



Japan and China

Peace breaking out

TOKYO AND BEIJING

A concerted effort to improve relations in the shadow of historical grudges

THE way the Chinese like to put it, the trip to Beijing last October by Japan's new prime minister, Shinzo Abe, "broke the ice". The two countries' relationship had been plunged into the chiller by the provocative visits of Mr Abe's predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi, to Yasukuni, the Tokyo war shrine that glorifies Japan's militarist past. Now, the trip that Wen Jiabao will make to Tokyo and Kyoto on April 13th, the first visit to Japan in more than six years by a Chinese prime minister, will be the "ice-melter". Optimism abounds on both sides. But it is wishful thinking to expect the problems between Asia's two biggest powers to be reduced to a few puddles of warm water.

For now, China is determined to do everything to make Mr Wen's trip a success. Take the issue of the so-called "comfort women". Mr Abe has in the past month caught himself up in an uncalled-for furor by refusing to admit that the Japanese imperial army coerced Korean, Chinese and other women to work in brothels in the second world war. This managed to offend even Japan's staunch ally, the United States. Yet the Chinese government, usually quick to take historical offence, has studiously ignored the fuss. Indeed, over more recent abductions that Mr Abe cares very deeply about—of ordinary Japanese kidnapped by North Korea during the 1970s and 1980s—Mr Wen himself expresses sympathy for Japanese concerns.

As for the Yasukuni shrine, to which Mr Abe has traditionally been a more committed visitor than has Mr Koizumi, the Chinese believe that they have an understanding from him that he will not go while he is prime minister. Afterwards, says one Chinese policymaker, he can even go and live at Yasukuni, for all the Chinese will care.

If this minimum requirement—no prime ministerial visit, or at least no public one, to Yasukuni—is met, then the Chinese government seems determined to build a new "strategic partnership". Japan seems inclined to reciprocate. In a surprisingly short time, a wide range of topics has come up: economic and environmental co-operation; mechanisms to ease territorial disputes in the East China Sea, complicated by possibly large deposits of gas and oil; even confidence-building measures between the two countries' armed forces.

Mr Wen's visit will formalise a new cabinet-level dialogue on economic co-operation. In addition, Japanese firms will be offered the chance to bid for nuclear-power projects, as well as for parts of proposed high-speed railway lines between Beijing and Shanghai, Beijing and Wuhan, and Dalian and Harbin in Manchuria—whose railways imperial Japan once controlled. Japanese investment and know-how will be sought for environmental projects, including on energy efficiency.

The dispute in the East China Sea is potentially explosive. The hydrocarbon de-

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posits fall on both sides of the median line between the two countries that Japan says should be the boundary between their respective exclusive economic zones. China does not recognise the boundary, and is already extracting gas from a field which straddles it. Progress over the dispute appears slow—a seventh round of bilateral talks ended last week in Tokyo. Yet participants say that understandings have been reached in important areas. In particular, China has accepted that the solution lies not in focusing on prickly issues of territoriality, but on joint development of the disputed fields. The haggling is now over precisely which areas should be developed. Meanwhile, Chinese officials say their vessels carefully avoid crossing the disputed boundary. There is talk of establishing a hotline between the Japan Coast Guard and the China National Oceanic Bureau, to co-ordinate search-and-rescue missions in an increasingly crowded sea.

Dates, damn dates

Military relations also appear to be warming. A similar hotline is expected between the two countries' navies, partly in order to prevent incidents such as accidental collisions at sea from escalating. Defence ministers plan reciprocal visits. The official Chinese press also reflects the new warmth. Nan'eng Chuang, a weekly magazine, reported on April 1st that Japan "naturally" had concerns about China's military expansion, given its territorial disputes with its neighbour—a departure in the press from the usual claims of a resurgent Japanese militarism. Now there is talk of an official visit to Japan later this year by the Chinese navy, with the prospect (hard, until recently, to imagine) of the five-starred red flag flying in Tokyo Bay.

In a rare honour, Mr Wen has been invited to address Japan's parliament, where »

he will suggest that China is rising, but along a peaceful incline; he will invite Japan to share it. As well as meeting politicians and Emperor Akihito, Mr Wen has asked to chat to students and farmers. He is also to meet the head of *Soka Gakkai*, Japan's largest Buddhist organisation, with 8m households. The charm offensive, says a Chinese diplomat, is meant to show people that China has a "new idea" about Japan. This is unlikely ever to extend to support for Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations' Security Council. But with so many other obstacles blocking UNSC reform, that can be overlooked.

China's push for better relations involves some political risk at home—and not least because Mr Abe, having opened to China, has to survive upper-house elections in the summer. The months ahead are studded with sensitive anniversaries related to Japan's wartime depredations in China. Any of these could rekindle the anti-Japanese sentiment that erupted into unruly demonstrations in 2005. China's state media emphasise that this year should be celebrated as the 35th anniversary of "normalised" relations with Japan. Yet ordinary people are more likely to note that July 7th will be the 70th anniversary of the start of Japan's all-out invasion, and December 13th that of Japan's worst atrocity in China, the Nanjing massacre. Last month an adviser to China's parliament proposed that September 18th be named as a "day of national calamity" because of Japan's occupation of Manchuria beginning on that day in 1931. The icebergs are melting, but historical issues still make up their underwater mass. •

Cambodia's local elections

Hun Sen wins again

PHNOM PENH AND POIPEP

And intends to go on and on

T7" **HOM SARAT** anxiously scans the electoral roll for her name but cannot find it. She is in a hurry to go to work, at one of the many casinos in Poipet, a growing tourist town near Cambodia's border with Thailand. "I will be very upset if I can't vote," she says. Many voters seem to have been assigned to polling stations they did not expect. Officials from the opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) try to help them, but some get fed up and leave without voting. As a result, said election monitors, turnout in Poipet was less than half the national average of about 70%.

Such scenes have led, inevitably, to opposition claims that Cambodia's local-commune elections on April 1st were rid-



A good party. But it lost

died with fraud. There were also reports that the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), led by the prime minister, Hun Sen, had treated voters to meals and gifts. San Sean Hor, a CPP candidate in Poipet, denies this and says the SRP is a poor loser. It lost, he says, because it "did not know the heart of the voter".

The SRP had hoped to do well in Poipet, having courted workers at the casinos. But preliminary results showed the ruling party cruising to victory, winning seven of 11 seats. Nationwide, the CPP again crushed its rivals, winning control in 1,592 of the 1,621 communes, just six less than in the previous election in 2002. The SRP improved its tally from 13 to 27 but mainly at the expense of Cambodia's fading royalist movement, which recently split for the umpteenth time. A breakaway faction led by Prince Norodom Ranariddh, the movement's leader not long ago, seems to have won no communes (official results are not due until April 24th) and the rump royalist party, FUNCINPEC, won only two, down from ten last time. Prince Norodom, recently sentenced to 18 months' jail in a lawsuit over FUNCINPEC'S headquarters, has fled abroad and could not campaign.

The election was far from perfect. However, Tarikul Ghani, observing it on behalf of America's National Democratic Institute, notes that there were fewer complaints and notably fewer politically motivated murders than last time—and more candidates.

It is only ten years since Mr Hun Sen staged a bloody coup to eject Prince Norodom from their joint prime ministership, amid open street warfare between political rivals. It is just three decades since the horrors of Pol Pot's "year zero", when perhaps a quarter of the population died. Considering its recent history, Cambodia is not doing so badly. Mr Hun Sen no longer needs to deal with his foes as harshly

as he once did. Chea Vannath, a social scientist, who survived a Khmer Rouge prison camp, says the prime minister has become skilful in provoking splits among his foes and at harrying them through the courts. His party's grip on power at local and national level looks unassailable, especially now that the Cambodian economy is booming—it grew 10.5% last year and may grow 9% this. Ms Chea says he is a far better orator than any rival. He should win national elections in 2008 easily.

So confident is Mr Hun Sen these days that in January he boasted that he would not retire until he was 90. He turned 56 this week and may not last quite that long, but seems sure to run Cambodia for the foreseeable future. His critics groan at this, accusing him of running a corrupt one-man state. But the prime minister, in turn, is reported to get furious that they never give him credit for, as he sees it, bringing stability and progress to a devastated land.

Mr Hun Sen is a keen scholar of Cambodia's ancient rulers, looking to them for inspiration on achieving greatness. *Cambodge Soir*, a daily, recently reported that he had financed the publication of a book about Sdach Korn, a commoner who, in the 16th century, routed the country's monarchy and created a less hierarchical society. As the newspaper noted, Mr Hun Sen sees his idol as a bringer of peace and prosperity. Some historians remember him as a man thirsty for power, who never hesitated to take it by force. •

Kashmir

Troops out?

SRINAGAR

India tries to placate critics in Kashmir of its huge military presence there

WHAT looked like a looming disaster for India's ruling Congress party in the state of Jammu & Kashmir has been resolved with a flourish. But the political triumph does not answer the question that provoked the crisis: should India keep an estimated 600,000 troops in the state? "The insurgency they are fighting is simmering far less intensely; relations with Pakistan, a sponsor of their enemies, have much improved; and the military presence in the state is deeply unpopular. So the question is bound to be asked.

It has been asked with particular force by Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, whose People's Democratic Party (PDF) rules Jammu & Kashmir in coalition with Congress. He has threatened to pull out of this coalition if the government does not agree to "demilitarise", that is to withdraw troops and repeal the Armed Forces Special Powers