China-Japan ties at ‘historic turning point’ after Shinzo Abe’s visit, but can the goodwill hold?

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s latest China visit marked a major effort to reset the tumultuous relations between the two Asian giants amid a backdrop of historical grievances, territorial disputes in the East China Sea, and geopolitical rivalry in the wake of Beijing’s rapid ascendency in the region.

Climaxing Beijing and Tokyo’s efforts over the past year to repair their troubled ties, both sides agreed to set aside their political differences and vowed to boost economic ties and promote free trade amid growing global uncertainty and protectionism. Amid trade tensions with Washington, the two sides signed over 500 business deals with a total value of more than US$2.6 billion, ranging from infrastructure, energy and car projects to a US$30 billion currency swap pact.

They also agreed not to aim threats or direct aggression at each other and resolved to increase high-level diplomatic and military exchanges through constructive dialogue amid speculation about a planned visit to Japan next year by President Xi Jinping. The visit came in the midst of rapid changes in the global order as a shift in power dynamics – years in the making – plays out among a rising China and the existing giants in world affairs, including the US and Japan, which China overtook as the world’s second-largest economy in 2010.

More importantly, the trip coincided with the spiraling tariff war between Beijing and Washington, and a looming clash over national interests that went far beyond trade frictions under US President Donald Trump’s “America first” strategy. As a result, Abe, who was labeled an “unwelcome person” by Chinese officials five years ago, was treated with unusual hospitality, encouraged to take part in lengthy talks and feted with lavish banquets with both Xi and Li. Top Chinese leaders were unusually straightforward in their descriptions of the sensitive timing of Abe’s visit. In a meeting with Abe on Friday, Xi said both countries should move ties in a “new historic direction” while “instability and uncertainties are growing” across the globe.

Sino-Japanese relations, like Beijing’s love-hate relationship with Washington, have their intrinsic problems. The list includes the countries’ wartime history, territorial disputes in the East China Sea, deep-rooted distrust and hostility, regional competition and the US-Japan military alliance.

Therefore, it would be premature to expect a softening in tensions and long-standing disputes in the Sino-Japanese relationship as a result of Abe’s latest visit. Incidents such as a Chinese submarine entering the waters around the Senkaku Islands in January and

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Beijing’s outsize military spending in the region would continue to be the strategic pivot on which the bilateral relationships would hinge.

Lee Myon-woo, a Japan expert and vice-president of the Sejong Institute in Seoul, said the Xi-Abe summit was unlikely to solve the structural problems in the countries’ relationship. “While there would be some improvements of bilateral relations after the summit, Japan is still likely to continue [with] its China containment strategy to limit growing Chinese influence over the Asia-Pacific region,” he said.

“After all, Japan is a major ally of the US. In fact, it has repeatedly vowed to strengthen its alliance with Washington. Japan will further implement strategies to check China’s regional clout and is less likely to tolerate China’s assertiveness in the region.” Most analysts agree that Trump’s unpredictable and often incoherent style— as well as his capricious actions against free trade and globalization— are indispensable factors in the latest “renormalization” of Beijing-Tokyo ties.

Zhou Yongsheng, a professor at China Foreign Affairs University in Beijing, called Abe’s visit a turning point in relations between the two countries and said trade tensions with the US gave both countries fresh impetus to patch up their differences.

The visit, he said, marked the 40th anniversary of the signing of the China-Japan Treaty of Peace and Friendship. It also followed Li’s visit to Japan in May, the first by a Chinese premier since 2011. “It is another reinforcement and strengthening of high-level political exchanges, which will build up greater mutual political trust,”

“The trade war is not good for either China or Japan since it targets both of them, and the US tariffs on iron and steel hit Japan even more harshly since their exports for these materials far exceed China. But despite this, Japanese leaders refuse to directly attack the US because their alliance with the US is at the centre of their foreign policy strategy. But they are nevertheless aligned with China on the trade front.”

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1 Shi Jiangtao, “China-Japan ties at ‘historic turning point’ after Shinzo Abe’s visit, but can the goodwill hold?”, (October 29, 2018), Retrieved November 07, 2018, From South China Morning Post: https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2170469/china-japan-ties-historic-turning-point-after-shinzo-abes-visit