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A Bitter Pill for Prime Minister Kan

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By James Farrer

It was a bitter pill for the Democratic Party of Japan, no matter how they swallowed it. By releasing a Chinese fishing boat captain detained by Japan without a trial, Prime Minister Kan Naoto was clearly bowing under Chinese pressure. The captain had been arrested by the Japanese coast guard for allegedly ramming his boat into Japanese coast guard vessels while in territorial waters claimed both by China and Japan. The Japanese government appeared to buckle and released the captain to China on Saturday. According to an unnamed official in the prime minister's office quoted in the *Asahi Shinbun* on Sunday (9/26/2010), "The Chinese could have recalled their ambassador, or cut off diplomatic relations. There was no other possible landing point."

Within Japan this was a shocking turning point in bilateral relations, a sudden strategic victory for a rising China that could lead to many scenarios, including the possibility that China would send fishery administration or even military ships to patrol the waters off the disputed islands and back out of an agreement to jointly develop undersea gas fields in the area. An official in the foreign ministry quoted in Sunday's *Asahi* said, "There's no telling how overbearing the Chinese are going to be after this. There's nothing to be done about it, this will go on for the next twenty years."

The Japanese public seems to have reacted three ways to the release of the captain. One group, the sort who usually read the business-economics newspaper *Nikkei Shinbun*, was undoubtedly relieved to see the government release the captain last Saturday. As Chinese sanctions escalated into the economic sphere, including a stoppage of the export of rare metals to Japan, the worry was that this political spat would seriously affect Japan's increasingly important economic relationship with China. It was this economic group that seemed to be making the decisions in Tokyo last week, hoping that pragmatism and mutual economic interests would prevail. The danger of this view, expressed to me by one Japanese reporter I spoke to, is that in the economic sphere the Chinese now see Japan as needing China more than China needs Japan, and will continually try to push this advantage on various fronts. Recent strikes against Japanese companies in China are a sign that more economic pressure can be expected.

Another segment of the public, who are more likely to read the relatively liberal *Asahi Shinbun*, was relieved, but also dismayed. This more internationally minded group, including many Democratic Party supporters, had hoped for the past few years that Japan and China were actually improving their relations. Now the DPJ's China policy seems to be in tatters. Talk of an "East Asian Community" and a "mutual strategic relationship" seems naive in this tense atmosphere, to say nothing of the rhetoric of "fraternal love" of the previous Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio. Now, there is a depressing sense that no relief from Chinese pressure is forthcoming. The Chinese government is now demanding an apology and recompense for the trouble caused in the case of the hapless fisherman. This may be perceived in Japan as a signal that the Chinese government has no interest, or perhaps no incentive, in improving relations with Japan. Most troubling of all to the Japanese internationalists, the recent actions against Japan included halting exchanges between school children, and canceling tours to Japan, acts that inflame tensions between the citizens of the two countries at the societal, not simply the political, level. Many Japanese China watchers are convinced that twenty years of anti-Japanese education in China (especially under the leadership of Jiang Zemin) have produced an atmosphere in which anti-Japanese rhetoric is all-purpose political medicine that the Chinese government can apply to any problem, domestic or foreign. If this is the case, there will be little chance for true détente.

In general the leftist and liberal segments of the Japanese public are worried that China has reacted only tepidly to the efforts of the DPJ to improve relations between the two countries. One of the most baffling acts involved the Chinese navy conducting exercises near Okinawa at about the time Japan was debating the agreement to shift US forces within Okinawa. The Chinese naval exercises seemed timed perfectly to embarrass both the peacenik and pro-China wings of the DPJ, which subsequently beat a retreat to the relative security of the US alliance. The US bases in Okinawa will stay put, and it

seems likely that the hawks within the DPJ (a party which includes an extremely broad spectrum of politicians from socialists to rightists) will have a greater say in foreign policy.

Only one group seems genuinely energized by these events. This is the small but loud, and perhaps growing, right wing in Japan. Right wingers in Japan, like the so-called “angry youth” in China, thrive on Sino-Japanese tensions of any kind. Much of their online rhetoric is racist and dehumanizing, and aimed at stirring up anti-foreigner tensions within Japanese society as well as in Japan’s relations with China and Korea. The more rational right wing sees this as a chance to bash the government of Kan Naoto, who will likely pay a heavy price for kowtowing to Beijing. The conservative *Sankei Shinbun* even went after the *Asahi Shinbun* for not toeing a strict enough line on Japanese sovereignty claims for the disputed islands. The mainstream conservative *Yomiuri* criticized the weakness of the prime minister’s actions as not standing up for Japan’s territorial integrity.

Read in the Western press, these events may seem inconsequential. Westerners forget that China and Japan have one of the largest bilateral trade relationships in the world, and profound mutual interests at the societal and political levels. Living as I do between Tokyo and Shanghai, as so many thousands of people do these days (Japanese, Chinese and others), we can only hope that both governments find a way of managing the seemingly irresolvable territorial dispute, and perhaps even return to the policies of engagement begun between the previous Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao.

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Tags: China-Japan