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No. 127/2010 dated 5 October 2010

## **China-Japan Dispute: Tokyo's Foreign Policy of Pragmatism**

By Bhubhindar Singh

### **Synopsis**

*The Japanese government was slammed for giving in to Chinese pressure when it decided to release the captain of a Chinese vessel. Japan's decision to release him, however, was a pragmatic one.*

### **Commentary**

TENSIONS FLARED following Japan's arrest and detention of the captain of a Chinese vessel that collided into two Japanese coast guard ships in the East China Sea in early September. Though the Kan government released the captain after detaining him for more than two weeks, the crisis has shown no signs of dissipating. Instead, it has escalated with calls from China for a Japanese apology; and Japan, in turn, now seeks compensation from China for the damage caused to the Japanese ships.

The Kan government faced intense pressure and criticism at home from opposition parties, the media and academics for its decision to release the captain. They argued that the Kan government 'gave-in' or 'bowed' to Chinese pressure and portrayed Japan as weak. But is that so? I would argue that Japan's decision to release the captain was motivated more by pragmatism.

### **Never too Late**

There has been considerable controversy surrounding Prime Minister Naoto Kan's decision to release the Chinese captain. It can be seen as a pragmatic decision due to the following reasons:

Firstly, the Japanese government had completed its investigations. According to the Naha District Public Prosecutors' Office in Okinawa, the captain was released because investigations revealed that the collisions were not premeditated. In addition, it was announced that the captain had no criminal record. Officials from the Prosecutors' Office also cited diplomatic reasons relating to the impact of the bilateral tensions on the Japanese people and Sino-Japanese relations.

Secondly, Japan had already made the point that it would not be pushed around by China. Japan was steadfast in its investigations even though China gradually intensified action against Tokyo that involved summoning the Japanese ambassador on more than five separate occasions, suspending ministerial-level exchanges, cancelling Chinese tour packages to Japan and a series of other actions – all having considerable impact on the political and economic dimensions of the Sino-Japanese relationship. Though Japan may have accelerated

the legal process, the arrest and investigations for the incident, respected domestic laws.

Thirdly, the Kan government had just been sworn in. The bilateral spat between China and Japan was on-going during the party presidential election. The decision to release the captain marked a fresh start to both their term as the government of Japan and to Sino-Japanese relations.

Finally, the decision also shows that the new government has the right priorities – to focus on the recovery of the Japanese economy. The Democratic Party of Japan – Prime Minister Kan's party -- was elected last August to bring about reforms to Japan's long-standing economic stagnation. Fixing the economy is more important for most Japanese than any foreign policy issue. Whilst the stalemate in Sino-Japanese relations did not adversely affect the Japanese economy, it had the potential to do so. The China factor is absolutely crucial for the recovery of the fragile Japanese economy as China is Japan's largest trading partner. The release of the captain in good time is recognition of this factor.

### **New Phase in Sino-Japanese Relations**

Described widely as the most serious in recent years, the latest bilateral tiff reveals that the Sino-Japanese relationship has entered a new phase. The tensions are likely to continue for some time and could even shape the bilateral relationship over the medium to long term. Already engaged in a competitive economic relationship albeit a stable one, the incident signals the increasingly defining character of political interests in the course of bilateral relations. As political interests rather than economic ones dominate discussions, the Sino-Japanese relationship will experience more difficulties.

This is apparent in the territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands between Japan and China. Given its economic and military rise, China has been displaying a tougher but more confident approach to advance its national interests. This approach was first witnessed when China's foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, lashed out at Hillary Clinton's remarks that the South China Sea issue was part of the United States' national interest; and now in reaction to Japan's arrest and detention of the captain. Notwithstanding the rising concerns generated in some quarters, this robust approach by China is here to stay.

In reaction, Japan does not want to be perceived as a weak state. Japan realises that a show of weakness could set a precedent for the future – a scenario Japan wants to avoid. As China continues to overtake Japan in the economic and military fields, Tokyo feels it important to ensure equal footing in its dealings with Beijing. This is especially so in relation to territorial disputes.

In light of the new phase in Sino-Japanese relations, three points are crucial. Firstly, stability in Sino-Japanese relations is vital for the region's continued growth and progress. Secondly, both Japan and China need to adopt a pragmatic approach when addressing bilateral disputes, unhindered by emotional or nationalistic sentiments. Japan's release of the Chinese captain is a step in the right direction.

Finally, the rise in bilateral tensions in the last three weeks has underscored the importance of the continued presence of the United States military in East Asia. The US alliance is not only the cornerstone of peace and stability in the region. It will also ensure that bilateral disputes do not degenerate into conflicts which could disrupt the economic and political stability of East Asia.

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