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Relations between Japan and China enter a new phase

REGIONAL DOMINANCE: Tokyo's decision to grant Lee Teng-hui a visa in the face of Beijing's protests is indicative of a growing power struggle between the two nations

AFP , TOKYO

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Japan and China have entered a new phase in their fight to be Asia's dominant power, with a row over Japan's visa for Taiwan's veteran leader indicating Tokyo will no longer back down to its neighbor, analysts said yesterday.

The Japanese government issued tourist visas on Tuesday to former Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) and his family, ignoring China's repeated warnings not to do so and a demonstration in front of the Japanese embassy in Beijing.

"Through the visa issue, Japan appears to be showing it is an independent country and sticks to its policies without asking about a third country's wishes," said Hidekazu Kawai, a professor of international politics at Gakushuin University in Tokyo.

Japan said 81-year-old Lee, who left office in 2000, was a private citizen and there was no reason to stop him touring historic sites in the country where he studied in his youth.

But Beijing called the issuance of the visa in Taipei a "very significant incident" and hinted of retaliation.

It says Lee is bent on helping the island achieve formal independence.

The dispute came as relations between Japan and China were already at an ebb after a Chinese submarine breached Japanese waters and Japan listed China as a potential threat in its updated defense guidelines.

"The two countries are now entering into a new phase of their tug of war, vying for the region's leadership in this century," said Yoshinobu Yamamoto, a professor of international politics at Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo.

As the competition heats up, Japan has repeatedly warned it is going to cut off financial assistance to China, saying the communist giant that has sent a man into orbit no longer needs such economic help.

"Japan is seeking to secure its power, as the country is faced with uncertainties such as a decline in population," Yamamoto said of Japan's declining birth rate.

Well-populated China, on the other hand, has a rapidly growing economy and increasing confidence.

"Not only is it developing bilateral relations with neighbors, but at the multilateral level, and Japan is worried," said Gilles Guiheux, director of the French Center for Contemporary China in Hong Kong.

"Japan is also worried that China is upgrading its military systems," Guiheux said.

But experts warned Tokyo could not secure the region's leadership without earning some trust from Beijing, which has threatened to use its veto to stop Japan's US-backed bid to also have a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

"The Japanese government is under pressure to regain its status as a regional power," said Joseph Cheng (鄭宇碩), political

"Japan is seeking to secure its power, as the country is faced with uncertainties such as a decline in population."

Yoshinobu Yamamoto, a professor of international politics at Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo

analyst at City University in Hong Kong.

"To do this, it must respect the feelings of its neighbors to win their trust," Cheng said. "It is important if Japan wants to facilitate a permanent seat on the UN Security Council for example."

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has angered Beijing since coming to office in 2001 through his annual visits to a controversial shrine which honors the Japanese war dead, including convicted war criminals.

China, where memories of Japanese brutality are kept alive by state propaganda, has blocked state visits between the two countries for the past three years over Koizumi's shrine pilgrimages.

The Chinese president, "Hu Jintao (胡锦涛), is building his power base in China and he cannot give ground on the nationalism issue," Guiheux said.

"He has used the [war memories] as a tool to pursue his own political goals. Bashing Japan has become part of the political culture."

But experts believe the political disputes between Japan and China could be tempered in part by growing economic interdependence.

"It is clear that economic forces are driving the two sides into a closer relationship," Guiheux said. "Despite the rhetoric, I don't think it will escalate to any dangerous degree."

China is Japan's second largest trade partner after the US, as key Japanese manufacturers, particularly in the electronics and auto sectors, shift production to China to benefit from its low cost labor base and growing markets.

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