

Between political alienation and economic dependence

THE SINO-JAPANESE RELATIONS AFTER THE LDP ELECTION VICTORY AND THE CP CONGRESS

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzō Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping could vastly expand their political power this autumn. Both are now in a position to govern for years to come. Abe dissolved the Japanese Lower House in order to face down the opposition in the new elections. The coup succeeded. Abe wants to "reclaim" Japan. Xi Jinping was almost simultaneously appointed as the core leader of the Chinese Communist Party. He is now the undisputed leader of the Middle Kingdom, on par with Mao Zedong. Xi wants to realize the "Chinese dream". A collision course seems pre-programmed.

In October 2017, two time-intensive events in Japan and the People's Republic of China further exacerbated the foreign and security rivalry between the two Asian states for power and influence in the region and beyond, while reaffirming the importance of growing economic links.

On 22 October 2017, the politically troubled Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP) under Prime Minister Shinzō Abe (63) scored a surprisingly big victory in the aptly held early parliamentary elections. The LDP won 313 out of 465 seats in the Japanese Lower House, giving its chairman a confirmation of a largely domestic and revisionist interest-driven policy, which in the meantime was hardly thought possible. Also when the North Korean crisis and Japan's handling of a pyromaniac regime was cited to be the primary concern. It was the fifth landslide victory for Abe's coalition since 2012, uninterrupted duration of which could bring him

the profile of a longest serving Japanese top-politician in office.

A few years ago, it seemed that Abe had lost everything: Once only, but once and for all. He had to resign as prime minister, at the time when a return was unthinkable. One spoke of him as a leading figure, who had failed completely; undoubtedly indecisive and politically overwhelmed. End of story.

His success story started with a startling comeback in 2012. A historic third term of office until 2021 has become realistic.

In November of the same year (2012) began a linear rise, probably unimagined in the East as in the West, of another Asian politician, whose end is still not in sight, and the one who was portrayed as the politically most influential man in the world on the front pages of recently published magazines not limited to those devoted to domestic propaganda of China. Just days before the Japanese LDP's election victory, in the 19th CPC Congress hosted in Beijing from 18-24 October, 2017, the Chinese President, Party Chairman and Commander-in-Chief, and head of countless commissions, committees and audit groups, Xi Jinping (64), was chosen as the "core of the party" and confirmed as currently the sole and apparently undisputed leader.

At the same time, his thoughts on a "new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the 21st Century" reached the status of canonized scriptures. An honor that had on-

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ly been given during his lifetime to the revolutionary state founder Mao Zedong and posthumously to the "renewer of China", Deng Xiaoping.

Both, Abe and Xi, face contrary state systems, have a completely different aura, and do not seem to have much in common at a first glance. And yet something unites them: not the hope for a better world, but only the strength and rebirth of their country and people. Both are, on the one hand calculating, rational engineers of power, but also sometimes charismatic gifted political leaders.

The fact that it is easier for Xi Jinping in his one-party dictatorship than for Shinzō Abe to be the prime minister of a democratically constituted state makes sense only theoretically. For the immediate predecessors of Abe (no matter from which party), the political power slipped just as fast as their nominations for the head of government were made, while Abe like the proverbial phoenix from the ashes converted into an oppositional undisputed elite politician.

Both Abe and Xi appear to be messianically inspired by the prophecy of national revitalization. While one wants to "reclaim" his Japan and would like to expand on his long sought after constitutional amendment to the domestic armed forces (which, incidentally, are among the largest and best equipped in the world) and their defence mission that has been purely defensive since 1947, the other wants to realize the "Chinese dream" and help China regain its former traditional, regional function. First in the neighbourhood, then in the region, and finally, via the iconic Silk Road Initiative, in the world. Not rise, as often claimed, but comeback is the motive behind all the ideas and actions of the Chinese one-party/from now on: One-man dictatorship!

Whenever nations are satisfied with their political and economic development and live in harmony with the overwhelming majority of their neighbours, hardly any charismatic visionaries are needed. However, in times of economic stagnation and social paralysis, many yearn for encouragement, promise for

the future and convincing tribunes whose ideas and dreams proclaim inspiration and self-assurance.

The Japanese Prime Minister and the Chinese leader of the Chinese Communist Party belong, surprisingly enough, to this category of political leaders. Shinzō Abe and Xi Jinping, almost the same age, seem unglamorous at first glance, but each in, their own way, is decisive, strategic and goal-oriented.

On the other hand, Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao, did not shine through a sustained charismatic demeanour (he often acted apathetically and inwardly with his mimicking idleness) nor through the impression of concentrated leadership of anything but a homogeneous billion people. It is not without bitterness that Chinese speak today, rightly or wrongly, of the lost years of his term of office.

Above all, however, both are biased by family biographies: Abe's grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, was in the Second World War initially ammunition and armaments minister and later also head of government for a short term. His political motive to liberate Japan from the loser's image and to lead it back to a glorious future could also be a set of guidelines behind all other current political concepts of his grandson Shinzō.

Xi's father Xi Zhongxun was once considered to be one of Mao's closest companions before he fell into disgrace in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution and thrown into prison. After his rehabilitation, he was one of the most prominent critics of the Tiananmen massacre of 1989 and was also a patron of Hu Jintao, the predecessor of his son Jinping.

The conservative-populist leanings of both leaders are reflected in Abe's inheritance from his grandfather and other family members in his membership of the ultra-nationalist "Japanese society," and in Xi's unwavering mission to re-appoint the CPC as the sole decisive body for socio-political monitoring and interpretation.

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Although the contemporary history of Sino-Japanese relations is heavily affected by unresolved disputes over uninhabited island groups in the Chinese Sea, the conflicts between the two nations are much deeper. Thus, the causes of a never-ending rivalry can already be traced back to historical developments.

The competition between these East Asian neighbours stems from their search for a regional and symbolic political function in Asia, whose Sino-cultural influence is claimed by China, while Japan's rapid techno-industrial development (techno-nationalism) in the late 19th century brought a shameful defeat to the proud Middle Kingdom in the First Sino-Japanese War, which was far more than mere military failure. The Chinese empire was considered to be the "Rome and Athens of Asia" (H. Kissinger). It had founded, influenced and expanded Japan's writing system, administrative bureaucracy, Confucian hierarchy and filial piety. China had become a cultural mentor, even occasional teacher of the otherwise isolated archipelago.

The later Japanese colonisations of Korea and Taiwan, each extracted from the ancient Chinese tributary system of vassal states, not just diminished the territory of Sino-centric empire, but also created a traumatic anti-Japanese mood. The clichés, ethnic dissonances and generally suspicious mistrust prevail until today, which has constantly been reminded by frequently defaced or cancelled Sino-Japanese summit dialogues.

In the shame culture of East Asia (unlike the West's blame psychology, which knows of forgiveness and pardon), military humiliations, territorial losses, national failures, and national political failures weigh extremely heavily.

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Although China boasts of an allegedly uninterrupted history of 5000 years, it must also accept that many centuries, apart from invasions by alien invaders (Mongols, Manchus), were not particularly glorious, and recently Japan caused the most traumatic break in the modern history of the country. Also by another Asian and geographically much smaller neighbouring state, whose mocking modernization efforts suddenly paid off. China had nothing to set against the Japanese fleet.

The volatile Sino-Japanese relations have been suffering since the invasion of Japanese imperial troops into Chinese territory (1937) to the present day from undigested history, 'past-enduring' interpretations of which do not let the process of reconciliation take off on either sides (quite apart from the visits of top Japanese politicians to famously controversial Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo), and from the unresolved ambivalence of US Asian politics.

Japan and China were forcibly 'opened', exploited, and tapped to fulfil their own goals by the West in the 19th century. Neverthe-

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less, while Japan decreed rapid modernization, the drowned and decadent Chinese empire was dying with the well-known consequences. Although both countries have claimed an equal footing in international diplomatic relations, they have rarely succeeded in maintaining their own bilateral relations.

Tokyo and Beijing have moved since early contacts in a contradictory web of independence and submission, attraction and rejection, admiration and damnation, trust and doubt. Rare manifestation, more often secretly and subconsciously.

China's economic recovery and Japan's economic downturn, which began in the same period, increasingly revealed the potential of conflict in both countries. From politics developed alienation to the point of hatred, and trade gave rise to competition and envy.

Japan knows about the sensitivities of the neighbouring People's Republic and its historical consciousness: past greatness, younger humiliation, present success, future dominance. And fears Beijing's ambitious goal of replacing the United States as the leading global economic powerhouse by 2025. This would, for the first time, mean having to accept a non-English-speaking, non-Western and non-democratic power as the number one. According to an ancient Asian proverb, two tigers cannot peacefully live together on a mountain. Nippon's role would be defined accordingly.

At the beginning of the golden years of its economic development, it was easy for Japan not to worry about the shattered and bitterly poor China that was ruined by the civil war and was scarcely making any headway socially. It was impossible for China to grow into an economic competitor and industrial giant, which would one day displace Nippon from the place of export master! However, China achieved the unimaginable in thirty years. The deep fall of Japan lasted two decades.

Today, apart from the historical lines of conflict (war crimes, historical lapses) between

Japan and China, there are also geo-strategic-military, controversial territorial disputes - for which, according to a well-known saying by the legendary Zhou Enlai, "future generations should find time". China, initially, has other things to do in the Chinese Sea, as well as the symbolic political debate over Japan's request for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, which China expressly rejects with great international effort as expected.

All disputes and dissonances between Tokyo and Beijing are not merely a rigid, anachronistic form of inherited irreconcilable politics of interest, even though the historical "DNA" is handed down inter-generatively, but a combination of mission-conscious perspectives with real-political understanding, whose ultraconservative ideas (Abe: Re-imperialization of Japan, Xi: renaissance of the PRC) could not be more populist.

So it is surprising that both remained popular despite all their unpopular measures (Tokyo constitutional amendment, Beijing anti-corruption campaign) and could even expand their power and sphere of influence.

Abe and Xi think and work in a far less 'nationally oriented' manner than their predecessors. They deal with other issues, i.e. new strategic goals, supporters, voters, coalitions and majorities (also applies to the CPC with its multiple wings) and regime-threatening movements. Above all, they worry about themselves: their heritage, their legacy, their mission.

Abe and Xi know that personal failure is inherent in a visionary grand scheme. Both were desperate to come (again) to power, got there and, as it seems, are not deterred by anything. Their struggle for office retention and possibly extended reigns (if necessary, under constitutional change) shows no normal type of political artisans, but points to power enthusiasts beyond institutional constraints with a very inherent inner mission, risky as it may be.

Exactly this agenda, however, makes the coexistence of both personalities, with their sense of mission, highly sensitive. Because

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the two largest economies of Asia are now led by the currently most influential and leading nationalist politicians of their generation.

The fact that America's Donald Trump and North Korea's Kim Jong-un, two other dazzling and erratic powerhouses, have also appeared on the stage of world affairs, does not make things easier.

On the contrary: Since the Second World War and the Cuban Missile Crisis, Earth has not been as close to the abyss of self-destruction as it is today.

Abe and Xi, each in his own way, fight to gain more meaning in the context of national, regional and global politics. The preparations of the Japanese government for the visit of US President Trump in November 2017, in Tokyo, showed this very clearly.

Japan has a completely different idea of dealing with the DPRK (North Korea) than China, which still needs the former fraternal and vassal state, despite its insubordination, as a buffer zone to South Korea (and the influence of American interest policy there). Apart from the scenarios of millions of refugees from North Korea, if the local system collapsed.

Paradoxically, those involved in the Korean conflict call their self-preservation the foremost motive for both the procurement, development, and expansion of missile technology, including nuclear long-range armament (North Korea, regime) and its defence in the event of a nuclear attack (Japan, Hokkaido Defence); South Korea, border security; USA protection of the native west coast).

But even in this context of communion – which was originally meant to animate rapprochement, dialogue and disarmament – within the framework of the Six-Party Negotiations, the relationship between Japan and China remains marked by rivalry and mistrust.

Full diplomatic recognition between Japan and China has existed for almost 50 years;

but the foreign relations of both countries have not grown or even become narrower. The disorganized conflict in September 2012 reached its lowest point in the dispute over the Senkaku Islands, although seven years earlier massive anti-Japanese riots had already occurred in Shanghai.

The next few years will not be different, especially given the background described by the national consolidation of power of both heads of government and their largely family-oriented ideologies.

A central role is played by the escalating North Korean crisis, which is not only exhausted in the military conflict between Pyongyang and Washington, but also affects Tokyo, Seoul and, to a lesser extent, Europe.

An increasing military aggression of North Korea drives Japan to increased alertness. The physical threat from the neighbouring state has never been more noticeable than at the end of August/beginning of September 2017. The fact that Tokyo, still and probably not without justification, regards China as the protector of North Korea has an additional negative impact on both negotiations with the PR and relations with South Korea. Abe, along with Trump, wants to continue putting military pressure on Kim Jong-un. Xi, on the other hand, wants to negotiate and persuade Pyongyang to give in to anti-North Korean sanctions. The approval of such sanctions by China was unthinkable just a few months ago.

Japan's Shinzō Abe and China's Xi Jinping have been politically strengthened, legitimized in accordance with the system and have confidentially emerged from the Japanese parliamentary elections and Chinese party congress in October 2017. Their creative leeway and strategic instruments have expanded, and the inner positions solidified. Ambitious, resilient and motivated, they dominate their government machinery and cleverly manage domestic shifts of power and changing party fabric.

The biographical experiences, their mentality, career paths and ideological thinking dif-

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fer vehemently, but they both have similar long-term and ambitious perspectives.

In the case of Xi Jinping, the finish line could be 2049, the 100th anniversary of the PR China that was founded in 1949. Xi himself would be 96 years old, but if you look at his now 91-year-old predecessor Jiang Zemin as a comparison, that does not seem too far-fetched.

Of course, Shinzō Abe and Xi Jinping, as important as they are in their region, do not play on stage alone. The deciding ensemble also includes the American president and the commander-in-chief of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Abe, Xi, Trump, and Kim. Today, four extremely populist, nationalist politicians of completely different age, family and origin structure ascertain the fate not only of the Asian world.

Three of them rule over the use of a total of thousands of nuclear weapons - with an uncertain course and a theoretical finale that was once considered impossible.