Policy Forum 08-041: An Outbreak of ‘Warm Spring’: The Hu-Fukuda Summit Assessed

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By Sourabh Gupta

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I. Introduction

Sourabh Gupta, Senior Research Associate at Samuels International Associates, Inc., writes, "With Beijing having internalized the imperative for a changed tone of voice with which it speaks to the

Japanese and with nationalist revisionism perhaps having crested in Tokyo… the portents, going forward, this time around however seem a lot better."

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II. Article by Sourabh Gupta

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By Sourabh Gupta

To serve both as a reminder of the past and a warning to the future, visiting Prime Minister (and ex-Imperial Japanese Army conscript) Kakuei Tanaka was greeted on arrival in Beijing in September 1972 by the PLA chorus' triumphant rendition of its anti-Japanese resistance-era battle hymn.

Substituting a volley of words for the chorus, twenty six years later, at a televised state banquet at the Imperial Palace (no less), visiting President Jiang Zemin laid out an earful -- pointedly lecturing his host on Japan's wartime aggression, leaving attendees and viewers both visibly paled and furious in equal measure.

Sensing a surfeit of 'apology fatigue' in Tokyo and the diminishing returns of constant reminders, visiting President Hu Jintao, mercifully, chose to identify his landmark visit as a 'starting point of a new history' rather than a continuation or culmination of a contentious recent past.

In fact, gauging by the Joint Statement released, the Chinese side - for the first time - officially recognized the pacific trajectory of Japan's postwar development, without any equivalent concession or further acknowledgement by Tokyo of its war responsibility. By comparison, the Obuchi-Jiang Joint Declaration of 1998 had *explicitly* excluded a reference to Japan's policy as a 'peaceful nation', following the Japanese Prime Minister's refusal to issue a *written* apology to the Chinese for Tokyo's WWII role.

The Obuchi-Kim Dae-jung Joint Declaration of 1998, by contrast, issued a month prior to President Jiang's visit, had paired Japan's recognition of its "colonial rule" - and "heartfelt apology" thereof, with Seoul's appreciation of Japan's Peace Constitution and peaceful post-war development.

For President Hu, however, to suggest his visit as the 'starting point of a new history' is only half-correct. Even as Tokyo's official recognition of its war responsibility vis-à-vis China has crept ingloriously from "remorse" (1972) to recognition of "great sufferings" (1992) to recognition of "aggression" (1998), the corner on this particular 'history' crisis in bilateral relations is unlikely to be turned without a full and frank admission of a "heartfelt apology" on Kantei's part.

An appropriate stimulant, perhaps, to this official Japanese crawl over 'history's' finish line might well be Beijing's bestowal of understanding, if not support, of Tokyo's Security Council bid. Keenly noticed in Kasumigaseki earlier this winter was a China-India 'Shared Vision' declaration that included an unprecedented Chinese 'understanding and support' of India's UNSC permanent membership aspirations. In the event, the Fukuda-Hu Joint Statement paid a mere curtsy to Japan's international aspirations and current United Nations role - an improvement over President Jiang's firm refusal in 1998 to countenance anything so much as a mention of Japan's UNSC bid, but not much further.

Yet, aside from the 'history' issue, formidable obstacles loom in regards to Beijing's acquiescence of Tokyo's Security Council bid. By no means is it clear that Beijing is in favor or seating *any*

developed country on the Council, let alone an alliance partner that is expected to faithfully tow Foggy Bottom's line. Interestingly though, Tokyo's voting patterns at the U.N. General Assembly over the past three decades have favored Beijing's interests almost as frequently as they have paralleled Washington's.

Memories of Tokyo's 1961 co-sponsorship - and, post-1966, its annual co-issuance - of a blocking resolution that stymied Beijing's bid for the China seat on the Security Council don't help either. That said, a diplomatically delicate written apology-cum-Security Council-membership bargain, particularly in the context of a warming trend in relations, remains within a realistic, albeit narrow, realm of possibility.

On the other perennial irritant - Taiwan - that has surfaced in every joint Sino-Japanese document, however, verbiage was terse -- with neither Beijing's preference of Japan's *opposition* to Taiwanese independence nor Tokyo's hope of China's adherence to an exclusively peaceful resolution of the straits dilemma captured in the Joint Statement.

Given the formal extension of Japan's strategic imprint over cross-straits issues during the past decade, and which is likely to be clarified further by decades-end in an updated National Defense Program Outline (NDPO), the issue of Taiwan indeterminate status lends a note of potentially serious destabilization to Sino-Japanese relations. This is particularly so, given that even more than the case of Beijing's normalization bargain with Washington, its restoration of ties with Tokyo was heavily predicated on "Three Principles" that were fundamentally of an anti-Taiwan coloration.

Balanced against non-movement on the Taiwan issue at the summit however was significant movement on a previously intractable bilateral dispute - the contested jurisdictional and drilling rights to promising sea-bed gas reserves that straddle a hypothetical median line between overlapping Chinese and Japanese exclusive economic zone (EEZ) claims in the East China Sea.

In a quiet but notable movement in its position last December, Beijing had agreed to the median line as the locus of "joint development" of gas reserves - in line with Japanese preferences and *implicitly* further perhaps acknowledging the median line as the *de facto* maritime boundary.

With the negotiations stalemated through April and with Chinese production already having commenced at an adjacent gas-field, President Hu - deferring to the demands of his host - proposed that joint development proceed at the largest of the gas fields (Chunxiao/Shirakaba), which lies 4 km on the Chinese side of the median line.

With the Japanese territorial and geological interest adequately safeguarded, the finalization of the economic and technical details of joint development is expected to proceed quickly. Given however the tendency, at times, of Japan-policy to be used as a proxy in intra-party contests within the corridors of power, the slim possibility of Beijing's temporizing on the Chunxiao development pledge - should a revisionist or Sino-phobic government succeed the distracted Fukuda administration - cannot be ruled out entirely.

Two Steps Forward, One Step Backward … or Other Way Around?

In recent times, even as the denseness of economic interaction has grown dramatically, with Sino-Japanese trade quadrupling (since the 1998 summit) such that in 2007 China edged the U.S. as Japan's largest trading partner, 'hot' economics has rarely devolved into politics of comparable warmth. Recent progress on the gas dispute and a host of myriad lesser issues notwithstanding, it remains to be seen if the blossoming of the bilateral relationship can outlive the passage of 'warm spring'.

In 1998, President Jiang Zemin too had arrived in Tokyo during one of the low points in post-1972 Sino-Japanese relations. Then, dogged as the relationship was with memories of the PLA's missile exercises nearabouts Japanese territorial waters; the 1996 U.S.-Japan Security Declaration; Prime Minister Hashimoto's visit to Yasukuni; and construction by right-wingers of a lighthouse on the disputed Senkaku islands, negative views of China among the surveyed Japanese public had exceeded the positive for the first time since 1978.

The summit, fractious as it was, helped place relations on a more even keel such that by the early-2000s, productive agreements on disposing off Imperial Army-abandoned chemical munitions in China and a creative, advance mutual notification mechanism for marine investigations in disputed EEZ waters were amicably reached.

Bilateral relations however were to fall into utter disrepair thereafter, in large measure (though not solely) due to Prime Minister Koizumi's nonchalantly reckless nationalism. Likewise, it remains to be seen if the current momentum endowed to bilateral ties can outlive the challenges that await it down the line.

With Beijing having internalized the imperative for a changed tone of voice with which it speaks to the Japanese and with nationalist revisionism perhaps having crested in Tokyo (with pro-constitutional revision proponents being outnumbered by opponents for the first time since 1993), the portents, going forward, this time around however seem a lot better.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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