

Abe's visit to Beijing: a tentative rapprochement with China

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The state visit of newly-installed Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to Beijing on October 8 was a first cautious step in ending a lengthy diplomatic standoff between the two countries. Significantly, Abe also visited South Korea the following day.

Chinese and South Korean leaders had refused to meet with former Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi in protest at his repeated public visits to the Yasukuni Shrine—a symbol of Japanese wartime militarism. China, in particular, insisted that a Sino-Japanese summit was impossible until the Japanese leader stopped visiting the war shrine.

Abe, like Koizumi, is a right-wing nationalist who advocates Japan taking a more aggressive role in North East Asia and internationally. Before coming to office, Abe made a number of visits to the Yasukuni Shrine and strongly defended Koizumi's decision to do so.

Abe's trip to Beijing was his first abroad as prime minister and broke with the usual tradition for Japanese leaders to make their initial visit to Washington. The decision indicates considerable pressure from powerful sections of Japanese corporate elite for a rapprochement with China and South Korea.

In Beijing, Abe attempted to conciliate Chinese leaders by acknowledging that Japan had caused “enormous damage and pain” to the people of Asia during World War II. “With this deep self-reflection, we have lived the past 60 years. This is something common among people including myself who have lived in the past 60 years. This will not change in the future,” he told a press conference. His statement, however, stopped short of a formal apology.

Chinese President Hu Jintao praised Abe's visit as a “historic turning point”. The two leaders issued a joint statement agreeing to build a closer Sino-Japanese “bilateral relations” and expressed “deep concern” over the threatened North Korean nuclear test. The statement

called for an end to Sino-Japanese disputes over maritime borders and gas fields in East China Sea, in order to transform it into a “sea of peace, cooperation and friendship”.

Abe urged the Chinese leaders to put aside the Yasukuni issue for the time being. “I explained that I will not say whether I visited or I will visit Yasukuni Shrine as long as it remains a diplomatic and political problem,” he told the press. “From the viewpoint of solving political difficulties [between Japan and China], I will handle [the issue] appropriately,” he said.

Abe's ambiguous comments were designed to appease the Chinese leadership, while at the same time allowing him to continue to promote Japanese patriotism at home. Both Tokyo and Beijing have exploited the Yasukuni Shrine issue to whip up right-wing nationalism. The willingness of Chinese leaders to accept Abe's deliberately vague remarks is a sign that they are also under pressure to end the standoff.

Abe arrived in South Korea as the North Korean nuclear test was being announced. After meeting with South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun, Abe declared that Tokyo and Seoul were walking in “lock-step” on the issue. In order to allay concerns in Beijing and Seoul, he restated Japan's formal position that the country would never build nuclear weapons of its own.

After just two weeks in power, the liberal *Asahi Shimbun* hailed the “new Abe”. It disparaged commentators who suggested that Abe's softer image was a gimmick to consolidate support for next year's upper house election. “[W]e are confident that you would never resort to such cunning tactics as a leader who aspires to be ‘a fighting politician’. Why not take the time to properly explain to the people why you changed your ideas?” it wrote in an open letter to Abe.

But Abe's conciliatory stance toward China and South Korea does not mean he has abandoned his right-wing

agenda. His victory in last month's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership contest indicated the party's support for his promotion of Japanese patriotism, rearmament and a more assertive international role. In 2002, Abe even suggested that the possession of small, tactical nuclear weapons would not necessarily be a breach of the country's so-called pacifist constitution.

If consolidated, Abe's turn to China could indicate a tactical reorientation. In 2001, Koizumi strongly backed the Bush administration's "war on terror" as the means for reviving Japanese militarism and, with US backing, taking a more aggressive stance in North East Asia. He sacked his foreign minister and key ally Makiko Tanaka, who was critical of the US and advocated a more independent stance, including closer ties with China. In 2004, despite overwhelming popular opposition, he dispatched Japanese troops to Iraq.

This strategy has created new dilemmas for the Japanese ruling elite. Amid growing volatility in the Middle East, Koizumi also initiated a more forceful strategy to secure vital energy supplies, centred on accessing oil and gas in Central Asia and Siberia. Tokyo's close ties with Washington had effectively kept Japan out of these regions.

The new Abe government has already received several rude warnings of the consequences of being too close to the US. Last month Russia suspended a major gas project on Sakhalin Island, which was to supply a large portion of Japan's future gas needs. Moreover, because of Japan's backing for Washington's sanctions on Iran, Tehran is threatening to terminate a multi-billion project with Tokyo to develop one of the world's largest oilfields at Azadegan.

The corporate elite in Tokyo is also worried about rising tensions with Beijing and Seoul. In 2004, China surpassed the US to become Japan's largest trading partner. Japan is also China's third largest trading partner after the EU and the US. Sino-Japanese trade is expected to reach \$200 billion this year. According to official Japanese data for the period from January to July, trade with China reached \$116 billion and with South Korea, \$44 billion.

Japanese financial commentators have noted Abe's inexperience in economics and "market reform". The economy has just recovered from a decade of stagnation, largely due to China's rising demand for Japanese capital goods. The economic growth has helped to blunt the potentially explosive social consequences of Koizumi's pro-market measures, which have cut social spending and made further inroads into the country's system of life-

long employment.

Abe was clearly under pressure both from sections of big business and within his own party to use his opportunity as a new leader to break the deadlock with China and South Korea. For its part, Beijing also has a vested economic interest in improving relations.

In 2005, Japan invested \$6.5 billion in China, more than a tenth of the total foreign investment for the year. Japanese companies and their subcontractors employ more than 10 million Chinese workers, mostly in manufacturing. Concerned at the political dangers of rising unemployment and poverty, Beijing has to maintain the huge inflow of foreign investment.

Despite friendly handshakes in Beijing and Seoul, however, none of the underlying conflicts have been resolved. North Korea's nuclear test has the potential to quickly heighten tensions. Both China and South Korea fear the prospect of Japan using North Korea's actions as the excuse to build its own atomic weapons.

A comment by the *Korea Herald* on October 13 entitled, "Will Japan take the nuclear path?" warned that today's "cooperation" between China, South Korea and Japan could be soon displaced by a regional arms race. "The [North Korean nuclear] test is critical in tipping the delicate balance of Japan's debates on defence policy to the right... If the nuclear armament debate bubbles up in Japan, this is likely to stimulate South Koreans to think about the same option."

Already sharp differences have emerged over the UN resolution on North Korea. While all three countries have condemned the nuclear test, Japan strongly backed the US demands for tough sanctions on Pyongyang. However, South Korea and China, which have backed a policy of economically opening up North Korea, only reluctantly supported the sanctions, warning of the dangers of regional instability.



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