

The resignation yesterday of Masaki Saito, Japan's de facto ambassador to Taiwan, marks a new chapter in ailing ties between Tokyo and Taipei. The question is whether this represents a chance for the relationship to start afresh between the Taiwanese government and a new Japanese administration, or augurs a further deterioration.

Saito's position became increasingly untenable earlier this year after he suggested that Taiwan's international status is unresolved. The fact that this was true did not lessen the awkwardness of his injection into the debate on Taiwan's sovereignty and identity. With a Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government in power, and no shortage of KMT legislators ready to assail Japan over the smallest perceived slight, Saito learned the hard way that diplomacy and truth-telling are rarely soulmates.

The once-intimate cultural connection between Taiwan and its former colonial master is rapidly weakening, partly because of the gradual disappearance of the old generation who were raised to speak and write Japanese, and partly because few among the younger generation are learning Japanese. The latter has been accentuated at times by the hostility of governments under KMT control, most memorably the Taipei City Government under Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) between 1998 and 2006.

Politically, likewise, this is no longer an era in which independence activists turn to Japan for solace. The historical relationship between Taiwanese independence activism and Japan, which sheltered key figures such as Su Beng (蘇炳) and Thomas Liao (廖正興) over the decades, is history.

The KMT, however, is mindful of this history and bears a long grudge; for its part, the Democratic Progressive Party seems to be at a loss at how to make use of the Japan card, assuming that one still exists. Either way, the relationship between Taipei and Tokyo was always going to offer new challenges after the end of a productive period under presidents Lee Teng-hui (李登輝), a Japanese speaker, and Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁).

These challenges have been exacerbated by Ma's vulnerability to controversies generated or inflamed by KMT hardliners. Under pressure at key moments, Ma tends to sit in the shadows, tolerating the hardliners' poisonous language and infantile symbolic acts, emerging from the darkness only occasionally to quibble about ephemera with moderates.

When the fight is done, Ma will appear, all smiles, but by that time the sober observer knows where his sympathies lie — and that he has no appetite for direct confrontation. It is a bizarre mix of the personal and the aloof, and it helps to explain why Su Chi (蘇起), National Security Council secretary-general and Ma's political minder, has had to clean up after his boss' mess and mediate with the Japanese or deflect extremist sentiment as required, and why the Ministry of Foreign Affairs so frequently appears nonplussed on relations with Japan.

Ma's refusal to directly chide extreme elements in the KMT for their attacks on Japan has proved most disappointing, and has fueled the perception that while he may not condone the

Exit Saito, enter uncertainty

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crude methods and language of certain Nipponphobic colleagues, at a deeper level he shares their distaste for Taiwan's Japanese history and resentment at its geopolitical stake in Taiwan's future. This, together with all of the petty bickering, has squashed the efforts that Ma put into improving his image in Japan — including a tour before becoming president.

While Saito's removal will be regarded as a victory by Taiwan's pro-China crowd, the months-long number that was done on him by the government (ostracization) and the KMT caucus (ugly personal attacks and demands for resignation) will likely not be forgotten in Tokyo. It will take careful, and sincere, behavior on the part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ma himself for Saito's successor to feel any more welcome, and for ties to improve.

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