trace the history of the two countries, Japan first began offering financial support to China when it began taking its baby steps toward a route of reform and liberalization. Japan was intent on keeping the country from turning back. When Beijing found itself in a tight spot after the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, Japan scrambled around doing its best to prevent China from becoming internationally isolated. Further down the road, China chose to make the transition to a market economy, and entered a phase of strong economic growth, which is still on-going. Japan was instrumental in enhancing China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). In other words, Japan has always been there offering China indirect support so as to facilitate the country's reform. Tokyo did it more than the United States and European countries that insisted on China's democratization.

However, the real structural reform for China must be completed hereon. And the work is going to be uphill. There is not a single country that hopes to see China, now deeply integrated with the global economy, become embroiled in confusion. In order to ensure China completes a smooth and stable transition, Japan also faces a crucial stage as it tries to fulfill its mission in offering the much needed indirect support. China needs Japan's help. Especially valuable are the experiences Japan accumulated as a forerunner -including the successes and the failures. I believe that herein lies the numerous bridges that will help build the mutually beneficial strategic relationship between the two countries.

**(This is the text of an article by KOKUBUN Ryosei, Professor, Contemporary Chinese studies, Keio University, and a Member of the Global Forum of Japan (GFJ), which originally appeared on the The Asahi Shimbun's website "Asahi.com" on April 21, 2007.**

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