

The Dragon & the Chrysanthemum

By Conn Hallinan | May 31, 2005

At first glance, the growing tension between China and Japan seems almost inexplicable. Massive anti-Japanese demonstrations in China over events that took place more than half a century ago? A heated exchange filled with mutual threats over an offshore petroleum field that western oil companies think is not worth exploiting? Has a Shinto shrine and slanted textbooks really driven the two great Asian powers to the edge of a Cold War or worse?

No. While history does play a role in all this, if you want to understand the antagonism between Beijing and Tokyo, you have to start in Washington and, in particular, Washington State. In Mid-April of this year, the Japanese government agreed to let the U.S. Army's 1st Corps transfer from Fort Lewis, Washington to Camp Zama near Yokohama.

U.S. troops in Japan are hardly something new. Some 50,000 of them are spread among 73 bases on the main islands and Okinawa, and the Japanese shell out \$2.6 billion yearly to keep them there. But American troops in Japan, according to the U.S.-Japan security treaty, are supposed to maintain "peace and security in the Far East." Period. However, 1st Corps' responsibility extends beyond the Pacific Basin to include the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, through which passes the bulk of the oil that supplies China's roaring economy.

Besides the recent decision to re-deploy 1st Corps, the United States is busily building up Guam as a "power projection hub," with, in the words of Pacific Commander Admiral William Fargo, "geo-strategic importance." The United States is also trying to shift Guam-based bombers to Yokota airbase near Tokyo. Christopher Hughes of Warwick University, an expert on the region, told the (British) *Guardian*, "The ramifications of this would be that Japan would essentially serve as a frontline U.S. command post for the Asia-Pacific and beyond."

And that "frontline" is heating up considerably. Earlier this year CIA Director Porter Goss and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told Congress that China constitutes a "military threat" to the United States. The testimony appears to signal a

decision by the Bush Administration to institute a policy of "encircling" China with bases and U.S. alliances. The most obvious moves in this direction are the recent ones involving beefing up personnel and bases in Asia. But the United States has also tightened its control of Gulf oil through its occupation of Iraq and is extending its influence into Central Asia, a growing source for China's energy needs.

The Chinese are acutely sensitive to issues concerning their borders, and Taiwan in particular, but what has really put them on edge is a recent statement by the right-wing Mayor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, that the "U.S., Russia, and Japan" should work together to strangle China's oil supplies. "It would keep China in check greatly," he said, "since China has no resources."

It would also turn the present tensions in East Asia from worrisome to downright scary. It is in light of these moves that the recent spat over textbooks, a Shinto temple, and offshore oil fields needs to be seen.

Disputed History

The issue of distorted history books and visits by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to the Yasuekuni Shrine—where 14 class-A war criminals are deified—enrages not only the Chinese, but every country in the region that suffered under Japanese colonialism. The textbooks in question ignore or downplay Japan's colonial policy, including the infamous Nanking massacre in China and the issue of "comfort women" forced into prostitution for the Japanese Army.

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The drive to cleanse Japan's actions in World War II is led by the Society for Historical Textbook Reform, backed by industrial giants Canon and Mitsubishi and more than 100 Diet members from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. As Mark Seldon and David McNeill of *Japan Focus* point out, not only have the textbooks allowed an "extremist fringe" to put its version of history into homes across Japan, but the campaign has pushed other texts "sharply to the right."

Fujioka Nobukatsu, vice-chair of the Society, says, "We're confident that we can change the teaching of history in schools here." It is a process that seems to be having an effect. In a recent commentary in the *Financial Times*, David Wall of Cambridge University writes that in his seminar on East Asian politics, "Japanese students, and even junior diplomats, laugh at Chinese students' accounts of the massacre and other atrocities, saying the stories were Chinese government fabrications and pure propaganda."

Many Japanese, however, oppose this ratcheting up of tensions with China. Naoto Kan, the leader of the main opposition Democratic Party of Japan, cautions about seeing China as "a military threat." Yotaro Kobayashi, chair of Fuji-Xerox, has asked that Koizumi stop visiting the Shrine, a request echoed by head of the Japan Association of Corporate Executives and Chair of IBM, Kakutarō Kitashiro. It is no coincidence that business leaders are prominent among those calling for reducing tensions. China constitutes 20.1 percent of Japan's foreign trade, slightly more than \$213 billion last year.

What critics of Japanese nationalism fear is that the memories of World War II, and the enormous pain and damage the war inflicted on Asia and Japan, are receding. And the further they recede, the more Japan is willing to flex its military muscle. Japan has the fifth largest navy in the world, the 15th largest air force, and a military budget close to \$40 billion. The government recently elevated its Defense Agency to a full ministry.

Japan also signed onto the American Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) system and will spend \$10 billion deploying it over the next decade. While the United States and Japan claim that the ABM is aimed at

North Korea, the Chinese view it as a threat to their small strategic nuclear force.

The United States is pressuring Japan to dump Article 9 of its "peace constitution," which renounces war as a "sovereign right of the nation" and "force as a means of settling international disputes." It also bars Japanese troops from any "combat zones." When the Koizumi government sent 500 troops to Iraq, it circumvented the ban by simply declaring Iraq a "non-combat zone."

Japan's Global Role

Last year, then Secretary of State Colin Powell bluntly told the *Financial Times* that "If Japan is going to play a full role on the world stage and become a full, active member of the Security Council, Article 9 of the Japanese constitution will have to be re-examined." A recent poll by *Mainichi Shimbun* indicated that 70 percent of the Diet was opposed to altering the constitution or dumping Article 9.

Japan has become increasingly aggressive with its neighbors. It recently claimed Korea's Tokodo Islands, setting off huge demonstrations in South Korea. Japan began its colonial career by seizing the islands from Korea in 1905 and renaming them Yakeshima. The islands were returned to Korea in 1945.

The Koizumi government is picking fights with China as well, including taking control of a lighthouse first established by right-wing nationalists on Diaoyu Island. China called the action a "provocation against, and an intrusion into territorial sovereignty."

Japan also exchanged sharp notes with Beijing over the disputed offshore Chunxiao oil field. A Japanese official told the *Financial Times* that Tokyo was pursuing "proportional escalation" over the fields. "If they do something, then we will do something until they understand our determination."

It is not even obvious that there is much to argue over. Last year Royal Dutch Shell, the Anglo Dutch Oil Group, and Unocal withdrew from developing the fields because the companies said there wasn't enough oil or gas to merit it. So what's going on here?

Well, Japanese nationalism is nothing new, and it appears that at least a section of Japan's political classes has decided the best way to confront the growing power and influence of China is to sign on to U.S. designs for the region. But is Japan also laying the groundwork for a step that would have been unthinkable a generation ago: acquiring nuclear weapons?

In 2002, Japan's then Chief Cabinet Secretary, Yasur Fukuda, said Japan was considering abandoning its long-term opposition to nuclear weapons. In the face of Korean and Chinese alarm, the government disavowed the statement, but it is not the first time government officials have raised the subject. And the United States has tacitly supported such talk.

Both Vice President Dick Cheney and Senator John McCain (R-AZ) have warned China that if North Korea developed nuclear weapons, it was likely that Japan would do so too. A number of Bush administration sounding boards, like neoconservative Charles Krauthammer, have openly advocated Japan going nuclear as a way to offset the growing influence and power of China. Acquiring nuclear weapons would be relatively easy for Japan, which has plenty of fuel to reprocess, as well as missiles and satellite targeting systems.

It has been 50 years since atomic weapons destroyed two Japanese cities and killed more than 200,000 people, and these memories are growing dim for a new generation of Japanese. Memory charts a path to avoid the mistakes of the past. Amnesia condemns they be repeated.

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