

The Anti-Japan Protests in China and an Uncertain Future

By *Sasaki Takeshi*

Implications of the Anti-Japan Protests in China

THE anti-Japan protests in China in April 2005 made news worldwide. Some protesters threw stones and damaged the Japanese Embassy in Beijing and the Consulate General of Japan in Shanghai, while members of the Chinese armed police force stood idly by. This state of affairs introduced another bone of contention. Demonstrators also vandalized Japanese restaurants and companies. One of the slogans they shouted was, "There is no guilt in patriotism." The Japanese government demanded that the Chinese government issue an apology and pay compensation for the damage, but the Beijing side answered by simply saying that all responsibility lay with Japan.

Actually, demonstrations against Japan had been expected for some time because this year marks the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. Over the last few years, while Japan-China economic relations have expanded with increasing interdependence, cold winds have dominated in the political arena. The absence of any official dialogue is apparent from the fact that the leaders of both countries have been unable to meet for a sincere political dialogue. The Chinese side claims that the biggest hurdle to such a summit meeting is Prime Minister Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni shrine, where the spirits of martyrs for the nation are enshrined, and the point is including class-A war criminals. China keeps repeating that such visits are an attempt to justify Japan's wartime actions. Koizumi's answer to this is that his visits are only an expression of his strong commitment to peace. Disagreement over how to view history

has repeatedly disrupted relations between Japan and China, and between Japan and South Korea. Former Prime Minister Nakasone's visit to Yasukuni in 1985 also caused rancor, and no subsequent Japanese prime minister had paid a similar visit until Koizumi.

In August 1995, then Prime Minister Murayama officially stated Japan's remorse for the past war and a strong commitment to peace. In the following decade, however, disagreements over the historical interpretation has been addressed in relation to political issues such as Taiwan, China's military expansion, Japan's changing stance regarding official development assistance to China, and territorial rights to the Senkaku (known as Diaoyu in China) Islands. The immediate cause of the recent anti-Japan protests was a report that Japan might be given a permanent seat on the Security Council as part of overall United Nations reforms. Koizumi says that his goal is to promote future-oriented relations between the two countries, but we cannot ignore the fact that the demonstrations were triggered by concern over the very direction of that future. Thus, the point of controversy has gone beyond the issue of whether he should stop visiting Yasukuni. It has now expanded to the question of how Japan should deal with the wider situation.

East Asia has become a new hub for the global economy, and the political stability of this area is crucial for the rest of the world. It is argued that closer economic ties bring political stability. However, it would be foolhardy to assume that political stability in East Asia can be achieved without improvements in the political environment because politics has its own dynamism. It is impossible to predict the

consequences of the anti-Japan protests in China, but I can at least analyze the current political situation.

The Close Linkage between Historical Interpretation and Politics

China's rise toward superpower status is being watched carefully in the international political arena. China is becoming confident enough to feel practically no threat from any other country. The protesters showed great confidence in their country's superiority and power through their slogan that derisively labeled Japan as a "small country." This suggests a return to the old Chinese imperial mindset. We cannot forget that the report issued by the 16th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (November 2002) stressed that the Party must take the lead in bringing about a great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Beginning around the mid-19th century, China suffered for about a century under the hands of the Great Powers. Decade after decade of war and destruction led to a feeling of victimization, and this feeling was finally transformed into a patriotic energy dedicated to rebuilding the country. Communism was able to divert this strong sense of nationalism for a while, but it lost much of this ability after the introduction of policies of reform and opening up to the outside world, especially after the Tiananmen Square incident. The Jiang Zemin government is said to have chosen patriotism as a way to counterbalance the decline in socialist ideology, and it is certainly true that the 16th National Congress identified the Chinese Communist Party as the vanguard of the Chinese people and the nation. This pushed nationalism to center stage. Patriotism has served as a tool to alleviate social discontent over internal problems, especially the rapidly widening gap between rich and poor. It is commonly assumed in Japan that much of the patriotism fostered through the Chinese educational system is of an anti-Japanese nature. Most of the people protesting against Japan this time were

Illustration: Iwasawa Akio

young – the very people whose schooling had a nationalist slant – and it was these young people whose rallying cry was “There is no guilt in patriotism.”

Viewed from this perspective, and taking the political climate into account, it would appear that the recent anti-Japan protests were almost bound to happen. This is the common view in Japan. But this does not mean that we Japanese had expected that Chinese nationalism would one day take the form of demonstrators surrounding the Japanese embassy or consulate and throwing stones at them, while armed police would just sit back and watch. There are various views on the interpretation of history in Japan, too, but the Japanese people have a strong distrust of the violence committed by some demonstrators and the Chinese government’s lack of a response to that violence. The Chinese official position, that all responsibility lies with Japan, is making the Japanese even more wary. To the Japanese ear, “no guilt in patriotism” seems to imply that a big power need not feel any guilt for anything.

During the Asian Cup soccer games in China last summer, many local fans booed the Japanese team, releasing their strong anti-Japan sentiments. After Japan defeated China and won the championship, some local fans attacked a Japanese Embassy vehicle, creating a situation where the officials inside could have been hurt. At the time, the hostility expressed toward Japan prompted some Japanese to talk of a “second Boxer Rebellion.” If we were to think along these lines, it would seem that the inability of a country to interpret history correctly is not only a Japanese issue but a Chinese one as well.

If someone’s interpretation of history is such that they believe there is no guilt in patriotism, they will tend to be convinced that the country they feel hostility toward is the only one with a mistaken view of history. This perspective would only lead to further political naiveté, a blind alley preventing a mature understanding of political and historical realities. Unfortunately, excessive patriotic feelings

cloaked in no-guilt convictions are all too common in this part of Asia. The challenge now facing us is to find ways to stop events from creating an uncontrollable chain reaction.

A Political Crisis with No Immediate End in Sight

Causes for concern are not only the risk of more anti-Japan protests but the violent demonstrators and Beijing’s response to such violence. The Chinese government runs the political risk of being accused of betraying patriotic feelings if, in accordance with international norms, it uses force against violent protesters. From this perspective it seems that the government has chosen the only road open to it – in effect, to ban the protests themselves, at least for the time being. But the question now remains: does the Chinese government have enough authority to gain widespread support for any unilateral decision to control the political result – anti-Japanese sentiments – of the patriotism it fostered through its educational system?

This leads us to another question with significant historical implications: how will the Chinese people, who have only known a political system that forcefully leads the entire country along a single path, and who have only followed that path until now, behave politically in the future? This question has implications beyond the possibility of more anti-Japan protests – it also asks how the Chinese government will deal with pressure for greater political freedom.

Throughout their history, the Japanese know perhaps more than any other people in Asia, that patriotism can be neither innocent nor “not guilty.” After World War II, Japan took that misplaced patriotism and did everything it could to channel its energy into building an economic powerhouse. But the increase in patriotic feelings in China and on the Korean peninsula, which have continued to grow



as an anti-Japan political tool, will spark to a negative backlash from Japan.

The generation of politicians that worked on both sides during the Cold War to build amicable relations between Japan and China and between Japan and South Korea has now retired, and there appears to be no one suitable to take their place at a time when political dialogue is most needed. Economic development can no longer hold back the forces of nationalism – on the contrary, it is now fostering more nationalism. The drive toward democracy is almost certainly spurring more nationalism. It is extremely dangerous for cross-border expansion and a backlash of nationalism and populism to be developing while old political systems are melting down.

There are many factors in China that could trigger more anti-Japan protests. The governments of both countries will most likely keep a close eye on possible changes in international opinion, while doing everything they can to keep events from flying out of control. **JS**

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