Diplomatic Relations between Japan and China Can They Improve

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The leaders of the two biggest economies in Asia, China and Japan, have plenty of opportunities to improve diplomatic relations if they are sincere and open-minded.

(Newswire.net -- July 28, 2017) -- Japan and China are committed to pursuing the development of a strong and healthy bilateral relationship. In essence, this was the public and official agreement reached during the meeting of the two leaders in Hamburg on the occasion of the G20 Summit held in early July this year. Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and China’s President Xi Jinping have had several previous meetings echoing the same stand.

But behind the feigned courtesy is an undercurrent of animosity and resentment among the Chinese people resulting from a series of wars between the two countries. The significant ones are the First Sino-Japanese War (1894 – 1895) and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937 – 1945) that included the infamous Rape of Nanking and continued through World War II.

The persistent strained ties between Tokyo and Beijing fluctuate periodically. In 2006, relations reached cordial level when Abe became Japan’s prime minister, succeeding Jonichiro Koizumu, who incited Chinese revulsion for his constant visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. The two countries initiated a joint study group that would come up with a mutually acceptable interpretation of historical events. Reception from citizens of both countries was generally negative and a second joint history research in 2010 did not fare better. The effort did, however, neutralize hostile sentiments for a while.

The closer ties were further forged when a 7.9 magnitude earthquake struck the densely populated province of Sichuan in China on May 12, 2008 and the Japanese government offered financial aid and rescue teams. The most disastrous natural disaster left 5,000,000 people homeless and another 90,000 killed or missing. Japan was the first country to offer financial assistance, which then prime minister Wen Jiabao accepted. This marked the first time that China opened itself to foreign aid. Two days later, Japan was the only foreign rescue team to enter Sichuan and help in recovery efforts. Other countries were only allowed entry five days after the earthquake. In media coverage too, China deliberately gave an inordinate amount of internet and print reporting of Japan’s aid compared to other countries’.

The goodwill generated between Japan and China was the combined efforts of the two nations and their ruling government officials to promote better relations between their countries for their mutual benefits.

Still, in spite of all-out attempts on both sides to establish harmony and cooperation, their citizenry harbored ill will towards the other country and provocative actions authorized by government are intensifying the dormant negative perceptions that never really went away. It isn’t helped that certain statements and incidents stoke the people’s lingering antagonism instead of assuaging them.

The Nanking Massacre in 1937 is one longstanding feud between Japan and China, the focus being on the number of Chinese killed. Japan claims a lesser figure than the 300,000 deaths that China insists on. While many foreigners have attested to the atrocities committed, the actual tally from various credible sources differ, ranging from 40,000 to 300,000. What historians do agree on are that the crimes Japan committed and its illegal aggression into China are the causes of war.

The revision of Japan’s middle school history textbooks is a contentious issue between Japan and China, with the latter accusing the former of whitewashing its World War II crimes and using tempered terminology to soften its image as taught to its school children. Lesser known is China’s own revision of its history in classes taught to children.

An objective study undertaken by Stanford University scholars in 2006 revealed that almost all of Japanese textbooks were neutral and bland, China’s were the most nationalistic and South Korea’s focused on Japan’s oppression.

The Senkaku Islands, (or Diaoyu Islands to the Chinese,) has been an annoying bone of contention between Tokyo
and Beijing. Its historical ownership is complicated since both sides claim precedence over the other. The 1950s – ‘60s were relatively quiet but when the United States returned the islands to Japanese rule under the Okinawa Reversion Treaty in 1971, China objected. When a survey by the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) found that the islands are a rich resource of hydrocarbon and fisheries. Moreover, the East China Sea which separates Tokyo and Beijing and where the islands are located is an important trade route for both.

Then, on September 7, 2010, a Chinese fishing vessel rammed two Japanese Coast Guard ships after being confronted for illegal fishing. The Chinese captain was arrested but subsequently released after China, in retaliation, cut off its exports of rare earth metals to Japan. These rare earth metals are key components for electronic gadgets and appliances, cars, energy suppliers, aerospace, etc. in 2014, Japan sued for damages done to the Coast Guard ships. Tokyo does not need the financial compensation; it is suing as a matter of principle to show that releasing the Chinese fisherman is not an admission of defeat.

Recent issues that try the patience not only of Japan but of the United States and other Asian countries as well is China’s aggression into disputed territories, its building of artificial reefs, its non-recognition of rulings by international courts and its military intrusion into debatable jurisdictions.

Amid all the animosity between the two biggest economies in Asia, China and Japan have plenty of opportunities to improve diplomatic relations, if its leaders are sincere and open-minded. But the general consensus is, Japan’s Abe has to tread slowly to avoid perceived provocation of its hypersensitive neighbor.