

NEWSMAKERS

The thriller in Manila

As vultures circle a troubled Shinzo Abe, Taro Aso is emerging as a frontrunner to succeed him, **Greg Torode** reports

Habitually cautious and proper, Japanese envoys are hardly known for their swaggering ebullience. Yet those were the qualities Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso displayed during the Asean regional ministers' meetings in Manila this week.

Dressed in immaculately tailored light-shaded suits, Mr Aso was a visibly bright presence, clapping shoulders and pumping hands with his regional counterparts.

"He looked like a winner," one diplomatic insider said. "Everyone was talking about him... no one had ever seen him quite like this. For a man whose party and leader had just suffered a big defeat, he looked a surprisingly happy man."

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations meetings kicked off, of course, on the day Mr Aso's Liberal Democratic Party suffered one of the worst electoral defeats in its 52-year-history.

Voters in the upper house elections reacted to a wave of scandals across the cabinet of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Mr Abe has vowed to stay on yet the political vultures spot a carcass. Some Japanese analysts have even started referring to him as a "dead body", a Sumo wrestling term for a fighter on the verge of collapse.

Commentators suggest he will stagger on until next month, resigning soon after representing Japan at the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation forum in Sydney.

And if Mr Abe goes, the frontrunner to replace him is Mr Aso.

The developments created an extra buzz around Mr Aso during one of the key events on the regional diplomatic calendar. For some, particularly Beijing, the week was particularly strategic, offering the chance of a formal meeting between Mr Aso and new Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi (楊潔篪) and more informal encounters over lunches and dinners.

Just as Beijing's envoys spent considerable effort discreetly courting Mr Abe before he replaced then-prime minister Junichiro Koizumi last September, they can be expected to do the same with Mr Aso, diplomatic sources said.

Mr Koizumi, despite his modern, reformist image, sent Sino-Japanese ties into a tailspin with repeated visits to Tokyo's Yasukuni war shrine.

Mr Abe was also an enthusiastic visitor but Beijing let him know it was prepared to offer a clean slate to restore ties.

Reflecting internal business and public concerns, he took the bait,

making renewed ties with Japan's largest trading partner his priority. He made a swift visit to Beijing, a move reciprocated by Premier Wen Jiabao (温家宝), who visited Tokyo in April. The nagging issue of the Yasukuni Shrine, where 14 class A war criminals from the second world war are among those honoured, may remain unresolved but at least it had been put in the background.

But when it comes to courting Mr Aso, Beijing may find him a tougher sell than Mr Abe.

Mr Aso and Mr Abe hail from the same right-wing edge of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party, both apparently keen to assert a new Japanese nationalism. Both, too, are political nobility with long experience in the LDP's cloistered political salons, with deep family ties to Japan's ruling elites.

If there is a difference, it is the extent of Mr Aso's outspokenness – hardly a common trait for a foreign minister, even if he has curbed his tongue in recent months.

It is not just that Mr Aso has a long track record of proudly speaking his mind; his choice of words can be particularly jarring.

As economics minister back in 2001, he was quoted as saying he wanted to make Japan a nation where "rich Jews" would want to live.

Just last month, he was forced to apologise to Alzheimer's sufferers

For a man whose party and leader had just suffered a big defeat, he looked a ... happy man

Diplomatic insider on Taro Aso in Manila

after suggesting that even they could understand that Japanese rice fetched a higher price in China than at home.

He has long stoked the embers under simmering historical disputes in Northeast Asia, stemming from Japan's occupations in Asia last century. As interior minister in 2003, he suggested that Koreans had "volunteered" to take Japanese names during colonial times.

But it is his comments about the mainland that have triggered some of the biggest controversies, given considerable sentiment across Japanese business foreign policy and business elites that historical issues must not be allowed to poison future ties with the rising giant of a neighbour.

At times, Mr Aso has had little truck with moves underway to promote shared understanding between Japanese, Chinese and Korean scholars. "It is extremely difficult to have the [same] kind of understanding of history," he said.

In a similar vein as foreign minister, Mr Aso urged Emperor Akihito to break from palace tradition and visit the Yasukuni Shrine, saying the soldiers honoured there gave their lives shouting "banzai" for the throne, rather than the prime minister.

He added that any grumbles from Beijing would only prove unproductive. The more Beijing complained, he said, the more inspired he felt.

"It is just like when you're told 'Don't smoke cigarettes', it actually makes you want to smoke. It is best to keep quiet". He also described the mainland as a "considerable threat".

Such remarks in office at the height of Mr Koizumi's difficulties over the Yasukuni Shrine in 2005 and early last year brought condemnation from some unusual sources.

An editorial comment in the *The New York Times* described Mr Aso as "neither honest nor wise" in his attempts to go out of his way to inflame Sino-Japanese relations.

Some Japanese political analysts speculated at the time that Mr Koizumi had deliberately made such a provocative choice as foreign minister to polish the prime ministerial credentials of his chosen successor, Mr Abe. Mr Abe may be conservative, but he looked positively moderate in comparison to Mr Aso, the thinking went.

If that was indeed the case, it has backfired as Mr Aso finds himself in pole position. It is also worth remembering that Mr Aso's outspokenness is not a product of mere accidental slips of the tongue.

In a rare interview, he told the BBC last year that it was unfortunate that no one told Beijing what they truly thought. "I believe that we must represent Japan's true feelings and it must be done by someone like myself," he said.

Not surprisingly perhaps, Mr Aso has a marked individual streak. While he may visit a Shinto shrine such as Yasukuni, he is a practising Christian, a minority in Japan. He also happily indulges in the reading of manga comics, reportedly devoting up to 20 a week despite his duties.

Like Mr Abe, his background also makes interesting reading, putting him in the highest echelons of the ruling conservative elites. If he does replace Mr Abe, he will be following his grandfather Shigeru Yoshida, the premier who signed the "pacifist" constitution of Japan and father-in-law Zenko Suzuki. There are regal titles, too. His sister is married to Prince Tomohito.



ILLUSTRATION: TERRY PONTIKOS

Such a background helped lead to a top-drawer education. A graduate in politics and economics at Gakushuin University, he went on to study at Stanford University to the concern of his family, who feared he was being exposed to too many American influences. He ended up at the University of London in the early 1960s, acquiring a taste for Saville Row suits and a refined English accent that he has kept.

As a young man he toiled in the family business, the Aso Mining Company – including a spell running its operations in the war-

tom African state of Sierra Leone. Serving as Aso Mining's president from 1973 to 1979 before entering politics, he managed time for his love of shooting and golf. A crack shot, he represented Japan in the 1976 Olympics in Montreal.

The Aso Mining link is another source of lingering controversy. A key part of Japan's military-industrial complex for decades before the second world war, Aso Mining was a major producer of coal. Thousands of Koreans and hundreds of allied prisoners were forced to toil in Aso mines.

But any historic tensions were kept beneath the surface this week as Mr Aso concentrated on diplomacy, seeking to forge and deepen ties across the region, not just with Beijing but New Delhi and Hanoi and the rest of the 10 Asean nations. He managed to invoke a swift and detailed response from Mr Yang when he linked China's growing influence on the world stage to its food safety troubles.

"This week he was on his best behaviour," one Asian diplomat said. "The trick for Beijing is going to be how to keep him there."

Torode's Asia

Greg Torode



Blunder adds a bit of levity at Asean talks

It is probably just as well there is often a touch of humour on the fringes of the annual Asean ministers' meetings.

Given the inevitable clash between high aims and low expectations resulting in little tangible progress, there is often precious little else to smile about.

Canada's deputy foreign minister, Leonard Edwards, unwittingly provided one of the brighter spots this week when he appeared at the state dinner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' regional security forum in Manila.

As 28 of his regional peers turned up for the official photo in dark suits and ties, Mr Edwards emerged from his limousine at the Malacanang Presidential Palace sporting a shimmering, translucent barong – the pineapple-fibre shirt worn by well-dressed Filipinos on formal occasions.

There is a time and a place for national dress at every Asean gathering, but this apparently was not it. It did wonders for his visibility, however, particularly after he was put in the front row for the photo.

Mr Edwards managed to smile throughout the dinner, which is more than many lower ranking Canadian diplomats were doing the next day.

"Just don't mention the barong," one was heard to say as the subject, which made the North American media, surfaced.

There were, of course, many more serious moments.

The Manila meetings marked the 40th anniversary of Asean, initially founded by five nations in 1967 as a bulwark against the spread of communism.

The grouping has now spread to 10, covering its former enemies, Communist Party-ruled Vietnam and Laos, Cambodia and the previously isolated Myanmar.

That gives it influence over the

The forum's closing communiqué is long on platitudes and short on practical specifics across a vast range of issues

lives of a relatively young, fast-growing, rapidly integrating population of 540 million, and Asean leaders know they have to fight to stay relevant, as well as cope with the challenges posed by a rising China and India.

One answer lies in work to create a charter to give the grouping a proper legal footing, backed by voting to speed decisions and the teeth to enforce them. This will strengthen the grouping's hand in future dealing with other blocs, such as the European Union, and offer the prospect of faster, deeper integration with North East and South Asia.

Asean leaders are supposed to finalise the charter at their anniversary summit in Singapore next month. Indications this week suggest, however, there is still considerable work to be done.

Despite plenty of bold talk in the months and weeks leading up to this week's sessions, the foreign ministers could not free themselves from the consensus decision making that has made for painfully slow Asean moves, such as on free trade and environmental protection, in the past. And quite how recalcitrant members are dealt with in future remains unclear.

"We decided to let the leaders decide," was how host minister, Alberto Romulo, explained it away in classic Asean style.

Asean's annual security forum with the wider region is also still struggling to shake off its talk-shop image after 14 years.

The forum's closing communiqué is long on platitudes and short on practical specifics across a vast range of issues, from Myanmar and the South China Sea, to the need for faster economic integration across the region to Iran and Afghanistan.

Its real value is not in the main conference, but in the side meetings between individual countries. This is where the real business of the region is conducted, allowing the big powers such as China, Japan and India to meet each other and smaller countries as well. North Korea, too, also basked in the relative openness, broadening its regional reach.

These sessions are vital in a region where the old security assumptions are falling away amid an unprecedented military build-up. This is no laughing matter.

World wants to know what made Duch a killer

Anne Hyland

What makes a person kill?

It is a question that never ceases to enthral and fascinate and will once again be asked as prosecutors, who are investigating the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge, delve into the mind of Kaing Guek Eav, who is better known by his nom de guerre Duch.

Duch was at the heart of the killing machine of the Khmer Rouge – the ultra-Maoist regime that ruled Cambodia with a brutal hand from 1975-1979 and under whom 1.7 million Cambodians died.

Back then, Cambodia had a population of seven million, and the loss of almost one quarter of its people through overwork, starvation, illness or execution, as the Khmer Rouge pursued its crazed ideology, stunned the world.

Now Cambodians want answers from Duch, who was earlier this week charged with crimes against humanity. He is the first of a handful of senior leaders who are expected to be prosecuted by a tribunal run by the Cambodian government with the assistance of the United Nations.

Cambodians want to know: "Why did the Khmer Rouge kill so many?"

Duch, who oversaw the deaths of

tens of thousands of Cambodian men, some of whom were his colleagues, extended family and friends, as well as women, children and babies, claims to have no answers.

His defence plea has been that he was simply following orders. Those orders included dropping babies from the balconies of the infamous interrogation centre Tuol Sleng, of which Duch was the director, because they were a distraction to torture he oversaw.

To many Cambodians, Duch, now a gaunt 64-year-old, is a monster. But as Nic Dunlop, an authority on Duch, said, monsters are often like you and I.

"The thing about these monsters is that they are often very ordinary people, who are very charismatic, very friendly, open, charming and even garrulous," he said.

Dunlop wrote a book on Duch called *The Lost Executioner*, after he spent years searching for Duch, who many had presumed was dead following the fall of the Khmer Rouge.

When Dunlop found Duch in 1999, he said he didn't discover a monster. "On the contrary, he appeared to be showing genuine remorse for the things he had done in his past life."

Indeed, if the 1970s were



Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Duch, in 1976 and in detention this year

excluded from Duch's life, he would have been ordinary.

He was born in 1942 into a poor, rural Sino-Khmer family. His father worked as a clerk and his mother grew vegetables and fruit to sell. Duch was the eldest of five children and, being the only son, he enjoyed the privilege of an education and rewarded his parents by becoming a star pupil.

Teachers were impressed by Duch's thirst for knowledge and his love of mathematics, and financially assisted his studies through secondary school and college, where he trained to be a teacher.

Oddly enough, many of the senior figures in the Khmer Rouge would turn out to be former



The thing about these monsters is that they are often very ordinary people, who are ... very friendly

Nic Dunlop, author

schoolteachers, including the regime's leader, Pol Pot.

Duch would repay the kindness of his teachers with vicious brutality. One who helped him would years later arrive at Tuol Sleng. The teacher was accused of being an enemy of the Khmer Rouge and Duch showed no mercy: the teacher was tortured and put to death.

It was during his time at teachers' college that Duch was exposed to the Communist Party of Kampuchea, which would become known as the Khmer Rouge. It drew in young Duch, who, after becoming a teacher in 1965, soon headed a communist cell.

Students of Duch recalled him as a good, patient and kind teacher whose worst habits were chain-smoking and dressing poorly. There was no sign of violence.

His work for the party and his speeches against the "fascist" regime of King Norodom Sihanouk, who was prime minister, would eventually land him in prison in the late 1960s where he spent two years and was probably tortured. During this time, it is likely that Duch learned some of the torture techniques employed at Tuol Sleng.

Duch was released in an amnesty granted to political prisoners and he fled into the arms of the Khmer Rouge.

He emerged with the name Comrade Duch and a role in special security running prisons, where enemies of the Khmer Rouge were tortured and killed.

Those prisons were the precursor to Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh that Duch operated for three years.

At least 14,000 Cambodians were tortured and slaughtered under Duch's supervision at the prison. Torture methods included beatings, rape, electrocution and water boarding. Blood was drained from many of the dead bodies and used at a nearby hospital.

After the Khmer Rouge fell, Duch went into hiding for 20 years. He changed his name to Hang Pin and abandoned Buddhism for Christianity, perhaps to be forgiven for sins committed in this lifetime.

Duch worked with aid groups until he was exposed in 1999 by Dunlop. Shortly afterwards, he was arrested and held in a military detention centre until being charged this week.

Fears remain he may become a scapegoat for the crimes of the other Khmer Rouge senior leaders, who have yet to be charged.

Many of them have lived a life of luxury and freedom in Cambodia since the end of the madness they perpetrated almost three decades ago.