

Slippery slope

Tom Plate says China's newfound assertiveness in its territorial disputes with Japan rests on a misguided belief that its rival is in decline – a mistake the world may have to pay for

Try it, you might like it: a sense of proportion. Avoid the extreme cry of apocalypse now – or, at least, of apocalypse soon. Stretch your intellectual and historical horizons to appreciate Japan as an expanse of more than just a few decades, or of even just a few centuries. It is a culture and a people that will endure.

Here are some obvious points. Japan is not about to tip over and fall into the Sea of Japan, not to mention into the East China Sea. It is millenniums old and culturally deep – as rooted as any society we have on earth. It is an archipelago of almost 7,000 islands, with a population of nearly 130 million. It may be ageing, as is much of Asia, but it is anything but unproductive or spent or destitute.

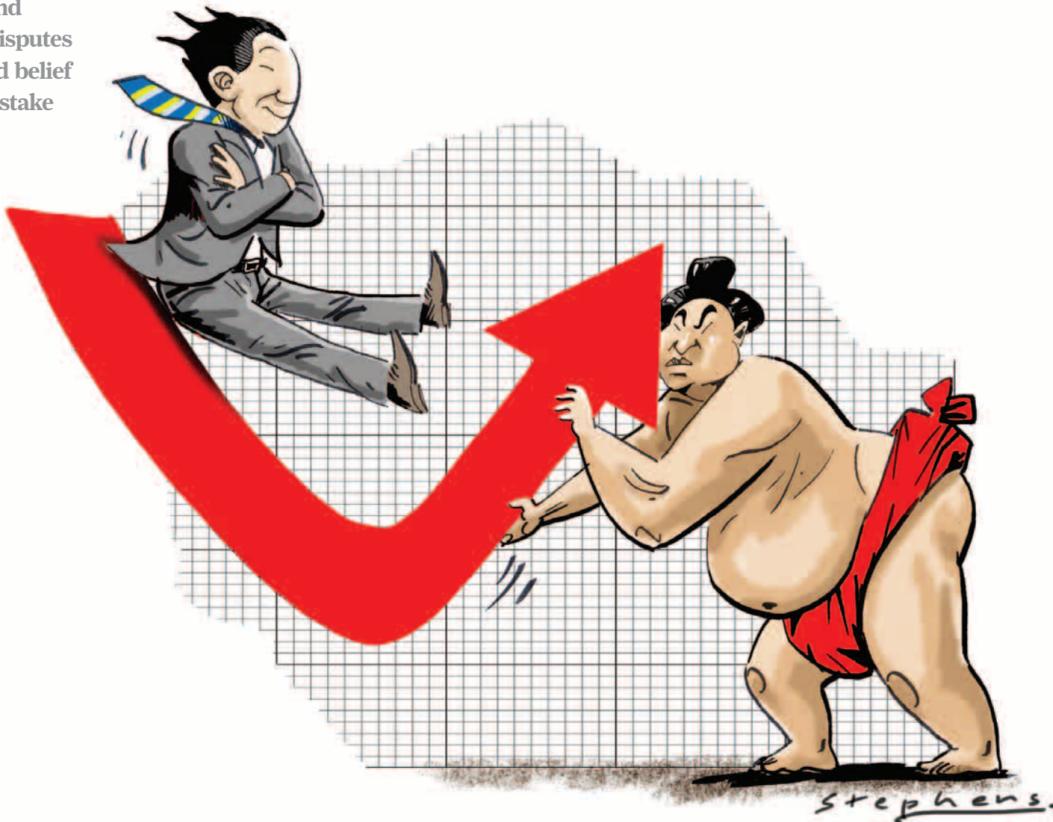
As Chris Patten, now chancellor of Oxford University and Britain's last governor of Hong Kong, rightly notes in reviewing a significant new book on Japan: "Japan's real per capita income has risen 0.9 per cent a year since 2002, faster than the US and Britain; unemployment even in the worst years of recession never rose above 5.5 per cent and was at 4.1 per cent at the end of 2012; social cohesion remains strong; its companies are more global than ever with huge overseas investments. Japan is still by a comfortable margin the third-largest economy in the world, with citizens on average eight times wealthier than the Chinese."

These observations correctly reflect the theme and tenor of David Pilling's excellent new book, *Bending Adversity: Japan and the Art of Survival*. Pilling takes the long view about Japan: as it were, reports of its demise have been greatly exaggerated.

Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew – who, at 90, lived through the Japanese occupation, its second world war devastation and its relentless return to prominence – rightly notes that it would be "madness" to ever count the Japanese out. But with the mass international news media, still influential despite the splintering by social media, measured assessments are often rare.

Remember this? In the 1980s, Japan, the economic powerhouse, was "taking over" the world. But, by the next decade, debt-laden Japan was reported to be utterly "lost". How is such a sharp plunge from near-dominance into near-oblivion possible? It makes no sense. It is media yin-yang at its silliest.

But at least one major actor bought into the decline line: Beijing. As China's return to prominence on the world stage was cheered as historic, Japan's decline was



framed in almost funereal terms. As if actually believing that win-lose narrative, Beijing began reasserting old claims almost fearlessly.

When you consider the risks of conflict between the globe's second- and third-largest economies, not just for East Asia



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but also for the world, is there any bilateral tension as idiotic and pathetic as two elephants shaking their tusks in a dumb quarrel over rocks named Senkaku (Japanese) or Diaoyu (Chinese)?

And, yet, that is where the sumo mat

has been put down. As Beijing has been brassily advertising its air and sea territorial claims for all the world to see, in Tokyo, the government of Shinzo Abe has been rocking its tusks back in response. If compromise is in the air, it is not visible. Collision seems probable.

This could put at risk China's astonishing economic rise, and Japan's core relationship with the United States, which for the time being at least has no appetite for jumping into a serious conflict in East Asia. Yet Tokyo stubbornly digs in as China stubbornly persists. Neither political culture appears capable of facing reality, only saving face.

It is impossible to observe the Abe government without worrying about whether Japan will now take a bad turn. Let's face it: for two decades, its political culture has veered close to the resolutely unimaginative.

You wonder how such a fabulous country that has spawned the most skilful multinational corporations and universally admired technological products (not to mention phenomenal literature and

awesome art, design and film) can throw up prime ministers and governments of such rigidity and banality as would challenge a satirist to further caricature.

One feels great sympathy for the population, which for decades has remained admirably and even stoically pacifist. But it now faces the reality of a China that has risen from a long sleep with pent-up energies eager to settle old scores.

And so the Japanese are weighed down with a shogun power culture underlying the structure of their dysfunctional party system.

The only obvious transformative option would be a reversion to imperial authoritarianism. That would surely prove a cure worse than the disease. But it could just be that China's new assertiveness will help push Japan in that direction faster than anyone realises.

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Missing spark

Su-Mei Thompson says Leung's new measures to lessen poverty and the burden of elderly care will benefit women, but they don't go far enough

This week's policy address was fairly comprehensive in its attempt to deal with Hong Kong's most pressing issues. While it did not explicitly refer to women other than to announce a new study by the Labour and Welfare Bureau and the Women's Commission on why women leave the workforce and how we can attract them to return, the government's new initiatives – to improve the supply of housing, alleviate poverty, ease the burden of care for the elderly and enhance the upward mobility of the younger generation – all have profound implications for Hong Kong's women and girls.

This is all to the good, of course. However, it would have been heartening to see a few more creative solutions cutting across separate policy areas, recognising the interconnectivity of different social issues.

For example, the government's introduction of additional elderly-care allowances is helpful since the burden of elderly care can be considerable. But what can be done to reduce the strain on working women needing to take time off to accompany elderly parents for medical treatment?

While the government has committed to addressing the shortage of affordable housing, surely at the same time, given the rapidly ageing population, it would be beneficial to examine the possibility for more multi-generational housing and the location of medical services within housing estates and residential districts to reduce the stress on working women (and men) looking after elderly parents.

We also support the launch of the new study on why, particularly at the grass-roots level, women are dropping out of the workforce.

The policy address seemed to anticipate that a main reason for this is the lack of adequate childcare support and included new initiatives for enhanced support, for example through extended hours at day care centres. However, it was disappointing that there was no mention of the introduction of statutory paternity leave by all Hong Kong employers and not just the civil service, which has been offering five days of paternity leave since 2011.

In addition, if the government had taken the bold step of announcing a review of the live-in requirement for domestic helpers, this could potentially have opened up more options for part-time childcare support for households who don't have the space or wherewithal to employ full-time domestic help.

Although there was a lot of emphasis in the policy address on enhancing Hong Kong's capabilities in information and communications technology, it is a pity the government did not address the paucity of women studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics and pursuing careers in related fields.

In summary, while the policy address represents a good attempt to tackle many of our most pressing social issues, the conventional approaches it espouses mean that the private sector, non-profit organisations, think tanks and the broader community must step in with original, out-of-the-box solutions that will mobilise cross-sectoral support and lead to more tangible change.

Su-Mei Thompson is CEO of The Women's Foundation. This article is part of a monthly series on women and gender issues, developed in collaboration with the foundation

Link's campaign for more flexibility for Hong Kong reits should raise eyebrows

The Housing Authority recently warned that it could become poor due to impending projects over the next four years.

In its latest financial forecasts, it said its surplus and cash balance will drop sharply and it has not ruled out having to ask for funding from the government to meet construction targets.

As someone who fought to block the authority from selling public assets on the cheap back in 2005, I am still angry over the issue. The reality today is that the authority sold public assets to The Link Reit for HK\$20 billion – far below market prices. Those assets are now estimated to be worth more than HK\$81 billion.

After selling off public assets that would have been the goose that laid golden eggs, the authority now has the nerve to claim it is scraping the bottom of the barrel as it is again running out of cash.

No wonder the public is outraged. Who wouldn't be incensed after witnessing the authority hand over its only cash cow to the rich and powerful property tycoons without hesitation?

After its listing on the stock market, The Link Management has been renovating old shopping centres and then raising rents in order to boost income.

It may have expanded its income, but bearing the brunt of this are small-shop tenants who can barely afford today's skyrocketing rents, as well as tenants that provide medical and community services such as clinics.

As a result, small businesses

Albert Cheng is worried by reports that it wants to work with Housing Authority on property development, which is barred by current rules



are gradually being pushed out of Link Reit-managed arcades, replaced by big chain stores that have almost unlimited financial backing. This has not only killed off the traditional "mom and pop" stores that make the arcades different, it has also created a monopoly, taking away the colourful nature of the community.

In the long run, it will affect the quality of life of public



The bad memories of the authority selling off our assets on the cheap are still fresh

housing tenants in these communities, because higher shop rents will trickle down to consumers, increasing their daily expenses.

However, there are limits to any business development. As a real estate investment trust, The Link Reit is no exception.

Its original priority was to buy unsold Housing Authority shopping arcades or facilities, but due to rising public discontent regarding the high rents forced upon small businesses, this has been

suspended. This has limited the business development of The Link Reit.

On the other hand, the Housing Authority has been seeking different revenue channels, one of which is to copy The Link Reit model by "revitalising" shopping arcades, which is an excuse for it to put up rents afterwards.

This is similar to privatisation and does nothing to benefit existing tenants, especially small businesses, which will eventually be pushed out.

In reality, the authority is paving the way for business monopolies, allowing big businesses to gobble up shopping arcades on public housing estates.

We shouldn't just be angry, we should be disgusted.

Meanwhile, in order to expand its revenue, the Link Reit is reportedly trying to join hands with the authority, buying up old shopping arcades to rebuild them.

But according to the rules for any real estate investment trust, the Link is not allowed to get involved in property development in any way.

Even in the redevelopment of shopping arcades, The Link is limited to redeveloping those retail spaces bought from the Housing Authority years ago.

The redevelopment scope for the Link can only be relaxed and expanded by its monitoring body – the Securities and

Futures Commission (SFC) – otherwise it is bound by the status quo and can work with the Housing Authority with only very limited flexibility.

There is evidence to show that the cheap sell-off of public assets may be repeated. According to reports, the Link sought approval last year from the SFC to relax the rules guiding its redevelopment scope.

It all goes to show that the Link wants to go full steam ahead with the redevelopment of shopping arcades on public housing estates.

Last November, the Monetary Authority proposed relaxing the monitoring rules for the Link, seen as paving the way for it.

The Transport and Housing Bureau has not confirmed whether it has received any redevelopment application from the Link.

Those Housing Authority assets that are still unsold belong to Hongkongers and we shouldn't allow the authority to hand them over to the private sector and big business.

The bad memories associated with the Housing Authority selling off our assets on the cheap are still fresh. We should remember the consequences from the last time and make sure it does not happen again.

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We can't ignore the reality of asylum seekers in limbo

Tony Read says government policies don't address the actual situation

Two recent events involving refugees in Hong Kong illustrate the gap between the government's policy towards those seeking protection from persecution and the reality of the circumstances they face.

At a recent Legislative Council panel meeting, the Social Welfare Department announced enhancements to the service package for claimants in terms of accommodation, food, transport and utilities. While these are welcome developments, they are unlikely to assuage the anger and resentment asylum seekers feel from the delays and poor treatment they have received.

At the Court of Final Appeal, Michael Fordham QC made a strong case for four successful protection claimants to be granted the right to work, arguing that this was a basic human right and that the government was not entitled to withhold it as a blanket ruling.

The verdict is awaited, and many wonder whether Hong Kong will at last see this human rights approach for refugees being upheld in the rule of law.

Hong Kong's immigration policy ensures that asylum seekers and protection claimants are not returned to their country of origin while claims are being assessed.

The government is currently rethinking its approach to screening the claims but the final result will still be to resettle successful claimants elsewhere or return unsuccessful claimants to their country of origin, to ensure Hong Kong is not a final destination for refugees.

Currently, during the screening process, applicants are not allowed to work and rely on meagre handouts from a government that aims to avoid creating a "magnet effect" for others seeking a place of refuge. Deputy Secretary for Security Maggie Wong Siu-chu made it quite clear at the Legco meeting that the handouts are intended to be "humanitarian aid", not social security. The assumption is that the screening process is efficient and short.

Hong Kong's policies for refugees are thus based on two assumptions: that a claimant's



Hong Kong has unexpectedly become a very long pause in their life development

final destination will not be Hong Kong, and that their stay here will be comparatively short. Unfortunately, both these assumptions are far from reality for many.

A recent survey by the Refugee Concern Network of claimants seeking additional aid from non-governmental organisations found that the majority had been here for more than two years and nearly a third have been here over nine years. It is clear that the real needs of this group are being overlooked.

They have skills and abilities; a need for community interaction; some wish to get married and have a family, and provide education for their children. Hong Kong has unexpectedly become a very long pause in their life development. Clearly, they need social security, not just humanitarian aid.

Not all successful claimants are successfully resettled; some are ineligible to be resettled elsewhere and find themselves trapped in Hong Kong with an indefinite and insecure future.

While they form only a small percentage of claimants, they must not be penalised for circumstances beyond their control. They need to be recognised as Hong Kong citizens with full working rights.

Lastly, these policies are clearly not effective as a deterrent. New arrivals seeking protection come from places such as the Central African Republic and Togo. Why do they come here? Because Hong Kong offers economic prosperity?

More likely, the fact their life was in danger was a more pressing concern. They chose Hong Kong because it is politically stable and has a fair judicial system. We should be proud of this reputation.

These are real people with real lives; they are simply seeking recognition of their plight. They cannot just be sacrificed for a greater cause.

Tony Read is justice advocate for The Vine Church and chairman of the Justice Conference Asia, which will take place on May 22-24