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Premier Wen's Japan Visit: China's "New Thinking" at Work?

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CHINESE PREMIER Wen Jiabao's recent visit to Japan, the first by a Chinese prime minister in seven years, was widely hailed as a success. His meeting with Japanese leaders laid the groundwork for a "strategic and mutually beneficial relationship". His speech to the Japanese Diet, the first by a Chinese leader in 22 years, was a significant attempt to present his views directly to the Japanese people through their representatives in parliament. Indeed, Premier Wen's devotion of an unusually large part of his three-day visit to interact with the Japanese public was unusually conspicuous.

Despite a hectic schedule, he intermingled with ordinary Japanese from many walks of life, including park-goers at the Yoyogi Park, farmers, college students and business people. He enjoyed a traditional tea ceremony, played baseball with Japanese youth, and composed a Japanese poem praising Sino-Japanese friendship. While playing baseball, he intentionally wore an outfit bearing the number 35 to signify the 35th anniversary of the normalization of relations between China and Japan. This was an indication that every move during the visit was carefully crafted to send a clear message to the Japanese that Beijing is prepared to embark on a new path in its relationship with Japan.

This new path embodies many policy prescriptions of the "new thinking" on Sino-Japanese relations that some Chinese scholars have been advocating to the leadership in Beijing. The gist of such "new thinking" includes toning down the history issue in favour of increased cooperation with Japan on issues of mutual concern, and stabilizing bilateral ties to improve China's security environment in East Asia. It should be noted that at the time the "new thinking" proposal was made public, it was severely bashed by anti-Japanese "patriots" in China.

Addressing Concerns of Perception and Image

Chief among Beijing's concerns that must have driven this new thinking was the worsening image of China in Japan. This image plummeted during the massive anti-Japanese demonstrations in several Chinese cities in the spring of 2005, apparently triggered by then premier Junichiro Koizumi's repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. Demonstrators chanted anti-Japanese slogans, smashed Japanese businesses, and even physically abused Japanese soccer players in Beijing.

Many Japanese, especially the youth, say that they are fed up with China's constant demands for more formal apologies from Japanese leaders on the history issue. They believe that their leaders have apologized enough over Japan's military past, arguing instead that China's real intention was to play the history card to gain leverage over Japan.

Seeing the predicament on history in bilateral ties, Premier Wen clearly attempted to

downplay this issue as advocated by the “new thinking” proponents. In his speech at the Japanese Diet, he emphatically noted that the present and the future were more important than the past. He emphasized the 2,000 years of Sino-Japanese friendly exchanges, as exemplified by successful visits of Japanese scholars to China during the Tang Dynasty, and contemporary Chinese learning from Japan, such as the cases of Sun Yat-sen and Lu Xun. He told the Japanese audience that the duration, dimensions and influence of the friendship and exchanges between China and Japan were rarely seen in the history of human civilization.

Premier Wen also stated that Japan had openly acknowledged its history of invasion and expressed deep remorse and regret to those countries invaded, which he said China appreciated. Significantly, Wen did not explicitly talk about the “sexual slavery” and Yasukuni Shrine issues in his speech. He conspicuously avoided the harshness and demanding tone that were noticeable during former President Jiang Zemin’s visit to Japan in 1998.

Another source of Japanese unhappiness about China is the claim that China has been ungrateful towards Japanese development assistance over the decades. The Japanese believe that Tokyo’s generous aid to China has not been properly communicated to the Chinese public nor sufficiently appreciated by the Chinese government. As if in response to this sentiment, Wen, in his 40-minute speech, spoke highly of the Japanese assistance, saying that it had contributed to China’s modernization and that the “Chinese people will never forget it”

Wen’s revelation that he had drafted the speech himself, coupled with the live telecasting of his speech in China, should be seen as part of China’s efforts to educate some of its extreme nationalists and quell anti-Japanese sentiments among its people.

Smiling Away Strategic Misgivings?

Wen’s populist appeal and diplomatic charm also aimed at building a benign image of China in Japan to mitigate Japanese anxiety over the impact of China’s rapid rise. As China and Japan rise simultaneously for the first time in East Asian history, there is indeed some sense of mutual unease. The Chinese premier’s public cordiality was a signal to the Japanese public that the two giant neighbours can live harmoniously with each other now and that some sort of *modus vivendi* is possible in the future. To further alleviate Japanese anxiety, Wen stressed that China is still a developing country and there is still a long way to go to realize its modernization.

By stabilizing relations with Japan, China hopes to minimize the adverse impact on its security environment in East Asia. The strengthening of Japan-US security alliance, Japanese advocacy of a union of democracies in Asia, and more recently the signing of a Japan-Australia security cooperation treaty, are developments whose impact Beijing has to seriously contemplate. Alleviating Japanese anxiety over China’s future role in East Asia would at least slow down the worsening security environment in China’s immediate neighborhood.

Will Japan play ball?

Premier Wen’s three-day charm diplomacy underscores a significant shift in China’s stance towards Japan. This shift was already evident before Wen’s visit, as seen in China’s moderate response to Japan’s steps toward “normalization,” such as the upgrading of its self-defence forces and discussions to amend the peace constitution. The fact that Premier Wen’s reconciliation did not spark a noticeable domestic populist opposition or any fresh anti-Japanese emotion back home indicates that Beijing has a lot of room to manoeuvre and

cultivate domestic public opinion. By offering this reconciliatory stance and charm offensive, Wen has shrewdly kicked the ball into the Japanese side. How the Japanese leaders kick the ball back and how the two sides address other divisive issues, such as oil in the East China Sea, will test the viability of China's "new thinking" towards Japan.

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