

Asylum incident fuels anti-China rhetoric in Japan

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After more than two weeks of diplomatic controversy between Japan and China, five North Koreans who were dragged from the Japanese consulate in Shenyang on May 8 were permitted by Beijing to fly to the Philippines and on to South Korea on May 23. However, the result of what is being termed the “Shenyang incident” is an intensified political campaign by right-wing, nationalist forces in Japan for a confrontational anti-China policy.

The basic facts of what took place on May 8 are not in dispute, due to the existence of a video-tape of large parts of the incident. Two North Korean men ran through the open gates of the Japanese consulate, followed by two women with a young child. While the men reached the visa application section of the building, the women were stopped by Chinese police. The video clearly shows the police dragging the two distressed women and child from inside the consulate grounds. Japanese officials are shown watching the eviction passively and even stooping to pick up Chinese police officers’ hats that had been knocked off in the fray. Later, police reentered the consulate to forcibly remove the two men.

Despite the clear signs in the video that the Japanese officials had made no attempt to prevent the police entering the consulate grounds, the response of the Japanese government of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi was to launch a diplomatic broadside against China. It accused Beijing of violating Japan’s sovereignty and demanded an apology and the immediate return of the North Koreans to the Japanese consulate.

China rejected the Japanese claims out of hand. It insisted that its officers had entered the consulate with the permission of a Japanese vice-consul—as the video tends to indicate—in order to remove a potential “terrorist” threat to the Japanese staff. By May 15, reports had surfaced that the Japanese ambassador to China had told embassy staff in Beijing on the morning of May 8 that North Korean asylum seekers could be “subversives” and

that they should be “driven out” from Japanese facilities. The vice-consul in Shenyang whom China alleges gave permission to the police spoke twice during the incident with a Japanese official in Beijing, who is believed to have repeated the ambassador’s instructions.

It was also reported that a Japanese vice-consul refused to accept a letter from one of the five requesting asylum. This would be entirely in line with the refugee policy of the Japanese government, which is one of the most restrictive in the world. Despite being the globe’s second largest economy and confronting a declining population, Japan has accepted only 291 refugees in the past 20 years. As a general principle it does not even grant political asylum, sending successful applicants to “third” countries instead.

On May 16, buoyed by the evidence implicating Japanese officials, China’s foreign ministry declared Tokyo had “put forward unreasonable criticism and demands harming China’s international image” and that it would deal with the “problem” of the five alleged Koreans “independently”. On May 20, it bluntly announced it was no longer negotiating with the Koizumi government over the issue. Finally, on May 22, China arranged for the transfer of the five North Koreans to South Korea, via the Philippines. A diplomat told *Agence France Presse*: “At first Japan asked China to give them back, then to interview them, and finally just inform Tokyo about their fate. Japan, as far as we know, got nothing.”

Koizumi and his government, however, continue to insist on their version of the incident: that the Chinese police entered the consulate uninvited and rode roughshod over Japanese national sovereignty. This stance does not have any innocent explanation.

Koizumi’s attempts to demonise China for abusing refugees and Japan’s national pride is consistent with the foreign policy of his cabinet. Koizumi is a lifetime

member of the anti-China and ultra-nationalist Fukuda faction of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Its orientation has been to exploit the framework of the US-Japan security alliance to legitimise Japanese imperialism using military power to uphold its commercial and strategic interests internationally. Since September 11, Koizumi has aggressively aligned Japan with the Bush administration's "war on terrorism". The Japanese military has been deployed in support of the war on Afghanistan and legislation is currently before the parliament that will facilitate its involvement in any US war on Iraq.

In order to build a social base for a militarist policy, Koizumi has sought to stoke up Japanese nationalism and patriotism. His government has supported the publication of right-wing school textbooks justifying Japan's wartime actions and he has made controversial visits to the Yasukuni shrine to Japan's war dead. These actions have provoked opposition in China, Korea and other countries invaded by Japan in the 1930s and 1940s.

By playing up Japan's "humiliation" by China in Shenyang, Koizumi clearly hoped to trigger an outpouring of anger at Beijing. While his administration has suffered a fall in its approval rating due to the public perception it mishandled the entire affair, the incident has strengthened the agitation of right-wing and nationalist layers.

On May 16, Takeshi Uemura, the senior political editor of the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Japan's largest daily newspaper, authored a column declaring the actions of the consulate staff to be part of a broader Japanese malaise—"a tendency to act in a masochistic way when it comes to a matter involving China". He was referring to the postwar taboo in official political circles on justifying Japan's wartime actions or advocating militarism—publicly at least. Uemura, among others, wants an end to anything resembling an apologetic stance on Japan's brutal colonial past. His evidence of the "masochistic" relationship included Koizumi's failure to be even more provocative over the textbook and shrine questions. In particular, he criticised Koizumi for attempting to avoid tensions with China by visiting Yasukuni last month, rather than on August 15, the anniversary of the end of World War II.

The following day, a *Yomiuri Shimbun* editorial declared that the collaboration of consul officials with the Chinese police as being due to "the presence of a pro-China clique within the Foreign Ministry". An unnamed member of the LDP was quoted describing the Shenyang incident as evidence the Foreign Ministry was "full of

weaklings who would wag their tails when facing China". There have been numerous calls for a purge of Japan's diplomatic staff in the country, including the removal of the current ambassador.

Koizumi has made his own contribution to the rhetoric about a Chinese fifth column within the Japanese political establishment. On May 16 and 17, the main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) conducted its own investigation of the Shenyang incident and concluded that the Japan consulate had provided support and encouragement to the Chinese police to remove the asylum seekers. Koizumi responded with a vitriolic attack on May 18: "The DPJ's criticism that Japan is at fault is so masochistic. We are caught up in grave negotiations with China and the party should take that sort of thing into consideration. Why they like China so much, I don't know. The DPJ should think carefully about why Japan is protesting against China the way it is."

However, the fact the DPJ sent a delegation to China to discredit Koizumi's claims is evidence that his cabinet is far from having things its own way. Its pro-US and anti-China stance is fuelling opposition from powerful political forces that believe the policies of the Bush administration are headed for a debacle and wish to strengthen Tokyo's political and economic relations in Asia, especially with Beijing. The most prominent representative of this layer is Makiko Tanaka, who Koizumi sacked as the foreign minister in January. In latest opinion polls, Tanaka registers as the most preferred candidate for prime minister while Koizumi's support has slumped to just 38 percent—compared with 80 percent a year ago.

With Koizumi becoming ever more provocative toward China, it is only a matter of time before the foreign policy differences in Japanese ruling circles lead to a major political confrontation.



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