

China needs to deploy a more silken touch with its neighbours

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Comment\Insight & Opinion

Tom Plate

Tom Plate says China cannot escape the blame for regional tensions, given its clumsy diplomacy so far

Let's play the blame game. Let's bash the Japanese government for ratcheting up tension. Bad, bad Japanese, right? Isn't it just that simple?

Since May 3, 1947, Japanese people have lived (and on the whole lived graciously and productively) under the embrace of an American-concocted constitution that with determination tied its defence forces up in restrictive Article 9. But look how well it worked out: Japan became one of the world's greatest economies - until very recently, the No1 economy in Asia.

But now Shinzo Abe, working to realise his dream of dumping this iconic and ironic legacy of the second world war in history's dustbin, looks to be on the verge of ... triumph! The prime minister has his party and party allies just a legislative click or two away from expanding the leeway (and budget) of the Self-Defence Forces when they have a need to "defend Japan", or help out allies, or whatever.

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Of course, Japan-bashers are quick with the mean-genes argument: isn't it telling that Abe's mother was the daughter of Nobusuke Kishi, who, before becoming the 37th prime minister, distinguished himself as a member of the Tojo cabinet. No escaping those genes, eh?

Maybe, but here is what is far more interesting to me: that in his moment of political triumph, Abe's move elicited such a tepid response from the Japanese people - seemingly far from a gung-ho one in which they pull their samurai swords from the attic. One can imagine that colossally losing a world war - including a pair of atomic bombs dropped on two of their cities, leaving survivors and their children with a grim genetic legacy - might just take the fizz out of the champagne.

So how in the world did Abe carry the day against the admirably noble (and smartly pragmatic) pacifism of the Japanese people? What was the secret behind his mini-coup? Someone must have stepped up big time to help him peddle the idea of military renewal to a populace that on the whole had been saying: "No, we've been down that road before - never again."

What in the world happened? Part of the answer is to be found in the government's recent defence white paper, its message as obvious as the Great Wall of China. At its centre is general obsession, and in the text are many particulars. There's the well-documented Chinese naval build-up, the potent policy influence of a possibly semi-sovereign People's Liberation Army (reflected in Chinese President Xi Jinping's campaign to tame it), and China's fast and furious land reclamation and sandbar resurrection projects, which Beijing says are more like open-to-all neighbourhood recreation centres, but which most normal people say surely look like burgeoning military bases.

Japan's white paper concludes: Beijing is "poised to fulfil its unilateral demands without compromise" by the blunt instrumentality of "coercive attempts to change the status quo".

Is it just Orwellian-style propaganda, hyped-up fodder to justify a major Japanese arms build-up? Or is it the plausible worry of a concerned government responsibly warning its people? If your inclination is to go Orwellian, fine, but half of non-Chinese Asia agrees with the idea that the challenge of China is no joke. Most of the other half doesn't know what to think but is nonetheless unnerved. (What's left is a few countries quietly pocketing aid from Beijing and remaining dutifully silent.)

So whatever Abe is up to, he is not the only guy in Asia who's got China on his mind. The Philippines, not exactly in the forefront of diplomatic pugnacity, has its bright lawyers at The Hague bringing questions before the UN-backed Permanent Court of Arbitration. Other governments are siding with Manila. Arms-buying binges are in progress. Governments are snapping up surveillance planes and naval equipment, as if to ensure no more lonely reefs or sandbars are sand-castled up overnight into landing strips without anyone knowing about it.

And then you have the senior head of the Communist Party of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, obviously rattled and trying for all the world to seem sincere and contrite, showing up at the White House the other day, looking for a little love.

There you have it: the changing geopolitical landscape of Asia.

To be fair, China does have plausible cases for much of what it's doing in the East and South China seas, along with the gut belief that it is its historical right to take whatever it can before anyone stops them, which is exactly what some neighbours had been doing decades before.

One thing is certain: all these moves have started to make Abe look less like a menace than a responsible leader. And who should get credit if that remarkable image transformation comes into full focus? It does take two to tango. In the last year or so, China has presented to the world not the "peaceful rising" image but the "we're rising and you're not" image.

China's new Asia-wide infrastructure investment programme and its hope to take the lead in forging a modern Silk Road and all the rest might someday add up to a kind of Central Asian Marshall Plan. If so, this will be applauded by all and greatly honoured by history. But in the meantime, Beijing might consider that it would be in its best national interest to treat its neighbours with a more tender touch. Abe could be made to look like a political moderate if China proceeds apace on its current course. Yes, China has such power. But that's not diplomacy. And it is not smart. Its diplomacy needs to be woven of much finer Chinese silk.

Columnist Tom Plate, the author of *Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew*, is the distinguished scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at Loyola Marymount University

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