The case for a new open door policy - for Japan and China

Money aside, there is strategic value in welcoming tourists.

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Those who've followed the history of World War II would probably know that after Hiroshima, the second city that had initially been marked out for nuclear devastation was not Nagasaki but the ancient Japanese capital of Kyoto.

In their search for the ideal target, military planners had mapped out the city, at the time home to more than a million people and a major industrial centre. According to a BBC report in 2015, they determined that Kyoto's people were "more apt to appreciate the significance of such a weapon as the gadget".

The scientists on the Target Committee, it appears, preferred Kyoto because it was home to many universities, and they thought the people there would be able to understand that an atomic bomb was not just another weapon – but a turning point in human history.

But eventually, it was Nagasaki that was levelled with a plutonium bomb called Fat Man, unleashing shock waves even bigger than the weapon used over Hiroshima.

How did this come to be?

United States secretary of war Henry Stimson apparently intervened and ordered Kyoto be removed as a target, even taking the case to president Harry Truman after the military dug in its

heels and insisted on Kyoto. Mr Stimson considered the city to be of high cultural significance.

Was there something else that Mr Stimson did not reveal about Kyoto that led him to be so protective of this ancient city? Possibly.

It seems, as governor of the Philippines in the 1920s, he had become a fan of Japanese culture. What's more, Kyoto had been his honeymoon destination.

Earlier this month, as Japan loosened travel restrictions by removing the 50,000 daily cap on all arrivals, including returning Japanese – amounting to a complete opening up after 2½ years of full and partial bans for vaccinated visitors from 68 countries – the story about Mr Stimson is a useful reminder of the importance of people-to-people relationships in helping to calm bilateral wrinkles between nations.

No one doubts that the lifting of the Japanese travel bans could not have come sooner. There has never been a time when the free and peaceful mixing of ordinary people, and curiosity about one another – where people live, what they eat and how they dress – has been so important.

Just last week, Japan and Australia, who already share highly classified intelligence and are committed to joint military operations, signed a landmark agreement that looks likely to shape their ties for the next decade.

The security agreement, which covers intelligence and cyber-security cooperation and operations in space, is the first such pact that Tokyo has signed with a nation other than the US, and it is clearly prompted by fear of China.

This is why Japan's opening – and the need for China to do likewise – is of deep significance to Asian geopolitics.

On Wednesday, China took some steps in that direction when it announced plans to increase the number of international flights operated by domestic and foreign airlines to 840 a week from Oct 30 to March 25, doubling the number of flights allowed in the

matching year-ago period but still significantly below pre-pandemic levels.

Better than ads

In the last normal year for tourism, 2019, Japan received 32 million visitors. A little less than a third were visitors from China, who spent an estimated 1.8 trillion yen (S$17.2 billion) collectively on hotels, travel tickets and spending at places such as the factory outlet malls in Gotemba, near Mount Fuji.

The cordial welcome they received in a country that many Chinese are taught to regard with suspicion would have earned Tokyo more brownie points than all the money it could have expended on advertisements that seek to mould Chinese public opinion.

That success owes in part to Tokyo's decision, starting in January 2019, to simplify visa applications for Chinese tourists. Undergraduates, graduates and former students who had graduated in the three years prior can apply for tourist visas without asset qualifications, as long as they show proof of academic qualifications.

Indeed, Tokyo's efforts to lure Chinese travellers had worked so well that Japan supplanted Thailand as the favourite destination for Chinese travellers that year. Thanks to such measures, five times the number of Chinese visited Japan in 2019 as did Americans.

Do remember, it is not China but America that is Japan's treaty ally, while China is its perceived adversary.

Just as important as it is that the Chinese travel the world is that the mainland should also take in visitors. China received about 145 million visitors in 2019, and its top four sources of inbound tourism were South Korea, the US, Japan and India – all nations with which ties have been tetchy lately.

Needless to say, these visitors went home with tales of the development miracle unfolding in front of their eyes – a miracle that is of global value, and therefore, makes it easier to comprehend why it needs to be defended. In short, a better understanding of China.

Too bad that Covid-19 led to inbound China numbers dropping massively in 2020 and 2021; not a surprise, really, given the pandemic conditions. Meanwhile, the number of Japanese international travellers, whose numbers hit a record 20 million in 2019, dropped to just over three million in 2020.

‘People power’

The current tensions in Asian politics, with the US as the dominant outside power, may have been years in the making, but it always helps if there is people-to-people familiarity. When she was US secretary of state, the late Madeleine Albright carried back China-made toys for her family, which she picked up on an official visit to the country. Likewise, there’s a well-known jeweller in Yangon who proudly displays the credit card bill signed by then US President Barack Obama.

When the Albrights and Obamas of the world determined policy towards China and Myanmar, it would not be a surprise if they thought of the people whose work fashioned the objects they took home to their loved ones.

Studies by the British Council in Libya and Turkey have established that cultural heritage preservation projects and education programmes have gained broad-based popular support despite social divisions and polarisation that affect the wider bilateral relationship. They helped create opportunities for bilateral cooperation and engagement in other areas.

“In this kind of environment where there is a strategic reordering under way, the risk of miscalculation or miscommunication is far greater than it’s ever been before, so cultural relations actually allow us some opportunity to avoid that,” says Professor Caitlin Byrne, an international relations expert who participated in an integrated review published in March 2021 by the council.

This is why, just as Japan has now done, China needs to reopen as well – at least in the interests of maintaining its influence in Asia.

South Korea’s Jeju Island, a tourist paradise, has already had two China shocks. First, the group tourists who dried up from 2017 after

Beijing and Seoul clashed over the US positioning the Thaad anti-missile system within South Korean borders; and second, in these past 30 months, Covid-19-related travel restrictions.

According to the Korea Tourism Organisation, the monthly average number of Chinese tourists in South Korea had already fallen to 380,000 during the three-year period starting in April 2017, a third fewer than the previous three-year period. As people do with personal shocks, nations learn to live with such surprises, and eventually find alternative sources of sustenance.

Likewise, Chinese visitors to Asean had more than quadrupled in recent years – from just over seven million in 2011 to more than 32 million in 2019. Yet, last year, a mere 13,000 Chinese visited top tourism destination Thailand, compared with around 12 million in 2019.

For Chinese visitors to be absent from a potential swing state in this time of geopolitical crisis could only be costly for Beijing. Their absence shrinks the argument of China being critical for the success of regional economies. Indeed, a recent Business Times report said Thailand's marketing plan for 2023 included the targeting of new source markets such as Saudi Arabia and secondary cities in the US.

Indeed, the Asean-China joint statement announced in Laos in 2017 had recognised the strategic importance of the tourism industry in promoting greater people-to-people contact and fostering mutual understanding and regional stability. The following year, when they met in Vladivostok, Chinese President Xi Jinping and then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had stressed that the two sides should carry forward the tradition of people-to-people exchanges and consolidate the social and public opinion foundation for bilateral ties.

In Japan, Covid-19-imposed restrictions arrived to curb travel just as Chinese destinations had accounted for 27 per cent of Japan's international routes. Second- and third-tier cities in China, including Nanjing, Xi'an, Hefei, Ningbo, Haikou and Dalian, had opened new routes to Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya and other places as the intensity of contact grew by leaps and bounds. Today, the travellers are missing, and the relationship is one of deep wariness of

intentions. Tourists and business travellers tend to be the equivalent of the open-palm military salute.

To be sure, there are any number of cliches, such as distance and absence making the heart grow fonder, that might argue a contrary view. Likewise, one of the most influential social theories in the last half-century has been the so-called “strength of weak ties” – which holds that arms-length relationships help with jobs, promotions and wages.

But that relates to the job market. International relations are quite another matter. Mr Stimson may have agreed.