

# Wen's visit fails to end Sino-Japanese tensions

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23 April 2007

The three-day “ice-melting” visit by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to Japan from April 11 to 13 marked only a superficial reconciliation between the two countries. Behind the handshakes, smiles and friendly gestures, sharp tensions continue between the two rival powers in North East Asia.

The trip to Japan was the first by a Chinese leader in six years. No Sino-Japanese summit was held during the tenure of the previous Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi from 2001 to 2006. Beijing opposed Koizumi's more aggressive stance in the region and his public visits to the notorious Yasukuni shrine to Japan's war dead—a symbol of his revival of Japanese militarism.

After succeeding Koizumi last September, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe came under pressure from sections of the corporate elite to improve relations with China and South Korea, where Japan has huge economic interests. Abe's first foreign visit was to Beijing and Seoul last October, rather than Washington, and laid the basis for Wen's trip last month to Japan.

Wen's tour was pitched at winning public support in Japan. In Tokyo, he joined morning Taichi exercises with local residents. After delivering a speech to the Japanese parliament—the first by a Chinese leader since 1985—he told reporters he had prepared the script for months. In Ritsumeikan University, Wen played baseball with students, trotting onto the field in a No. 35 jersey to highlight the 35 years since the normalisation of Sino-Japanese relations.

Abe and Wen issued a joint communiqué after meeting on April 11. The statement called for the two countries to build a “strategic, mutually-beneficial relationship” and to “create a beautiful future of bilateral relations by squarely looking at history”. Abe will visit China again this year, while Chinese President Hu Jintao is likely to come to Japan in 2008. Japan will send 20,000 people to 19 Chinese cities this year to join in celebrations to mark the

35th anniversary of normalised relations.

The two leaders agreed on a number of initiatives, including Japanese assistance to China on pollution, more regular charter flights between Tokyo and Shanghai and an end to China's ban on imports of Japanese rice. Beijing also agreed to support Tokyo's efforts to resolve the issue of North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s.

The relationship between the two countries is, however, fraught with contradictions. Since Japan normalised relations with China in 1972, following the US rapprochement with the Maoist regime, bilateral trade between Japan and China has increased 200-fold, reaching \$US207.36 billion in 2006. China, including Hong Kong, is now Japan's largest trade partner, ahead of the US, and a key production base for Japanese manufacturing industry, playing a key role in Japan's recent economic “recovery”.

At the same time, the massive foreign investment in China and resultant rapid economic growth has created an expanding rival to Japan. While Japan's economy is still much bigger and more advanced than China's, Beijing's economic rise has translated into growing military might and political influence in Asia and the Pacific. Over the past decade, Tokyo has sought to remove the constitutional restraints on its use of military force to defend its economic and strategic interests, bringing it into conflict with China. The Bush administration, in particular, has encouraged Japan to take a more assertive stance in the region, particularly toward China.

These underlying antagonisms were expressed at every step of Wen's trip to Japan. Prior to the visit, Japanese Defence Minister Fumio Kyuma announced the first naval exchange with China since the end of World War II, saying it would reduce “mutual anxiety”. This mutual anxiety persists, however. While Beijing warns about the revival of Japanese militarism, Tokyo claims China's

rapidly increasing military spending is a “threat” to the region. In discussions with Wen, Abe again urged Beijing to be more “transparent” about its military build-up.

Before his departure, Wen, in turn, warned against visits to the Yasukuni shrine by Japanese leaders, saying: “I hope that this will never happen again.” In his speech to the Japanese parliament, Wen declared that Beijing’s military growth was purely for “peaceful development”. But he warned Japan not to support an independent Taiwan, an issue that “concerns the core interests of China”. The pointed remark was directed against a joint US-Japan security statement in 2005, which for the first time made an explicit reference to Taiwan and thus hinted that Japan might support the US in defending the island in a war with China.

Wen’s references to Japan’s invasion of China in the 1930s were carefully constructed so as not to heighten tensions on historical issues. He described the Japanese occupation as “a calamity” for China, but added that ordinary Japanese people were also the victims of World War II and blamed Japanese aggression on a “limited number” of militarist leaders. However, the Japanese ruling elite, especially the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), has never formally apologised for the war crimes of the 1930s and 1940s.

Abe’s grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, was the industrial minister in the wartime cabinet and was initially under suspicion as a war criminal after World War II. In March, Abe provoked a wave of international protests when he declared that the Japanese army was not responsible for the wartime sex slavery imposed on more than 200,000 “comfort women” throughout Asia. After the remark, Wen apparently shortened his planned visit to Japan, originally scheduled for five days.

On Japan’s bid to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Wen only declared in the joint communiqué: “China understands Japan’s wish to play a bigger role in international community.” In fact in 2005, China campaigned in the UN to block Japan’s bid for a permanent seat and allowed the issue to fuel a wave of anti-Japanese protests in Chinese cities. Beijing fears that Tokyo’s more strident international role will undermine China’s influence in Asia.

Under Koizumi, maritime disputes between the two countries became a major bone of contention. Although Wen has called for the East China Sea to be transformed into a “sea of peace, friendship and cooperation,” the joint statement failed to clearly define the disputed maritime borders, suggesting only that there should be joint

development of parts of the East China Sea. It is clear that nothing is resolved.

China claims a 200-mile “exclusive economic zone” from its continental shelf, whereas Japan insists on a maritime border based on the median line between the coasts of the two countries. In a sea that is no more than 360 miles wide, this has led to disputes, particularly over gas fields and other resources. Several rounds of negotiations have ended fruitlessly.

In order to increase Japan’s leverage, Abe’s government unveiled two bills in March to protect Japanese oil rigs and vessels in its “exclusive economic zones”. As China is already pumping gas out of these areas, the legislation will exacerbate tensions. A senior Japanese foreign ministry official told the *Financial Times* on March 20: “The gas field development has some dangerous elements. If we take the same action that China is taking [extracting gas from close to the median line], there might even be a military conflict.”

Just as Wen concluded his visit, the lower house of the Japanese parliament passed a key bill allowing the government to hold a national referendum to revise the country’s post-war constitution. It will lay the basis for removing or modifying the so-called pacifist clause, enabling Japan to use its military more aggressively and to form security pacts with other countries.

Leaving Japan on April 13, Wen hailed his visit as a “success”. Two days later, however, the Chinese ambassador to Japan, Wang Yi, admitted on a television talkshow that while Wen’s visit was a big step forward, the “water from the thawed ice is still cold”.

Last Monday the US, Japan and India held their first-ever joint naval exercise at Yokosuka near Tokyo Bay. Although the drill was small and largely symbolic, it was part of Washington’s efforts to bring regional powers, including Australia, into an anti-Chinese network of strategic alliances. The naval manoeuvres say far more about the real state of affairs in Asia than all the friendly gestures during Wen’s trip.



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