

POLICY BRIEF

Feb. 7, 2018

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Between substance and appearance: China's « smile diplomacy » towards Japan decrypted

Valérie Niquet

Much has been made of the bilateral meeting between Prime Minister Abe and President Xi Jinping, a “new start” in bilateral relations, that took place on November 11, after the APEC meeting in Da Nang (Vietnam).¹ Commentators – including in China – put the stress on the length of the meeting and the “smiling face” of both leaders. During the summit, Xi Jinping mentioned the recent increase of “positive developments” between Japan and China.² More significant maybe, after this first meeting with Xi, China arranged for another meeting with Prime Minister Li Keqiang, that took place in Manila after the ASEAN summit. After years of tensions, the leaders of both countries thus succeeded in meeting twice, for a significant period of time, in less than a week.³

China's Approach towards Japan: Strategic evolution or tactical change?

Japan has always been keen to achieve a kind of positive *modus vivendi* with the PRC, both for strategic and economic reasons. And the meeting with Xi has also been qualified as “extremely productive” by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁴ Thus, the most noticeable evolution is the obvious change in China's posture. But beyond that switch in signaling policy, one may wonder how deep that change is. The contrast with former declarations and analysis, published in the PRC only months before these two meetings, is, on the surface, impressive. After the G 20 Hamburg Summit, commentaries in the Chinese press were verging towards the hectoring. All difficulties

1 Julian Ryall, « Xi Jinping and Shinzo Abe Say it is a Fresh Start for Japan », *South China Morning Post*, 19-11-2017 on <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2120455/xi-and-abe-say-its-fresh-start-china-and-japan-hmm>

2 Japan-China Summit Meeting, 11-11-2017 on <http://www.mofa.gov.jp>

3 « Abe-Li Meeting Sign of Improving Japan-China Ties », *Japan Times*, 13-11-2017

4 Japan-China Summit Meeting, op.cit.

in bilateral relations were the “fault of Japan”, a “deficit in trust” that resulted from the lack of sincerity from Shinzo Abe, and Tokyo’s unwillingness to “truly accept China’s development and treat China as a cooperation partner”. Japan was also asked to “adopt a prudent defense policy”, and at the same time “respect China’s normal and justified defense buildup”.⁵ A very different tone, contrasting with the post November summit comments.

However, in spite of the more positive attitude of China, on the PRC’s foreign ministry website, the report of the November meeting between the two leaders remain close to that more traditional rhetoric. In that report, two sides, are asked to “bear in mind the fundamental interest of the two people and correctly grasp the general direction of peace”. In other words, Japan should adopt a “strategic long term vision”, focus on the more important objective of a rapprochement with China and stop insisting on contesting issues. As usual, Tokyo is also asked to “take more practical action to reflect the strategic consensus”.⁶ So, as there is actually no fundamental change in the mainstream political line on relations with Japan, and as issues of contention have not been solved, what are the reasons behind China’s new “smile diplomacy” and the obvious willingness to make a good impression both to Japan and to other significant actors in the region.

Three main factors

China’s apparent change of attitude can be attributed to three main factors, directly related to China’s own interests, both internal and external.

The first factor results from Japan’s most recent general elections, with Shinzo Abe’s

coalition (PLD and Komeito) winning large victory. A victory underlined by Prime Minister Abe himself during his meeting with Xi Jinping, when he mentioned the “new strengthening of leadership in Japan and China”.⁷ Contrary to what China’ leadership may have hoped for after his fall in popularity during the summer, Shinzo Abe’s position, and his ability to implement his policy and strategic vision for Japan and Asia, have been consolidated. Chinese leadership will have to “make do” with this Japanese administration until 2021, and the new more open policy towards Japan might be the result of a pragmatic analysis of the situation, and the decision to switch from a confrontational, to a more “seductive” strategy.

Shinzo Abe’s victory, is also a confirmation of Japanese’s public opinion evolution on defense issues, and the reduced influence of more traditional pacifist posture on Japan’s decision making. Japan’s leadership is obviously confident enough to declare during the meeting with Xi for instance that there would be no real improvement in bilateral relations without stability in the East China sea.⁸ Moreover, a series of important events – that will also involve the PRC - will give Tokyo the opportunity to increase its visibility on the global scene. In 2019, Japan will for the first time host the G20 meeting in Tokyo, and in 2020, the Olympic Games will also be a significant global opportunity.

The second factor is related to the situation in the Korean peninsula, the positions expressed during president Trump’s visit to Tokyo in November 2017, and the emphasis put on the solidity of the US-Japan alliance. Both countries stressed their “100% agreement” on the strategy needed to place increased pressure on the DPRK. President Trump mentioned

5 « Japan Needs to Walk the Talk to Improve Relationship with China », *China Daily*, 14-08-2017.

6 Xi Meets with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, 11-11-2017 on <http://fmprc.gov.cn>

7 Japan-China Summit, op.cit.

8 Idem.

the “iron clad US commitment to Japan’s defense through the full range of military cooperation, conventional and nuclear”, as well as the “unwavering robust Japan-US Alliance”. Whatever the possible debates on extended deterrence, the signaling was strong and positive for the bilateral alliance. And any hope that the PRC might have had of divergences between Tokyo and Washington on these defense and security issues, and on their importance to both countries, have been deceived.

On North Korea and the role of China, both the US and Japan recognized that all three share the goal of complete and verifiable denuclearization, but they also mentioned their expectations to see China increase its own efforts to implement sanctions and be more forthcoming to put maximum pressure on North Korea.⁹

Beyond North Korea, both Washington and Tokyo also referred to the concept of “Indo-Pacific”, based on shared fundamental values, economic prosperity through connectivity and peace and stability through capacity building, an openly direct response to China’s own ambitions and assertive strategy in the region.¹⁰

China is confronted, at least for the time being, by a strong “united front” between Washington and Tokyo on issues of vital importance to the PRC. With the possibility of some form of military action at its borders, China, which did not succeed to marginalize Japan and impose its own “new type of great power relations with the US”, might be tempted by a strategy of appeasement with Japan, the closest ally of the United States in the region. The main objective of doing this would be to try and regain some kind of leverage on the strategic balance of power in the region. As

well, China’s more amenable position regarding South Korea and THAAD answers the same objective.

The third factor, and maybe the most important for China, is the economic cooperation and, more precisely, Japan’s potential contribution to the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI).

This factor is particularly important for the PRC as these projects, a prolongation of the “China Dream”, are directly related to Xi Jinping’s own legitimacy, based on prestige and his capacity to achieve this objective of “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. Inscribed in the communist party constitution at the 19th congress, “BRI” is at the heart of “Xi Jinping thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era” and as such it cannot be allowed to fail.¹¹

At a time when economic growth in China is lacking, when expectations are high in this domain to balance the hard-ideological turn since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012 and the personal consequences, for hundreds of thousands of communist cadres, of the ongoing anti-corruption campaign, Xi Jinping needs more foreign investments, either at the bilateral or multilateral (ADB) level, for his grand projects. In Asia, only Japan could eventually deliver, and financially contribute to the success of China’s Belt and Road global ambitions. A major objective of China’s change of attitude towards Japan is thus to persuade “Japan’s government to adopt a positive attitude” on these projects, vital for the survival strategy of the Chinese political regime.¹² This is why, at his meeting with Shinzo Abe in November, Xi Jinping mentioned that Japan and China could play a role to increase the stability and prosperity of the region and the world “in the framework of

9 Japan US Working Lunch and Japan-US Summit, 06-11-2017 on <http://www.go.jp>

10 Idem.

11 « Chinese Communist Party Adds BRI to its Constitution », *Global Times*, 21-10-2017 on <https://globaltimes.com>

12 « Japan Needs to Walk the Talk to Improve Relationship with China », *China Daily*, op.cit.

the Belt and Road Initiative”.¹³

Conclusion

Noteworthy is that 2018 will see the commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the 1978 Treaty of peace and friendship between Japan and China. Both countries have a common interest in using these celebrations to achieve better relations. However, expectations might differ. Japan essentially wants stability, but for China, the 1970s and 1980s are still considered to be the best period of bilateral relations both with the United States and with Japan. These relations however, were based on the perception of a common Soviet threat during the cold war. In order to achieve a rapprochement with Japan, to avoid any collaboration between Tokyo and Moscow at the time, and to receive a significant amount of development aid, the PRC was during these years, ready to overlook all contentious issues, including history and territorial issues.

All this of course changed after the end of the cold war, that saw the end of the Soviet threat and, in parallel, the emergence of an increasingly state-backed anti-Japanese nationalism in the PRC at the beginning of the 1990s, at the service of the legitimacy of the CCP.

No turning back to that period is possible, as the strategic fundamentals are not pertinent anymore. It is not sure however, that the Chinese regime, today, would be able to accept the principles of a new basis to really improve trust between the two major powers in Asia, fully recognizing the positive role of Japan since the end of the Second World War, and its legitimacy as a global power.

¹³ Japan-China Summit, op.cit.