

No peace without reconciliation

SINO-JAPANESE TIES AT RISK: Bilateral relations should no longer be held hostage



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WHEN The Economist predicts that China and Japan will be willing to wage war over the Sen-kaku/Diaoyu islands, you know that the recent storm in the East China Sea is more than a tempest in a teacup.

The latest Sino-Japanese firestorm was ignited by the Japanese government's purchase of the three islands in the Senkaku chain from the Kurihara family. Beijing vehemently objected to this act, which effectively "nationalised" the islands.

The Japanese government was forced to lock horns with China due to the manoeuvring of Tokyo's governor, Shintaro Ishihara -- a nationalist with strong views on China -- to purchase the islands. The 2.05 billion yen purchase was to ward off a "larger" threat to Sino-Japanese ties.

Although unsatisfactory to Beijing, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are now "safer" in the hands of the central government, rather than under the control of an unpredictable political maverick with strong right-wing credentials.



The recent appointment of Makiko Tanaka, a respected name in Beijing, as education minister, can only do so much in regarding to the future of Sino-Japanese relations.

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands issue, as with most territorial issues, is interlinked with history and nationalism. While it is a serious national security issue for Beijing and Tokyo, the dispute remains to be animated and coloured by "war time issues".

It is unfair to be overtly critical of Japan for its alleged failings to address its colonial legacy. Japan has officially apologised for its wartime role and has made amends.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, Japan has assiduously rebuilt its relations with Southeast Asia through extensive linkages of trade and generous disbursement of official development assistance. Regrettably, the rapprochement with China has been less successful.

Events in the past few weeks have reaffirmed the urgency to manage Japan's wartime history with China. Tokyo's standard explanation that these matters have been resolved through its postwar settlement with the Allied Powers (San Francisco Treaty) has not gone down well with the aggrieved parties.

References to official documents will fall on deaf ears and remain irrelevant if the victims continue to harbour animosity and pains for closure. Wartime issues will remain salient as long as Chinese dissatisfaction goes unheeded.

Peaceful relations are only possible if China collaborates with Japan to put the latter's colonial past to history.

Regional stability is at stake when its two largest economies are sinking into a diplomatic abyss. Remonstrations against Japanese business interests across major Chinese cities belie the economic and financial costs of the dispute.

The deteriorating relations may spill over to regional processes such as the Chiang Mai Initiative and the East Asia Summit. Attempts to multilateralise the issue will put Asean and Malaysia in an awkward position, and run counter to decades of carefully cultivated cooperation.

One of the "casualties" of regional cooperation may be the nascent East Asia community. Leaders from the 13 Asean Plus Three countries were expected to receive and examine the second East Asia Vision Group report next month.

The EAVG 2 is expected to provide some clarity and direction to further institutionalise the mechanisms to link Southeast with Northeast Asia. The strained relations between Tokyo and Beijing will dampen proposals toward this end.

No doubt, the stakes are high. China is an important trade partner and accounts for 20.6 per cent of Japan's overall trade (2011). Japan's External Trade Organisation expects two-way trade to grow to US\$350 billion in 2012.

Analysts will be less optimistic in light of recent events, but the density and interdependency of trade on both sides of the East China Sea will mean that it would be difficult to delink trade from each other. Hopefully, the logic of common prosperity will prevail to salvage and improve the damaged bilateral ties.

The turn of events has also derailed celebrations to mark the 40th anniversary of the normalisation of Sino-Japanese relations on Sept 29.

Instead of toasting to four decades of friendship, relations have deteriorated to levels unseen since the Koizumi administration. The recent ministerial appointment of Makiko Tanaka -- the daughter of former premier Takuei Tanaka -- was clearly an attempt by Tokyo to put its relations with Beijing back on the right track.

There is only that much that the Tanaka name, no matter how respected it is in Beijing, will carry. The future of Sino-Japanese relations and regional stability rests on Beijing and Tokyo's political will to work towards a sincere and comprehensive reconciliation.

Without an enduring and stable reconciliation, Sino-Japanese relations will always be held hostage to "history" and ultra-nationalism on both sides.