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ANALYSIS

HU JINTAO'S JAPAN VISIT: TRUCE, NOT RECONCILIATION

John H. Miller

PRC President Hu Jintao's May 6-10 visit to Japan—the first by a Chinese head of state in a decade—was designed by Tokyo and Beijing to be the capstone of their two-year effort to repair their troubled political relationship. The chief “deliverable” was to have been an agreement to cooperate in exploiting oil and gas deposits in disputed waters in the East China Sea. China and Japan have been at odds for years over the demarcation of their respective Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) there, creating a volatile situation which could spark naval clashes. Although they profess a willingness to set aside their conflicting EEZ claims in favor of joint development, the devil is in the details. Protracted negotiations have so far failed to produce a decision on which areas should be jointly developed, and no agreement on the issue was announced during the summit.

In an attempt to offset this failure, Hu and his host, Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, pledged to deepen bilateral cooperation on pollution control, trade promotion, and cultural exchanges. In addition, Hu scored public relations points by striking a conciliatory pose on Tibetan unrest and Japanese indignation over tainted food imports from China. He further pleased his hosts by refraining from lecturing them on “history”—*i.e.*, their obligation to offer “proper” remorse and restitution for Japan's pre-1945 aggression. His predecessor, Jiang Zemin, had offended the Japanese by using his 1998 visit to hector them on this issue, setting the stage for the souring of relations in the early 2000s. In keeping with Beijing's more restrained position of recent years, Hu avoided criticism of Japan's impotence and emphasized the desirability of building a “forward-looking” partnership.

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Less than two years ago, Chinese and Japanese leaders were barely on speaking terms and anti-Japanese feeling ran high in China. The immediate cause of this confrontation was the decision of Junichiro Koizumi, Japan's prime minister from 2001 to 2006, to challenge China on history issues. He did so by repeatedly paying his respects to Japan's war dead at Tokyo's controversial Yasukuni Shrine and refusing to block government approval of school textbooks that “whitewash” Japan's imperialist and militarist past. The Chinese denounced these moves as an affront to Japan's victims, a manifestation of its lack of contrition for its crimes, and a symptom of its reviving militarism and ultranationalism. They were especially outraged by his worship at Yasukuni Shrine which portrays Japan's 2.5 war dead, including 14 convicted war criminals, as fallen heroes. Koizumi defended his actions as an assertion of Japan's sovereign right to decide how it should remember its past, and rejected Chinese pro-

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tests as politically-motivated meddling. Many Japanese agreed with his stand. They were fed up with China's seemingly unappeasable demands for contrition and felt that they had made amends by providing it with generous economic assistance.

By 2006, however, Tokyo and Beijing were looking for ways to end the confrontation. They were alarmed by large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations in China's cities in the preceding year and worried that such protests might escalate, imperiling burgeoning bilateral trade and investment ties in which both countries have a vital stake. The main stumbling block to a rapprochement was Koizumi, who viewed the Yasukuni and textbook issues as matters of principle and refused to back down. But his retirement in 2006 created an opportunity for a change of course which his successor, Shinzo Abe, grasped by suspending Yasukuni visits. Beijing promptly reciprocated by toning down its criticism of Japan and lifting its ban on high-level exchanges. Abe's replacement by Fukuda last September brought to power a leader more to China's liking since Fukuda carries none of Abe's right-wing nationalist baggage. Although Fukuda's domestic political problems make it likely that his tenure will be short-lived—his approval rating is less than 20 percent—it is reasonable to suppose that the warming trend will continue.

There are, however, at least three reasons for caution. First, there is no guarantee that the Abe-Fukuda policy of restraint on Yasukuni and textbooks will be maintained in the face of domestic political pressure for a return to a hard line. Japanese nationalists are certain to try to provoke clashes with China on these issues in hopes of forcing an end to what they regard as Japan's "subservience." Second, other bilateral issues carry the potential to derail the rapprochement even if Beijing and Tokyo succeed in keeping a lid on the history quarrel. The most serious of these is the East China Sea dispute, but tensions over Japan's relations with Taiwan and bid for a permanent UN Security Council seat could also flare up at any time. Third—and perhaps most important—deep-rooted mutual hostility and suspicion militate against moderation and

compromise. A major source of the problem is the Chinese Communist Party's "patriotic education campaign" which paints Japan, past and present, as a national enemy. Having set this campaign in motion, the Party cannot rein it in without undermining its legitimacy as the champion of the Chinese nation against threatening external forces. Since dispelling grassroots anti-Japanese feeling is not an option, Hu and his colleagues can hope only to curb its more violent and disruptive manifestations. On Japan's side, the problem springs less from anti-Chinese sentiment, which is relatively weak, than the changing national identity of the Japanese. In Benjamin Self's apt formulation, the "penitent pacifists" of the Cold War era are becoming "assertive nationalists," albeit gradually and haltingly. Japanese anger at perceived Chinese bullying which Koizumi tapped is currently dormant, but it can be expected to revive with minimal provocation.

Renewed feuding between China and Japan is not inevitable, nor is bilateral cooperation impossible. Growing economic interdependence and a shared interest in regional stability, plus continued political restraint, could keep their relations on an even keel and perhaps eventually produce a "new equilibrium." However, the underlying source of friction is a clash of nationalisms, which involves highly emotional questions of national identity, pride, and integrity. Appeals to economic self-interest may have limited effect in ameliorating this clash. One should not, therefore, equate the temporary goodwill generated by Hu's visit with a genuine reconciliation or assume that this conflict-prone relationship will become less difficult to manage.

The U.S., meanwhile, has an important stake in the prevention of another round of Sino-Japanese quarreling which would only complicate the quest for stability in Northeast Asia. However, overt American intervention would not be helpful or welcome. A better approach would be quiet, behind-the-scenes encouragement of both sides to work toward the restoration of businesslike and cooperative relations.