



Significance of the Visit to Japan by Chinese President Hu Jintao

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In the first top-level visit in a decade since President Jiang Zemin's State Visit to Japan in 1998, President Hu's visit to Japan began on May 6. Attention in Japan has been focused on two points. One point is the question of how current hot issues such as the joint gas exploration in the East China Sea, poisoned frozen dumpling issue, and the Tibetan unrest issue are dealt with and taken to the next stage. The other point is how the long-held thorny issues of Taiwan and history are described in the Joint Statement issued as a fourth important document between Japan and China since the one of 1992.

With regard to the wording related to the above points in the Joint Statement signed on May 7, there is no outstanding progress dealing with the former issues and no novelty regarding the latter issues. The only result that was stressed is to promote "the strategic mutually-beneficial relationship" which was already agreed on in 2006. Some critics may conclude that the visit and the Statement brought about no outstanding outcome. But this visit should be regarded as historically significant as a symbol of the new Japan-China relationship. The reasons are as follows:

First is the history issue. It was only touched upon in the Statement which described, "squarely facing history and looking toward the future, both sides unveil a new relationship..." while, on the other hand, China directly expressed appreciation for the peaceful path that Japan has followed for over 60 years since World War II. Recalling the fact that President Jiang persistently sought Japan to apologize for the past during his stay in Japan 10 years ago, the wording this time can be said to be a significant political turnaround. Last year when Premier Wen Jiabao visited Japan, he clearly showed China's new policy towards Japan, and this time the head of state of China recognizably endorsed it. This also can be verified by China's dealing with history-related issues in a restrained manner consistently since the visit to China by then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Secondly, the meaning of the reconfirmation of the strategic mutually-beneficially relationship between the supreme leaders of both sides is very profound. Although such a relationship was the “goal” both sides would strive for during Wen’s visit in April 2007, this time, the relationship was acknowledged as established and proclaimed to be comprehensively promoted. Use of the “strategic” relationship in the context of Japan–China relations expresses a meaning uniquely different from the commonly-used “strategic partnership” in other bilateral relations. Core meanings of the strategic mutually-beneficial relationship in the Japan–China context are three: (1) To deal with bilateral relations from a broad perspective as great nations on equal-footing while recognizing basic differences in terms of political systems and national interests; (2) To overcome history of the two nations; (3) China recognizes Japan as a regional power and both nations work together for creating a regional order. Each of these core meanings is new and epoch-making given the course of the history between Japan–China relations.

Thirdly, Japan unwaveringly welcomed the visit of President Hu under the harsh international criticism against China in terms of the Tibetan issue. The attitude of the Japanese Government has a significant meaning in strengthening the relationship given the fact that the visit is the first for Hu since he entered the second term of presidency in October 2007. With regard to the global warming issue, the Joint Statement affirmed that China positively participates in building of the post-Kyoto Protocol international framework. In terms of the Tibetan issue, as well, the Japanese Government restrained from harshly criticizing China for its response in public and rather prioritized diplomatic demarche. These examples suggested the possibility that Japan might become a buffer state of the confrontation between China and the US and Europe, a role which Japan fulfilled in the case of the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989. It is preferable for Japan to initiate its own diplomacy through such a role and put forward the importance of Japan from the viewpoint of public diplomacy.

Fourthly, it is not surprising that both countries could not reach clear-cut agreement on the individual issues mentioned above and deferred the solutions due to the complexity of the issues, although there must exist a disappointment among Japanese people. Considering further the tough situation surrounding China, both sides seemingly judged that continuation of the strenuous negotiation at a later time would bring about more preferable soft-landing results from a wider perspective, including current public opinion, both internal and international. It is noteworthy that the natural gas exploration

issue in the East China Sea seemed to have had important progress, according to Prime Minister Fukuda's comments in a post summit meeting press conference: "a solution is in sight for this long-standing issue." This development would prevent possible unexpected conflicts. Also, the Statement has no new phrase regarding the Taiwan issue, simply stating that Japan "maintains its stance on the Taiwan issue as stipulated in the 1972 Japan–China Joint Communiqué. This can be interpreted, in a sense, to mean that both countries showed their will to aim for regional stability. There was also a voice in Japan seeking China to support Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, just as China did for India. But it can sometimes be true that haste makes waste.

Japan–China relations obviously entered a new era, even judging from the external situation surrounding them. It should be regarded that the confirmation of this recognition by proclaiming the strategic mutually-beneficial relationship in the important official document constitutes a considerably significant outcome. So long as the individual issues are later addressed with the aim to solve them within this recognition from a wide perspective as well as international law and justice, the solutions must be close to the assertions of the Japanese side. In this view, Japan is now standing at the position, in turn, to seek actions, including regarding history-related issues, by the Chinese side and watch them carefully.

The Institute for International Policy Studies (IIPS) issued a recommendation paper entitled "A New Chapter in Japan–China Relations" prior to President Hu's visit, requesting both Governments to constructively take action. I highly evaluate the Summit talks and the Joint Statement this time as a powerful step forward, which direction is exactly along with our recommendations.