
A blossoming relationship?

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FIRST came the “ice-breaking”, then the “ice-melting”. Now, comes the “cherry-blossom viewing”, admittedly late in the season. A succession of reciprocal visits by the two countries’ leaders have taken Sino-Japanese relations out of the cooler over the past 20 months. On Tuesday May 6th Hu Jintao began a state visit, the first trip to Japan by a Chinese president in a decade; at five days, it will also be the longest for Mr Hu. Before meeting his counterpart, Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, he predicted an “everlasting warm spring” between the two countries.

The temperature began to plunge in 1998, with the visit to Japan—the first ever by a Chinese head of state—of Mr Hu’s predecessor, Jiang Zemin. Mr Jiang had come demanding a fulsome written apology for Japan’s wartime past, yet as he delivered hectoring lectures on the subject, the apology never came. A growing number of Japanese had come to feel, rightly or wrongly, that their country had apologised enough for its wartime brutality. Besides, they resented the way a rising China played on war guilt to extract concessions, mainly financial, from its rich neighbour. The Communist Party, with its history of famine, purges and crackdowns, was one to talk.

Relations hit rock-bottom under Junichiro Koizumi, Japan’s prime minister from 2001-06. Top-level contacts between the two countries were suspended after Mr Koizumi began making devil-may-care visits to Yasukuni, the Tokyo shrine that honours not just Japan’s war dead but also executed war criminals.

To nearly everyone but Mr Koizumi, it was by now clear that Asia’s two biggest powers should be talking to each other. His successor, Shinzo Abe, a right-wing hawk with disturbingly unreconstructed views of Japan’s past, nevertheless broke with Mr Koizumi’s line by visiting Beijing as his first gesture in office and making clear that he would refrain from visiting Yasukuni. The Chinese were grateful. They were overjoyed when Mr Fukuda succeeded Mr Abe after a year. Mr Fukuda’s father, when he was also prime minister, had restored diplomatic relations between the two countries; Mr Fukuda fils was considered a “friend of China”, that double-edged honour. He had long criticised politicians’ visits to Yasukuni and believed that Japan’s good relations with its Asian neighbours were paramount.

Mr Hu and Mr Fukuda will have plenty to talk about. China has overtaken America as Japan’s biggest trading partner. China is hungry for know-how, and Japan thinks it can be of particular help in providing environmental technology. For Mr Fukuda, whose domestic standing is shaky, a big prize would be a Chinese commitment to tackle climate change, an important theme at the G8 summit which Japan will host in July. As for Mr Hu, he will be thankful if his visit passes without strong protests over Tibet. It came as a relief to China that the Olympic torch passed through Japan last month with relatively little kerfuffle. The news that China has reopened discussions with representatives of the Dalai Lama has eased Japanese diplomats’ worries that Mr Hu’s visit would be drowned out by protests.

As the two leaders play ping-pong and discuss a replacement panda for Ling Ling, who died at Tokyo’s Ueno Zoo last week, much will be made of improved relations. For instance, the two countries’ militaries have embarked on measures to improve confidence, including port visits by naval ships. Elsewhere, diplomats point to the way a food scare in Japan involving tainted Chinese dumplings was handled calmly by the authorities on both sides, even as hysteria was whipped up by Japan’s mass media.

Yet beneath the enforced bonhomie, abiding issues remain. One of the biggest is over gasfields in a disputed area of the East China Sea. Despite a dozen rounds of negotiations, the two countries have failed to reach agreement on joint development, thanks to touchiness about sovereignty. Originally, Mr Hu’s visit was to be the occasion for a deal.

Biggest of all, though, is the deep and angry nationalism of many Chinese, which the Communist Party bears much of the blame for fostering. For now, the nationalism is directed elsewhere, stung by European and American criticism of China’s treatment of Tibet. But it is at its most virulent when directed against Japan, as it last was three years ago in violent anti-Japanese protests in Shanghai and elsewhere. It will take a lot of ping-pong to erase the impression of many Japanese that they are loathed in China more than they are admired.

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