

Japan and Asia: The Implications of an Improved Relationship

Guibourg DELAMOTTE

As China's power increases, Japan is moving closer to other Asian countries. This return to Asia is not univocal, and the newly elected Democratic Party is not in a position to change the direction of Japanese foreign policy.

At the end of the 19th century, Japan stood out from the rest of Asia to such a degree that it made an effort to disassociate itself from the region. As the first Asian nation to modernize, it had long since turned its gaze and focused its efforts on the West, preferring, before the Second World War, to join with the colonizers rather than risk becoming colonized itself.

Sixty years after the end of the war, Japan's 'return to Asia' is not yet fully complete. The tensions that periodically cloud relations between China and Japan,¹ as happened in autumn 2010, are evidence of their precarious balance: history is continually brandished.

The Democratic Party, which gave Japan its first real alternative when it came to power in September 2009, ultimately has maintained the diplomatic approach taken by the Liberal Democrat Party, now in opposition: its relations with Asia cannot be given priority to the detriment of its relations with the United States. This party is currently unable to head the ambitious Asian policy that would deprive China of the historical 'card' it plays so willingly. What is more, for some in power, improving relations with China is incompatible with the implications of the Japan-US strategic alliance. They struggle to envisage relations with Asian countries independently from American policy and presence, and the protection that Japan gains from these: Asia, which opens up so many economic opportunities, is, outside of the

¹ In September 2009, a fishing vessel apparently deliberately struck a Japanese coastguard boat near some Japanese islands. Anti-Japanese demonstrations followed, after the vessel's captain was taken into custody and subsequently freed.

trade context, perceived as the source of a variety of dangers ranging from nuclear and ballistic threats, and the failure to respect territorial sovereignty, to terrorism, mafia groups (harder to control than local *yakuza*) and immigration, which is considered damaging to employment and social cohesion.

Forgetting past excesses

In 1868, the Meiji Emperor – re-established on the throne by those opposed to the policy of signing the ‘unequal treaties’ with Western powers, which the shogun had been pursuing since 1853 – initiated the modernization of Japan. By endeavouring to develop the nation, Japan ‘left’ Asia to become more westernized.² The Western nations’ unwillingness to accept this new rival as one of their own contributed to its drift towards militarism, which led to the war crimes that Asia has never forgotten.

In order to ‘reintegrate’ itself into the region after the Second World War, Japan firstly sought to re-establish its diplomatic relations with as many neighbours as it could. International or national contexts at the time limited its ability to do so: Japan failed to sign a peace treaty with the USSR in 1956;³ had to wait until 1972 to re-establish diplomatic relations with China; and was not able to sign the Treaty of Basic Relations with South Korea until 1965.

Japan also promoted regionalization through its political initiatives, its rapid development and its transfer of wealth via private capital or public development aid: thanks to Japan, regional economies, inter-regional trade and regional institutions flourished. The Ministerial Conference for the Economic Development of Southeast Asia was organized by Japan in 1966, a predecessor to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations created the following year by five south-east Asian countries).

² A reference to the slogan of the time, “Datsu-a, nyu-ô” (‘Leave Asia, join the West!’).

³ Nevertheless, as Japan needed the backing of the USSR in order to join the United Nations in December 1956, and was keen to obtain the release of 45,000 soldiers of the Imperial Army imprisoned in Siberia, a joint declaration was hastily signed in October 1956: the question of the ‘northern territories’, annexed by the USSR after Japan surrendered at the end of August 1945, remained unresolved. Tahara Sôichirô, *Nihon no sengo* (‘Post-war Japan’), Kôdansha, Tokyo, 2003, p. 224.

Choosing half-measures

Japan never became the regional leader to which its position as the world's second most powerful country seemed to predispose it in 1969. Dethroned by China in 2010, its time is perhaps not yet over: some Asian countries, while they believe that China can provide what Japan used to, namely growth, they also fear it as they used to fear Japan, which they now see as a counterbalance against Chinese power.

Several factors explain why this world power, whose rise was so dazzling, never became a regional leader. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere had left painful memories, and the region was therefore unreceptive to the idea of Japan playing a role that the country itself did not want to take on. In fact, despite its support for the regionalization movement, Japan has long shown reticence towards regional integration. Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio (September 2009-June 2010) was the first to draw a parallel between the European construction and Asia, as a way of pointing out that he believed greater regional integration to be advantageous.⁴ His early vision of an Asian Community did not die along with his government: it featured in the programme for the House of Councillors election campaign of July 2010, but has not yet taken shape.

Moreover, Japan's approach to regionalization has been curbed by protectionism, particularly in the area of agriculture. Every free-trade agreement or economic partnership signed by Japan thus comprises an opt-out clause for rice (except for countries such as Singapore, where it would be irrelevant). South Korea, which has promoted the signing of these agreements since 1999, has shown less caution.

Finally, its regional approach is ambiguous insofar as it is afraid to confront the region alone.

Opening up Asia to the West

After 1945, Japan's path towards regional rehabilitation took it west. The 1951 Security Treaty between the United States and Japan, later replaced by that of 1960, placed Japan under the protection but also under the guard and control of the United States. The

⁴ "Watashi no seiji tetsugaku" ('My political philosophy'), August 2009 issue: (<http://www.hatoyama.gr.jp/masscomm/090810.html>) (consulted 10 November 2010).

Security Alliance gradually rebalanced itself. It now has a stabilizing role among Asian countries, with the exception of China, which now considers the Alliance to have turned against it.

This American supervision has meant that Japan is accustomed to approaching its neighbours with the United States at its side. Its status as a privileged partner also isolated it from the rest of the region during the Cold War, and that legacy remains present: Japan is experiencing a political and strategic ‘solitude’ which is encouraging it to open Asia up to those Western countries to which it feels closest.

Tied militarily to the United States, which has long since been its main trade partner, Japan has always encouraged the US to remain anchored in the region. In 1989, therefore, it launched the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) with Australia, an organisation to which the United States belongs, and held back from joining a project that Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad put forward in response, from which Japan was excluded. It was also at Japan’s initiative that India, New Zealand and Australia were invited to the East Asian Summit (EAS) in 2005, and joined the East Asian Community (EAC) that was subsequently created: the rise of Chinese power has led Japan to seek a counterbalance with other democracies in the region.⁵

In fact, despite the economic ties that link Japan with its Asian neighbours,⁶ its relations with some of them remain volatile.

Sensitive neighbours – to varying degrees

Japan’s relations with its Asian neighbours vary depending on the country and period in question. Certainly, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand hope to gain support from Japan against China’s rising military power, whereas Cambodia, Vietnam and Burma wish for Japan’s power to remain economic. Japan has good relations with Indonesia, its primary supplier of natural gas, and it works with Indonesia in the fight against terrorism. These countries rarely challenge Japan on historical matters. Colonization there was more short-

⁵ Soeya Yoshihide, “*Higashi ajia anzenhoshō shisutemu no naka no nihon*” (‘Japan within the East Asian security system’) in: Soeya Yoshihide and Tadokoro Masayuki (ed.), *Nihon no higashi ajia kōsō* (‘Japan’s vision of East Asia’), Keiō university press, Tokyo, 2004, pp. 193-216.

⁶ In 2009, Japan’s Asian investments were worth twice its exports to North America: USD 20.6 billion as opposed to 10.8 billion. Asia represented 54% of its exports and 44% of its imports, far more than North America (17.5% and 12.4% respectively) or the EU (12.5% and 10.7%). Source: JETRO.

lived than in Korea. As compensation to Korean ‘comfort women’, Japan established a fund that was in place for ten years. Japan has no territorial disputes that might give rise to nationalism in these countries, and has tended to support the emergence of nationalism in those nations.

The situation is different in northeast Asia, although Taiwan is the exception to this rule. Japanese occupying forces there showed greater respect for the local population, whereas the occupation by Chiang Kai-shek’s Chinese troops on the island in 1945 left bitter memories.⁷ An even more important factor, perhaps, is the Cold War, which brought the two countries closer together as allies of the United States. Taiwan disputes Japanese sovereignty on the Senkaku islands (‘Diaoyu’ in Chinese) but there have never been any clashes between the two navies, which cooperate with one another. Relations with South Korea deteriorated under the presidency of Roh-Moo-hyun (2003-2008), which was marked by scandals. Japan disputes South Korean sovereignty on the Liancourt Rocks (‘Takeshima’ in Japanese; ‘Dokdo’ in Korean), which are much more anchored in the Korean population’s national pride than they are in that of the Japanese population. Japanese-Chinese relations worsened considerably during Koizumi Jun’ichirô’s term in office (2001-2006). The Japanese Prime Minister believed that he could make Japan’s neighbours accept that Japan, like any other country, could pay tribute to those who ‘died for the homeland’ without any need for revisionism. China also claims the Senkaku islands and a large area of Japanese sea territory.

Two issues aggravate South Korea and China from time to time: the problem of Japanese school textbooks⁸ and Japanese prime ministerial visits to the Yasukuni shrine, particularly on 15th August every year, the anniversary of the end of the Second World War.⁹ China, in particular, can play things to its advantage – politically but also economically – when it comes to Japan: it will never let go of the ‘historical card’ it holds. How can that period of history be forgotten, when the apologies provided are not considered sufficient? The

⁷ Especially on account of the “28 February 1947 Incident”, cf. Lai Tse-Han, Wei Wou, Myers Ramon, *A Tragic Beginning: the Taiwan Uprising of February 28, 1947*, Stanford University Press, 1991.

⁸ Protests focus on textbooks that are, in reality, used very little (in less than 1.5% of schools), and have not received the authorization of the Education ministry, which, if need be, asks for corrections to be made before authorizing the books’ distribution in schools.

⁹ The visit made by Prime Minister Koizumi in traditional dress on 15 August 2001, the anniversary of the end of the Second World War, gave rise to protests in both countries; the protests begin again each time a visit is carried out, albeit more discreetly. The Yasukuni shrine houses the souls of 2.5 million people (mostly soldiers) who have died in wars led by Japan since 1869. Among them are 13 war criminals convicted by the Tokyo International Military Tribunal. The shrine is also considered revisionist on account of the museum located there.

government repeats them, but they are continually contradicted by statements issued by politicians seeking to flatter a small minority of their electorate.¹⁰

Japan's anticipated return to Asia

The reprimands made by China and South Korea have led to a radicalization of the Japanese right, both in political and intellectual circles. The non-radical Japanese right is in favour of maintaining the American bases and the Japan-US Alliance in their current state, with the United States assisting Japan in the event of an attack that it does not have the military means to fend off. The more radical right would like Japan to continue the Alliance, but to equip itself with the military capability and active capacity of an average military power. It condemns the 'Chinese threat'.¹¹ For the more moderate right, the increases made to the Chinese military budget, the lack of transparency, the difficulty in establishing a red line between State leaders and defence ministry, and social instability in China are all matters of concern.¹²

The Japanese left remains 'pro-Asian': in favour of continued apologies and opposed to the American military presence ('anti-bases'), believing that the bases contribute to China's feeling of being 'surrounded'. This political left is also greatly attached to Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, on which the notion of pacifism is based – now seen to be under great threat.¹³

These divisions in Japanese society are reflected in the Democratic Party, a centre-right party, which is caught between its political right- and left-wing factions. Indeed, it was created from a union between the liberal left and former members of the Liberal Democrat Party, who are often young.

¹⁰ Kiichi Fujiwara, 'Japanese diplomacy: the limitations of putting the United States first', *Heiwa no riarizumu* ('The realism of peace'), Iwanami shoten, Tokyo, 2004, p. 242.

¹¹ For example, the current foreign affairs minister, Maehara Seiji, mentioned the 'Chinese threat' in a speech delivered on 8 December 2005 at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington (the term was used in Japanese, the language in which he spoke).

¹² Tanaka Akihiko, Okamoto Yukio, "Sekai wa Chûgoku wo kyôson dekiru ka" ('Can the world co-exist with China?'), *Chûôkôron*, August 2008, pp. 26-37, translated in *Japan Analysis*, 13 October 2008, Asia Centre.

¹³ Koseki Shôichi, MaedaTetsuo, Yamaguchi Jirô, Wada Haruki, "*Kenpô 9 jô iji no motode, ikanaru anzenhoshô seisaku ga kanô ka*" ('What security policy is viable while respecting Article 9 of the Constitution?'), *Sekai*, June 2005, pp. 92-109.

No changes to diplomacy

In the context of the summer 2009 election campaign, the Minshutô (Democratic) party quickly established itself as pro-Asian – as a way of distancing itself from the rival Liberal Democrat Party – and anti-bases, a move which had the advantage of pacifying left-wing as well as right-wing members.

Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio then undertook to re-open an issue on which his predecessors had negotiated for 10 years with the United States: the conversion of the Futenma Marine corps base on Okinawa Island. Hatoyama believed it would be possible to move it off the island, indeed off Japan entirely. In spring 2010, two events brought the region's instability to the Prime Minister's attention. The first concerned North Korea: in March 2010, a South Korean corvette was sunk by a North Korean torpedo. The second concerned China: in April 2010, two ships belonging to the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force crossed paths with some Chinese ships, which included eight frigates and two submarines, 140 km west of Okinawa in the Miyako Strait (Japanese territory). They were coming from the East China Sea and heading for the Pacific on a training exercise. They had not given warning that they were passing. Adding to the provocation, two Chinese helicopters then flew over the Japanese destroyers at low altitude. These events led the Democratic Party to reaffirm its attachment to the Japan-US Alliance: Kan Naoto, who took over from Hatoyama in June 2010, guaranteed that he considered the alliance to be the central axis of Japanese diplomacy.¹⁴ After the United States reiterated that the Senkaku islands are part of Japanese territory, and thus fall within the scope of the Alliance,¹⁵ Japan increased its contribution to the costs of maintaining the military bases, a contribution for which the previous government had secured a reduction.¹⁶ As far as relations with Asia are concerned, it is now time for trust to be re-established with the countries in question, particularly, as stated in the election manifesto of 2010, with China and South Korea.¹⁷

¹⁴ Kan Naoto, inaugural speech of 11 June 2010 (consulted on 10 November 2010): (<http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/kan/statement/201006/11syosin.html>)

¹⁵ Statement by Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, to the Japanese foreign affairs minister, Maehara Seiji, on 23 September 2010. 'Senkaku wa nichibei anpo tekiyô taishô, Kurinton chôkan, meishin nichibei gaisôkaidan' ('Summit of diplomatic leaders: Clinton declares that the Senkaku islands are covered by the security treaty'), *Sankei Shimbun*, 24 September 2010.

¹⁶ "Omoiari yosan sakugen sezu" ('The "compassion budget" will not be reduced'), *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 28 October 2010. Japan's payment to the United States will be 188.1 billion yen for the financial year 2011 (in 2008, 2009 and 2010, it had been reduced to 139.5 billion yen).

¹⁷ "Genki na nihon wo fukkatsu saseru" (Re-energizing Japan), Election manifesto for the July 2010 elections: (http://www.dpj.or.jp/special/manifesto2010/data/manifesto2010_hanten_kakudai.pdf) (consulted on 10 November 2010).

After considerable hesitations, the Democratic Party has therefore returned to the path of diplomacy mapped out by its predecessor: the United States and Asia are its pillars, but the United States also guarantees Japanese security. The Democratic Party quickly regretted its vague attempts at independence when the regional situation grew tense. For a while, the status quo has held out – and may continue to do so.

Ultimately, when it comes to historical matters or the degree of accepted economic openness, that status quo is the expression of a consensus – the middle ground on which right-wing and left-wing voters can agree: the memory of Hiroshima, and apologies issued to other Asian countries.

The Democratic Party is not, however, in a position to launch a new policy with regard to Asia. A ‘pro-Korean’ policy would require Japan to:

- abandon its view that the Liancourt Rocks are part of its territory, because South Korea occupies them and has made them a national symbol;¹⁸
- allow dual nationality: naturalization, as well as being relatively difficult,¹⁹ makes it complicated for people to then enter Korea because there is no agreement on the free circulation of peoples.²⁰
- grant permanent residents voting rights in local elections. Hatoyama Yukio has declared himself in favour.²¹

Japan could therefore expect greater cooperation with South Korea in negotiations with North Korea, or with regard to China. In return, it could expect South Korea to admit that the Japan of 2010 is no longer that of 1930.

¹⁸ Robert Dujarric, “Enhancing Japan's position in the Senkaku Dispute”, Pacific Forum CSIS, 15 October 2010: (<http://csis.org/files/publication/pac1050.pdf>) (consulted on 20 November 2010).

¹⁹ A person is required to live for 5 years in Japan, be able to provide for himself or herself, have no other nationality or give up his or her nationality. Article 5, Law on Nationality (Kokuseki hô) n°147 of 4 May 1950.

²⁰ Ozawa Ichirô, former secretary-general of the Democratic Party, is in favour of it: “Eijû gaikokujin no chihô sanseiken ni tsuite” [‘On permanent residents’ voting rights in local elections’], <http://www.ozawa-ichiro.jp/policy/05.htm> (consulted on 1 June 2010).

²¹ “Hatoyama shushô, Lee Myun-bak daitôryô ni ‘gaikokujin sanseiken maemukini’, kita chôsen mondai de renkei – nicchûshunô” [‘Summit of Japanese and Korean heads of state – Hatoyama comes out in favour of foreigners’ voting rights; consultation expected on the North Korean issue’], *Jiji tsûshin*, 10 October 2009).

Southeast Asian countries would like it to become simpler for foreign workers to enter Japan²². Just 1.74% of the Japanese population is made up of immigrants, and work visas are granted sparingly.

These measures would be unpopular, and are difficult to adopt for a party that does not yet have a stable foundation. Its main electoral support comes from workers unions opposed to competition from a foreign workforce²³. Finally, a concession to South Korea over the Liancourt Rocks could have repercussions for the ‘northern territories’ (southern Kuril islands), which Japan hopes to reclaim from Russia.

The Democratic Party has realised too late that it needs the United States. It is not in a position to adopt political measures that would truly tie it to its neighbours, and so the direction of Japanese diplomacy is unlikely to shift any time soon.

Article previously published in laviedesidees.fr on 7 December 2011. Translated from French by Susannah Dale.

Published in booksandideas.net on 9 september 2011.

©booksandideas.net

²² “EPA ni okeru sâbisu bôeki to hito no idô” (‘Movement of persons and trade in services within the framework of EPAs’); <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/pr/wakaru/topics/vol57/index.html> (consulted on 1 June 2010).

²³ “Rengô no gaikokujinrôdôsha mondai ni kansuru tômen no kangaekata” (‘Rengô’s current ideas on immigrant workers’) 21 October 2004: <http://www.jtuc-rengo.or.jp/roudou/gaikokujin/kangaekata.html> (consulted on 1st June 2010).