

Japan's Nationalist Bubble

– Time for Japan's Ruler to Put Away Nationalist Banners –

By Tim Kelly

BACK in 1991 when I stepped off the plane for my first stint in Japan, the bubble economy had just collapsed. At the time most people did not know it. The economy, they assured themselves, was merely catching its breath, and stock and land prices would soon soar again. The painful reality was that the country was at the beginning of a bruising decade of economic woe that shattered the myth of an unbeatable Japan and set the stage for the resurgent nationalism that dominates politics today.

Tanigaki Sadakazu, Japan's former finance minister, sums up the bubble years as a time when Japan "was rich and amiable." The subsequent collapse in asset prices and the toll that had on the economy, he argues, is one cause for anti-foreign sentiment, mirroring the rise of militarism during the depression of the 1930s that led Japan to war and

eventual defeat. It is not yet that dire but if left to fester it will, he reckons, spread. Stoking that nationalism is a fear of China. As Japan languished in the 1990s its giant eastern neighbor boomed, emerging as a military power and an economic rival in the region. With GDP expanding at 10% a year, China is getting closer to overtaking Japan as Asia's biggest economy.

■ Us and Them

So is Japan anti-foreign? To the tourists that come to see the temples and sample the hot spas certainly not; it is a friendly place. Stick around for a while, though, and Japan feels less welcoming. For some, the enthusiasm for Japan's culture wears off when they knock up against an us-and-them view of the world (the "them" being all non-Japanese). As a foreigner you soon get the feeling you will never really be let inside. An insistence on speaking broken English to fluent Japanese-speaking foreigners or apparent amazement that any outsider can eat with chopsticks is perhaps a symptom of what at times seems like an obsession with wanting to feel apart. Covering G8 meetings and other overseas summits as a reporter earlier in my career, I was always baffled by the Japanese delegation's insistence on running their own show away from everyone else. Colleagues covering other nations would converge on the central press center while I would sit hidden away

with the Japanese press in their own media room tucked away in a hotel.

To avoid accusations of too much generalization, I must point out that there are many Japanese that care little for national differences and any number of foreigners with more perseverance than I have, who have done much to gain acceptance by the communities they live in. I am convinced, though, that they are the exception.

Most Japanese seem indifferent to foreigners, preferring to just ignore them. That is a pity and a worrying sign. With a population projected to shrink by 20 million over the next four decades, Japan will need foreigners, particularly those with skills, to help keep its economy going. Yet beyond the offer of money Japan has little to provide. Struggling to find apartment owners that will rent to foreigners, dealing with an archaic family registration law that takes little account of the 40,000 or so foreigners who marry Japanese every year, and an education system with the scant resources for non-native speakers are a few of the reasons why people will stay away. And with scant sign there is any political will to do anything about it, it is unlikely to get better anytime soon.

■ Danger of Nationalism

All that may give me and other foreigners something to grumble about, but it does not make Japan a hotbed of nationalism. Ask me to point out signs of deepening distrust of foreigners, and I cannot. Sure there are the right-wing nationalists that cruise the streets of Tokyo in vans and buses decked in jingoistic slogans, but they were doing that in 1991 as well. Most people pay little heed to the xenophobic ramblings and the dated marching music that blares from muscular speakers atop their black vans. Japan, albeit slowly, is also becoming a more diverse nation. Since

Photo: Kyodo News



Former Prime Minister Koizumi visiting Yasukuni shrine

Photo: A. Miyake, FCCJ

1991, the number of foreign residents has more than doubled to 1.5 million, even when you discount the 600,000 or so Japanese-speaking ethnic Koreans raised here. That non-Japanese community also lives largely free of the fear of racial violence that immigrants in the United States or Europe sometimes face. Physical attacks on foreigners in Japan are extremely rare. The kind of flag waving that engulfed the United States in the wake of the Sept. 11 terror attacks five years ago is unimaginable here. Japan's youth are more likely to sport the British Union Jack (as a fashion statement) than their national flag.

In fact the only time the Japanese ever seem to let their patriotic hair down at all is for sports. The year 2002, when Japan hosted the soccer World Cup jointly with South Korea, was one of the rare occasions when flag-waving crowds took to the streets.

So why are politicians such as Tanigaki or the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's Kato Koichi warning about a "danger of nationalism." Perhaps what they are really worried about is nationalism among the nation's political elite rather than the people they represent. Visits by the former prime minister, Koizumi Junichiro, to the Yasukuni shrine did much to isolate Japan. Koizumi insists that his pilgrimages to the site, which includes convicted war criminals among the dead it honors, in no way condoned past militarism. The Chinese and the South Koreans disagreed and a tour around the museum that stands next to the shrine will leave the visitor in little doubt about the nationalist leaning of the shrine. Kato for one has good reason to be frightened. An ultranationalist unhappy with



The author (second from left) listening to the speech of then Finance Minister Tanigaki Sadakazu

his outspoken criticism of the visits burnt down Kato's house following Koizumi's last visit to the shrine on August 15 to mark the 61st anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II.

Hoping to See the Nationalist Bubble Burst

It is not just the shrine that has the ability to inflame nationalist passions abroad, though. In China, where officials seem happy to let people blow off steam in anti-Japanese demonstrations rather than in protest against the communist rule, a little provocation goes a long way. Constitutional change that recognizes Japan's right to have an army is one more trigger for accusations of creeping nationalism. Although Japan does not officially have an army, it is nonetheless one of the world's top military spenders, with a budget for weapons and personnel on a par with the United Kingdom.

In the end, though, cooler heads may prevail to avert any slide into an Asian

cold war. There will of course be problems. China and Japan are going to have to find a way to accommodate each other's ambitions in Asia, and competition for gas, oil and other raw materials can only intensify as both vie for dwindling reserves to fuel their economic growth. Yet both countries need each other; there is too much at stake. Japan has the capital and technology that China must have to keep on expanding, while for Japan its neighbor is both a low-cost production base (billions of dollars already invested in production plants there) and a vast market for Japanese goods.

Before I get on the plane that takes me out of Japan for the last time – I am in no rush to leave – I hope I will have the chance to report that the nationalist bubble has burst. That will be good news for Japan, Asia and the rest of the world. **JS**

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