

JAPAN

A plateful of whale meat, with money attached

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DELEGATES from 45 countries around the world gathered recently at the southwestern Japanese city of Shimonoseki to discuss and decide if a ban imposed on commercial whaling is to be lifted. The week-long annual meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC), which ended last Friday, has been variously branded in the media as a forum of hot exchanges of words between supporters of rival camps, as a stormy session resulting in drifting further apart the two opposing groups, and even as an international forum where vote-buying mechanism seem to have shaken off all moral bindings to show the world that some of those who talk loud about the virtues of democracy do not hesitate to use money to ensure that their positions prevail. So, money seems to be openly playing a major role in the practice of democracy not only in local or national level elections in poor and backward nations, but also in international forums, where it is the elites who gather and decide the fates of others.

Right from the beginning the IWC conference was sharply divided into two opposing camps and a power struggle between those eager to continue hunting whales and others who want to protect the giant marine mammals gradually intensified after a series of voting produced mixed results. The first order of business the conference dealt with was the issue of Iceland's re-entry into the IWC. Iceland's return to the Commission was crucial for Japan as the host nation was eager start negotiation on lifting the 1982 moratorium on commercial whaling. Although a two-third majority is required to lift the ban, Japan was hoping for a simple majority, as this would allow Tokyo to move forward with a call to start the negotiation. As a pro-whaling nation, Iceland's reentry would probably have given Japan that much advantage. But the country's bid was rejected by a narrow margin of vote and from then on things started to go downhill for both pro and anti-whalers.

Delegates from different countries continued their heated debate on wide-ranging issues related to whaling for five consecutive days and eventually rejected a number of proposals submitted by both camps. The first casualty after

Iceland's failed bid was Japan's attempt to lift the embargo on commercial whaling, which was followed by another proposal submitted by the Japanese delegation calling on members to allow local communities to catch 50 minke whales every year in their coastal waters. From then on the whole show turned out to be a concerted act of revenge and counter revenge that at the end saw outright rejection of most of the proposals submitted by both sides. The IWC voted down proposals submitted by Australia, New Zealand and Brazil for creating



The whale at stake

whale sanctuaries in the South Pacific and the South Atlantic. It also blocked a joint US-Russian bid to renew a five-year catch quota of 280 whales for aboriginal peoples in two countries, and subsequently voted down Japan's proposal for completion of the Revised Management Scheme, a framework for sustainable whaling based on scientific data.

Japan is claiming that the 1982 moratorium has significantly increased whale population and as a result, Japanese fishery industry is facing serious crisis due to a sharp fall in the catch of Sardines and some other fishes. On the basis of such evidence Tokyo called for a resumption of limited commercial whaling. The United States and Russia, on the other hand, tried to convince the delegations that the aboriginal whaling is an essential part of peoples' way of life in regions they live and hence their right of whaling should be respected by others. But both attempts failed to win over sympathy of others and

even a revised US-Russian proposal to allow arctic indigenous peoples to catch bowhead whales was also finally voted down.

The pro-whaling camp's position in rejecting the US-Russian proposal apparently was some kind of a revenge for anti-whalers' earlier rejection of Japan's bid to resume limited coastal whaling. Due to such stubborn positions taken by two opposing camps the conference eventually ended in a virtual stalemate. The IWC is now expected to convene a commissioners' meeting before next year's annual confer-

ence in Berlin to save the meeting from being further bogged down. Meanwhile, a slim one-vote majority in blocking Japan's bid to resume commercial whaling prompted the anti-whaling lobby to accuse Japan of vote buying. The 21-20 vote with three abstentions and one non-participation at the first voting at IWC meeting demonstrated a near equilibrium on the issue, which prompted the environmental group Greenpeace and some other organizations to accuse the Japanese government of using its economic clout in the form of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to get developing nations to support its pro-whaling position.

The whaling commission has six new members this year, of which four are considered active supporters of Japanese position. It should be mentioned that of the four, Japan solicited landlocked Mongolia's entry into the Commission. The Third Millennium Foundation, another non-governmental environmental group lobbying for anti-whaling campaign, warned that if such vote buying practice allows Japan to gain majority in the future it could mean a rollback of the conservation gains of last two decades. In a report published before the IWC meeting at Shimonoseki, the group highlighted six Caribbean countries Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia and Vincent, and the Grenadines, as the most striking examples of countries whose IWC votes were being bought by Japan's fisheries aid. All six received significant amount of Japanese aid in fisheries related projects since early 1990s. The report said Japan not only used aid as an incentive to vote in its favor, but also used the threat of aid withdrawal as a means to maintain developing countries' support.

It was not the first time that the issue of vote buying allegation against Japan surfaced during the IWC annual conference. Dominica's former minister of environment, planning, agriculture and fisheries, Atherton Martin, raised the same allegation against Japan during the 2000 IWC meeting. He submitted his resignation after his country voted against the South Pacific sanctuary proposal and said at the time, "They (Japan) announced that if they couldn't get Dominica to come along with them, they would have to place Dominican projects under review. If that is not extortion by the Japanese government, I don't know what it is."

Japan, on her part, is adamantly denying any charge of governmental vote buying, saying that any such allegation is rude to new IWC members who have decided to enter the commission of their own choice. Such claim might have sound substantial if not the landlocked Mongolia, without having a single trawler of its own, had not realized all of a sudden that the time for not only joining the IWC, but also to jump into the bandwagon of commercial whalers has arrived.

The city of Shimonoseki during the IWC meeting was offering visitors a rare chance of testing the unique culinary culture related to whale meat. To a group of critics such scenes were stark reminder of Japanese aid being offered to some developing countries, where the whale meat proved to be too tempting to resist. Because it is not only coming in a plateful, but also with money attached.

CHINA

Mega-NATO: Out in the cold

FRANCESCO SISI

NEXT Tuesday in Rome, the strategy that led US president Richard Nixon to Beijing 30 years ago will come to an end, and could rapidly reverse into its opposite. On that day, Russia will sign an agreement that will incorporate Moscow into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the alliance designed half a century ago to defend the West against the Soviet Union.

The main focus of the treaty will be Central Asia and its appendices, the Middle East and the rest of Asia. The agreement will also have to deal with Japan, up until now a bulwark of American interests in Asia but not part of NATO. One does not need to be a visionary to see that a NATO that includes Russia and Japan could become an umbrella alliance spanning the whole Eurasian continent and thus an instrument to deal with any crisis, big or small, in the world. And it would mainly deal with the rest of Asia, where, from Pakistan to India, to Southeast Asia to China, there could all kinds of problems while the region is the largest economic growth area in the world. So Russia's accession to NATO could isolate China more than on any other occasion since Nixon's visit.

On that visit, Nixon ignored China's ideology and underscored the geopolitical value of the alliance: to isolate the USSR and force it to divert its attention from the western front to the eastern front. For China, considering the United Nations, where it holds veto power, as the only accredited forum for security debates. In the past, China was also reluctant to join in multilateral economic agreements. This has obviously changed, as China has joined both the World Trade Organization and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. On the security

front, China has for the first time also joined in a multilateral agreement, the Shanghai Five, although the organization is not purely about security.

China has been reluctant to join security pacts for fear of losing out its precious veto power in the UN, and also because it didn't want to become a junior partner, an experience of which it has bitter memories after its alliance with the USSR in the 1950s.

The situation after September 11 has been changing rapidly and tension between Pakistan and India has been escalating. In fact Pakistan, a country where China still has large influence, is, in the words of former Italian foreign minister Gianni De Michelis, the fuse of the world. It would therefore be in China's best interests, after Russia's accession to NATO, to look for ways to join the alliance in order to avoid isolation.

However, this will not be easy, for internal and external reasons. The reasons internally spin around the old conflict between socialism and nationalism. For similar reasons, NATO might not be willing to welcome the Chinese into the alliance. But what would China's future be outside an expanded NATO? The talk in Beijing minimizes the importance of this event. The Chinese believe they have good relations with Russia, excellent relations with Europe and improving ties with the United States and Japan. They consider these entities separate and to be played eventu-

ally one against the other. They fail, however, to see that if it all went down to a choice between America and China all of these players would choose America. In other words, with this pact Russia is willing to become America's junior partner in Central Asia, and thus perhaps also keep an eye on Beijing for Washington. One could see it as a new containment, although nobody would call it that, so carefully crafted that Chinese chest-thumping and nationalistic screams would draw no sympathy worldwide. The importance of this isolation can be seen only in the dramatic effect of Nixon's strategy of opening up to China 30 years ago. If China does not react, it may end up in a bad predicament.

A series of countermeasures should be devised, and on top of the list should be a massive rejuvenation of the Chinese leadership. In a world where leaders are typically in their mid-40s or early 50s, Chinese leaders stand out as singularly old, even those earmarked to head the next generation of leadership. Their modes and mores are also outdated and out of sync with a world that looks with suspicion, or at least perplexity, at the old name of "communism".

On the external front, China has been thinking regionally and it has done so to prevent fears of expansionism. However, the recent changes in the world are forcing China to think globally.

Courtesy-Asia Times

MYANMAR

Democracy talks ought to start soon

OPPOSITION leader Aung San Suu Kyi said Thursday that a transition to democracy in Myanmar was unlikely to follow a "rigid timetable," but she wants negotiations with the military government to begin as soon as possible. Suu Kyi, who spent 19 months under house arrest before being released May 6, said her National League for Democracy party would have a clearer picture of how reforms could progress once it gauged the country's humanitarian and political situations.

Suu Kyi, who won the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize for her struggle to end decades of uncompromising military rule, said that she was eager to begin discussing policy issues with the regime. "It's not for us alone to decide when that will happen," she said. "If it were entirely up to us it would happen as soon as possible."

Secret talks aimed at national reconciliation with the junta began in October 2000 -- a month after military rulers placed her under house arrest for defying a government travel ban -- but have yet to advance

beyond the "confidence building" stage, her party and the government said.

Myanmar has lived under military rule since 1962, when former dictator Ne Win took power in a coup. In 1988, the military launched a bloody crackdown on widespread pro-democracy demonstrations. Suu Kyi's NLD swept to victory in 1990 elections, but the results were not recognized by the military.

The government discussions will include the topic of releasing political prisoners, which Suu Kyi said

would be "a really important move in the right direction." About 290 political prisoners, mostly from the NLD, have been released since reconciliation talks began, but human rights groups say about 1,500 remain jailed. The NLD only now is reopening offices after years of tough restrictions.

Earlier Thursday, elder democracy campaigners held a ceremony in Suu Kyi's honor in the Myanmar capital, Yangon.

Courtesy: Miami Herald