

Lost Horizons: The Flawed 'Nationalism' of the Koizumi Regime

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[In mid-April Japan's deteriorating relations with China produced mass Chinese demonstrations and much hand-wringing around the Pacific. Subsequently, the frictions again receded into the background, partly as a result of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's April 22nd expression of "deep remorse" at the Africa-Asia summit in Jakarta. Yet according to Kaneko Masaru of Keio University, the problems are hardly over. Even if the tensions don't soon erupt again, they are rooted in multiple and deep-rooted conflicts, and may result in continuing political and economic costs on Japan.]

Throughout April, many Japanese expressed irritation at what they perceived as China's endless demands for apologies. The bulk of Japanese conservative opinion in particular claimed that no matter how many times Japan apologizes, demands for more arise. A second argument popular on the right was that the Chinese government uses the Japan issue politically. For example, some insist that Japan is being scapegoated in order to distract attention from China's domestic tensions.

But looking at the issue from the Chinese perspective, matters appear a good deal different. The Chinese see a striking lack of

consistency. Certainly they have heard apologies from Japan, and they heard one again on April 22 when Koizumi recycled former Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi's August 15 1995 expression of "deep remorse" for colonization and wartime atrocities. But along with these periodic apologies there have been a stream of such profoundly contradictory actions as Koizumi's politically driven visits to Yasukuni Shrine, the textbook revisionism, and renewed Japanese claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands. Think about these kinds of actions in comparative terms. What if Germany's Schroeder suddenly paid a visit to a Nazi cemetery? His political base would cave in and there'd be an uproar in Europe and beyond. But in Japan, under this present leadership, the sense of responsibility towards neighbouring and formerly colonized countries is weak.

Koizumi's recent apology does nothing to settle the core issues, and indeed China immediately replied with a demand for concrete actions. Small wonder. Not only did 80 MPs visit Yasukuni before Koizumi spoke but he himself later refused to say whether he would visit the shrine in the future. To curry favour with the right, Koizumi has long practiced a Bush style of performative politics (recall the "Mission Accomplished" speech from the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln) by announcing that he intends to visit Yasukuni on August 15, the anniversary of Japan's surrender. Protests from China and Korea forced him to revise that plan and visit Yasukuni on a different day. But they have not curbed his desire to visit, so little has changed. Koizumi's unprincipled behaviour is almost certain to continue and aggravate

tensions between the two countries.

There is, of course, plenty of disaffection with the short-sightedness of the Koizumi regime. But when people do speak up, they are quickly bullied into silence. We saw this in the case of Keizai Doyukai (Japan Association of Corporate Executives) former head Kobayashi Yotaro, Chairman of Fuji Xerox. Last November, he publicly called on the Prime Minister not to visit Yasukuni, arguing that it was creating difficulties for Japanese firms. He was not, in other words, making an argument about the need to face up to history or anything like that. He was speaking from the very narrow and self-interested position of keeping the focus on the bottom line. Yet incredibly, even that was too much, as the right-wing sound trucks were sent around to Kobayashi's house. More recently, Molotov cocktails were hurled into his yard. There may be - indeed, there probably are - informal requests from the business community to be careful with the China relationship, but even prominent figures don't dare speak openly on the issue.

The Koizumi regime is led by holdovers from the Cold War who seem incapable of grasping how profoundly the world around them has changed. Here we are with political and economic linkages exploding throughout Asia. Even in the case of Japan, trade ties to China are now more important than those with any other nation. Yet at the same time, Japan's leadership is placing its bets on sticking as close to the Bush Administration as possible and has no problem dissing its neighbours. The Koizumi regime reveals no indication of having seriously debated the country's appropriate foreign policy stance in light of the realities of the Asian political economy and social and political changes sweeping the region.

Kobayashi's warning showed us that even at the narrowest edge of self-interested calculation, the Koizumi administration is making a mess of policy. But this mess is

imposing far greater economic costs than merely some lost sales for the corporate community. Asia is in the midst of a boom centred on China's extraordinary level of investment in infrastructure. Japanese firms are selling a lot of equipment to China and building their own factories there. But Japan is not getting the most lucrative "operating system" deals. These latter include, for example, constructing the high-speed train linking Beijing and Shanghai, and providing portable-phone systems, computing systems and other technologies. These technologies will determine the outline of China's development and thus create openings for continuing sales from the European and American firms that won the deals.

Nor do the costs stop there. Consider the ineptness of Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Nakagawa Shoichi. He's an extremist from the Kamei faction, and long associated with textbook controversies and other right-wing hobby-horses. Nakagawa had offers from the Chinese for cooperative development of offshore natural gas reserves, investment in pipelines, and so on, but turned them down. China lacks the technology to exploit its offshore reserves efficiently. Cooperation between Japan and China on energy projects is a sensible policy, a win-win initiative that would foster stronger ties and regional stability. But Nakagawa and the others in charge didn't see it that way. Their incompetence is so gross that watching it unfold is a little like viewing a horror movie where a multi-headed monster thrashes around a lot, scaring everyone, but can't get its act together and move forward.

As for the argument that China is using nationalism, that is certainly rich. Japanese conservatives frequently used nationalism in this country's postwar relationship with the US. Recall how ready an earlier generation of leaders was to claim that Japan could not take on a bigger defense role for fear of antagonizing the popular forces that opposed

the US-Japan Security Treaty (AMPO). Moreover, national identity arguments here have long been rooted in Japan's success at avoiding falling prey to colonial rule. That such "national identity" ideas should have strong roles domestically and at the level of foreign policy is hardly unusual. In fact, for governments to seek legitimacy through success in withstanding colonialism (or, in Japan's LDP, at presiding over high-speed growth) is standard practice everywhere. It is thus to some extent understandable that the Chinese state should stress the country's anti-colonial struggle in its education. Here we see how the side that inflicted suffering easily forgets, while the side that experienced it does not. China's behaviour is thus not alienating it from the rest of the world - as is often claimed - because it is largely doing what others, including Japan, do and have done.

The main problem here is the way the Koizumi regime has responded to China. Rather than responding with emotionalism, they ought to have approached the challenge with cooler, more realistic heads.

Underlying these disturbing trends are the Koizumi regime's intellectual limitations, of course, but what has allowed this incompetence to run riot is the lack of countervailing power within the LDP itself. The imbalance in the LDP is due to the weakness of the Keynesian conservatives and the old Miyazawa faction. These groups are hardly an ideal opposition, but at least on the foreign policy front they were relatively liberal and pacifist-oriented and had long-established ties to neighbouring Asian countries. When their

leaders went up against Koizumi's "structural reforms," their heads rolled one by one. So now you have the dominance of neonationalist restorationists cum market fundamentalists, in parallel with the religiosity and market fundamentalism of the Bush regime. The lack of powerful critical voices within the LDP on the foreign-policy front is a genuine crisis.

As to the future, the more the Koizumi regime copies the Bushites and alienates this country from Asia, the worse the tensions will grow. The Taiwan issue and the uncertain fate of the China bubble among other challenges give ample reason for concern. One of the great ironies in all this is that the Koizumi people prate endlessly about national interests even as they ignore Japan's real national interest in strengthening Asian ties and promoting regional stability. Another is that the US has better options for recovering from its present dismal leadership and forging stronger bonds with China, as the Americans are more welcome and useful in the China market.

Koizumi has clearly learned nothing from recent events, but is almost certainly going to remain Prime Minister until September of next year. Nor is there much prospect of better leadership arising afterwards. So for the time being, Japan's policymaking elite is likely to continue squandering the country's chances of forging a cooperative and stable relationship with China. The costs of this idiocy - to be blunt - are incalculable.

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