

The Foreign Policy of Japan under the New Abe Administration

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The December 2012 elections brought the LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) to power after a 3-year-long DPJ (Democratic Party of Japan) intermezzo. It also meant a return of Shinzo Abe to the post of Prime Minister which he had already briefly held in 2006-2007. LDP's election program was based on several ambitious and in part unprecedented policy initiatives aimed at kick-starting stagnant Japanese economy, upgrading the role of the Self-Defense Forces (JSDF – Japan's de facto army) and boosting Japan's international status and national pride. Just as the pre-election campaign was underway, one of the biggest foreign policy crises in Japan's post-war history was unfolding. The territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku islands, claimed by Beijing under the name Diaoyu, brought the bilateral relations to their lowest point since their normalization in the 1970s. It was the flare-up of nationalism surrounding the issue that also helped the LDP to gain momentum to win the December elections after which it formed a ruling coalition with the New Komeito party. The following analysis will examine the nature of the foreign policy of the new administration and the challenges posed to Japan by the regional environment.

Towards „normalized“ foreign policy

Japanese foreign policy has long been characterized by unique features which stem from Japan's historical experience. After the

catastrophic defeat in WWII, Japan was dictated a new constitution by the US occupation, which has since exhibited extraordinary resiliency as it remains unamended to this day. The notorious Article 9 of the constitution states that „Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes“. Furthermore, it stipulates that “land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained“. It is this legal framework that underpins the postwar Japanese pacifism. The Yoshida doctrine, named after Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida (1948-1954), further embedded the pacifist principles in the Japanese foreign policy. Under Yoshida's recommendations, Japan should focus on economic development, rely on the military alliance with United State as a basis for its security and keep a low diplomatic profile.

Tokyo has generally upheld these principles for several decades. However, the requirements of its international status and growing regional security challenges have compelled Tokyo to gradually change its strategic calculus and move towards „normal“ foreign policy. Since the early 1990s Japan has participated in several UN peacekeeping operations. The JSDF have also been deployed in a non-combat role in post-war Iraq in 2004-2005 and in an anti-piracy mission off the coast of Somalia since 2009. During the DPJ rule, the long-standing arms exports ban was eased and

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a new military strategy of “dynamic deterrence” was adopted.

Abe’s policies are thus a culmination of a slow process in which Japan cautiously steered off its established foreign policy course. What is revolutionary, however, is the serious effort on part of the Abe administration to eliminate the legal limitations on the use of military power. Abe has declared his intention to revise the constitution and remove the constraints on the use of force by JSDF and change their status to regular armed forces. He has already made concrete steps towards this goal. According to the Article 96 of the Japanese constitution, two thirds of votes in the both Houses of the Diet (Japanese parliament) and a follow-up national referendum are required for a constitutional revision to be approved. During Abe’s first term in 2007, the National Referendum Law was passed. This law stipulates that only simple majority approval in popular vote is necessary for constitutional amendment to be adopted. Abe is now pushing for an analogical relaxation of the requirement for the Diet vote. If approved, this revision would make it much easier to amend Article 9. Nevertheless, two things must be noted. First, in order for these plans to be successful, the LDP and other pro-revision parties have to gain necessary seats in the summer 2013 Upper House elections. As for now it looks like the overwhelming popularity of Abe should assure a comfortable victory. Second, the public is divided on the issue, despite a general appeal of Abe’s calls for stronger patriotism and national pride. This notwithstanding, everything so far suggests that Abe is determined to press on the issue.

The issue of collective self-defense has also come to the fore. According to the current interpretation of the constitution, Japan is not permitted to exercise the right of collective self-defense, a fact which mainly has implications for the Japan-US Alliance. During Abe’s first term as a PM, a special committee tasked with drafting a report on how Japan should exercise this right, was formed. After an abrupt end to the Abe’s incumbency the issue was adopted by Noda; no progress was made though. Following his return, Abe picked up where he left off and the right of collective self-defense is in all likelihood going to be included in the new National Defense Program Outlines later this year. Abe was briefed on the conclusions of the six year-old report specifying limited cases in which the right of collective self-defense may be exercised and which may serve as a basis for the new interpretation. A change in this direction would significantly bolster the US-Japan alliance.

Apart from these initiatives, Japan has also increased its defense budget for the first time in 10 years, signaling a heightened importance given to the national security. For Abe however, all the aforementioned moves are just a part of a broader effort. The pride in national history and tradition amongst Japanese people also ought to be revived, beginning with the reform of educational system. The result will be a teaching of a less apologetic version of Japanese history. On April 28, 2013 Japan for the first time officially commemorated the Restoration of Sovereignty Day. It marks the day San Francisco Treaty took effect in 1952, formally ending WWII and Allied Occupation of the country. During the ceremony Abe said that

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„we (the Japanese people) have a responsibility to make Japan a strong and resolute country that others across the world can rely on“. The staggering popularity numbers enjoyed by Abe partly result from the new-found national pride, which Abe`s LDP makes use of and further encourages.

The larger picture

As Japan appears to be moving towards a heightened international status and more active foreign policy, the countries of the region watch carefully. While the regional environment is full of security challenges, it also provides Tokyo with immense opportunities for cooperation.

Arguably the biggest challenge for Japan is China with the new leadership at helm. China and Japan are the parties to the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. China claims these eight tiny Japanese-controlled islands as its sovereign territory, pointing to history. The islands are also separately claimed by Taiwan. The significance of these small barren rocks rests in their proximity to strategically important maritime routes, rich fishing grounds and potentially abundant oil and natural gas deposits. First and foremost, however, the dispute remains a matter of national pride and sovereignty, which makes it all the more difficult to achieve a compromise settlement and threatens an inadvertent escalation. Recently, Beijing has declared the Senkaku/Diaoyu to be its “core interest” a term which is reserved for the most vital national interests, worth defending by every means. The fact that the Chinese

president Xi Jinping himself is heading the special inter-agency committee specifically dealing with the Senkaku/Diaoyu further underlines the importance attributed to the issue by the Chinese leadership.

The most recent series of tensions erupted after the Noda government nationalized the islands in September 2012. Beijing sharply condemned this action while the whole country got engulfed in massive anti-Japanese protests. As Noda was replaced by Abe, the crisis continued. In January 2013 a Chinese frigate locked its weapons-controlling radar onto Japanese Navy ships in the vicinity of the disputed islands. Moreover, the incursion of Chinese ships into the Japanese-controlled waters continued and Chinese aircraft have been more frequently intruding into the airspace near the islands, prompting scrambling by Japanese jets. In connection with the arrival of a flotilla of Chinese ships near the islands in April, Abe has warned that „it would be natural to expel by force“ any attempted landing on the islands.

The islands row is not the only strain on the Japan-China relations. The nationalistic rhetoric coming from Tokyo has angered Beijing and also Seoul. There is a feeling in China that Japan has not shown adequate remorse for its past behavior, primarily the conduct of its forces during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Especially controversial is the issue of the Nanjing massacre, the scale and even very occurrence of which is doubted by many in Japan. Pouring oil into fire, the Japanese lawmakers and cabinet ministers recently visited the controversial Yasukuni shrine during its spring festival. The Yasukuni

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shrine honors the country's war dead, amongst them 14 Class-A war criminals. While Abe did not make the visit himself, he defended the actions against Chinese and Korean criticism.

The historical burden also partly explains why Tokyo cannot find common ground with Seoul. South Korea seems to be a logical partner for Japan even if their threat perceptions concerning China may diverge: both countries are the most threatened by North Korean nuclear-bombs-wielding regime and both have close military alliances with the US. The reality of the relationship is much different, though. The scars of the past and particularly the issue of "comfort women" is the reason behind the fact, that the level of anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea is rivaled only by that of the Chinese. Japan and South Korea are also engaged in a territorial dispute concerning the Dokdo/Takeshima islets. The last year's unprecedented visit by former South Korean president Lee Myung-bak to the disputed islets has seriously damaged the bilateral relations and they do not seem to exhibit signs of recovery as yet. The worsening ties have taken their toll on bilateral cooperation – in 2012, for example, the much-touted military information and equipment-sharing agreements failed, despite the best efforts of the US. The current jingoistic rhetoric coming from Japan together with the aforementioned Yasukuni visits has inflicted even more harm upon the relationship. The new South Korean president Park Geun-hye has criticized Tokyo and warned Japan against shifting to the right. If Abe wants to engage Seoul, he must dampen down the nationalist

rhetoric and put an end to this ultimately self-defeating behavior.

The lagging cooperation is particularly perplexing if one takes into account the North Korean threat. The Kim Jong-un regime has embarked upon a violent rhetoric in early 2013 threatening nuclear attacks. Due to the limited range of North Korean missiles, South Korea and Japan would be the most vulnerable if Pyongyang acted upon its verbal threats. Japan hosts several US military bases which would be a likely target. North Korea has already test-fired its ballistic missiles over Japan before; hence Tokyo takes these threats seriously. Specific issue of the relations with Pyongyang is the problem of abductions. North Korean agents have abducted several Japanese in the 1970s and 1980s. The Abe government is determined to bring the abductees back to Japan. Due to this, Japan has recently declared that it would not resume aid to North Korea until the issue is resolved, even if Pyongyang abandoned its nuclear program. On the other hand, Tokyo also seems to be willing to use unilateral diplomacy towards Pyongyang to achieve the resolution of the abduction issue, as indicated by recent surprise visit of Japanese envoy to the country and Abe's stated openness to a summit meeting with Kim Jong-un.

Somewhat compensating for worsened relations with China and South Korea, Japan has embraced Russia. The long-problematic relationship seems up for a new start after Abe's successful visit to Moscow in April 2013, where the two parties agreed on reopening the Kurile dispute talks as a necessary precondition for an eventual signing of the

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peace treaty. The disputed sovereignty over the Russian-administered South Kurile Islands has been a matter of fierce diplomatic disputes in the past. Whereas the achievement of final settlement will be complicated and does not probably lie in the short-term horizon, this development shows that the two countries are willing to put the dispute aside and deepen cooperation in other areas. The “reset” of Japan-Russia relationship might significantly affect the power dynamic in the region.

Abe has championed a vision of a „strategic diamond” of maritime democracies, enclosing the Indopacific region. These are India, Australia, US and Japan. There is currently no substantial cooperation between Japan, India and Australia in defense matters, although some links have been established. The recent incursions of Chinese troops into the Indian controlled territory in the contested border area might move India to work closely with Japan, which too faces assertive Chinese behavior. Japanese cooperation with Canberra is supported mainly by Washington, the treaty ally of both countries. However, this cooperation is yet to show tangible results. The most important edge of the “diamond” therefore remains the one of the US.

The relationship with Washington is the single most significant bilateral relationship for Tokyo. In the last few years the alliance has gone through a harsh period, particularly during PM Hatoyama’s rule. Strengthening Japan-US ties is now of primary concern for the Abe administration. Indeed, it is the most important pillar of its foreign policy. Conversely, Japan is a lynchpin of the US Asian pivot strategy. The policies of Tokyo and

Washington are thus a natural match. While keeping neutral stance on the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu, the US officials have repeatedly reiterated the position, that the territory in question falls under the scope of the Security Treaty by which the US is bound to the defense of Japan. Any Chinese violent action concerning the Senkaku/Diaoyu would thus amount to *casus foederis*. Japan and the US have also started to work on the revision of the Guidelines for Defense Cooperation, which determine the framework of defense cooperation of the two countries’ militaries. If the efforts of the Abe administration prove successful the JSDF could contribute more actively to the alliance. The chief irritant in the relations remains the issue of Okinawa bases relocation where progress seems elusive. However, this issue is unlikely to seriously hamper the continuing progress in strengthening of the bilateral relationship, especially when its importance for the both sides is increasing.

The Northeast Asian security environment is becoming increasingly dangerous. There is however one area, where the zero-sum visions of the interstate relations seem to yield to advantages of cooperation. This area is the regional economic integration. Following a Chinese initiative, the long dormant trilateral FTA (Free Trade Agreement) talks between China, South Korea and Japan have been reopened. The first round of the talks concluded in March, with two more slated for later this year. Despite severing almost all official talks and consultations with Japan in light of the recent tensions, China has been keen to proceed on this forum. Behind Beijing’s

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willingness to conclude the FTA, apart from straightforward economic benefits, lies the attempt to counter the US-led TPP free trade pact which excludes China. Japan has already agreed to join the talks on TPP, the embodiment of the economic component of the US Asian Pivot. China now feels pressed to hasten the FTA negotiations (along with the RCEP, a region-wide free trade pact) in order to undermine the emerging TPP. As for Japan, the creation of a FTA with its number one (China) and number six (S. Korea) trade partners would surely prove to be a huge boost to its economy.

Conclusion

The policies of the new Abe administration are clearly heading towards a new era in the Japanese foreign policy. It is the systematic and concentrated effort of the Abe administration to revise the pacifist constitution that distinguishes it from moves towards normalization of the Japanese foreign policy in the past. The driving force behind the Japanese strategic recalibration is an attempt to adapt to the changing security environment, a move which has been long overdue. The ever-looming North Korean threat and a newly assertive China are the greatest challenges for

Japanese security. More active foreign policy does not necessarily mean aggressive, though. As long as the American commitment to Japan remains unwavering- what at least for the foreseeable future appears to be guaranteed- prospects of a militarist, aggressive Japan are highly unlikely. On the contrary, building upon a transformation of the role of its armed forces, Tokyo could contribute more to international stability and also become a more reliable alliance partner for the US. Japan must avoid nationalistic rhetoric and provocative actions in order to cement itself as a responsible power and reliable partner for other countries in the region. How successful Tokyo proves to be in managing the complicated relationships, particularly vis à vis Beijing, will be crucial to the maintenance of peace and stability in the coming Asian century.

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