



### THE EMERGING SINO-JAPANESE DETENTE

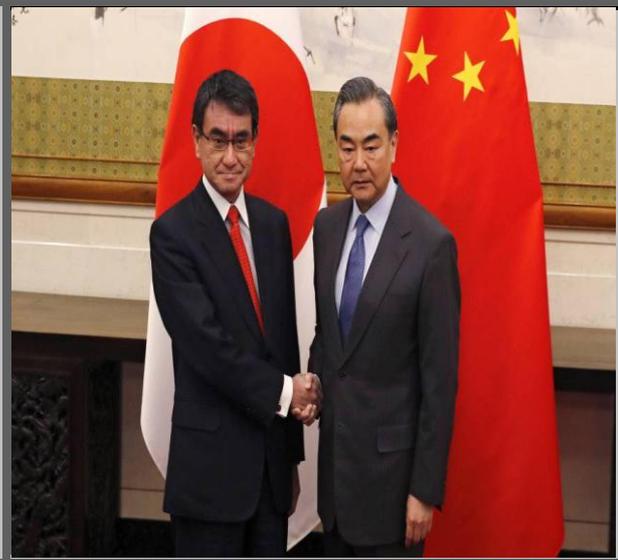
By  
**Dr Ahmad Rashid Malik**  
Director

*The China-Pakistan Study Center (CPSC), ISSI*

Edited by  
**Najam Rafique**

February 01, 2018

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



**Japanese Foreign Minister, Taro Kono, paid an official visit to Beijing on January 27-28, 2018. Earlier, Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida had visited Beijing in April 2016. This is Kono's first official visit to China after assuming his portfolio in August 2017. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held talks with Kono and exchanged opinions on bilateral ties and issues of common concerns.<sup>1</sup>**

This formal effort will help re-assure the promotion of bilateral ties between the two countries after tense relations in the past seven years over the Island issue, known as Diaoyu in China and Senkaku in Japan. However, in a potentially harmful move on January 25, 2018, China had rebuked Japan after it opened a museum for the disputed island in Tokyo. The museum, run by the Japanese Government, displays documents and photographs defending Japan's claims over the Island.<sup>2</sup> The museum also displays photographs of the Takashima (in Japan) and Dokdo (in South Korea), an Island counter claimed by South Korea, inviting anger from both China and South Korea ahead of a trilateral meeting to be held in Japan soon.

The settlement of the Island issue is the key in resolving bilateral trust between the two countries. Ahead of his visit to Beijing, Kono had remarked that he was, “willing to promote cooperation and communication between Japan and China in all areas while properly addressing outstanding

<sup>1</sup> Liu Caiyu, “Japanese FM's China visit breaks deadlock but analysts warn of two-faced strategy”, *Global Times Beijing*, January 28, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> “China rebukes Japan after it opens museum for disputed islands”, *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), January 26, 2018.

problems.”<sup>3</sup> Similar feeling had been expressed by Wang, who said that, “China hopes that Japan does not slacken its efforts and puts its words into action, and works with China to get ties back onto a normal, healthy track as soon as possible.”<sup>4</sup> Kono’s visit will lay down the ground for Prime Minister’s Shinzo Abe’s visit to China that date of which has not been finalized yet.

The relations between China and Japan are significant. They are neighbours and crucial trading partners. Both guarantee the security of the Asia-Pacific in the wider context. The dawn of the 2018 would be a turning point in de-icing the strained relations between the two countries and putting them back on the track. The improvement would be expected to raise the Sino-Japanese relationship to a new stage of cooperation and mutual trust.

### **The New Beginning**

The year 2018 marks the 40th anniversary of the signing of the China-Japan Treaty of Peace and Friendship. The détente was created between the two countries in 1972 and Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka visited China and opened the dialogue. The bilateral relations rapidly flourished until 2010 when the controversy over the Senkaku / Diaoyu erupted and diplomatic and economic relations were deteriorated.

However, since October 2017, Sino-Japanese ties have been moving towards a positive trajectory. Many gulfs are being bridged and there is a mutual goodwill to put the relations on a robust foundation after the exchange of political, legislative, and business delegations in the past couple of months. The exchanges of the delegation of the political parties set the ball rolling in the right direction. A delegation of the Communist Party of China (CPC) visited Japan in November 2017.<sup>5</sup> Natsuo Yamaguchi, leader of Japan's Komeito Party, visited Beijing in December 2017.<sup>6</sup> Reciprocating, Toshihiro Nikai, Secretary-General of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) of Japan, visited Beijing and held talks with President Xi Jinping.<sup>7</sup> Japanese Business Federation Chairman, Sadayuki Sakakibara, and Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry Chairman, Akio Mimura, were among the roughly 250 representatives who visited China in November 2017, making it one of Japan's largest

---

<sup>3</sup> “Kono says willing to promote China-Japan relationship”, *China Daily* (Beijing), January 26, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> “Put words into action’: China urges Japan to get ties back on track”, *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), January 28, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> A delegation of the Communist Party of China visited Japan in November 2017. “Chinese delegation introduces CPC party congress in Japan”, *Xinhua* (Beijing), November 26, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> “Vice-premier reaches out to Japan delegation”, *China Daily* (Beijing), December 3, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> “LDP Secretary-General Toshihiro Nikai invites Xi to visit Tokyo next year amid warming ties with Beijing”, *The Japan Times* (Tokyo), December 28, 2017.

business delegations to China.<sup>8</sup> The delegation met with the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. A trust is now in the offing. The improvement of ties looks long-term and would have a positive impact on the Asia-Pacific's strategic and economic relations in the years to come.

### The Belt and Road Conjunction

Japan is also willing to work with China on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under the international standards, openness, and free atmosphere. It is expected that soon Japan would be an active player on the BRI. Kono said that Japan and China cooperating to address the immense needs for infrastructure in Asia would bring great benefits to the economy of both countries, as well as to the prosperity of Asia.<sup>9</sup> While addressing the National Diet, Abe also said that Japan will cooperate with Beijing to meet the growing demand for building infrastructure in Asia, bearing in mind President Xi Jinping's "One Belt, One Road cross-border infrastructure initiative."<sup>10</sup>

Abe said that Japan and China were "inseparable" countries, adding that Japan, "will seek to meet the expectations of the international community by developing friendly relations (with China) in a stable manner."<sup>11</sup> Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying, on January 23 said, "With the principle of wide consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits, China stands ready to work with Japan and other parties to promote the Belt and Road Initiative and achieve common development and prosperity of countries in this region."<sup>12</sup> The exchange of these statements on the BRI illustrate the convergence of views between China and Japan on this global connectivity and trade project. Being the second and third largest economies of the world, China and Japan could inject a new vigour in the BRI's infrastructure projects, trade connectivity across Asia, Africa, and Eurasia.

### The Trilateral Impact

There is also an upcoming trilateral meeting to be held in Japan between China, South Korea, and Japan the date of which has not been specified yet. The last meeting was held in Seoul in 2015. The process of this meeting was evolved in 2008. Kono also discussed the issue of the trilateral meeting with his counterpart in Beijing. It is hoped that the museum issue of the disputed Islands with China

---

<sup>8</sup> "Japanese business delegation visits China in trade outreach", *Nikkei Asian Review* (Tokyo), November 21, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> "Interview: Japanese FM says willing to promote steady development of Sino-Japanese relationship", *Xinhua* (Beijing), January 26, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> "Abe seeks constitutional reform, better China ties in Diet speech ", *Kyodo* (Tokyo), January 22, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> "Abe calls for deeper debate on Japan's constitution", *Nikkei Asian Review* (Tokyo), January 22, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference", January 23, 2018. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, Beijing.  
[http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/t1528156.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1528156.shtml).

and South Korea would not disrupt the convening of the trilateral meeting. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang is expected to take part in the meeting.

During Kono's visit to Beijing, there were discussions also on the North Korean nuclear and missile program. Japan wants China to pass on strict measures against North Korean nuclear and missile program.<sup>13</sup> However, under the inter-Korean peace talks, a much better room would be available to decrease differences on the issue.

## Conclusion

In spite of increasing enthusiasm between China and Japan, there is yet an obscurity about a number of fundamental issues as they keep surfacing over and again. It would take some time to see how Tokyo would be accommodating the inter-Korean peace talks, and at the same time, how it would improve relations with Seoul, and a new beginning with Beijing, as these issues are highly interwoven. In short, the convergence of views on the BRI and mutual goodwill to improve the political, diplomatic, and economic ties would likely lead to resolving other issues such as the Island and North Korean issue. The break of the diplomatic deadlock between China and Japan can be considered optimistic in putting the ties on the road to steady development, and the visit by Taro Kono would be a launching-pad for a new warming up between Beijing and Tokyo.

---

<sup>13</sup> Tomoyuki Tachikawa, "Outlook for Japan-China ties fragile as regional strategies slow thaw", *The Japan Times* (Tokyo), January 29, 2018.