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Editor:

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SINO-JAPANESE RELATIONS:

THE IMPACT OF WEN'S VISIT

Kenichi Ito

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao completed his three-day trip to Japan on April 13, the first visit by a Chinese premier in more than six years since Zhu Rongji came to Tokyo in October 2000. Wen, who had praised Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Beijing last October as "a trip to break the ice," described his recent visit as "a trip to melt the ice" and judged it a success. The Japanese side appears more cautious, still trying to figure out Beijing's true intentions. Nonetheless, Wen's visit is an unmistakable sign that the Sino-Japanese relationship has taken a solid step forward toward a post-ice period.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

Premier Wen told the Japanese parliament: “The amicable exchange between China and Japan is unprecedented in the history of the development of world civilizations in terms of its longevity, scale and impact.” This is no exaggeration. Wen called this Sino-Japanese relationship “a shared asset worth handing down to posterity.” I think Wen’s words echo the sentiments of many Japanese.

Still, the scars left by the violent anti-Japanese demonstrations across China two years ago remain. At that time, I was organizing a forum of intellectuals called the Council on East Asian Community in an effort to frame a common regional future together with China. The demonstrations dealt an unexpected blow to this endeavor, prompting me to write a newspaper op-ed: “The most shocking incident in the past year as we explored the possibility of an East Asian Community was the outbreak in April of violent anti-Japanese demonstrations that engulfed the whole of China. People are arguing that it is difficult to maintain normal, friendly relations with a country where slogans such as ‘patriotic innocence’ go unchallenged and whose government does not apologize for, compensate for and punish the destructive behavior of demonstrators. They say it is almost insane to imagine forming a ‘community’ with such a country. I do not reject these arguments. However....” What I really wanted to say followed that, but I remember there was little regard given at the time to opinions such as mine.

Since Japan and China normalized diplomatic relations in 1972, the bilateral relationship has continued to develop. Ties were strengthened through the mutual trust fostered between the countries’ top leaders: between Yasuhiro Nakasone (Japanese Prime Minister from 1982 to 1987) and Hu Yaobang (Chinese Communist Party Leader from 1980 to 1987), and between Noboru Takeshita (Japanese Prime Minister from 1987 to 1989) and Zhao Ziyang (Chinese Communist Party Leader from 1987 to 1989). Nevertheless, relations worsened after Jiāng Zémín came to power in the wake of the Tiananmen Square incident and started in 1994 all-out anti-Japanese patriotic education. Beijing refused to hold

summit meetings with Tokyo when Junichiro Koizumi, who became prime minister in 2001, made repeated visits to Yasukuni Shrine, where the spirits of Japan's war dead including 14 Class-A war criminals are enshrined. The anti-Japanese demonstrations in China came as the culmination of soured Sino-Japanese relations.

As the saying goes, *yin* (shade) and *yang* (light) can transform into one another. Both Jiāng's patriotic education and Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni were intended to win the support of their respective peoples. However, when the damage caused by such domestic-oriented policies became unbearable, calls for changes in policy mounted in each country. Last October my organization, The Japan Forum on International Relations, presented policy recommendations titled "Japan and China in the Changing Asia" that urged Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to pay an official visit to China and agree with Beijing to hold summit meetings on a regular basis. Abe flew to Beijing just a week after the recommendations. A number of problems exist between Tokyo and Beijing and their solutions will not be achieved overnight. Still, Premier Wen's visit signaled an important step forward in bilateral relations in that Tokyo and Beijing affirmed their political will to confront these problems. 

Kenichi Ito is President of The Japan Forum on International Relations, Inc. He is also President of the Council on East Asian Community and Professor Emeritus of Aoyama Gakuin University.