

Hailing Prime Minister Aso's Stance towards China

By YUSHITA Hiroyuki,

Newly-elected Prime Minister Aso Taro held bilateral talks respectively with Chinese President Hu Jintao, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and South Korean President Lee Myung-bank in October on the occasion of his attendance at the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) summit in Beijing, thereby kicking off his summit-level diplomacy with neighboring Asian countries. After the repeated changes of Prime Minister in Japan, both national and international attention was focused on how the Japanese new leader works out his policies towards China and South Korea. To our delight, during these meetings, the basic outline for building solid relationships and cooperation was confirmed among those heads of government, and the implementation of reciprocal visits and a frequent exchange of views on the telephone were also agreed upon between Japan and South Korea. Worthy of special note concerning Japan's relations with China was Mr. Aso's remarks at the Reception to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and China. Reading the press coverage of his remarks, I fully sympathized with him in the following three points.

The first point is concerning Mr. Aso's basic understanding of the nature of Japan-China relations. He stated, "It is not easy to name other countries as important to Japan as China. The essence of Japan-China bilateral relations is that our two countries are 'mutually indispensable to each other.' Japan and China are neighbors in perpetuity, that is, 'neighbors that cannot relocate.' Japan and China should make a concerted effort and grow together in order to realize an Asia that is both open and increasingly vibrant."

The second point is about Mr. Aso's basic perception of the status quo of Japan-China relations. He stated, "When we look at public opinion surveys regarding Japan-China relations, I cannot help feeling a touch of concern. In both Japan and China, the percentage of people holding at least some degree of positive feelings towards the other country does not reach even 30%. Even if we hold different views, we should always have a correct understanding of what the other is thinking. The important thing is to promote dialogue and exchanges at every possible level, thereby deepening our mutual understanding on broader basis."

The last point is about Mr. Aso's basic posture on the bilateral relations. He said, "We should not refrain from doing things in the name of 'friendship' between Japan and China. Rather, active cooperation through sound competition will constitute a true 'mutually beneficial relationship

based on common strategic interests.' There are a host of issues that Japan and China should engage in cooperatively, proactively sending a message from Asia to the world. We are looking towards the same future. We can have even more confidence in 'the latent power and vitality' of the Japan-China bilateral relationship."

Witnessing the dramatic rise of China, some Japanese have increased their wariness or strengthened their alarmist attitudes towards China. They center on such questions as "what will become of China" or "what China is trying to do." However, diplomacy or foreign relations are, by nature, processes on interactive basis; one nation cannot stand independent of other nations' actions. That is to say, China might transform itself according to the actions taken by Japan or the U.S. It is imperative, therefore, that Japan, instead of being passively gripped by anxiety or wariness, should enhance mutual understanding with China, thereby forging close ties with it, while the Japan-U.S. alliance remains the axis of Japan's foreign policy. Interestingly enough, France and Germany today go hand-in-hand taking the lead in advancing European integration; their present amity is startlingly contrasted to their hostile relationship in the past, exemplified by such instances as Franco-German War, World War I and World War II. I really hope to see Prime Minister Aso's basic posture on Japan-China relations will sooner or later take a concrete shape.

(This is the English translation of an article written by Mr. YUSHITA Hiroyuki, Visiting Professor of Kyorin University, which originally appeared on the BBS "Giron-Hyakushutsu" of GFJ on October 31, 2008.)