

What is needed is dialogue between our leaders

By Keiichi Hayashi
Ambassador of Japan

Everyone knows that relations between Japan and China are strained, especially in the East China Sea. Japan has been exercising utmost restraint. When a Chinese destroyer directed its fire-control radar at a Japanese destroyer last year, which in normal naval practice might be regarded as an act of war, the Japanese vessel made an evasive manoeuvre rather than risk further endangering the situation. Chinese ships repeatedly intrude into Japanese territorial waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands, which have been steadily under Japan's sovereignty for 120 years. Further evidence of Chinese provocation was seen with Beijing's unilateral declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone, which unduly infringes the freedom of flight in international airspace. Despite such steps, Japan continues to call for dialogue.

Can Japan really be considered to be displaying dangerous militarism, as stated by Ambassador Liu on this newspaper on 2 January?

Let me outline some facts. Japan's record over the past 68 years shows the strength of its democracy, its respect for human rights (one is not arrested in Japan for criticising the government), its commitment to peace (e.g. a strong contribution to UN peace-keeping operations), and its willingness to help developing countries. Our maritime forces never harass neighbours on the high seas, and we have upheld in action the values inscribed in the UN Charter. Such values are so deeply ingrained in Japan that a visit to a shrine cannot undo them.

Following the great sacrifices made during World War II by the United Kingdom among others, our two countries are now close allies in the pursuit of peace, sharing the fundamental values of liberal democracy. This was evidenced, for example, in recent cooperation to support disaster relief operations in the Philippines.

It is ironic that a country that has increased its own military spending by more than 10% a year for the past 20 years should call a neighbour “militarist”. China’s military budget is now the second largest in the world and more than twice that of Japan’s. Its attempt to change the status quo by force or coercion has raised concerns not only in Japan, but also among its neighbours throughout the East China Sea and the South China Sea.

Prime Minister Abe issued a statement entitled “Pledge for everlasting peace” upon his recent visit to Yasukuni Shrine. He said his visit was made to pay his respects and pray for the souls of the war dead and to renew the pledge that Japan shall never again wage war. Nothing more and nothing less, and by no means to pay homage to war criminals or to praise militarism. He also visited “Chinrei-sha”, a remembrance memorial to pray for the souls of all of those, irrespective of nationality, who lost their lives in the war. As he clearly stated at the time, Japan has created a free and democratic country and consistently walked the path of peace for the past 68 years, and there is no doubt whatsoever that Japan will continue to pursue this path.

Such a visit cannot be portrayed as a sign of reviving militarism. In the past, Japan caused tremendous suffering to the people of many countries, particularly in Asia. The Government of Japan has consistently made clear that it squarely faces this history, and expresses deep remorse and heartfelt apology. This stance is firmly upheld under the Abe Government.

As in the case of the Japan-UK relationship, exemplified by Eric Lomax and Takashi Nagase, the only way to heal the wounds of the past is through the pursuit of reconciliation. But, critically, it takes two for this to be achieved. In the case of Europe, the sincerity of the German leaders and the magnanimity of the French, British and other European leaders were important in helping them to achieve reconciliation. It cannot help that China seeks to instil distrust of Japan among its own people while making unfounded accusations.

It is important to note inconsistencies in China’s stance toward Yasukuni . More than 60 visits to Yasukuni by Japanese Prime Ministers since the end of WWII, with almost half after it was made public in 1979 that 14 Class A war criminals had been enshrined there in 1978. China began raising this issue from 1985, by

which time 21 of these visits had gone unchallenged. This makes one wonder what the intentions of the Chinese side are. China also formally expressed its positive evaluation of Japan's post-war record as nation of peace in the Japan-China Joint Statement of 2008, after all of these visits. Has Japan suddenly turned militaristic within five years? Certainly not.

China may well have different views. This is why the two countries should meet and seek mutual understanding. Prime Minister Abe stated that he wishes to build friendship with China based on respect, and that he strongly would welcome direct dialogue with Chinese leaders.

East Asia is now at a crossroads. There are two paths open to China. One is to seek dialogue, stability and abide by the rule of law. The other is the path of further provocation and escalation of tensions. The answer seems obvious. Although China has so far refused to enable dialogue between our leaders, I sincerely hope that it will come forward, rather than keep invoking the ghost of "militarism" of seven decades ago, which no longer exists.