

Stronger China, tougher Japan make an Asian stand-off

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At APEC, the most important issues are never the ones on the agenda. In Vietnam over the weekend, the region's leaders will go through the motions of trying to revive the Doha round of global trade talks that collapsed a few months ago.

But for those with an eye to history, the real focus will be the atmospherics between East Asia's two most powerful states, China and Japan. If these two great powers cannot find a way to get along better, all the trade negotiations in the world will not save the Western Pacific from a dark and violent future.

The tension between them has deep roots in history, but it is being powered anew by China's resurgence as Asia's pre-eminent economic and strategic power. Despite the growing economic interdependence between them, there is no getting round the simple fact that for Japan, China's rise is threatening. China's manufacturing muscle, and its ability to move further and further up the quality curve, threatens Japan's long-term economic position. China's adroit mix of pressure and charm, and America's post-September 11, 2001, travails, have created an aura of inevitability about Beijing's rise to regional leadership.

It is Japan, however, that has taken much of the blame for the sharp downturn in relations over the past few years. Former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine have been seen, not just in Beijing but elsewhere in Asia, as an uncomfortable reminder of Japan's militarist past. There have been hopes that Japan's new Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, will take a more conciliatory line.

Don't bet on it. Abe himself has long advocated a more active and assertive foreign policy and strategic role for Japan. He has been willing to make conciliatory gestures to China, as he did in a visit to Beijing soon after taking office. But his ability and willingness to maintain a warmer atmosphere in Sino-Japanese relations will depend on China's willingness to reciprocate. So far we have not seen much of that. Over the past few years, China has gone to great lengths to eliminate the negatives and emphasise the positives in all its bilateral relations in Asia, except with Japan. With Japan, it has done the opposite.

Of course it is hard to be comfortable with the symbolism of Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. But it is equally hard to escape the conclusion that for China the visits have been more a pretext than a reason to criticise Tokyo. The two states are locked in a competition for influence in Asia. Beijing, as well, seems to find anti-Japanese sentiment a useful spur to the nationalism on which the Communist Party's legitimacy in part depends.

A fair assessment of the significance of the Yasukuni Shrine issue, and other occasional manifestations of Japanese historical revisionism, has to place them alongside Japan's record as an international citizen since 1945. For 60 years now, Japan has behaved impeccably as a peace-loving, constructive and responsible member of the international community, and a generous aid donor - including to China. Japanese might reasonably wonder: what more must the country do to prove its bona fides as a responsible international actor?

Of course Beijing's concerns resonate - in more muted terms - in other countries as well, including Australia. There seems to be a universal assumption that Japan only has two options: to

remain for all time a radically pacifist state of the kind it has been since 1945, or to revert to the militarism of the earlier decades of the last century. But of course this is wrong; there is no reason to think that Japan cannot evolve to become a more "normal" state, which protects its own territory and interests with armed force within the clearly accepted rules and norms of international conduct, just the way other states - including Australia - do.

With China's rise, such a development is more or less inevitable. Japan will continue to rely on the US for its security for as long as possible, but the Cold War arrangements that still persist in North-East Asia cannot address the new strategic challenges posed by the rise of China. Strategic competition between China and Japan has a dynamic all its own, and Japan has no choice but to respond to China's rise by building for itself a more normal "strategic" posture. It is the need for Japan finally to move on from its postwar pacifism, as well as China's own return to great-power status, that is reshaping the landscape in Asia today.

It is vitally important for all of us in the Western Pacific, including Australia, that this should happen peacefully. We missed a great opportunity to help Japan find a more normal strategic personality befitting its economic power when the UN last year failed to agree that it deserved a permanent seat on the Security Council.

This weekend in Hanoi, the most useful thing John Howard might do is have a word to his Chinese counterpart. China welcomes Australia's recognition that as China grows it needs to be accorded the status of a regional leader, and be trusted to use its power responsibly. Unless China is prepared to live with a powerful and strategically "normal" Japan, it is hard to see how Asia can stay peaceful over coming decades.

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