

CHINA-U.S.-JAPAN RELATIONS

Japan frustrated with US' China policy

By KOSUKE TAKAHASHI
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

US PRESIDENT Barack Obama has started a six-day trip to East and South-east Asia. In Japan, the first stop of his four-nation tour, Mr Obama was forced to adjust to a widening policy conflict over how to cope with a rising China. The way the two nations deal with their differences on this issue in the coming months could have important implications.

Figuratively speaking, the United States and Japan may be sleeping in the same bed, but they are having different dreams. Mr Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe cannot let this situation continue.

What exactly is it that divides the two nations? To understand, it is important to be familiar with a commonly accepted view in Tokyo about the current world situation.

With US naval hegemony fading, Japan sees China as moving to fill an emerging power vacuum in East Asia. The business-minded President Obama probably wanted the focus of his visit to be on the ongoing Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) deal with Japan in order to score political points ahead of mid-term elections in November. Instead, it was overshadowed by differences about how the two allies should deal with China.

Worried about Chinese claims in the East China Sea, the nationalistic Abe administration has adopted a very confrontational stance. It has also been bolstering the nation's defences in the Nansei island chain that includes Okinawa and the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. It has even tried to strengthen ties with countries and regions surrounding China, such as India, Mongolia, Russia, South-east Asia and Australia.

For the hawkish Abe government, the current Obama administration is a less reliable ally. This time, Mr Obama merely reiterated at a press conference in Tokyo the US position that the Senkaku Islands are administered by Japan and, therefore, fall within the



US President Obama (left) and Japanese Prime Minister Abe shake hands before a private dinner on Wednesday. The US leader's trip to Japan has been overshadowed by differences over how the two allies should deal with China. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

scope of Article five of the US-Japan security treaty.

Mr Obama said that the US is opposed "to attempts to change the status quo by force". But no high-ranking US official has ever explicitly said "the US will fight with Japan once China occupies the Senkaku islands. We will defend Japan", or any comment to that effect.

The lack of a strong commitment from Washington is deepening Tokyo's suspicions about just how important the security alliance is to the US.

There is a growing scepticism among conservative political circles in Tokyo that the US is gradually bending over backward to appease China. Japanese political leaders are frustrated at the implicit US acceptance of China's in-

tensifying efforts to send patrol ships near the Senkakus on an almost daily basis. US officials have certainly not condemned this latest evidence of China's increased assertiveness.

Some Japanese politicians also believe that Mr Obama's pivot to Asia has more to do with Washington's growing economic interest in China's massive markets, rather than concern about the need for new military deployments.

Earlier this month, US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel even talked about a "new type of military relations" between China and the US, giving a positive assessment of bilateral military ties when he visited Beijing.

In the eyes of the Japanese, more and more US scholars also appear to have yielded to Chinese

power. An article by University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer entitled "Say Goodbye to Taiwan" in the March-April issue of the National Interest shocked Japanese experts. In it, he wrote that Taiwan will eventually have to give up even its present de facto independent status and seek a Hong Kong-style accommodation with Beijing.

As the examples of Ukraine, Syria and Iran illustrate, the Obama administration has been very reluctant to intervene decisively in world affairs. More and more Japanese are afraid this weak-kneed stance could also apply to the Senkaku Islands issue.

The left-liberal Obama administration, on the other hand, sees Mr Abe's nationalistic behaviour, such as his visit to the controver-

sial Yasukuni Shrine last December, as a security risk. The patriotic act certainly ratcheted up already strained tensions with China and South Korea.

Washington is afraid that Mr Abe's historical revisionism on wartime Japan, combined with Japan's military buildup, will continue to cause needless friction with its neighbours.

On April 22, the Japanese media reported that former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage told Shigeru Ishiba, the secretary general of the Japanese ruling Liberal Democratic Party, that there was no need for Tokyo to rush into reinterpreting the Japanese constitution to allow for the exercise of the right of collective self-defence.

Mr Armitage reportedly said he

believed Japan should focus instead on the economy.

Such comments suggest that more US officials may regard Mr Abe a security risk if his nationalist policies lead to further tension with China and South Korea.

This is especially true when the US needs China's leverage and influence, if not support, on other international affairs such as on the Ukraine crisis and North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes.

It is hard to say whether either the US or Japan has a wrong foreign policy. It is natural for any nation to pursue its national interest as top priority. But the two nations do need to agree on how to deal with a rising China.

It is more than a matter of political styles. Many political experts in Tokyo view Japan's nationalistic prime minister and the liberalist US president as finding it difficult to get along on a personal level.

Both nations need to make a concerted effort to engage China rather than contain it. To ease regional tensions, Japan needs to agree with Beijing to shelve the territorial dispute over the Senkakus and try to establish crisis prevention mechanisms, such as hotlines.

Japan may want the US-led alliance to pursue a policy of encirclement against Beijing. But this would benefit only China's military hardliners, which in return could provoke a sharp backlash in Tokyo. Considering the pace of economic development in each country, Japan cannot compete with China in an arms race. Mr Obama appears to realise this, but Mr Abe does not.

And with the reaction of Japan's conservatives in mind, Mr Obama needs to be careful what he says. Speaking in Tokyo yesterday, the US president said that he had not drawn any new "red line" over the Senkaku islands.

Such comments, probably meant to emphasise the need to resolve maritime disputes peacefully, are unlikely to go down well in Japan.

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The heart of leadership

By DAVID BROOKS

THROUGHOUT American history, most presidents had small personal staffs. They steered through political waters as amateurs, relying on experience, instinct and conversations with friends.

Then candidates and presidents hired professionals to help them navigate public opinion. By the time Theodore White began his Making Of The President series in 1960, the strategists, who had once been hidden, came into view. Every successive administration has taken power away from Cabinet agencies and centralised more of it with those political professionals who control messaging from within the White House.

This trend is not just in politics. We have become a consultant society. Whether you are running a business or packaging yourself for a job or college admissions, people rely on the expertise of professional advice-givers.

The rise of professional strategists has changed the mental climate of the time, especially in the realm of politics. Technical advisers are hired to be shrewd. Under their influence, the distinction between campaigning and governing has faded away. Most important, certain faculties that were central to amateur decision-making – experience, intuition, affection, moral sentiments, imagination and genuineness – have been shorn down for those traits that we associate with professional tactics and strategy – public opinion analysis, message control, media management and self-conscious positioning.

A nice illustration of this shift came in Sunday's New York Times Magazine in the form of Jo Becker's book adaptation, "How The President Got To 'I Do' On Same-Sex Marriage". It is the inside story of how the President Barack Obama's advisers shifted the White House position on gay marriage, from one he didn't really believe in – opposition to same-sex unions – to one he did.

Not long ago, readers would have been shocked to see how

openly everyone now talks about manoeuvring a 180-degree turn on a major civil rights issue. It would have been embarrassing to acknowledge that you were running your moral convictions through the political process, arranging stagecraft. People might have manoeuvred on moral matters, but they weren't so unabashed about it.

Today we're all in on the game. The question is whether it is played well.

There were two sorts of strate-

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gists described in Becker's piece. One group, including the former Republican Party leader Ken Mehlman, has ardent supporters of same-sex marriage who tried to craft the right messaging. Mr Mehlman told Mr Obama to talk about his daughters when he announced his new position.

The other strategists were in charge of the President's political prospects. Under their influence, the substance of the issue was submered under the calculus of coalition management: who would be pleased and displeased by a shift. As usual, the strategists were overly timid, afraid of public backlash from this or that demographic.

Becker describes a process in which there were strategy sessions but no conclusion. The strategists were good at trivial things, like picking a TV interviewer for

the scripted announcement, but they were not good at propelling a decision. "This was so past the sell-by date," one senior administration official told Becker, "yet there was still no real plan in place. It just shows you how scared everyone was of this issue." The person who finally got the administration to move just went with his heart. Vice-President Joe Biden met the children of a gay couple and blurted out that same-sex marriage is only fair. He went on Meet The Press and said the same thing.

Mr Biden violated every strategist rule. He got ahead of the White House message. He was unscripted. He went with his moral sense. But his comments shifted the policy. The President was compelled to catch up.

Edmund Burke once wrote, "The true lawgiver ought to have a heart full of sensibility. He ought to love and respect his kind, and to fear himself." He was emphasising that leadership is a passionate activity.

It begins with a warm gratitude towards that which you have inherited and a fervent wish to steward it well. It is propelled by an ardent moral imagination, a vision of a good society that can't be realised in one lifetime. It is informed by seasoned affections, a love of the way certain people concretely are and a desire to give all a chance to live at their highest level.

This kind of leader is warm-blooded and leads with full humanity. In every White House, and in many private offices, there seems to be a tug of war between those who want to express this messy amateur humanism and those calculators who emphasise message discipline, preventing leaks and maximum control. In most of the offices, there's a fear of natural messiness, a fear of uncertainty, a distrust of that which is not scientific. The calculators are given too much control.

The leadership emotions, which should propel things, get amputated. The shrewd tacticians end up timidly and defensively running the expedition.

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How big data can help poor students

By JIN-YONG CAI

COUNTRIES need skilled and talented people to generate the innovations that underpin long-term economic growth. This is as true in developed as it is in developing economies. But it will not happen without investment in education and training. If we are to end poverty, reduce unemployment and stem rising economic inequality, we must find new, better and cheaper ways to teach – and on a vast scale.

This goal may seem to be beyond even wealthier countries' means; but the intelligent collection, analysis and use of educational data could make a big difference. And, fortunately, we live in an age in which information technology gives us the right tools to broaden access to high-quality, affordable education.

Big data – high-volume, complex data sets that businesses use to analyse and predict consumer behaviour – can provide teachers and companies with unprecedented amounts of information about student learning patterns, helping schools to personalise instruction in increasingly sophisticated ways.

The World Bank Group and its private-sector lending arm, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), are trying to harness this potential to support national education systems. A recently launched initiative, called the Systems Approach for Better Education Results (Saber), collects and shares comparative data on educational policies and institutions from countries around the world.

In the private sector, the ability to collect information about teacher-student interaction, and interaction between students and learning systems, can have a profound impact.

In Kenya, for example, Bridge International Academies is using adaptive learning on a large scale. An IFC client founded by three American entrepreneurs, Bridge runs 259 nursery and primary schools, with monthly tuition averaging US\$6 (S\$7.60). It

is a massive learning laboratory for students and educators alike.

Bridge tests different approaches to teaching standard skills and concepts by deploying two versions of a lesson at the same time in a large number of classrooms. The lessons are delivered by teachers from standardised, scripted plans, via tablets that also track how long the teachers spend on each lesson. Exam results are recorded on the teacher's tablet, with more than 250,000 scores logged every 21 days.

These benefits do not come without risk. We are only beginning to grapple with how big data's tremendous potential for learning can be harnessed while protecting students' privacy.

From this data, Bridge's evaluation team determines which lesson is most effective and distributes that lesson throughout the rest of the academy's network.

We know that a host of issues can cause a student's performance to decline – scorching summer heat in classrooms without air-conditioning, problems at home or poor-quality teachers, to name a few. But when one gathers results on a large scale, variables flatten out and the important differences emerge. That is the great value of big data.

Another case is Sabis, a provider of K-12 education in the United States, Europe, Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. Sabis mines large data sets to ensure high standards and enhance academic performance for more

than 63,000 students. Continuous tracking of annual student academic performance yields more than 14 million data points that are used to shape instruction, achieve learning objectives and ensure consistency across the company's network of schools in 15 countries.

Knewton, an adaptive learning platform that personalises digital courses using predictive analytics, is another company at the forefront of the data revolution. With tailored content and instruction, even classrooms without private-school resources can provide individual learning. As a result, teachers spend their time in the most effective way possible – solving problems with students – instead of delivering undifferentiated lessons.

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We are only beginning to grapple with how big data's tremendous potential for learning can be harnessed while protecting students' privacy. In some cases, data-collection technology is outpacing our ability to decide how it should be collected, stored, and shared. No matter how rigorously data is secured, there is still a need for a clear licensing structure for its use. In many developing countries, there are no regulations for data privacy at all.

The interface between data and education holds the promise of new educational products for improved learning, with large potential benefits, especially for the poor.

To realise those benefits – and to do so responsibly – we must ensure that data collection is neither excessive nor inappropriate, and that it supports learning. The private sector, governments and institutions such as the World Bank Group need to formulate rules for how critical information on student performance is gathered, shared and used. Parents and students deserve no less.

PROJECT SYNDICATE
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