



Friday, July 6, 2007

## Japan must stand firm against asylum seekers

Yone Sugita

Japan and China are at loggerheads after the incident involving North Korean asylum seekers at the Japanese Consulate General in Shenyang. "Human rights" activists have allegedly supported a recent series of asylum attempts by North Koreans in China, believing that the flood of refugees may eventually lead to the collapse of the authoritarian regime in North Korea.

They seem to be "do-gooders," but the righteousness of this movement is quite questionable. The asylum seekers may have their own reasons to abandon their own countries, but they have no right to give other countries a hard time by their self-centered action. This behavior is nothing but "dependence on others" ("amae" in Japanese). Both Japan and China should take a resolute stand toward this kind of "amae."

It is a pity that this "amae" has impaired Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations. When a country unilaterally insists only on its own rights, especially its sovereign rights, compromise — the art of diplomacy, cannot be reached. The Chinese authorities might have violated the extraterritorial status of the consulate general, as stipulated by the Vienna Convention. Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi demands Beijing's formal apology, warning that otherwise China will face serious consequences.

However, there is no agreement between China and Japan as to what really happened. Mature diplomacy allows for pride to be swallowed for the sake of pragmatism. It is in the best interests of both China and Japan to stand firm against asylum-seekers and maintain a stable and harmonious bilateral relationship.

Why has the Japanese government politicized this incident instead of dealing with it in a calm and business-as-usual manner?

First, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, recently tainted by a series of scandals, is trying to cover up this possibly embarrassing incident by taking a high-handed and aggressive attitude. The Koizumi cabinet embraced the ministry's approach because it seeks to regain its popularity by adopting an uncompromising posture in foreign affairs. The cabinet's assessment, however, was quite wrong. According to the latest polls, over 80% of the Japanese people disapprove of Koizumi's handling of this incident.

Second, China has severely criticized Japan over a series of issues including Koizumi's recent visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, a history textbook issue, and Japan's protectionism toward its agricultural products. The Koizumi cabinet considers the Shenyang incident a great diplomatic opportunity to take China down a peg; yet, it turns out that Koizumi has dug his own grave. Japan's unilateral demands harden China's stance and bilateral negotiations have reached a stalemate.

Third, on the back of the rise in nationalist feelings in Japan, the government has dispatched its self-defense forces abroad and is trying to pass epoch-making national emergency legislation. Japan's bombastic assertion of its sovereignty in the Shenyang incident is further capitalization on the recent

emergence of nationalism in Japan.

The incident reminds us of the strength of nation states and sovereignty in the 21st century, the age of globalization. Nation states certainly remain as key units in the international arena. However, unilateral assertion of sovereign rights creates conflicts among nations.

The Japanese government should learn how to compromise and should recognize that harmonious relationships ("wa") are more important than embellishing reputations by displaying an aggressive posture in international relations.

May 20, 2002

---

Copying or using text, photographs, illustrations, video or images appearing on this site without permission is prohibited.  
All rights reserved.