

China Watch by Gregory F. Buhyoff

A new diplomacy

Peking is looking toward Japan. It is also looking away from its weakened "American Card."

The recent visit to Japan by Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang is the latest in a series of moves which suggest a reorientation of Peking's policy toward much closer ties with its eastern neighbor. The visit emphasized economic cooperation, but that emerging courtship is only one aspect of a shift in China's strategic posture, presaging a possible cooling of relations with the U.S.

Zhao's six-day trip in the first week of June culminated several months of vigorous diplomatic, economic, scientific, and cultural exchanges between Japan and China. Accompanying Zhao on the trip were Foreign Minister Huang Hua, senior Vice-Foreign Minister Wu Xueqian and Minister of the powerful State Economic Commission Zhang Jingfu.

To make the Zhao visit as cordial and successful as possible, not so much as an oblique reference was voiced on either side to the dispute outstanding over sovereignty of the Senkaku Island. Emphasis was on the expansion of economic cooperation between Japan and China. Prime Minister Suzuki answered Zhao's calls for expanded cooperation by promising economic cooperation, a pledge unreservedly endorsed by representatives of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the powerful Keidanren business federation.

Zhang Jingfu told Shintaro Abe of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry that Japanese

oil companies would be given top priority for participation in joint venture exploitation of China's promising offshore petroleum deposits, news that will pique the multinationals salivating over prospects for resource extraction in the region since China began accepting bids for joint-venture drilling earlier this year. Japan agreed to considerable increases in imports of Chinese-made machine tools, and Abe called for a quick conclusion to a bilateral accord governing imports of Chinese coal. Japan is busily revamping its facilities to accommodate increased imports of coal.

Tokyo is also expected to increase government and private sector financing for infrastructural improvement related to raw-materials recovery. Japan's Overseas Economic Fund is currently helping China to finance the construction of two railways and wharves connecting the coal mines of Shanxi and the port city of Tianjin.

Behind the promises of enhanced cooperation lie fundamental strategic considerations. Peking's move toward Japan coincides with an increasing shift away from the United States. This shift is being fueled by a perception among Chinese leaders that the United States has entered a period of deepened economic and military decline, calling into question its ability to counter the Soviet Union.

According to the *People's Daily*, a recent meeting of high-level

economists and social scientists in Anhui province concluded that the United States has rendered itself incapable of assisting China economically in the way originally anticipated, even if the dispute over Taiwan did not exist.

Japan is eminently capable of providing the economic assistance that would be lost in the event China decides to distance itself from the United States and is perceived as less prone to loot China's oil than the multinationals.

Because Japan has increasing economic and political ties with other Asian nations, as well as Latin America, and is untarnished by its stand on the Falkland Islands and Mideast crises, Peking thinks Japan could help further China's own cause in the Third World.

That the Chinese leadership is preparing for the possibility of a breakdown in Sino-U.S. relations was hinted at by Zhao on several recent occasions when he made it a point to publicly reassure the Japanese that no matter what happens to relations between Peking and Washington, Chinese relations with Japan will not be affected.

Peking surmises that Tokyo has an increased stake in a potential "symbiotic" relationship with China. Given the intensification of trade pressure on Japan from its traditional trading partners, and given the renewed threat to Mideast oil supplies, relations with fossil-fuel-rich China is one of Japan's principal contingency plans. Japanese leaders also fear that a cooling of Sino-U.S. relations could result in a Chinese tilt toward Moscow (a notion Peking is subtly encouraging), and think that forging closer ties with China will keep her in the "Western camp."