

**HAS HU JINTAO'S RECENT VISIT REALLY
BOOSTED A FUTURE-ORIENTED
SINO-JAPANESE RELATIONSHIP?**

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EAI Background Brief No. 382

Date of Publication: 15 May 2008

Executive Summary

Seeking to depart from a bilateral relationship bedeviled by the burden of history, China and Japan resolved to forge a future-oriented relationship based on mutual benefits. Beijing for the first time did not demand apologies and expressions of remorse for Japanese militarism to appear in their joint statement.

Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo affirmed: “Japan learnt a great deal (from Tang China). Japan became an opened country which appreciated diversity” and that the precedent of good bilateral ties during the Tang era is “perhaps a hint” to a mutually beneficial relationship.

President Hu Jintao replied: “Bilateral relations are now at a new historical starting line”. At the rhetorical level, China and Japan are now “back to the future” --- two thousand years of friendly ties with the exception of armed conflict between 1895 and 1945.

However, certain ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) parliamentarians and public opinion shapers are uncomfortable with Fukuda harping on the halcyon years of Japan-China relations underpinned by a shared civilization. Apparently, they are not enamored with the implicit “inferiority” of Japan learning from a “superior” Middle Kingdom.

Public opinion remains sour on both sides. Many Japanese politicians, media and general public are critical of China’s handling of the Tibet issue; they also felt that the Chinese authorities have not taken responsibility for their pesticide-tainted dumplings; there is also the unresolved dispute over territory, gas and oil in the East China Sea and the double digit growth of the Chinese military budget.

Nevertheless, Nippon Keidanren (Japan Business Association) and local governments in the Kansai region were eager to meet Hu because of business considerations.

Although Tokyo and Beijing advocate cooperation on the issues of global warming, energy, developmental assistance to Africa, the bilateral relationship remains fragile notwithstanding a bilateral trade worth US\$236 billion in 2007.

Japan is tied to the US strategically, and both Beijing and Tokyo remain rivals in the region despite their pledges of friendship. Hu also refused to give unequivocal support to Tokyo's desire for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Public support for the Fukuda Administration is down to a dismal 20.2 percent in May 2008. There is no certainty that the next Japanese Prime Minister will be just as friendly to China. Presumably, even rightwing Prime Ministers are unlikely to visit the Yasukuni Shrine because that would shatter Sino-Japanese political relations.