



A19 The psychology of superstitious rituals

A19 Indonesian voter turnout sliding

## Sino-Indonesian ties receive a boost

**C**HINESE President Xi Jinping's visit to Indonesia last week revealed the dramatic upsurge in bilateral relations since Jakarta froze its ties with Beijing following the abortive Indonesian communist coup in 1965. Even in 1990, when relations were restored at the end of the Cold War, their direction was uncertain. But today, there is a marked confluence of material interests between the world's second-largest economy, which could become the largest in a matter of years, and South-east Asia's largest economy, which like China is a member of the Group of 20 nations.

Mr Xi's proposal of a bank to invest in the region's infrastructural development suggested a larger framework in

which bilateral ties could thrive. Chinese funds could help answer the demand for road, rail, port and power infrastructure not only in Indonesia, but also in the rest of Asean. The signing of six cooperation agreements in sectors such as maritime and fisheries, tourism and space exploration was a visible aspect of bilateral relations that Mr Xi and Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono have upgraded to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership.

What was no less significant was the degree of political comfort apparent in Mr Xi making a speech to the Indonesian Parliament – unprecedented for a visiting foreign leader. He cited an Indonesian proverb, which says

that money can be earned easily but not friendship, to underscore China's desire for strong relations with its neighbours, including Indonesia.

This is a welcome gesture in keeping with the renewed charm offensive that China mounted with Mr Xi's visits to Indonesia and Malaysia. From the Chinese point of view, a strong partnership with Indonesia could help mitigate the consequences of the American pivot to the region, which some Chinese see as an attempt to encircle and contain China militarily.

But it is here that Beijing's own strategic intentions, as manifested in its approach to territorial disputes, will make a great deal of difference to eventual regional outcomes. Mr Xi

was reassuring when he said that his country wanted its disputes in the South China Sea to be handled peacefully with talks. Asean, several of whose members are embroiled in those disputes, will watch to see how Beijing matches its words with action. Asean needs to stay united and speak with one voice in its dealings with China, as with the United States.

China and South-east Asia have a mutual interest in each other's well-being, with trade leading the way. Maritime disputes, contentious though they are since they involve issues of sovereignty, should not be allowed to subvert the natural logic of geography that binds China to Asean.

Despite Japan's huge economy, it still struggles to escape the global marginalisation of its strategic affairs

## Reviving the land of the rising sun



EYE ON THE WORLD

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**"J**APAN is back" amounts to more than just a marketing effort to re-brand a country. For Mr Shinzo Abe, the current Prime Minister who popularised the phrase (tellingly, in English), it is becoming a rallying cry for the revival of a nation, for Japan's assumption of what it considers as its rightful place at the world's top table.

Nowhere is Mr Abe's determination clearer than in his push to boost the country's military power. Japan stands accused of seeking to revive its militaristic past over such high-profile efforts. But most of these fears are misplaced: far from moving ahead purposely, the Japanese are fumbling into a strategic competition they scarcely comprehend.

The scale of Japan's rearmament ambitions is no longer in doubt. The country is already America's biggest and closest technological partner on missile defence, outstripping the contributions made by the Europeans in this field, an astonishing reversal of military alliance arrangements which would have been inconceivable even a few years ago.

Tokyo also decided last year to purchase the US F-35 Joint Strike Fighter as replacement for its obsolete F-4 and F-15 fighter jets, giving Japan a long-sought-after ground attack capability by the end of this decade.

And it recently launched the 19,500-ton Izumo, a ship the Japanese prefer to classify as a "destroyer" despite the fact that it has a 250m-long flight deck which makes it look suspiciously like an aircraft carrier.

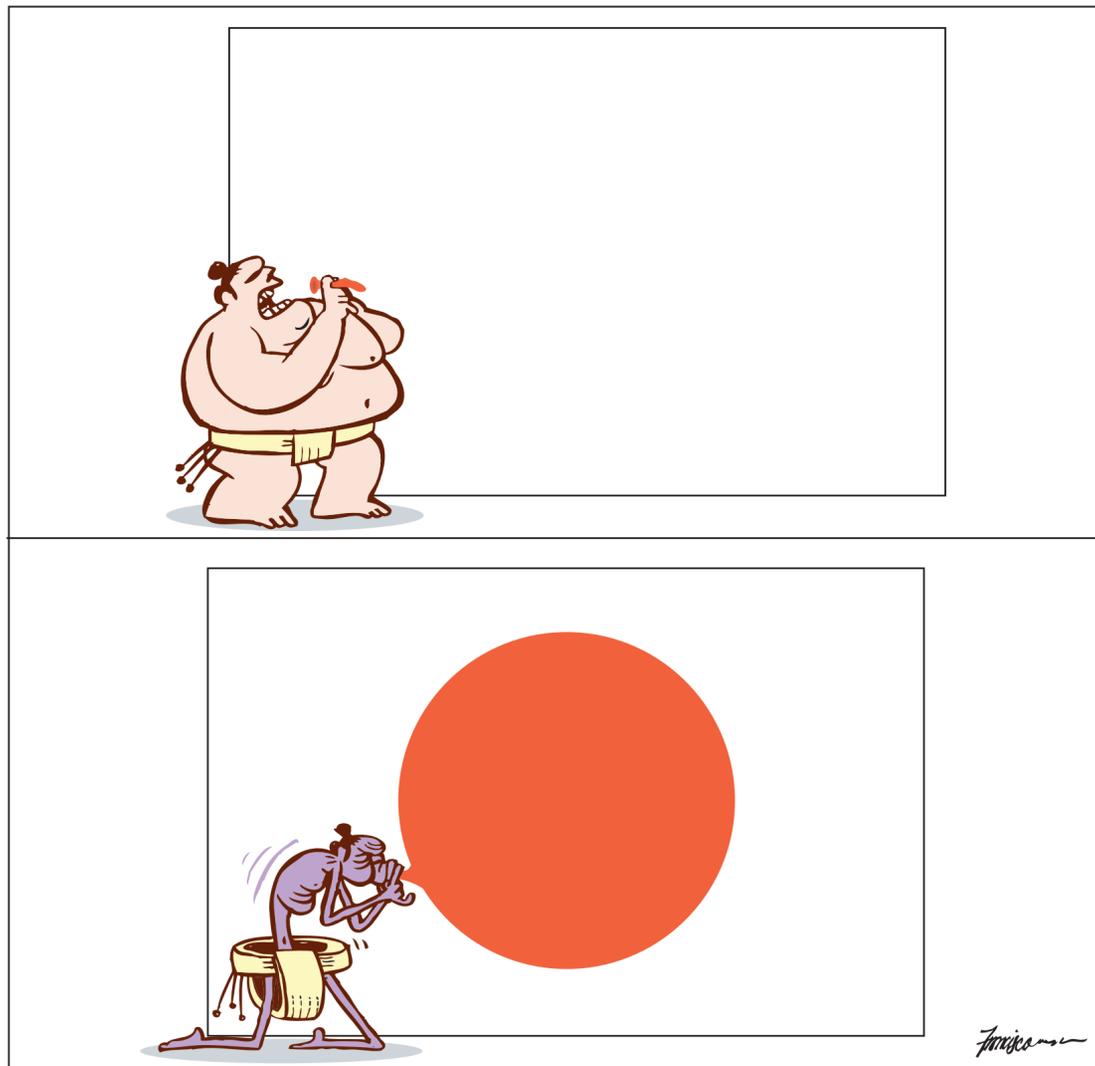
Some of these moves were started years ago and are only now coming to fruition. But all were given an added impetus by Prime Minister Abe since his return to power last December – and much more is in prospect.

For the first time in more than a decade, Japan's overall defence spending is growing. If current budget plans are implemented, defence expenditure will rise next year by 3 per cent, the highest such single yearly jump since the 1990s, when the Japanese economy was booming.

### More than hardware

**I**N SHEER numbers, Japan's military remains puny in comparison to that of its immediate big neighbours: it only has 243,000 soldiers, half of South Korea's standing army and only a tenth of China's. Japan also has only 700 serviceable aircraft, less than a third of the Chinese air force's inventory.

But the Japanese compensate



for quantity with quality: despite all the sabre-rattling over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, military planners in Beijing know that their navy is still no match for Japan's, despite the fact that China has four times as many vessels.

Besides, there is more to enhanced security than just hardware, as Mr Abe has shown. He has presided over a whirlwind of diplomatic initiatives. By next month, he would have visited every single Asean country, a feat no previous Japanese leader has accomplished in such a short time span. Mr Abe also toured Europe and the US, delivering a substantial security policy speech in each capital.

And the political tsunami continues. Last week in Tokyo, Mr Abe devoted a whole afternoon to telling a senior British delegation of his desire to forge closer military links with Britain, and a further full day to the US-Japan strategic dialogue, attended

by foreign and defence ministers from both nations. He successfully pushed for a visit of Japan's imperial couple to India next month, a rare event given the Japanese monarch's advanced age.

Japan also lifted restrictions on the sale of military technology to other nations by offering the Indians its indigenously made US-2 amphibious aircraft.

And if this is not enough, Mr Abe has pledged to amend his country's pacifist Constitution, thereby removing any restriction on the deployment of Japanese forces overseas. The Japanese Premier seems determined to smash all previous political taboos, and all at once.

Seen from the outside, Mr Abe's campaign to reassert Japan's global footprint, not only in economics but also in security terms, seems both imaginative and coherent. Sadly, however, much of this is taking place in an intellectual vacuum. The military

changes Japan is undergoing are real, but they remain incoherent and are years if not decades away from giving the country a true long-range military capability.

Nothing illustrates the distinction between vision and reality better than the dispute over the amending of Japan's Constitution. Much of this debate is irrelevant, because the explicit restrictions which the Constitution places on Japan's military have already been ignored, while those which are implicit can be readily changed without laborious amendments.

Japan's Constitution, for instance, decrees that "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained", but the country has had all three for decades. Yet at the same time, the Constitution does not explicitly say that Japanese defence budgets should stay below 1 per cent of the nation's gross domestic product, or that Japan cannot sell weapons to others.

### Hollow consensus

**A**LL these are restrictions imposed by politicians, and amenable to being cancelled by politicians. So the claim that Japan now requires years of heated legal debates plus a referendum on constitutional changes before it becomes a "normal military power" – as Mr Abe likes to put it – is just a smokescreen intended to cover the fact that no domestic political consensus exists on where Japan needs to be.

Such a consensus cannot emerge as long as Japan continues to lack the strategic culture required to transform the creed of national revival into deed. Officially, Japan has no intelligence service; in practice, it operates plenty of electronic listening devices and a network of overseas agents. But Tokyo has no centralised system of digesting the collected information and transforming it into an analytical assessment to help politicians

make informed security choices.

Mr Abe would dearly like to create a national security council akin to that operating in the US. But Japan has a parliamentary system similar to that of Britain or Singapore, rather than the American presidential political system. Mr Abe has therefore sent his advisers to London to see whether the British model of intelligence assessment, which is concentrated around the Cabinet Office, can work better. But no decisions have been taken.

### Strategic drift

**M**EANWHILE, Japan has no official secrets Act, so civil servants who leak government documents are never prosecuted; at worst, they lose their jobs. It was only recently that Japanese media correspondents were banned from milling around the same floor in the government building where the country's Cabinet meetings take place. The confidentiality of strategic decision-making is still decades behind that of other countries.

And the poverty of strategic thought extends much further. Mr Abe's preference for creating a web of regional friendships is shrewd. Nobody in Tokyo believes that this web can or should contain China, even if this was possible. The hope is that the network of potential allies which Japan currently nurtures will at least persuade the Chinese that they cannot push Japan around too much, or that Beijing will have to pay a great price if it continues doing so.

But the Japanese don't seem to grasp that the more they expect their network of regional allies to counter-balance China, the more these allies will shy away from such a task. What Japan needs is to create a regional system of cooperation which is more than an ill-disguised anti-Chinese club.

The biggest and most important step in this regard must be a Japanese-South Korean reconciliation. This will transform the strategic map of Asia, and have a profound impact on Chinese military behaviour, which currently assumes that the Japanese and Koreans will always remain at loggerheads. For the moment at least, the Abe administration has preferred to bypass the issue. Nor has anything been done to tackle emotional historic disputes.

The outcome, therefore, is not a Japan which is "back" but a country which is tiptoeing towards a new starting line without knowing if it should then sprint, or just halt there.

The danger for global security is not so much a revival of militarism in Japan but of a nation which is still one of the world's economic workhorses, frustrated by its strategic marginalisation and incapable of escaping it. In short, while Mr Abe may have broken Japan's economic paralysis, he has yet to break the country's strategic drift.

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