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PREMIER LI KEQIANG REVEALS CHINA'S TRUE MOTIVE: "CHINA-JAPAN RELATIONS HAVE RETURNED TO A PATH OF NORMALITY"

Katsuji Nakazawa

- We should consider the true intent underlying China's rapid rapprochement with Japan under the one-man rule of Xi Jinping six years after anti-Japanese demonstrations across China.
- Although China is actively seeking out third-country business cooperation in its Belt & Road Initiative as well as other economic collaboration, caution is still warranted with regard to the Senkaku Islands.
- Political and economic tensions between the US and China, antagonism on the Korean Peninsula, etc..

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“China-Japan relations have returned to a path of normality.” Chinese Premier Li Keqiang made this public remark in early May this year, during his very first visit to Japan after being appointed in 2013. This “throw-away line” in fact had a deeper meaning, revealing that China’s official perspective was that Japan-China relations had theretofore been off-course and abnormal.

Since when had this been the case? Since September 2012, when fierce anti-Japanese demonstrations took place in China as debate raged in Japan over the nationalization of Okinawa Prefecture’s Senkaku Islands, with Japanese companies doing business in China suffering significant damage. These Japanese companies were in real terms the true victims of the resultant destruction.

Six years later, the Democratic Party of Japan administration had been replaced by a Liberal Democratic Party cabinet, but this had not led to any particularly significant compromise in Japan’s relations with China. From the Japanese perspective, China had unilaterally set out to improve relations with Japan, and had now proclaimed these relations to be back on their normal course.

This is a welcome change but, unless the developments leading up to this point as well as the steps taken by China are properly analyzed and processed, Japan will find itself unable to respond appropriately if the same thing happens again.

It is important to note that in the backdrop to the anti-Japanese demonstrations in China was a domestic political struggle over the change of leadership as the Hu Jintao administration drew to a close. The fact that Premier Li Keqiang was able to make an official visit to Japan demonstrated that the adverse impacts of this domestic political struggle on Japan-China relations had for the most part been erased.

More to the point, the fact that Xi Jinping has mostly solidified his power base as President of the PRC and General Secretary of the Communist Party of China has also had a positive impact on relations with Japan. Engaging in an aggressive “anti-corruption campaign,” President Xi managed to sweep away most of his political rivals connected with his predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu

Jintao, and he was at last able to exercise control over relations with Japan of his own accord.

Prior to the November 2012 CCP Congress, the Hu Jintao administration was under attack by interests friendly to the previous president Jiang Zemin. A typical example of this was China's withdrawal from a 2008 agreement on joint development of gas fields in the East China Sea reached by the Japanese and Chinese governments after considerable effort. Jiang Zemin's supporters as well as military and security officials ganged up on the Hu administration and rebuked it for showing weakness to Japan. The history between the two countries readily turned China's Japan policy into a tool for political infighting.

This infighting has been settled, for the moment at least, under a system of one-man rule by Xi Jinping. It is ironic that the authoritarianism allowing a sudden constitutional amendment to lift the presidential term limit of two terms (a maximum of 10 years) has in fact led to the current stability in China's relations with Japan. While the domestic situation remains precarious, conditions on the broader front are now moving toward greater stability.

The international circumstances surrounding China at present are also developing to the advantage of Japan-China relations. China's relations with the US, which it deems of the greatest importance, are unstable both politically and economically, and the US-North Korea summit meeting could open the way to major historical changes on the Korean Peninsula. China's priorities are to secure its interests on the Korean Peninsula and mend its relations with the US, so it cannot afford to quarrel with Japan.

Furthermore, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe enjoys the extremely rare advantage of being able to communicate frequently with US President Trump, and China believes that it would be in its own best interests to establish relations allowing it to keep in regular contact with Prime Minister Abe.


Prime Minister Abe himself is in a difficult position due to domestic political issues in Japan, and he faces a tough challenge in the September LDP leadership election, but Premier Li Keqiang nonetheless invited him to visit China. President Xi Jinping will be making his first official visit to Japan in June of

next year to attend the Osaka G20 Summit, and there is every possibility that mutual visits by the leaders of Japan and China will be fully restored.

Premier Li Keqiang's extended visit to Japan lasted four days and three nights, one day longer than initially planned, and he spent the final day (May 11) from the morning onward together with Prime Minister Abe in Hokkaido in a surprising show of bonding. Premier Li did not delve deeply into such issues as differing views of history and the Senkaku Islands during this visit. He even expressed a degree of understanding and support of Japan's stance vis-à-vis North Korea on resolving the abduction issue.

The two leaders also agreed on launching the "Maritime and Air Communication Mechanism" designed to avoid unexpected clashes. The provisions concerning the area around the Senkaku Islands remain vague, though, and this could become a source of dispute in future.

That said, Japan should pursue cooperation with China in the economic sphere where it serves Japan's national interests, and it should adopt a forward-looking attitude on the business cooperation that third parties have agreed to extend to China under the Belt & Road Initiative. For its part, China recognizes that overzealous competition to offer the cheapest bids for overseas infrastructure improvement projects is pointless.

The intense international dickering over the Korean Peninsula, US-China relations, and Taiwan will likely continue for some time. Japan needs to strategically examine its relations with China with a proper understanding of the complex power dynamics involved. 

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