

Tokyo-Seoul thaw pushed by US, hard to realize

By Cai Liang

Apparently, the relationship between Japan and South Korea is rapidly warming up. After South Korea President Yoon Suk-yeol visited Japan in March, and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is scheduled to visit South Korea from Sunday to Monday, seeking to revive the “shuttle diplomacy” between the two heads of state.

But it is worth pointing out that this “warming-up” of bilateral ties is more of the result of the US’ push from behind the scene. Prior to Yoon’s US visit and his meeting with Biden, White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said that Biden planned to highlight Yoon’s “determination and courage” in his rapprochement with Japan during the visit. After Kishida announced his South Korea trip, US Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel sent celebratory messages on Twitter.

Nonetheless, the structural conflicts between Japan and South Korea including historical issues and territorial disputes will not ease due to Yoon’s compromise in forced labor compensation but will exacerbate, which will lead to a lack of public support for this diplomatic “warming-up.”

First of all, Yoon’s compromise can-

not bring about Japanese concessions to South Korea on historical issues. This will lead to the continuous ferment of conflicts between Japan and South Korea surrounding historical issues, and become an important lever for the opposition party to deal with Yoon. It will eventually cause Japan-South Korea relations to fall to a new low in the next few years. Regarding the issue of “forced labor,” the Japanese government issued an official position as early as 2021, saying that references to “comfort women” in textbooks should not include any indication that the imperial Japanese military was involved in any portion of the operations.

Yoon’s stance is actually an endorsement of Japan’s official position. His compromise in historical issues to Japan is viewed as a bonus point of Kishida’s South Korea diplomacy. This has made more than 60 percent of South Koreans dissatisfied with Yoon’s attitude toward Japan and believe that he is weak. On Thursday, members of the opposition Democratic Party and civic groups staged a rally against the visit of Kishida. It is highly likely that Kishida will not issue a comprehensive and explicit apology for Japan’s colonial rule to South Korea during his visit.

This is making Yoon hard to get rid of

the mark of his humiliating diplomacy toward Japan.

Meanwhile, the territorial dispute over Dokdo Islands, or what Japan refers to as Takeshima, has been a great cause of concern between the two sides. After Yoon left Japan, the Japanese government released its Diplomatic Blue Book on April 11 which renewed Japan’s territorial claim to the islands. On the same day, South Korea’s Foreign Ministry summoned Naoki Kumagai, deputy chief of mission at the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, to make a strong protest. After Kishida announced his visit to South Korea, Rep. Jeon Yong-gi of the Democratic Party visited the easternmost islets of Dokdo. The Japanese Foreign Ministry then said in a statement that “it is extremely regrettable that we cannot accept it at all,” while the South Korean Foreign Ministry rejected the protest and called it an “unfair claim.”

Last but not least, Japan’s nuclear-contaminated waste water dumping plan has also provoked conflict with South Korea. Yoon in March called for Japan to conduct a scientific analysis before releasing treated radioactive water into the sea. Nonetheless, Kishida plans to win support from G7 countries when Japan hosted the summit in Hiroshima. Since South Korea has accepted Japan’s

invitation to attend the summit, it is expected that Kishida will take the chance of his visit to win Yoon’s support in Japan’s dumping plan.

To sum up, the rapid “warming up” of Japan-South Korea relations can be described as “following the script of the US government” step by step. Although the two countries emphasize the need for “future-oriented cooperation,” in essence they are more actively cooperating with the regional strategic layout of the US to contain China, that is, to promote bloc politics and camp confrontation in terms of security, and to build an exclusive wall aimed at decoupling.

The “warming up” of Japan and South Korea’s diplomacy is internally a forced matchmaking based on the lack of national consensus, and externally it has the negative effect of “security overriding the economy”, which will continue to worsen the hard-won peace and security in Northeast Asia. Therefore, the answer to how far this diplomatic “warming up” can go is already on the horizon.

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The real purpose of the fake ‘China threat’ narrative in Australia

By Roland Boer

Let me begin with a personal note: I have at long last been able to return to Beijing from Australia. With a view from afar, you can see things in a different light, and this applies in particular to the talk in Australia of a “war with China.” This talk has always struck me as strange, and indeed misleading. Back in Beijing, I am beginning to see why it is misleading, and what its real purpose is. Let me explain.

To do so, let us use an important methodological principle. The realms of thought, culture, philosophy, and politics, are part of what we may call the “superstructure.” However, one cannot have a superstructure without a foundation. The foundation is economic.

In light of this distinction we may ask: in terms of the economic base, what are the objective conditions that may lead to a conflict? There are two primary conditions: economic depression and geopolitical changes. As for the geopolitical situation, despite provocations by the US concerning the Taiwan question and despite Japanese provocations concerning some islands, there have been no significant geopolitical changes.

I would like to say more

concerning economic realities, specifically with regard to China-Australia relations. For many years now, China has been Australia’s No.1 trading partner. The two economies are highly complementary, and any Australian business that is serious about its bottom line is seeking to deepen its engagement in China. At the forefront of these activities are organisations such as the Australia-China Business Council and the Australia-China Chamber of Commerce, respectively based in Australia and China. As China has stepped out of the COVID-19 pandemic and sprinted into 2023, these organisations are increasingly busy.

From my own experience of applying for a visa and returning to Beijing, I can attest that I had to wait weeks for an appointment and that the visa office I attended was processing 700-800 applications per day. Even with extra staff, the visa office would often work until after 6pm every evening. Further, the plane on which I flew was full, and one can assume that the many other flights on the China-Australia route are also full.

Clearly, from economic

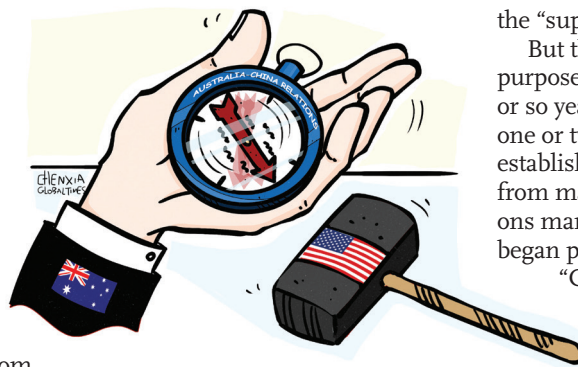


Illustration: Chen Xia/Global Times

realities to person-to-person exchanges, the situation is improving day by day.

To return to the objective conditions for conflict, it should be clear that in the region of East Asia and Southeast Asia there is neither geopolitical change nor economic depression. These objective conditions mean that war is highly unlikely. To be sure, the US would love to see third parties engage in a useless conflict with one another. However, without the basic conditions, it is unlikely that Australia or any other country in Southeast Asia will engage in conflict soon.

What then are we to make of the talk in Australia of “war with China” and the “China threat.” A rational observer can see that this is empty talk, without foundation in reality. To use my earlier distinction, this talk is very much part of

the “superstructure.”

But the talk does have a purpose. If we look back five or so years, we will find that one or two “think tanks” were established with funding from major US and UK weapons manufacturers. These began promoting the fake

“China threat” narrative and the “war with China” line. With thousands of variations on

the same theme, they gained traction in the Australia media and began to gain some influence. In the end, it was less about influencing the Australian public and more about swaying the politicians in Canberra. These politicians have eventually responded with increases in military spending to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars. For the weapons manufacturers, this result would be seen as a very good “investment.” Hype a fake threat, gain traction with the power-brokers, and the result is a massive amount of taxpayer dollars – taken from health, education, and so on – disappearing into the bottomless pockets of weapons manufacturers.

One may wonder what business leaders seeking to deepen engagements with China think about these developments. Let me put it this way: among

the economic and political elite in Australia there is a profound contradiction. One the one hand, we have many businesses deepening their engagements with China and they are certainly against any provocations since these would interfere with their core interest; on the other hand, we have a smaller number aligned with the military and the overseas weapons manufacturers, and they are keen to grab as many taxpayer dollars as possible.

This contradiction is a profound challenge for the current Labor government in Canberra. Currently, the government is swaying this way and that: seeking to improve relations with China and at the same time committing huge amounts of money for military spending. This approach is certainly not a way to manage a significant contradiction. Only the future will tell if they can learn to manage the contradiction in a better way.

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