

China and Japan: vital ties

Feb 25, 2013

Last year marked the significant juncture of the 40th anniversary of the restoration of diplomatic ties between China and Japan.

Unfortunately a number of events and exchange programs celebrating the anniversary were canceled or postponed due to escalating tensions. Relations between the two countries have deteriorated to a post-World War II low, and economic relations have also chilled.

However, I am not at all pessimistic about the future of Sino-Japanese relations. An old Chinese maxim says, "Drops of water can pierce even a rock."

In this way, friendship between Japan and China has been nurtured since the war's end by the efforts of pioneers who, even before the normalization of diplomatic relations, worked tenaciously to break through the obstacles that stood between the two countries.

These bonds of friendship have been steadily cultivated and strengthened through countless exchanges over the years, and they will not be easily broken.

When I called for the normalization of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations in September 1968, it was almost unthinkable in Japan to even mention the possibility of friendship with China.

In a sense, the situation was even more severe than it is today. But it was my belief that Japan had no future without friendly relations with its neighbors, and that stable and harmonious ties with China were essential for Asia and the world to advance along the path to peace.

In December 1974, after relations had been normalized, I was able to visit Beijing and meet with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping. Through these discussions, I learned that they viewed both the Japanese and the Chinese people as victims of the Japanese militarist regime. This further deepened my determination to develop an indestructible friendship

between our two peoples in order to prevent war between us from ever happening again.

Ever since, I have worked to promote friendship exchanges with a special focus on youth. In 1975, Soka University welcomed the first six government-financed exchange students from the People's Republic of China to study in Japan.

Now, nearly 40 years later, a total of 100,000 Chinese students are studying in Japan, and 15,000 Japanese students are pursuing their studies in China.

Over the years, China and Japan have created a history of exchanges in cultural, educational and many other fields, including, for example, a total of 349 sister-city arrangements. We have also developed a tradition of mutual support in times of hardship such as the aftermath of the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan and the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Tohoku.

Despite occasional periods of tension, the currents of friendship between the two countries have grown steadily stronger over the years; friendships have accumulated through innumerable face-to-face interactions and exchanges, each of which makes its own small yet invaluable contribution. For this reason, these currents will not easily run dry no matter what trial or obstacle they encounter. And we must ensure that this is never allowed to happen.

The political and economic arenas are always impacted by the ebb and flow of the times. Indeed, times of tranquillity are perhaps the exception rather than the rule. This is why, when faced with a crisis, it is important to adamantly uphold the two central pledges in the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and the People's Republic of China (1978): to refrain from the use or threat of force, and not to seek regional hegemony.

So long as we uphold these principles, we will without fail find ways to overcome the present crisis. Even more than when things are going well, it is times of adversity that present opportunities to deepen understanding and strengthen ties. I strongly encourage Japan and China to reconfirm their commitment to uphold the two pledges of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship and promptly set up a high-level forum for dialogue aimed at preventing any further deterioration of relations.

The more difficult the situation appears to be, the more important it is to engage in dialogue based on a commitment to peace and creative coexistence. Earnest and even heated dialogue can reveal the fears, concerns and aspirations that underlie the positions and assertions of each side.

In this context, I propose that China and Japan institute the practice of holding regular summit meetings.

I believe that the current crisis between Japan and China presents a unique opportunity to establish a framework for discussion, creating an environment that enables the leaders to conduct face-to-face dialogue under any circumstances.

Further, I suggest that Japan and China together launch an organization for environmental cooperation in East Asia. This could be an interim goal to be achieved by 2015 and would lay the foundations of a new partnership focused on peace and creative coexistence and joint action for the sake of humanity.

This new organization would create opportunities for young people from China and Japan to work together toward a common goal. It would also establish a pattern of contributing together to the peace and stability of East Asia and the creation of a sustainable global society.

Back in September 1968, I urged the young people of both countries to come together in friendship to build a better world. The foundation for this has now been laid in a quiet, uncelebrated way through the exchanges and interactions that have been conducted to date.

Now, I believe, the focus should turn to something more visible and durable. The time has come to take a medium- to long-term perspective and develop more concrete models of cooperation across a range of new fields.

I am convinced that it is through such sustained and determined efforts that the bonds of friendship between China and Japan will develop into something indestructible, something that will be passed down with pride from generation to generation.