

Post-visit Relations with China

By Tadae Takubo

In a historic first, Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko visited China from October 25 to 29, 1992. Although the visit was preceded by vigorous arguments pro and con in Japan, these arguments, like the visit itself, are history. In the debate, I was one of the people arguing that it was premature. Basically, my reasoning was that, with the very fluid international situation for the next decade or so, it was dangerous for Japan to embark on a political move with such major ramifications as the emperor's visiting China without having first done the most meticulous study and analysis of what impact the visit would have. If you want to divide people into camps, I was in the "con" camp.

Well before the visit, the July 17 *Sankei Shimbun* newspaper carried a full-page opinion advertisement detailing three crucial reasons against the visit and signed by over 100 well-known Japanese thinkers. The first reason cited was the objection to using the emperor for political purposes—a reason I have my own reservations about.

As the advertisement reasoned, "Even though Japan has extended massive economic cooperation to China and worked hard for better Japan-China relations, China has recently laid claim to the Senkaku Islands (long acknowledged as Japanese territory), has repeatedly criticized the use of Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) for United Nations peacekeeping operations even though China is itself a member of the U.N. Security Council authorizing such operations, and has otherwise acted contrary to the establishment of truly friendly relations between our two countries.

"This situation should be resolved by the government's own foreign policy efforts, and to have the emperor visit China at this juncture is to use him for blatantly political purposes—even with the fig leaf of the 20th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations. This is all the more so in light of the hopes expressed by

some that the visit will ease the memory of the relationship's unfortunate history earlier this century. For the emperor to visit China now would be out of historical character and would be a violation of the constitutional provision against a political role for the emperor."

Political purposes

Although this is very easy to understand and I do not have any particular quarrel with its main thrust, I do have trouble with the concept of "using the emperor for political purposes." How are we to define "political purposes"? Is, indeed, an objective definition possible? Are not those who oppose the emperor's visiting China themselves acting for political purposes?

The emperor frequently hosts banquets at the Imperial Palace for visiting dignitaries. Are palace banquets held for all visiting heads of state? Is the banquet itself entirely apolitical? How are the other guests selected? Is making up the guest list also a political act?

On the other side, is this prohibition against the emperor's acting for political purposes so strong that he would not be allowed to do so even if Japan were faced with a threat to its vital interests? Some of the people who helped plan the visit have said that it will serve to put an end to the bitter aftertaste of war that has poisoned Japan-China relations for so long. The question of "using the emperor for political purposes" is open to many different interpretations. And as a result, I do not think this alone is sufficient grounds to oppose the emperor's visiting China.

Once in China, the emperor delivered a brief statement on Japan-China relations at the banquet hosted for him in Beijing by Chinese President Yang Shangkun. My main concern was that this statement would include an expression of regret for past deeds and that China would constantly harken back to this whenever it wanted something from

Japan. Yet the relevant passage read, "However, in the long history of relationship between our two countries, there was an unfortunate period, in which my country inflicted great sufferings on the people of China. I deeply deplore this."

Because the emperor's visit was at China's repeated invitation, and because the Chinese leadership was on record as saying it would not invite an important guest only to embarrass him, it is thought that China did not press for specific wording in the statement. It was, I felt, a surprisingly natural expression of his feelings.

Most people who heard it immediately recalled the statement read by the emperor at the palace banquet for South Korean President Roh Tae Woo on May 24, 1990, in which he said, "I think of the sufferings your people underwent during this unfortunate period, which was brought about by my country, and cannot but feel the deepest regret." The next day, May 25, President Roh met with the Korean press at the Akasaka Guesthouse and said that Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu had been more frankly contrite in their first meeting than any other Japanese leader had ever been and that the emperor had also been very clear, going beyond the domestic constraints that had been in force during former President Chun Doo Hwan's visit to Japan in 1984. The essential issue, he said, has been settled.

Important neighbors

What more can I say? It is obvious that President Roh was using the emperor's statement for his own domestic political purposes. In contrast, the statement in Beijing was lower-key, and it will be difficult for China to use it for political purposes even if it wants to.

The real question is whether or not this visit to China by the emperor and empress—one of the diplomatic highlights of 1992—will do more than simply mark the

20th anniversary of the normalization of relations and will also break the logjam to produce a dramatic development in Japan-China relations. To be blunt, the ordinary Chinese did not care about the visit one way or the other. Or if they did, the authorities made very sure they did not do anything to express their feelings. And most ordinary Japanese, rather than eagerly soaking up the visit's pageantry, passively watched the news on television.

There are many schools of thought on Japan-China relations, including stand-asiders who firmly believe that there is no need to work to improve them, pessimists who say the need is there but that it will be very difficult given the two countries' different sociopolitical systems, and optimists who say that the relationship has to be and can be improved. Asked, everyone says that a positive effort should be made for good relations between Japan and China. This is taken for granted. I do the same thing.

Korea and China are both important neighbors, and it is only natural that we should want to build relations of economic, political (diplomatic), security, cultural, and other friendship and goodwill with

our neighbors and to bequeath these good-neighborly relations to posterity. Indeed, that is why Japan was willing to break ranks and extend large-scale credits to China when it was an international outcast in the wake of the Tiananmen incident and why Japan went ahead with the emperor and empress's visit despite the controversy it generated in Japan. Massive progress has been made in economic, personal and other exchanges since the normalization of relations 20 years ago.

Worrisome concerns

Even so, there is an unsavory or eerie side to China that worries many Japanese. And I get the impression that the Japanese government and media have shied away from reporting this darker aspect. There are many examples and instances that illustrate it. To cite just three:

(1) On February 25, 1992, Chinese President Yang Shangkun announced a new territorial waters law. Article 2 of this law stated that Chinese territorial claims extend to the continent of the People's Republic of China and its coastal islands, Taiwan and its subsidiary islands including Diaoyutai, and such subsidiary islands and island groups as the Penghu Islands (Pescadores), the Dongsha (Pratas) Islands, the Xisha (Paracel) Islands, the Zhongsha Islands, the Nansha (Spratly) Islands, and all other islands that are part of the People's Republic of China and further stated that all waters within the area described by this territory are to be considered Chinese inland waters.

This announcement came as an abrupt and unwelcome surprise to Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and all the other countries concerned, and the Japanese government also immediately lodged a protest that China had laid unilateral claim to the Senkaku Retto islands (which the Chinese new territorial waters law refers to as Diaoyutai) even though the two countries were even then negotiating over who had jurisdiction over the islands. Compounding this audacious grab for territory, the territorial waters law says that China will use

force to expel anyone who infringes on its claim.

China keeps talking about how much it wants peace and how it wants to strengthen the relations of friendship and economic cooperation with Japan, and this was the ostensible reason for their repeatedly inviting the emperor to visit China. Yet if this is so, one can only wonder why Chinese foreign policy would be so insensitive to other countries' feelings as it was with the territorial waters law.

(2) China has expressed visible consternation about the fact that Japan has finally cleared the way for its SDF to take part in U.N. peacekeeping operations in Cambodia, even though this participation is at the request not only of the United Nations but also of the government of Cambodia. This consternation would be understandable if today's SDF were the old Imperial Japanese Army, but it is clear to anyone who has even glanced at Japanese defense policy that they are different. The Japanese political system is different, popular opinion is different, and the SDF are different.

In addition to these inherent differences, the SDF participation is conditional in that they can only go in to assist in countries where the conflict has ended and where all the parties to the former conflict are agreed on a U.N. peacekeeping presence, and the SDF themselves are limited to taking a neutral stance and not interfering in local politics, to carrying arms only for self-defense, and in many other ways. To date, a total of 80 countries have sent 500,000 soldiers to take part in U.N. peacekeeping operations—operations that won the 1988 Nobel Peace Prize for their invaluable work.

As one of the five permanent members of the Security Council, China bears a heavy responsibility for the smooth and effective functioning of the United Nations. As such, one would expect China to welcome Japanese participation in these peacekeeping operations. Instead, in a clear indication of non-support, China says, "This is a sensitive issue for us."

Making this even more incomprehensible, China itself sent 47 observers and a work force of 400 to the Cambodian



Photo: PANA

Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko on their historic first visit to China in October 1992.

peacekeeping operation in April. China is willing to send its own uniformed forces to Cambodia for peacekeeping, but they are reluctant to see the Japanese SDF in Cambodia for the same purpose. One cannot help but wonder if there is some ulterior motive at work here, or if China is just objecting for the sake of objecting.

Disputed islands

(3) In a related vein are China's sharply higher military spending and its decision to send Chinese military forces to the disputed Paracel and Spratly islands in the South China Sea. The other countries that have claims to these islands are very apprehensive about these Chinese moves, and the moves have provoked a wide range of commentary. Interest has been especially strong ever since it was suggested in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis that the waters around these islands may conceal vast reservoirs of oil, natural gas and other resources.

In 1974, Chinese naval forces went as far as the Paracel Islands, and in 1980 an 18-ship flotilla sailed to the South Pacific in connection with ICBM tests. After taking over as Chinese naval commander in chief in 1982, Liu Huaqing wrote a thesis in 1984 calling for a strong navy to push China's maritime interests. In this paper, he observed that China possesses several million square kilometers of territorial waters. Following this, a Chinese naval fleet held major military maneuvers on and around the Spratly Islands in 1987, with amphibian troops practicing landing on the islands.

The next year, China converted the Fiery Cross Reef into an artificial island, and then built a two-story maritime observation station there, provoking a military clash with the Vietnamese when their navy protested the usurpation. Thus the February 1992 territorial waters law was part and parcel of a long series of Chinese military moves to expand its territorial waters.

Backing this up, Chinese military spending, which had experienced only single-digit growth until 1988, has been recording strong double-digit growth since 1989. Calculated under the NATO

formula, Chinese military spending, although much less than Japanese military spending, has been on a sharply upward curve since 1989. It is significant that 76-year-old former naval commander Liu Huaqing was made a standing committee member of the Politburo at the October 1992 Communist Party Congress despite his advanced age.

It goes without saying that economic reconstruction has to be paramount if China wants to accomplish economic development and "socialist markets" in line with its professed policies of reform and openness, and the whole world knows that China does not have very much in the way of surplus funds to spend on military expansion. Yet at the same time, Chinese military moves have surprised and shocked the ASEAN countries, Taiwan and Vietnam, to name just a few. Sea-lanes vital to Japan's economic well-being go right past the Spratly Islands. This is hardly a situation in which prudent observers can declare that all is well in the relationship—even if the emperor did visit China.

Clinton's China policies

The Clinton administration's policy toward China is another area of special concern for Japan. Perhaps because he had served as head of the U.S. liaison office in Beijing before the normalization of Sino-American relations, Bush seems to have been sympathetic to the idea that China should not be isolated, even though this drew some criticism in the wake of Tiananmen. Even after the West declared a freeze on high-level diplomatic contacts after June 1989, he sent National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft and Undersecretary of State Lawrence Eagleberger on secret missions to Beijing.

During the presidential election, Clinton attacked Bush as being "soft on China." Sino-American relations have deteriorated during Bush's watch, not only because of the Tiananmen incident but also because the bilateral trade balance turned in China's favor. Exacerbating this, the United States has looked on with disfavor as China became a major arms exporter to the Third World.

Most-favored-nation (MFN) treatment for China is renewed every year, but there is a strong contingent in Congress that would revoke MFN status unless China pays more attention to human rights. Every time Congress has passed a motion making MFN status contingent on a better human rights record, Bush has vetoed it. If Clinton takes a more hard-line stance toward China, Sino-American relations could well deteriorate still further. And even if they do not get worse, there is certainly no reason to expect any conspicuous improvement.

This is not purely a Sino-American issue. What will Japan do if Sino-American relations get worse? It is all very well and fine to talk of mediating between China and the United States in the hope that the relationship can be repaired, but the realities of international geopolitics demand more than bright-eyed optimism.

Shigeharu Matsumoto, who had studied in the United States and who worked hard for peace between China and Japan when he was stationed in China before World War II as Domei News Agency's Shanghai Bureau Chief, wrote in his *Shanghai Jidai* (Years in Shanghai) that Japan-China relations are inexorably linked to Sino-American relations. This is as true now as it was then. China and the United States are both important to Japan, and a falling out between these two countries would certainly pose a dilemma for Japanese foreign policy.

There is a very real possibility that the ASEAN countries, Taiwan and Vietnam may unite against China. At the same time, South Korea has normalized diplomatic relations with first China and then Russia, emerging as a major foreign policy player in Northeast Asia. What would Japan's response be if South Korea and China were to become militarily closer? The future is littered with such land mines, and it is still far too soon to tell whether or not the emperor's visit to China was a good idea or not. ■

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