

Japan's Bid for a Permanent Seat on the UN Security Council

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Gaining a permanent seat on the Security Council of the United Nations has been Japan's declared foreign policy goal since the early 1990s. The issue was first put on the agenda under the government of Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa. Japan's influence in the world organisation did not then and still does not today reflect the fact that it is the second biggest contributor to the UN budget (about 20%) and the biggest by far relative to population size. Japanese politicians also felt that it was time for a reform of the Security Council whose composition is based on the power relations at the end of World War II and a charter that still contains the "enemy state" clause (Articles 53, 107).

When Junichiro Koizumi became Prime Minister in April 2001, Japan stepped up its efforts and began to seek the support of other countries favouring UN reform. Nobody denies that the Security Council is an unrepresentative post-war relic, five of its 15 seats being occupied by permanent, veto-wielding members (Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States), while the remaining 196 countries are taking turns on the other 10 seats without veto power. However, the Permanent Five are unlikely to give up their veto. The "Group of Four" Japan had formed with Germany, India, and Brazil, therefore, proposed in 2005 a plan for a more balanced composition of the Security Council, sidestepping the veto issue. But the proposal led to naught.

Thus the Koizumi government has failed to accomplish what was its most important foreign policy goal. UN reform being as complex as it is with a required two-third majority of the General Assembly and unanimity of the Security Council, the blame for this failure cannot fairly be placed at Tokyo's doorstep alone. However, the deadlock at the East River is in many ways indicative of Japan's maladroit and unsuccessful handling of foreign affairs.

The unanimously bad press Japan's Foreign Minister Taro Aso has received since taking office in autumn 2005 is only the latest expression of this predicament. For in half a year's time Japan's chief diplomat has managed to antagonize his colleagues in all neighbouring countries so thoroughly that it seems difficult to brush his blunders aside as beginner's bad luck.

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To be sure, Mr Aso did not become Foreign Minister at a time of smooth sailing. Rather, all of Japan's immediate neighbours were up in arms about the insensitive and, some say, confrontational attitude Mr Koizumi has displayed over the past years. The Prime Minister's five visits since taking office to the Yasukuni shrine in central Tokyo, which was a hub of ultranationalism before and during World War II and has done little to shed this image since, have overshadowed the better part of his government's foreign policy. Although it is widely acknowledged by Tokyo's conservative political establishment that amicable dealings with Japan's biggest trading partner must be a high priority, Sino-Japanese relations have never been worse since diplomatic ties were re-established in 1972. While some Japanese commentators argue that if Mr Koizumi to refrain from further visits to the shrine, the Chinese would surely come up with other complaints, even proven hardliners such as former Premier Yasuhiro Nakasone only shook their head over Koizumi's apparent disregard for the damage he has done to Sino-Japanese relations.

With Mr Aso he did not appoint a foreign minister who is able or willing to straighten things out with Beijing. A right-wing nationalist, he lost little time to demonstrate that he cares no more what Chinese and Koreans think than the Prime Minister. Shortly after taking office he told a news conference that China was beginning "to pose a considerable threat," in diplomatic parlance a very serious statement indeed. In view of the fact that China's military spending while growing is still smaller than Japan's and considering the two countries' shared history since the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese War which has seen Japanese troops on Chinese soil on several occasions, but not vice versa, China's taking exception to such a remark is understandable.

However, history is not Mr Aso's forte, or concern.

Thanks to the significant improvement in educational standards and literacy (during the colonization), Taiwan is now a country with a very high education level and it keeps up with the current era.

This is what he said in a speech in Fukuoka, on 6 February 2006. Predictably, Beijing took offence, but the remark could not endear him to Taiwan either, Japan's best, if not only friend in the region. For Beijing, Taiwan is not just a renegade province, but a remnant of Japanese imperialism, too. Calling Taiwan a "country", as Mr Aso did in that speech, is at odds with the Japanese government's professed commitment to the one-China policy and can only be interpreted by Beijing as a provocation.

Another specimen of Aso's propensity to irritate the Chinese was a remark on 28 January 2006 when he said that a visit to the Yasukuni shrine by the Emperor would be best, for after all the soldiers enshrined there died for their Emperor rather than for a prime minister. The Chinese did not need further proof that Aso had no intention to mend the soured Japan-China relations and let it be known that they did not expect any improvement as long as Koizumi headed the government.

As for South Korea, relations have been tense because of Mr Koizumi's repeated visits to Yasukuni shrine and because of the never ending history textbook controversy. There is still no common understanding let alone evaluation of Japan's colonial rule over Korea in the first half of the 20th century. Again Foreign Minister Aso did not wait long after taking office to further exacerbate the situation. In December 2005 he angered the government in Seoul when he said that only South Korea and China complained about Koizumi's shrine visits. His intransigent attitude also infuriated Singapore which suffered under Japanese occupation during the war.

Japanese relations with North Korea are bad by definition, since the government in Pyongyang had rested its legitimacy on the guerrilla war against the Japanese and continued to cultivate this legacy after Japan's defeat in World War II. Tokyo moreover closely followed Washington's lead in isolating the communist state. Hopes for progress in the normalisation of relations between the two countries were boosted when Prime Minister Koizumi visited North Korea in September 2002 and again in May 2004. At the time, North Korea's relationship with the United States was deteriorating due to neoconservatives' growing influence in the Pentagon. Pyongyang, therefore, tried to reach out to Washington through America's key ally, Japan, and agreed to the meetings with the Japanese Prime Minister. However, few tangible results were achieved, because Koizumi, a shrewd politician at home rather than a diplomat, focussed on the fate of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean agents during the 1970s and 1980s. While this is undeniably an important issue, it deflected attention from the more serious problem of North Korea's nuclear programme. As a result, Japan's role in the "Six-Party-Talks" (with China, Russia, the United States and the two Koreas) about Pyongyang's nuclear arms ambitions has been weakened rather than strengthened. Instead, China has emerged as the chief player managing the situation.

Finally, Russia. Repeated joint declarations calling for an expansion of economic ties notwithstanding, Russo-Japanese relations remain frosty. Great plans for Japan's involvement in the exploitation of natural resources in Siberia were dampened in summer 2005 when Russian President Putin decided to prioritize China over Japan with a huge pipeline project linking Taishet near Lake Baikal with the Russian Far East and the Pacific coast. This was a great disappointment to those in Japan who had hoped to get access to Russia's vast energy resources, but it did not come as a surprise to observers of Russo-Japanese relations.

The principal stumbling block on the way to amiability between Tokyo and Moscow are the four Southern Kuril Islands closest to Japan. As agreed at the Conference of Yalta in February 1945, the Soviet Union received authority over the islands in exchange for declaring war on Japan. To complicate matters, Japan was forced to renounce all rights to the islands in the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty which, however, the Soviet Union did not sign. Repeated negotiations about what the Japanese call "the Northern Territories" yielded no positive results, but perpetual acri-

mony. In February 2006, Foreign Minister Aso once again provoked a formal protest from Russia by remarks on the disputed islands that Moscow saw as meddling in domestic affairs.

There are two sides to any dispute, to be sure, but it is noteworthy that the Kuril Islands are not Japan's only territorial problem. Rather, six decades after World War II Japan has such disputes with every one of its former adversaries in the region. The tiny uninhabited Takeshima/Dokto rocks in the Sea of Japan, which are controlled by Seoul, are a continuing irritant in Japanese-Korean relations. The Senkaku/Diao-yu Islands, which are claimed by Tokyo, Beijing and Taipei, are a sore spot in Sino-Japanese relations. In both cases, besides fishing rights and the promise of oil, there is the issue of face, which is just as important. It is a permanent threat to amicable relations between Japan and its suspicious neighbours.

Arguably, Japan is not blessed with very accommodating neighbours. Yet, the fact remains that Japan is at the centre of unresolved territorial conflicts that are a leftover of Japan's colonialism, expansionism, and war of aggression. The past's long shadow has often been invoked regarding the Yasukuni shrine visits and history textbooks; it also looms large over the map of East Asia.

This has, of course, historical reasons, the cold war legacy in particular. However, looking at Japan's foreign policy today, the conclusion can hardly be avoided that Japan's efforts to build friendly relations with its neighbours have been insufficient. Its foreign policy has just one load-bearing pillar, the alliance with the United States. Washington has rewarded Tokyo's loyalty with the promise to support Japan's bid for a Security Council seat. That didn't cost Washington much, because the American government had no reason to doubt that others would frustrate Tokyo's efforts, China and Russia in particular.

While indispensable, Washington's support for a permanent seat on the Council could never have been enough. Not a few Japanese diplomats have emphasised the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the neighbours on the continent if ever this goal were to be attained. Yet, they could never get the upper hand in determining Japan's foreign policy agenda. Under Prime Minister Koizumi the one-sidedness of Tokyo's foreign policy has become more pronounced than ever. That it has accomplished nothing is not surprising.

Japan is an essential element of Washington's China containment policy and lets itself be used as such. The "Axis of Evil" scheme with Pyongyang as one of its pivots in Japan's backyard provides Washington welcome leverage to keep Tokyo in line. Few people in Washington would be pleased to see close and amicable relations evolve between Tokyo and Beijing. But they need not fear, because for the time being this is not likely to happen. Tokyo's closeness to Washington is one of the reasons why Japan is regarded with suspicion throughout the region. Whether this is in Japan's best interest is doubtful.

Rich but not well-liked, worse, not trusted, and a key member of Washington's "coalition of the willing" which is designed to circumvent UN sponsored security arrangements, that is the image of Japan in East Asia today; not a good precondition for gaining a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.