

Japan stokes tensions with China

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Tensions between Japan and China are continuing to escalate. Tokyo has harshly criticised Beijing's failure to put an end to anti-Japanese protests, which are set to erupt again this weekend. After demonstrations last weekend, Japan's Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura summoned the Chinese ambassador in Tokyo to lodge a formal complaint, demanding an apology, stronger security measures for the Japanese embassy and businesses in China, and compensation for damage.

Tens of thousands of people took part in demonstrations in dozens of cities across China last weekend. In Beijing, protesters gathered outside the Japanese embassy in Beijing, chanted anti-Japanese slogans and hurled rocks at the building. In Shanghai, two Japanese students were beaten up. The protests, which began as an Internet campaign against Japan's efforts to gain a seat on the UN Security Council, were further inflamed by the official Japanese approval of a history textbook that whitewashes the crimes of Japanese imperialism in the 1930s and 1940s.

Japan's demands have put China in a quandary. Having openly embraced capitalist relations, the Beijing bureaucracy has increasingly stirred up nationalist sentiment as a means of creating a social base for the regime and to divert attention from mounting social tensions. At the same time, however, China does not want to jeopardise economic relations with Japan, which is a major investor and trading partner.

Above all, Beijing fears that any protests will rapidly get out of its control and become a focus for widespread anger and discontent against the government over deepening social inequality, unemployment and poverty. While seeking to rein in the demonstrations, Chinese leaders cannot afford to appear to be appeasing Japan, which could trigger a broader movement and destabilise the regime itself. Beijing has clamped down on websites calling for demonstrations, and declared that it does not endorse "violence". It has urged people this weekend to attend only officially authorised protests.

The Japanese government, on the other hand, is deliberately turning up the heat. In the midst of the first wave of protests, Japanese authorities gave the green light for the publication of controversial new history textbooks drawn up by the right-wing Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform. The avowed aim of the society is to encourage Japanese nationalism and pride in Japan's wartime "liberation" of Asia. It dismisses Japanese wartime atrocities as the product of Western propaganda.

The new history textbooks, for example, deny that Japan deliberately provoked war with China in July 1937, repeating the absurd pretext that the full-scale Japanese invasion resulted from an isolated incident of Chinese guards firing on Japanese troops. The books also blame China for "forcing" Japan to intervene and annex Korea in 1890s and then Manchuria in 1931. References to Japanese troops exploiting "comfort woman" or forced sex slaves—most of them

Chinese and Korean—have been dropped.

Controversy first erupted over the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform in July 2001 when the government of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi formally rejected demands from South Korea and China for revisions to the society's books. The society, which was established in 1997, includes hundreds of political and business leaders and is sponsored by major corporations such as Mitsubishi Motors and Isuzu Motors. The recent decision to authorise new texts in the midst of anti-Japanese protests in China can only be interpreted as a calculated move to heighten tensions.

If any further confirmation of Koizumi's provocative intentions were required, it was provided on Wednesday. Tokyo announced that it had authorised Japanese companies to begin drilling for oil in an area of the East China Sea that is in dispute between the two countries. Having refrained from taking such a step for years, the move in the midst of the current crisis has only hardened Beijing's position. China lodged a formal protest and declared that it "retains the right to take further action" over the drilling. Both countries are major importers of oil and gas and thus rivals for supplies.

China, which holds a permanent UN Security Council seat and thus a veto, has taken a tougher stance on Japan's membership of the body. Speaking on Tuesday, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao declared that Japan had to "face up" to its wartime history. "Only a country that respects history, takes responsibility for history and wins over the trust of peoples in Asia and the world at large can take greater responsibilities in the international community," he said.

Japanese politicians have blamed Beijing for the tensions and accused it of stirring up nationalism. Speaking on the television program "Sunday Project", Shinzo Abe, acting secretary general of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), declared that deepening social inequality was behind the anti-Japanese protests. Beijing, he claimed, was using Japan as "an outlet to vent that anger". While the Chinese bureaucracy certainly encourages nationalism for that purpose, the same is true of the Japanese government.

Prime Minister Koizumi, in particular, has pursued a political strategy of whipping up right-wing nationalism both to divert social discontent and to pursue the ambitions of sections of the Japanese ruling class to rearm and to take a more aggressive stance within the Asian Pacific region. Shortly after coming to power in 2001, Koizumi provoked the initial controversy over the textbooks and then pointedly visited the Yasakuni shrine where convicted Japanese war criminals are interred.

After more than a decade of economic stagnation, unemployment in Japan is at record levels, the guarantee of life-long employment is disappearing and social inequality is growing. These shifts have produced deep-going social tensions and widespread alienation from the entire political establishment, reflected in plunging voter turnouts for elections. Koizumi is seeking to fashion a social base for the LDP

by promoting a revival of Japanese nationalism and militarism.

At the same time, Koizumi has sought to circumvent the so-called pacifist clause in Japan's post-World War II constitution that limits Japan's military to the country's immediate defence. The key factor in enabling him to do so has been the backing of the Bush administration, which has encouraged Japan to change its constitution, to build up its military and to take a more "active" role in North East Asia—against China in particular.

Despite overwhelming popular opposition in Japan, Koizumi committed troops to the US occupation of Iraq—both to cement ties with Washington and as a precedent for the dispatch of Japanese military forces to other active war zones. With the backing of Washington, Japan has pursued an aggressive policy in North East Asia.

Last November, Tokyo responded to the intrusion of a Chinese submarine into Japanese waters by dispatching warships to chase the vessel and by stirring up an outcry against China. In December, a National Defence Program Outline identified China for the first time as Japan's largest security concern in the next decade. In a joint statement with the US in mid-February, Japan, again for the first time, openly referred to Taiwan as a mutual security concern—a move that potentially commits Japan to join the US in backing Taiwan in a war with China.

Significantly, in the current crisis the Bush administration has lined up behind Koizumi. White House spokesman Richard Boucher declared on Tuesday: "China does have a responsibility to prevent violence against foreign missions in Beijing. We think that it's very regrettable that this one did turn violent; it was not under control." As well as underscoring the hypocrisy of Washington's ritual calls for "freedom of expression" in China, the statement will only encourage Koizumi to take tougher measures. His decision to give the green light for drilling in the East China Sea came the following day.

Within Japan, Koizumi is exploiting the crisis to the hilt to quell opposition to his policies. Posturing as the defender of Japanese citizens, he demanded on Tuesday that China take "responsibility in securing Japanese free activity in China. We need this to be fully acknowledged by China". LDP secretary general Tsutomu Takebe went one step further, denouncing the Chinese demonstrations on Sunday as "almost equal to attacking Japan".

At the same time, there is a distinct nervousness in ruling circles in Tokyo over the potential economic fall-out from the confrontation. Japan's recent limited "recovery" has been based on exports to China and the increased exploitation of cheap Chinese labour. The Nikkei share market index has already fallen sharply, with corporations and banks with investments in China hit especially hard.

Takeo Fukui, chief executive of the auto giant Honda, told a press conference: "We are worried. We want to stay low-key at this sensitive time, and we want to reduce the number of overseas trips [to China]." Local Japanese executives have been instructed to be careful and to avoid addressing Chinese workers as *baka* or stupid, a wartime insult used by Japanese troops. Japanese companies are notorious for their physical abuse of workers in China as well as low wages and poor conditions.

These concerns are reflected in "liberal" sections of the Japanese press, which have reservations about Koizumi's right-wing nationalism. An editorial yesterday in the *Asahi Shimbun*, for instance, called for "cool heads" over drilling in the East China Sea and "efforts to build a mature relationship from which everyone can benefit". Earlier in the week, the newspaper opposed the official

endorsement of the new history textbooks. At the same time, however, the newspaper has declared that the Chinese government must "not tolerate such violent demonstrations".

The *Asahi Shimbun's* concession to anti-Chinese sentiment underlines the degree to which the entire political establishment has lined up behind Koizumi. Significantly, the opposition Democratic Party of Japan is also falling in behind Koizumi's campaign, with its deputy leader Ichiro Ozawa declaring: "It's unforgivable that the Chinese government gave demonstrators silent approval."

It is yet to be seen to what extent this nationalist campaign will be successful. Large sections of the population, particularly young people, are antagonistic not just to the government, but all political parties. Moreover there is a deeply rooted hostility to attempts to revive Japanese militarism as demonstrated by the widespread opposition to the dispatch of Japanese troops to Iraq and efforts to revive the ideology and symbols of Japan's wartime imperial regime.

In ruling circles internationally, there are fears that the tensions in North East Asia could lead to a political collapse in China, open conflict between the two countries, or both.

Referring to the precedent of the May 4 movement in 1919, when anti-Japanese protests turned on a corrupt Chinese government, the *Financial Times* warned: "That pattern has persisted to this day. And so has the explosive mixture in Chinese rebellions of xenophobia and anti-government protests... It is often forgotten that student protests in China in the 1980s, culminating in Tiananmen Square in 1989, also began with riots against foreign students and 'Japanese militarism'.

"Even as the latest anti-Japanese demonstrations erupted in Beijing and Shanghai, tens of thousands of villagers began rioting in Zhejiang province [last Sunday], protesting against miserable economic and environmental conditions. Anti-Japanese demonstrations spilled over to Hong Kong this week and many more are being planned for this weekend in at least 10 Chinese cities. Chinese websites are buzzing with angry rhetoric. And the anniversary of the May 4 Movement is looming," the newspaper noted.

While most of the media has focussed on the implications of Chinese nationalism, the *Los Angeles Times*, in a comment entitled "Japan's revisionist history", warned of the dangers of Japanese militarism. "The ultimate consequence of whitewashing the past could be the demise of Japan's admirable Peace Constitution, allowing Japan to retool its formidable industrial base into a weapon industry threatening its neighbors and possibly triggering an unprecedented arms race and another world war," it stated.

The potential for a military clash between the two countries over the disputed area of the East China Sea cannot be ruled out. In an editorial yesterday condemning China for "violating norms of international relations" over the maritime disagreement, the conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun* condemned previous governments for their "ostrich policy on issues concerning Japan's giant neighbour". It concluded by urging the government to "take every possible measure to protect ships digging experimental wells" and to pass legislation to deploy Japanese naval vessels to do so.



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