

Japanese premier in China for fence-mending talks

Japan's new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe arrived here Sunday for fence-mending talks with Chinese leaders, who had refused to meet Abe's predecessor since 2001.

Abe is scheduled to meet President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao and other leaders before flying to South Korea early Monday for similar talks in Seoul.

Apart from bilateral issues, his talks in Beijing are likely to be dominated by how to respond to North Korea's plan to conduct a nuclear test.

The leaders of China and Japan have not met since former Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi's 2001 visit to the Yasukuni war shrine, which honours Japan's war dead including 14 class A war criminals convicted after World War II.

Earlier this year, Chinese President Hu Jintao highlighted Koizumi's visits to the shrine as the 'major obstacle in the China-Japan relationship'.

China wants Abe to make a public promise not to visit the shrine but he is instead likely to stick to his position that he will decide on future visits with his 'heart', a Japanese official said in Beijing.

Abe has previously visited the shrine but has declined to say if he plans to do so as prime minister.

Apart from the shrine visits, the two sides are also expected to discuss disputes over offshore oil and gas exploration and control of islands in the East China Sea.

Abe's trip to Beijing is the first part of what he calls a new 'pro-active diplomacy' for Japan.

In his recent policy address to the Japanese parliament, Abe said Japan's close economic ties to China and South Korea made the improvement of diplomatic relations 'extremely important for the Asian region and the entire international community'.

Japan's exports to China soared to \$80 billion in 2005, with imports from China reaching \$108 billion, according to Japanese statistics.

- DPA

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