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Japan-China Relations in the Heisei Era

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At the very beginning of Heisei, in the late 1980s, the Cold War structure of the world had made great progress since the end of the 1970s. Despite the domestic reform and opening policies, Deng Xiaoping's idea of development as top state priority matched with Japan's prime focus on advancing economic relations with China. Some problems emerged or increased in weight, such as the issues of history, security and Taiwan, but they were minor. Rather, China's developmental path remained unstable, as demonstrated by the Japanese-led developed world in engaging China, with a symbolic display of good will and Emperor's 1992 visit to China.

Then a gradual, tectonic change in Japan-China relations started in the early years of the 1990s. The Soviet Union disintegrated at the end of 1991, which constituted a fundamental change in the international system. Domestically, the Japanese economic "bubble" burst, and the single-party rule by the Liberal Democratic Party came to an end in 1993. In China, Deng Xiaoping led a decisive victory in the struggle against the marketization and opening of the economy. The Soviet Communist Party had demised the

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) faced little external, ideological opposition to formally disband in 1992. Up to the early 1990s, Japan was rising, while China was stagnating. After then, while Japan stagnated in terms of economic growth. Such dynamic shift in the balance of a basic factor in the development of the bilateral relationship.

In the rest of the 1990s, new trends emerged in Japan-China relations. While there was exchange due to China's acceleration of reform and opening, sharp frictions emerged in the security. 1990s saw the surfacing of historical revisionism in Japan and the strengthening of the new generation of leaders in China. They were concerned about the social tide of western legitimacy to rule. China promulgated the Law of the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone and accelerated its maritime advancement into the East and South China Seas. China's nominal GDP grew rapidly, but in 2001 it was still less than one-third of Japan's. In those days it was still the biggest threat, faced with a democratizing Taiwan, the 1996 redefinition of the Japan-US Free Trade Area with ASEAN in the South China Sea. It is true that Japan-China relations were strained at factors such as Taiwan, nuclear testing and history, but we should not overlook the fact that cooperation were substantially large and conciliatory policies were generally upheld toward

The factors that initiated changes in the final decade of the 20th century were amplified in the 21st century. China joined the WTO in December 2001, which further boosted the economic growth of two countries. The resultant surge in China's economic development lifted its international status but exacerbated its social contradictions despite the attempt by the Hu Jintao administration to reform society." Much of Hu's first five-year term overlapped with the Koizumi Junichiro cabinet in Japan for economic liberalization and succeeded in maintaining a strong relationship with the US. However, the Yasukuni Shrine disrupted the political relationship with China. The US and China cooperation activities in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks in the US and Barak Obama became President and build a global partnership with China. However, he was soon engaged in a re-balancing policy. China increased its assertiveness in the wake of the 2008 World Financial Crisis and caused much concern among its neighbours, including Japan.

Because of China's maritime advancement, amply displayed in the 2010 trawler collision and the 2012 Senkaku Islands clash over the Senkaku Islands, the Japanese felt the military threat of China for the first time. China were fully confident, either, despite the fact that the size of its GDP exceeded that of Japan. Assertive and even aggressive language and behaviour emerged out of the revival and strengthening of national mentality, combined with the remaining victim mentality and the anxiety among the leadership about legitimacy. Heightened level of economic interdependence and cultural exchange between the two countries increased the resilience in the bilateral relationship, but that was not sufficient to prevent the increase in competition in the realms of politics and security.

Xi Jinping and Shinzo Abe came to power almost at the same time, in November and December 2012 respectively. Then the bilateral relations were at its lowest since normalisation 40 years before. In December 2008, vessels of the Chinese Coast Guard had entered the territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands for the first time to claim sovereignty. When the Japanese government purchased three is

from a private landlord in September 2012, preventing the nationalistic governor of the Tokyo government, Shintaro Ishihara from buying them, the Chinese government seized the opportunity of sending their vessels to the Senkaku Islands in a massive scale in an attempt to change the status quo by force.

The bilateral relationship gradually improved, however, due to four major factors. First, China has developed their economic ties. China remained to be Japan's largest trading partner, and for the sake of their growth rate, Japanese investment and technology increased their value. Second, a condition for China to introduce a friendly policy towards Japan was to have a strong leader with a solicitude for Japan. China met this condition and was able to make up with Japan without worrying too much about the US. Third, China's relationship with the United States, the largest factor in the international environment, has become more complex. A proposal to establish a "new type of major country relationship" with the US fell through, and strategic rivalry could not but intensify between the hegemonic power and the rising power. Fourth, China finds great value in developing its relations with Japan. And fourth, Chinese people's opinion towards Japan showed a remarkable improvement. According to a joint, annual survey conducted by the Japan International Publishing Group, the percentage of the Chinese people who have a good opinion of Japan increased rapidly from 21.7% in 2016 to 31.5% in 2017, and then to 42.2% in 2018. Such a change is a result of the adoption of friendly policies towards Japan, especially at a time when nationalistic sentiment is rising in China.

In contrast, however, there has only been a slight increase in the percentage of Japanese people who have a good image of China, from 8.0% in 2016 and 11.5% in 2017, and then to 13.1% in 2018. According to the survey, the largest reason for the negative perception is China's assertive actions around the Senkaku Islands. The largest stumbling block to the sustainable development of Japan-China relations is the security issue. The goals of the two countries are not identical. With the development of China's military might, the security dilemma, therefore, it is not easy at all to build trust and avoid the security dilemma.

Through the successful summit diplomacy in 2018, both sides have come to state that relations are on their normal track. When Prime Minister Abe visited Beijing in October 2018, 52 MOUs on cooperation in various country markets were signed between companies and business organisations on the two sides. The cooperation between Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision and China's Belt and Road Initiative could overlap. However, security remains a major issue and the bilateral relations require constant fine tuning. Both sides seem committed to implementing defence exchanges, cooperating in the economy and not only in promoting intellectual and youth exchange. Exchange is especially important since the perception gap between the two peoples is dangerously wide.

Top leaders' mutual visits have played an important role in developing a positive trend in bilateral relations. From the Japanese perspective, the stability of Japan-China relations for the time being depends on the cooperation of related departments of the Chinese government will follow the instructions of the top leadership.

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