

Japan and China Edge Closer

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The Japanese destroyer Sazanami made an historic stop in China in June Toru Futagami/AP Photo

For six decades the U.S. has been the dominant force in the Pacific, its economic, military, and diplomatic power unrivaled by either the rich but reticent Japanese or a resurgent China. But signs are emerging that this old order is beginning to change. The latest indicator has to be counted the most significant to date: The Chinese and Japanese are taking their first steps toward a kind of Asian entente cordiale.

After years of animosity, ties between Japan and China are unmistakably on the mend. State visits now are almost routine. In June, Tokyo and Beijing resolved a five-year dispute over gas fields in the East China Sea. Earlier this summer the Japanese destroyer Sazanami docked for a five-day call at a naval port on China's southern coast. The crowd onshore waved just the right mix of Chinese flags and the red and white of the Rising Sun. It was the first visit to China by a Japanese naval vessel since World War II, and it is unlikely to be the last. "Whether things will hold steady is still a question," says Kazuhiko Togo, a former Japanese ambassador and now a professor at Temple University's Tokyo campus. "But politically, relations are in much better shape. The trajectory is right."

Consider Japan and China as something like the Germany and France of Asia, and the implications are evident. Valery Giscard d'Estaing and Helmut Schmidt brought stability and a new potential for European cooperation when they solidified a Franco-German rapprochement in the late 1970s. Japan and China, whose economies already are tightly intertwined, could do the same for Asia. Over time we may also see a foreign policy coming out of Tokyo that is more independent of Washington's. Washington, indeed, should take note (as it surely has): The Sino-Japanese connection eventually will counterbalance the U.S. role as the bedrock guarantor of Asia's security.

This new turn in relations represents a considerable salvage job. Junichiro Koizumi stepped down as Japan's Prime Minister two years ago with relations at their most acrimonious in a decade, primarily because of his visits to Yasukuni Shrine, the memorial to Japan's war dead, including convicted war criminals. His successor, Shinzo Abe, lasted only a year, but he pulled off a Nixon-in-China gambit that surprised practically everyone. A nationalist and a tough talker on China, Abe signaled quickly that he would avoid the shrine; three weeks after assuming office he flew to Beijing to show the priority he put on repairing relations.

It was enough to thaw what seemed a hopelessly frozen relationship. Both Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, China's President and Premier, respectively, have since been to Tokyo and made all the right noises. Abe's successor, Yasuo Fukuda, has pushed Abe's stance toward Yasukuni a step

further: While Abe stayed away but declined to state a position publicly, Fukuda has declared flatly that he will not go to the shrine so long as he holds office. Fukuda also visited Beijing within six months of taking over.

The gas deal announced in June suggests just how far the two sides have come. Less than a year ago, China was sending bombers into the airspace above the disputed fields—sorties viewed in Tokyo as provocative displays of force. Now the two nations have agreed to establish a joint development zone and shelve questions of offshore sovereignty.

Unknowns aplenty remain. Two Japanese Prime Ministers have avoided Yasukuni, but an official policy on the shrine is nowhere in sight. The disputes over Japanese textbook accounts of Japan's war with China could erupt again. And Tokyo has yet to articulate a clear (let alone satisfactory) stance on the matter of wartime "comfort women," those Chinese and Koreans forced to serve as prostitutes for the Imperial Japanese Army.

Among issues that give Japan pause are China's military spending, its uncertain social climate, and its lack of progress toward democracy.

Furthermore, a troubling anti-Japanese sentiment seems just below the surface: Beijing censored coverage of both the *Sazanami's* visit and the gas deal for fear of arousing nationalist feelings, and officials in Tokyo took note.

Some serious psychodrama also comes into play as this relationship evolves. Japan and China have alternated roles as teacher and student for a millennium and a half. China's rise is a heavily freighted phenomenon in Japan—a fact that is often lost on Westerners—and evokes complex fears and emotions there. Ever since the Japanese began to modernize more than a century ago, they have agonized over their place in Asia. Are we part of it? Are we part of the West? Do we mediate between the two? Elaborating a 21st century relationship with the mainland is part of a larger undertaking to "enter Asia," as the Japanese put it, and thus will be a gradual process.

Setting history aside, the *Sazanami's* port call sent the U.S. an interesting message: Both China and Japan now want to advance beyond their disputes to cooperate more closely on security. Some Japanese officials suggest that the mechanism for this is already in place: the six-party talks (between China, Japan, the U.S., North and South Korea, and Russia) convened to resolve the North Korean nuclear question. "We have to think about a regional security framework like NATO," says Yoshimasa Hayashi, a member of the upper house of the Japanese legislature from the governing Liberal Democrats. "So the six-party talks—five countries tackling the problems of the sixth—should remain. Even if the issue is settled, we should keep the framework."

There is an emerging subtext. This region's security relations have long been likened to a bicycle wheel, with Washington the hub and Asian nations the spokes: Direct ties among Asians have been weak to nonexistent. This is now changing, as the new Sino-Japanese amity suggests.

To put it simply, Asia is becoming more Asian. No one, not even China, wants to elbow the U.S. aside. America has a lot of frontage on the Pacific lake, and most East Asians like it that way. But the American voice is gradually becoming one among many, and even its closest friends in the region—the Japanese first among them—like that, too.

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