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Issue Brief

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China-Japan: Towards Normalisation

October 4, 2017

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The diplomatic ties between China and Japan, the two powerful economic nations in East Asia, have recently began moving towards a positive diplomatic trajectory after a hiatus of over fifteen years. The swift move has been taken as a major breakthrough and a step forward in the already frozen diplomatic ties and rising political tensions between the two nations. A rapprochement between the two countries now seems to be in the offing.



The Breakthrough

In a sudden and surprise visit, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, appeared at the reception organised by the Chinese Embassy in Tokyo on September 28, marking the 68th anniversary of the founding of People's Republic of China. The visit also coincided with the 45th anniversary of the normalisation of the Sino-Japanese ties.¹ Abe became the first Japanese Prime Minister to attend such a event in fifteen years. This is the indication of the opening of a fresh dialogue between the two nations and putting the ties on a positive direction in the future.

Diplomatic ties between the two nations were established in July 1972 when Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka undertook his maiden voyage to Peking. Relations had remained cool since 1945 as Japan refused to recognise the revolutionary people's government in Peking against the nationalist Kuomintang government led by General Chiang Kai-shek, and supported by Japan.

Earlier, Abe sent a congratulatory message to his Chinese counter-part Li Keqian, purposing to advance cooperation and exchanges in all areas and build a stable friendship. He also said he was looking forward to meeting Li at the China-Japan-South Korea summit later this year. He wished to undertake an official

¹ Zhao Yusha, "Chinese Embassy hosts Abe in unprecedented visit to mark anniversary of ties", *Global Times* (Beijing), September 28, 2017.

visit to Beijing and hoped that the Chinese President Xi Jinping would visit Japan after that visit.² Li said that “current circumstances present new opportunities, as well as challenges,” and that Tokyo can meet Beijing “halfway to jointly safeguard the political foundation of their relations and properly manage and control their contradictions ... in the spirit of learning from history while looking to the future, to push for (their) stable improvement and development.”³

Cheng Yonghua, Chinese Ambassador to Japan, added that the relationship between China and Japan is being improved, but is still facing some sensitive and complicated factors. It is hoped that both sides could focus on the long-term and the larger interests to safeguard the political foundations for bilateral ties, and implement with concrete actions the important consensus that China and Japan are each other's cooperative partners rather than threats and shall support each other's peaceful development.⁴

The revival of the goodwill between Beijing and Tokyo would reset the diplomatic tone upset by years of upheavals on island issue (Senkakbu / Diaoyu) in the South China Sea since 2010. Bilateral trade had declined from US\$ 334 billion in 2012. Since then, bilateral trade continuously plummeted.⁵ People's traffic, however, witnessed an increasing trend and over 6.3 million Chinese visited Japan in 2016.

Impacts

This is the second "normalisation" between China and Japan. The present task is not as daunting as it was in 1972. Things could move much faster between Beijing and Tokyo this time keeping in mind the welcoming response from Beijing. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang said that the anniversary of the normalisation of diplomatic ties is “of great significance” and expressed hope that Japan sees it as an opportunity to draw lessons from history and look to the future and improve ties “in a correct direction.”⁶

Being the second and the third largest economies, both China and Japan have great responsibilities together to ensure peace and development in Asia. Japanese multinationals are already inclined toward

² Liu Zheng, "China and Japan revive goodwill gestures to mark diplomatic milestone", *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), September 29, 2017.

³ Kyodo, "Abe-Li message exchange signals warmer ties on 45th anniversary of diplomatic relations", *The Japan Times* (Tokyo), September 29, 2017.

⁴ Xinhua, "Abe attends ceremony marking China's National Day". *China. Org.cn*. September 29, 2017.

⁵ "JETRO Survey: Analysis of Japan-China Trade in 2015". Tokyo: Japan External Trade Organization: <https://www.jetro.go.jp/en/news/releases/2016/c52b1f3efe0aa231.html>

⁶ Ibid.

the ambitious Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to build trade and connectivity across the globe.⁷

Abe's dissolution of the lower house of the National Diet, the House of Representatives, on the same day and call for snap election is taken as another motive in opening dialogue with China. He may refrain from anti-China bashing in the forthcoming campaign to muster public support. In the earlier snap election held in 2014, Abe won on the basis of the anti-China feelings, which ran high on the Senkaku/Diaoyu spat at that time. There is much hope that this time reconciliation would work and contentious issues like homage to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo would be prevented to solidify the Sino-Japanese emerging rapprochement.

Conclusion

There are many reasons that have compelled Abe to offer the olive branch to China. These include domestic economic needs by Japan to uplift the economy under his "Abenomics", the call by multinationals to promote trade and investment with neighbouring China, enhance Japanese stakes in the BRI, stabilise the regional security architecture, and counter threats posed by the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK). There can be no doubt that with the deteriorating security situation in the region, the prospective Sino-Japanese rapprochement would be a guarantee for peace and stability in East Asia.

⁷ Editorial, "Japan and 'One Belt, One Road'", *The Japan Times* (Tokyo), June 24, 2017.