

LARISA ZABROVSKAIA

The Character of Japan-China Relations since the Earthquake of 2011

Abstract

After the earthquake of 2011, the Japanese authorities decided to switch the focus of its foreign policy from 'economic diplomacy' (promoting goods) to 'scientific diplomacy' ('know-how' expansion). In this case, China may become the most important ground for promoting Japanese innovation projects.

The modern stage of the Sino-Japanese politico-military rivalry and competition is accompanied by an increase in the economic interdependence and the degree of mutual interest in solving regional problems. However, in the near future the close relations between Japan and the US will not let Tokyo fundamentally reverse its policy toward China.

At present the Japanese authorities are making attempts to change their policy towards China, to make it more balanced and meet national interests. However, the frequent changes of Prime Ministers of Japan, who are sometimes diametrically opposed to one another as regards foreign policy, do not let Japan maintain a stable policy towards its neighbor.

The short term in office (2006–2007) of Prime Minister Shinzō Abe created good opportunities for the further development of Sino-Japanese relations. In 2006, in order to improve bilateral relations Prime Minister Abe paid official visits to Beijing and Seoul, abstained from visiting the Yasukuni Shrine and proposed the broadening of economic cooperation between China and Japan. In April 2007 a meeting between Mr Abe and the Prime Minister of China Wēn Jiābǎo took place in Tokyo, during which new agreements on the development of trade exchange and scientific-technical cooperation were concluded. However, the parties did not manage to overcome their divisions on territorial issues. The following Japanese Prime Ministers, Yukio Hatoyama and Naoto Kan, also supported improvements in relations with China. Moreover, Mr Kan had intentions to cooperate substantially with China in overcoming the after-effects of the earthquake and tsunami of 2011.

After the earthquake, the Chinese authorities also displayed interest in broadening the scope of various contacts with Japan. In March 2011 the President of the PRC, Hú Jintāo, visited the Japanese Embassy in Beijing and expressed his condolences to the people of Japan. In May 2011 the Chinese Prime Minister, Wēn Jiābǎo, paid a visit to Miyagi Prefecture, the region hardest hit by the earthquake. China provided humanitarian assistance to Japan in form of food and medicaments.¹

¹ Heizo Takenaka, *China Mirror*, <http://www.project-syndicate.org> (accessed 03.02.2011).

Thus, a new turn in the Sino-Japanese relations seems to have arisen since the disastrous earthquake and the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear disaster. In this case a bilateral interest in extension of contacts could be observed.

The Fukushima factor in Sino-Japanese relations

Taking into account the distressful situation in the country after March 11, 2011, the Japanese leaders were bound to revise their policy towards China, considering that their economically strong neighbor could help in the revival of Japan. They reminded Beijing of the great contribution made by Japan to Chinese modernization, pointing out that Japanese companies had created 9.2 million jobs in China, and the total amount of tax paid to the Chinese government since 1979 worked out at 5 billion yuan. Furthermore, over 200,000 Chinese students had studied at Japanese universities.

In other words, the Japanese politicians had good grounds for claiming that ‘Japan had played an active part in the modernization of China’ by granting loans on attractive terms, supporting the construction of infrastructure and ecological projects, suggesting a number of energy development solutions, and rendering assistance in research and development. In the opinion of the Japanese diplomatic official Keiji Ide, all this resulted in the fact that China “had learnt a lot from Japan and had hereby facilitated and accelerated its growth significantly”.²

Many Japanese politicians, in particular then-Prime Minister Naoto Kan, realized that due to the radiation contamination of a considerable area of its territory, Japanese goods and food would not be in great demand abroad. They therefore decided that Japan should change the focus of its foreign policy and switch from ‘economic diplomacy’ (promoting goods) to ‘scientific diplomacy’ (‘know-how’ expansion).³ In this case, China could become the most important ground for promoting Japanese innovation projects.

This is relevant also because Japan lost its leading position in the foreign trade of China in the early 21st century. Yet the Chinese economy has not suffered from the fall in imports from Japan, because its share amounted to less than 13% of total Chinese imports (US\$177 billion out of US\$1.4 trillion, 2010). The fall in Chinese exports to Japan has not affected the Chinese economy significantly either, because it came out to only 8% of total Chinese exports in 2010 (US\$121 billion out of US\$1.58 trillion).⁴

Evidently, the new circumstances forced Japan to revise its economic relations with China. Japan used a variety of international opportunities in order to test its new policy towards China. For instance, at the Sino-Japanese-South Korean summit of May 21–22, 2011, the matter of creating a regional emergency coordination mechanism was discussed. The parties came to an agreement that closer cooperation on nuclear safety should be established.

² Кэйдзи Идэ [Keidzi Ide], *Модернизация Китая и вклад Японии* [China’s modernization and Japan’s contribution]. Moscow, March 2011, p. 5. (A report manuscript in Russian).

³ Atsushi Sunami, *Japan’s Innovation System: Evolving from Catch-up to Post Catch-up. The MOF Lecture in Russia*, March 23, 2011, Moscow, 2011, pp. 18, 20. (A report manuscript).

⁴ Дубровин Д., Макаревич В. [Dubrovin D., Makarchev V.], “Последствия землетрясения в Японии для мировой экономики” [The effect of the earthquake in Japan on the international economy], *Compass (ITAR-TASS Agency)*, 2011, No. 13, p. 13. (In Russian).

The breakdown of the nuclear power station in Japan may have provided an impulse for complementing the Six-Party Talks on averting the nuclear threat on the Korean peninsula with another special regional institution aimed at securing nuclear safety. At present 88 nuclear reactors are operating in China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. Some of the nuclear power stations, such as Hongyanhe in Wafangdian (in the suburbs of Dalian, Liaoning province), are located along an earthquake fault line, and also by the sea.⁵

A recurrence of the Fukushima accident at other nuclear sites should not be ruled out. Creating an international mechanism for resolving the consequences of a nuclear disaster in North-East Asia has become a topical issue.

One of the consequences of the earthquake in Japan was that China's role on both the international arena and the Asian-Pacific region in particular became significantly stronger. This is a unique situation because for the first time in its history, Japan could fall under Chinese political influence, although it seems unlikely as yet taking the two nations' centuries-long rivalry, territorial disputes and ethno-cultural antagonism into account. However, it would be wrong to rule out the possibility of creating a Sino-Japanese union, which could become an unprecedented economic leader in East Asia. A reevaluation of the national interests of Japan, which could be directed at 'cooperation' rather than 'rivalry' with China, is quite possible. This could be promoted both by the Japanese value system, as reflected in the formula '*dobun-doshu*' ('the same characters – the same race')⁶ and the very proximity of the two countries' cultures.

Should a Sino-Japanese alliance be formed, it will become impossible to retain the American military bases in East Asia. In such a scenario the US will have to take extraordinary measures both in the financial and the military-political areas. This may be the devaluation of the US currency, or a major action of force in the Pacific. In other words, linking the economies of the two Asian giants – China and Japan – could lead to profound changes in the balance of powers in East Asia, and force the USA out of the region. In connection with this, the US has been taking proactive measures and working to ensure that pro-American politicians come to power in Japan. So far the American strategy has paid off, and has cemented the bilateral military and political relations between Japan and the United States.

In August 2011 Prime Minister Naoto Kan had to resign as he had been sharply criticized by his political opponents for his plans to abandon nuclear energy. The pro-American Yoshihiko Noda became the new Prime Minister of Japan, and took a position for fostering military and political union between Japan and the United States, seeing this union as a counter-balance to the military power of China and a basis for the foreign policy and security of Japan.

One of Mr Noda's first steps was the declaration that Chinese military expansion was giving rise to "concern in the Asia region", and he took a firm stance toward China. Moreover, he pointed out that the Japanese leaders of World War II "were not criminals" and therefore Japanese politicians' visits to Yasukuni Shrine should be regarded as a tribute to the

⁵ Wen Bo, *Japan's Nuclear Crisis Sparks Concerns over Nuclear Power in China*, http://nautilus.org/publications/essays/napsnet/forum/npower_in_china_WenBo (accessed 24.05.2011).

⁶ Арешидзе Л.Г. [Areshidze L.G.], *Международные отношения в Восточной Азии: Угрозы и надежды* [International Relations in East Asia: Threats and Hopes], Moscow: International Relations Publ. House, 2007, p. 154. (In Russian).

memory of those who died in the service of Japan.⁷ However, Mr Noda abstained from visiting Yasukuni Shrine before his official visit to Beijing, which took place on December 25–26, 2011. The purpose of the visit was to hold consultations on a number of the most important issues: the necessity to broaden trade and economic relations, cooperation in the field of energy efficiency and environmental protection, and discussing measures to safeguard peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

During the talks, the leaders of both countries made a point of deepening the mutual understanding and friendship between the peoples of the two countries, and noted the development of people's diplomacy and youth exchanges as a positive fact. Over 5.4 million citizens from both countries have taken part in different meetings, festivals and study trips. In Mr Noda's opinion, this promotes "the sustainable development of relations between China and Japan, and the friendship of the two countries' peoples".⁸

The Japanese Prime Minister attempted to discuss the issue of resuming talks on the joint development of gas fields in the East China Sea.⁹ At the same time, the Japanese authorities declared an intention to buy Chinese Treasury bonds of the sum of US\$10 billion. Such a deal was mutually beneficial: the Chinese yuan would advance to the status of an international accounting and reserve currency, and the Chinese economy would receive significant financial support. The above sum is not significant for Japan, 70% of whose foreign exchange holdings are in US dollars, and accounts for just 0,77% of the total reserves.¹⁰ Moreover, the move would be one of the strategic measures aimed at diversifying Japanese financial assets. The Chinese officials did not comment on this proposal made by Japan, whereas the Japanese mass media communicated that Japan had started buying Chinese treasury bonds.¹¹ As we can see, Japan once again resorted to the earlier proven tactics of financial injections in order to improve relations with China.

During the China-Japan summit, Premier Wēn Jiābǎo set out a number of priority issues for discussion. These included creating a joint investment fund, constructing an industrial park, and discussing issues connected to creating a free trade area between China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. Premier Wēn assured Mr Noda that China would continue its participation in recovery efforts in the earthquake-hit areas of Japan, and would share more of its experience on reducing disaster damage and safeguarding the nuclear plants.

The two sides discussed the situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea since the death of the Supreme Leader Kim Jong-il, and came to the understanding that the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula should "proceed in dialogue and through cooperation". The Chinese leaders claimed that it was necessary to avoid a situation where "the Six-Party Talks lead to rivalry in the North Korean Command authority and as a result

⁷ *Japan rules the Senkaku*, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/print/ed20110909a1.html> (accessed 9.09.2011).

⁸ *Deepening the strategic mutually beneficial relations between China and Japan is of importance*, http://russian.news.cn/importnews/2011-12/25c_131325314 (accessed 29.12.2011).

⁹ *Mr. Noda's Beijing summit*, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/print/ed2011128a2.html> (accessed 29.12.2011).

¹⁰ *Purchase of the Chinese treasury bonds by Japan is mutually beneficial for both parties*, http://russian.news.cn/importnews/2011-12/21c_131319931.html (accessed 5.01.2011).

¹¹ *Japan to start buying Chinese bounds under bilateral cooperation*, <http://english.kyodonews.jp/news/2011/12/133505.html> (accessed 21.01.2012).

to the breakup of the DPRK". Meanwhile, the Chinese leaders gave no encouragement to Japan's request "to push the DPRK into resumption of the Six-Party Talks and the repatriation of the Japanese who had been kidnapped earlier by the North Koreans".¹² In other words, the Chinese leaders gave the Japanese premier to understand that they were ready to cooperate with Japan on the Korean issue, but only within certain limits.

Upon the visit's completion, bilateral agreements were signed on cooperation in the field of energy efficiency and environmental protection, as well as on the expansion of youth exchange programs of up to 5000 people per year. The parties agreed to carry out collective actions to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations, and declared 2012 to be "A year of exchange and friendship between the peoples".¹³ These plans were not implemented in full because of tensions over the Senkaku Islands and the subsequent exacerbation of relations between China and Japan.

Judging by the subject of the documents signed, the discussion at the Sino-Japanese Summit was held according to the Chinese agenda. The problems in which Japan was mostly interested remained unresolved. These primarily concern resolving the matter of the development of gas fields in the East China Sea. For their part, the Chinese government does not like the looks of the ongoing declarations on the importance of the military and political union with the United States for Japan, and the participation of the Japanese defense forces in joint military operations with the US outside Japanese territory.

The landslide victory for the Liberal Democratic Party on December 16, 2012 made it possible for its leader Shinzō Abe to become the Prime Minister of Japan again, and to continue the fence-mending policy toward China. Many Chinese people are worried that Abe's second coming to power will further damage bilateral relations, as Japan's actions on disputed territories in 2012 seriously damaged its relations with its neighbors, especially with China. In an Internet poll carried out on December 17, 2012 in China, 78.8% percent of the participants believed Chinese-Japanese relations would worsen after Mr Abe took office, and 89.5% thought that if Mr Abe revises Japan's current constitution and upgrades the self-defense force into a self-defense army, the possibility of military conflicts in East Asia would greatly increase.

But on the contrary, on December 17, 2012 Mr Abe said that Chinese-Japanese relations are one of the most important bilateral ties for Japan. He said the current tension between China and Japan had not only damaged bilateral relations, but also harmed Japan's international interests. Mr Abe said that he will increase communication with China in order to revive relations.

Nevertheless, at the very beginning of 2013 members of the new Japanese cabinet visited not only China, but all of China's neighbors as well. Besides, Mr Abe invited the leaders of China's neighboring countries, India and Myanmar, to pay official visits to Tokyo. Chinese experts called this an attempt to create "a ring around China", adding that

¹² *Japan to start buying Chinese bonds under bilateral cooperation*, <http://english.kyodonews.jp/news/2011/12/133505.html> (accessed 21.01.2012).

¹³ *Deepening the strategic mutually beneficial relations between China and Japan is of importance*, http://russian.news.cn/importnews/2011-12/25c_131325314 (accessed 29.12.2011).

¹⁴ *Попытки Синдзо Абэ добиться «блокады Китая» не увенчаются успехом* [Shinzō Abe's attempts to achieve 'blockade of China' won't crown success], <http://russian.people.com.cn/95181/8201933.html> (accessed 21.05.2012).

all these diplomatic measures represented attempts to involve these countries in opposition to China, and to restore the dominant status of Japan in Asia.

Chinese experts consider that since Abe's return to the post of prime minister, three principles of Japanese foreign affairs were very quickly restored: 'strategic diplomacy', 'valuable diplomacy' and 'active independent diplomacy'. These three principles of diplomacy are like "the old song of the Cold War times" and a provocation of the group of countries having close economic relations with China. Chinese experts concluded that as a result, the edge of such diplomacy is directed against China.¹⁴

Furthermore, they state that at present China and Japan are incomparable in their economic, state and military potential. Global prosperity and stability are also impossible without China. Therefore, in speaking about a 'blockade of China', Japan is incorrectly estimates its own forces. China is thus closely watching the actions of the Japanese government and will not allow itself to be misled.

At the same time, Chinese experts emphasize that many abnormal actions by Japan under Abe's leadership are "dangerous signs" which could derail its efforts to become a "normal country". Pandering to a revival of militarism threatens to challenge the post-war international order and take the country even further from its goal. They warn that "a nation that does not have the courage to reflect on its past will not be able to move forward. Abe has much to learn from Japan's abnormal past to define the correct steps toward becoming a "normal country".¹⁵

Chinese scholars reproach Japanese leaders that Japan's continued enthusiasm for a Cold War mentality is not accidental. The country developed its economy recovery under the tutelage of other countries, rebuilding itself from scratch in less than 20 years to become the world's second largest economy. Chinese scholars consider Japan to have been the main beneficiary from the Cold War, but this has also resulted in the economic stagnation which has beset the thinking of the Japanese ruling class in the years that followed. Some elements in Japan are still trying to circle the ideological wagons in an attempt to protect the enormous gains they made during the Cold War.

At present the international situation has fundamentally changed. Asian countries are embracing rare opportunities for developing. Therefore, Chinese scholars believe that Asian people should see through the intentions of Japan's ultra-rightists, actively resist 'value diplomacy' and act together to safeguard regional win-win cooperation and common development.¹⁶ As a result, no "ring around China" would be created.

At the same time, Chinese experts emphasize that Japan cannot develop its economy without the Chinese market. They said that the Japanese economy relies more on China than vice versa, especially in the export sector.¹⁷

Apparently the new Chinese leadership under Xi Jǐnpíng also intends to strengthen miscellaneous links with its economically developed neighbor, despite the disputes over rights to the Senkaku Islands.

¹⁵ Wang Haiqing, Wu Xia, *Japan is moving away from goal of 'normal country'*, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90777/8289728.html> (accessed 19.06.2013).

¹⁶ Liang Jun, *Keeping a watchful eye on Japan's 'new cold war'*, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90777/828396.html> (accessed 17.06.2013).

¹⁷ Ding Ying, 'The Return of Abe', *Beijing Review*, Vol. 55, No. 52, December 27, 2012, pp. 18–19.

Behind the professions of friendship and mutual understanding lie insurmountable difficulties leading to recurrent frictions. At the same time, however, the leaders of the two countries are aware of the necessity to maintain stable and sustainable development in relations between China and Japan, which have become more active in recent years thanks to people's diplomacy and economic cooperation.

The modern stage of Sino-Japanese relations distinguishes itself in that the aggravation of politico-military rivalry and competition is accompanied by an increase in economic interdependence and the extent of mutual interest in solving regional problems. However, in the near future, the close relations between Japan and the US will not allow Tokyo to fundamentally reverse its policy toward China.

The continuous growth of China's military potential and political and economic influence will lead to an intensification of Japanese maneuvers between its ally (the US) and its regional neighbor (China). In this case, China is likely to adopt the attitude of an onlooker, and take a pragmatic approach to cooperation with Japan on different issues of regional politics. As a result, bilateral relations will be characterized by uncertainty and will depend on the personal preferences of the two countries' leaders.

