

Anti-Japanese protests erupt in China

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Proposed UN reforms that could place Japan on the Security Council have become the target of a wave of protests across China. Along with a widespread Internet petition, demonstrations have taken place in a number of cities outside Japanese retail stores. Initially encouraged by the state-owned media as a means of whipping up nationalist sentiment, the movement is now also turning on the government for failing to take a sufficiently tough line against Japan.

Several overseas Chinese organisations initiated the campaign in late February with a petition urging UN secretary-general Kofi Annan to exclude Japan from the UN Security Council. The petition gathered momentum late last month when Annan formally announced his UN reform plan. Major Chinese websites posted the petition, and, according official Xinhua news agency, 22.2 million signatures had been gathered by late last week.

The *Financial Times* reported: "Via the Internet, the petition has been distributed through universities and workplaces with a stirring patriotic message and a user-friendly format to attract signatories." The anti-Japanese sentiments reflect deeply-felt anger over Japan's reluctance to apologise for the atrocities of the Japanese military during World War II in which an estimated 35 million Chinese were killed, and fears of about Japanese remilitarisation.

Changes to the UN Security Council are just one aspect of Annan's reform package, which is due to be discussed in the UN in September. A number of countries, including Japan and Germany, are vying for a permanent seat on the Security Council which is currently limited to the US, Russia, China, Britain and France. China, which as a permanent Security Council member has a veto, is yet to decide its stance on Japan.

The issue flared up again this week after Tokyo approved the publication of a new high school history textbook that openly whitewashes Japan's wartime record, describing the Japanese army as a "liberator" in China and other Asian countries. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has encouraged the falsification of history in line

with his government's more aggressive stance towards China and in the region.

News of the textbook triggered a boycott of Asahi Breweries, Japan's major beverage maker, in the northeastern Chinese city of Changchun. The protest organisers accused the company of supporting the new book. Other Japanese goods, including beauty products and shampoo, have been affected as the boycott spread to other cities. Similar protests have taken place in South Korea where the government has openly opposed Japan's membership of the UN Security Council.

Comments have appeared on the Internet denouncing the Beijing regime for failing to take a tougher stand. Senior diplomat Wu Jianming has been a particular target. He publicly argued that China should decide on Japan's membership of the UN Security Council "in a rational manner", pointing out that China was now Japan's largest trading partner.

One comment read: "How can China stand firm when its state leaders are all impotent. If China gives approval this time, the state leaders have no right to sit in their current positions—let them go home and embrace their kids."

A petition organiser Tong Zeng told the *New York Times* on April 1: "China must vote no and not just abstain. The government may not want to take the lead, but the Chinese people have taken the lead...There has never been a petition campaign of this magnitude in China. It will be much harder for the government to suppress in the future."

Last Saturday 10,000 protestors in Chengdu, the provincial capital of Sichuan, massed outside two Japanese-owned department stores and smashed windows. The following day, anti-Japanese protests and riots erupted in several other cities. In Guangzhou, 10,000 people signed a 10-metre red banner bearing anti-Japanese slogans. In the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, at least 3,000 people marched with anti-Japanese banners and chanted slogans such as "For the downfall of Japanese imperialism" and "Boycott Japanese goods".

Hundreds of police, including riot squads, were sent to Shenzhen to protect two major Japanese department stores which the protestors tried to storm. The police presence angered the crowd which was joined by sympathetic onlookers. To placate protestors, the police allowed them to hang a Chinese flag from the Seibu store. An open letter called on Japan to apologise for its “massive atrocities against the people of Asia” and declared “all peace-loving and tolerant Chinese must not allow this.”

Beijing is deeply concerned that the protests will escalate out of its control. Having openly embraced the capitalist market, the regime is ideologically dependent on Chinese nationalism as a means of diverting hostility and anger over the country’s deepening social divide. The government deliberately cultivates backwardness and nationalism among layers of youth as expressed in last year’s riot by Chinese fans at the Asian Soccer Cup final when China lost to Japan.

At the same time, Beijing is fearful that a protest on any issue can rapidly become the focus of anti-government resentment and hostility. The same dilemma confronted the regime in 1999 after NATO warplanes provocatively bombed the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia. After initially giving the green light to protests outside the US embassy in Beijing, the leadership rapidly cracked down on demonstrations as tens of thousands joined and the movement threatened to get out of control.

While blaming the Japanese government for the recent protests, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang appealed for calm, declaring: “We hope the Chinese people will express their positions in a rational manner.” Even before Tokyo called for the protection of Japanese businesses in China, police had begun to move against protesters. In Taizhou city in eastern Zhejiang province, for example, plainclothes police attacked a group of anti-Japanese protestors and injured four people last Sunday.

According to the Hong Kong-based *Open* magazine last September, former Chinese leader Jiang Zemin was alarmed by the soccer riot of “extreme nationalists” who, he argued, were not targeting the Japanese but “the central government”. He warned that the “so-called anti-Japanese patriotic movement” would threaten political stability. The comments foreshadowed a crackdown in universities against “anti-Japanese” activities.

Beijing is well aware of the historical precedents such as May 4 movement in 1919, which was sparked by the decision at the Versailles peace conference to hand Germany’s colonial concessions in China to Japan. Mass protests of students and workers not only targetted Japan

but China’s corrupt government for accepting the conference decision. This anti-imperialist struggle anticipated the founding of the Chinese Communist Party and the revolutionary eruption in 1925-27.

The Communist Party long ago abandoned its founding principles of international socialism. While promoting nationalism, Beijing acts as a comprador or middle-man for transnational corporations and enforces the brutal exploitation of Chinese workers through police-state measures. The oppressive conditions of the Chinese working class today are often compared with those of workers in 1920s and 1930s when child labour and sweatshop conditions were widespread.

Beijing continues to open up the economy to foreign investors. Last month, for instance, the state-owned Shanghai Electric Group—China’s largest heavy electric-machinery maker—was in Tokyo trying to sell its 28 plants to major Japanese corporations. China is now Japan’s largest export market as Japanese companies sell machinery and parts and set up operations to exploit the vast pool of cheap labour. In northeastern China, Japanese firms are establishing call centres to take advantage of a low-cost, Japanese-speaking workforce—a legacy of Japan’s colonial rule over the region in the 1930s.

As a result, Beijing is concerned about the economic impact of anti-Japanese protests. Zhu Yehon, a Shenzhen-based economist, warned in the Hong Kong-based *Standard*: “If we boycott all Japanese goods, our economy will be paralyzed immediately.” Chinese companies are under pressure to reconsider joint ventures with Japanese firms. These include a planned \$US1 billion project by Nissan with state-owned Dongfeng Automobile, and a \$920 million operation involving Nippon Steel and China’s largest steel maker, Baosteel.

Beijing is attempting to walk a fine line. To placate resentment over Japan’s new history textbook, Beijing protested that the publication “seriously hurt the feelings of Chinese people”. But it is hoping to avoid taking a clear stand on Japan’s membership of the UN Security Council and thereby offending Tokyo. Through these manoeuvres, the government is seeking to head off an eruption of protests, not only against Japan, but over the economic and social crisis that it has created.



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