

ABE SHINZO'S NEW NATIONALISM AND THE FUTURE OF SINO-JAPANESE RELATIONS¹

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To many observers the election of the “hawkish” 52-year old Abe Shinzo as Prime Minister by the National Diet on September 26, 2006 appeared to complete Japan’s post-Cold War journey towards a more self-confident and assertive national identity. Abe’s initial popularity seemed to confirm that Japan finally had broken free of the repentant stance that had defined its policy towards China during much of the post-World War II period.² The new prime minister offered an unapologetic vision of a country that had transcended the burden of its militaristic past and was taking its rightful place among the major world powers. In his first policy address to a joint meeting of both houses of the Diet on September 29, 2006, Abe pledged to bring about a “beautiful” Japan based on traditional culture and values, and “a country that is trusted, respected, and loved in the world, and which demonstrates leadership.”³

ABE’S RISE AND JAPAN’S EMERGING NATIONAL IDENTITY

In terms of the broad sweep of Japan’s postwar political history, Abe’s rise to power has been nothing less than extraordinary. First elected to the Diet in 1993, Abe had served only five terms instead of the six normally required to be elected to a 3-year term as LDP president. He had never held a cabinet-level position until Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro appointed him Chief Cabinet Secretary in October 2005.

A closer look at the factors behind Abe’s election as well as his actions since taking office reveals a more complex picture than many observers have painted. Developments in late 2006 and early 2007 also raise some important questions about his staying power. A number of missteps and gaffes by Abe and his cabinet members that affect the lives of ordinary Japanese have had a very negative effect on his popularity, while moves to gratify his conservative “base” have had comparatively little positive resonance.

¹ This article has been adapted from the Afterword by Richard P. Cronin to Benjamin L. Self, *The Dragon’s Shadow: The Rise of China and Japan’s New Nationalism* (Washington: Henry L. Stimson Center, 2006).

² *Ibid.*, pp. 1-5.

³ Office of the Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 165th Session of the Diet,” September 29, 2006

<http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/abepphoto/2006/09/29shoshin_e.html>

The Role of Abe's Revisionist Nationalism to His Election: Less Than Meets the Eye

Although his unabashed nationalism has been his main source of public recognition, Abe's ideology actually had comparatively little direct connection to his selection as the LDP standard-bearer. For one thing, the impact of generational change goes well beyond the coming to power of new leaders with no personal knowledge of the causes and consequences of the country's past militarism, or calculated historical amnesia, however troubling those may be. Abe's flamboyant but soft-spoken style and emphasis on the need for more far-reaching economic and administrative reforms resonated well with many younger Japanese, particularly urbanites upon whom the future of the party depends. Koizumi's singular political achievement was regaining the urban vote for the LDP in his September 2005 electoral landslide for the first time since the 1993 split in the LDP. Although Abe lacked Koizumi's charisma, he represented the best chance to maintain this critical constituency.

A significant source of Abe's appeal to the LDP and to the Japanese public was largely superficial -- an image that was both fresh and conservative at the same time. For many Japanese public, Abe's youth and style alone seemed enough to make him popular. A well-known Japanese political commentator attributed Abe's popularity in part to his "very noble, prince-type of image like that of aristocrats," one that particularly resonated with "Japanese conservatives, housewives and the media."⁴

Certainly, in at least two respects Abe's triumph represents a significant advance in Japan's increasingly assertive international posture. First, the election of a politician with Abe's energy and high profile suggests the Japanese have come to expect a leader in the mold of his predecessor and patron, former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, who can hold his own on the world stage. (Whether this was a valid assessment remains to be firmly established.) Second, Abe's blunt rejection of efforts by China and the two Koreas to use the history issue as a diplomatic weapon against Japan has been in keeping with the popular mood.

Still, both of these explanations are rooted in gut emotions of national pride and the aspiration to be regarded as a normal country. Neither is directly indicative of public support for ideological nationalism of the kind that leads to confrontation and conflict. Even China's *People's Daily* agreed that the election was not a referendum on Abe's assertive nationalism. The official organ of the Chinese Communist Party, gave more emphasis to the

⁴ Views of political analyst Watanabe Tsuneo of the Mitsui Global Strategic Studies Institute in "Japan's PM Race in Final Stretch, Debate Focuses on Asia Ties, Tax," *Japan Policy and Politics*, September 4, 2006.

<http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0XPQ/is_2006_Sept_4/ai_n16704215>

concentration of power in Koizumi's hands and Abe's personality than his hawkish views.⁵

Among other more substantial campaign pledges that did not relate to his nationalist agenda, Abe pledged that he would maintain the recently achieved 3 percent annual economic growth rate and would work to close the growing income gap that was threatening Japan's comparatively egalitarian social order. A so-called "second chance" plank in Abe's platform, which proposed government assistance to allow failed businesses to "try again," responded to concerns that he might not be sufficiently committed to Koizumi's reforms and/or lacked significant economic policy experience.⁶

In the end, the most critical factors in Abe's successful bid for the LDP presidency appear to have been the support of his predecessor, Koizumi, and the hope within the party that his popularity and telegenic persona would give the party its best chance for victory in next year's Upper House parliamentary elections. Koizumi, who had greatly increased his personal influence through the victory of his chosen candidates in the September 2005 general election, had been grooming Abe for more than a year.

Low Saliency of Nationalism since the Election

Six months after his assumption of the premiership Abe's image has been substantially tarnished despite progress towards realizing his revisionist-nationalist agenda. The reasons for the rapid fall in Abe's popularity largely go beyond the focus of this article, but they underscore the essential practicality of the Japanese public and the limited appeal of revisionist ideological nationalism. A number of missteps and gaffes by Abe and his cabinet members have damaged his credibility, while moves to gratify his conservative "base" have had little positive resonance with the public.

The negative effect of these scandals, gaffes, and unpopular policy moves have overshadowed whatever boost Abe had gained from his success in restoring normal relations with China. As a consequence, his public support plunged from the 70 percent range just after his election in September 2006 to 39 percent in January 2007.⁷

Upgrading the National Defense Agency to ministry status in early January was met with relative equanimity in Japan, and even by China.⁸ An NHK opinion

⁵ "Why Abe Wins in Such a Carefree, Light-Hearted Air?" *People's Daily Online*, September 22, 2006. <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200609/21/eng20060921_304986.html>

⁶ Hiroko Nakata, "Prime Minister Front Runner Tries to Win Over Public by Establishing His Economic Credentials," *Japan Times*, August 10, 2006. *Asia Media News Daily* <<http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article-eastasia.asp?parentid=50676>>

⁷ "Japanese PM's Support Falls to Less than 40 Percent," AFP, January 23, 2007.

⁸ <http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20070123/wl_asia_afp/japanpolitics_070123025958>

poll found that only 42 percent of the Japanese public supported the move, while 23 percent opposed it.⁹

Passage of an education bill to fulfill his pledge to promote patriotism in the schools likewise has met with a tepid public response. Although some 50 percent of the public supported the bill, a significant 41 percent opposed it. Most Japanese think that the country needs to be more patriotic -- 63 percent in a January 2007 poll by the *Asahi Shimbun* -- but by a margin of 85 to 78 percent, more respondents agreed that Japan needed “to reflect” on its past militarism than those who said that they personally “felt a sense of patriotism.” Even more telling, patriotism among younger Japanese – i.e., those who are of military age and represent the future – was lower than among their elders.¹⁰

Politically tone-deaf gaffes by right-leaning members of his government have been especially embarrassing and have put Abe on the defensive. These include loose talk about reconsidering Japan’s no-nuclear policy by Foreign Minister Aso Taro and other senior LDP leaders following North Korea’s nuclear test, and the characterization of Japanese women as “birth-giving machines” by the health minister.¹¹

Equally damaging have been decisions that have raised questions about his commitment to economic reform and a reduction in the income gap – goals that may indeed be mutually incompatible. These missteps include Abe’s readmission to the party of 18 LDP politicians banished by Koizumi for opposing his postal reform bill, and the adoption of “pro-growth” policies that have been criticized as favoring big business.¹² Two senior officials have had to resign as a result of personal financial scandals, including the state minister for administrative reform who was assigned responsibility to lead regulatory reform, and the chairman of the tax commission, charged with carrying out economic reforms.¹³

CENTRALITY OF CHINA IN THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Much as the American 2006 mid-term relations were said to be about the George W. Bush administration’s handling of the war in Iraq, the competition for the LDP presidency turned importantly on the poor state of Japan’s relations

⁹ “Japan Upgrades Defense to Full Ministry,” AP, January 8, 2007 <<http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/01/09/asia/AS-GEN-Japan-Defense.php>>

¹⁰ “Most Japanese Want More Patriotism: Poll,” *AFP*, January 24, 2007 <http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20070125/wl_asia_afp/japanpoliticswwii_070125024212>

¹¹ “Japanese Prime Minister Struggles to Quell Talk of Nuclear Weapons for Japan,” AP, October 18, 2006. <<http://www3.whdh.com/news/articles/world/MI31154/>>; Abe Rejects Opposition Demand to Yanagisawa Over ‘Birth-Giving machine’ Remark,” Japan Today, January 31, 2007 <<http://www.japantoday.com/jp/news/397587>>

¹² “Japan PM Support Falls As Scandals Weigh,” *ninemsn.com*, January 23, 2007. <<http://news.ninemsn.com.au/article.aspx?id=180960&rss=yes>>

¹³ “Honma Scandal to Accelerate Decline of Abe’s Cabinet Approval Rate,” Japan Press Weekly, December 22, 2006 <<http://www.japan-press.co.jp/2509/politics2.html>>; Editorial: “Minister Sata Resigns,” *Asahi Shimbun*, December 29, 2006 <<http://210.173.169.167/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200612290093.html>>

with China. Like all of the candidates for the LDP presidency, Abe pledged to reestablish normal ties with China, Japan's main Asian rival as well as a critically important economic partner. Sino-Japanese relations had been dangerously strained during the past five years. Although the decline of Sino-Japanese relations had deep roots, the overt cause was China's harsh criticisms of Prime Minister Koizumi's repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. The Shinto shrine, established after the 1868 Meiji Restoration to honor Japan's war dead, has been widely viewed by China, the two Koreas, and even a significant section of the Japanese public as a symbol of unrepentant militarism.

Many Japanese also blame China for fueling tensions by provocative actions such as conducting deep-seabed oil and gas explorations in areas claimed by both countries, and blatant intrusions into Japanese waters by Chinese submarines. Revealingly, in a national poll conducted by *Kyodo News* in the wake of Abe's trip to Beijing and Seoul in October 2006, shortly after taking office, 83.2 percent of the respondents favored the trip while 56.6 also opposed a prime ministerial visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. The latter figure represented an increase of 5.3 percentage points from a poll taken just after Abe's election in late September.¹⁴

Abe's positions on the history issue and Japanese security policy likely will continue to cause frictions in relations with both China and South Korea. These include especially his promise to hold a referendum on revising the Constitution to allow the exercise of the right of collective self-defense and to consider whether Japan should acquire the capability to attack North Korean missiles on their launch pads.¹⁵ During his election campaign, then-Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe opined about the constitutionality of a preemptive attack on North Korean missile bases in a crisis, commenting that "there is the view" that such action would be constitutional, and that the discussion should be deepened about acquiring that capability.¹⁶

From one perspective, Abe's promise seemed questionable in light of the historical revisionism that is an essential element of his new nationalism. Moreover, as then-Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's Chief Cabinet Secretary, Abe had been a leading supporter of Koizumi's controversial visits to the

¹⁴ "83% Happy with Abe's China trip, Opposition to Yasukuni Visit Rises." *Japan Policy & Politics*, October 16, 2006.

¹⁵ Martin Fackler, "Tokyo Talks of Military Strike on North Korea," *IHT*, July 10, 2006. <<http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/07/10/news/japan.php>>

The 2006 issue of the Japan Defense Agency's annual publication, *The Defense of Japan*, explains that Japan has the right under international law to engage in collective self-defense with one or more countries but that the Government of Japan "believes that the exercise of collective self-defense exceeds the limit of self-defense authorized under Article 9 of the Constitution and is not therefore permissible under the Constitution." Japan Defense Agency, *Defense of Japan 2006* (provisional English translation), 3. <<http://www.jda.go.jp/e/index.htm>>

¹⁶ James Joyner, "Japan Considering Preemptive Strike on North Korea." *Outside the Beltway*, July 10, 2006. <http://www.outsidethebeltway.com/archives/2006/07/japan_considering_preemptive_strike_on_north_korea/>

Yasukuni Shrine. Both China and South Korea had rejected Koizumi's protestations that he went to pray for peace, not to glorify militarism.¹⁷

A PERSONAL ASPECT TO ABE'S HISTORICAL REVISIONISM?

Another reason to question the actual depth of public support for creating a new historical narrative is the uniquely personal aspect to the goal on the part of some proponents, most notably Abe himself and foreign minister Aso. The families of both men bear the taint of association with Japan's imperial aggression before and during World War II. Abe's maternal grandfather, Prime Minister Kishi Nobosuke (1957-1960), had been a senior economic official in the Japanese puppet state of Manchuko (Manchuria) in the late 1930s and an economic minister in General Tojo Hideki's wartime cabinet. He was also a signer of the declaration of war against the United States. Kishi had been jailed by the Occupation authorities for three years as a suspected Class A war criminal until being rehabilitated and going on to become a founding member of the LDP.¹⁸ Whatever was in his file, the rehabilitation of Kishi and numerous other conservative wartime leaders appeared to stem from the growing fear of Communism following Mao Zedong's victory over the Chinese nationalist regime of Chang Kai-shek in 1949, not the merits of the case. Abe has proudly described his grandfather as a role model, and those close to him have commented that he has inherited Kishi's political "DNA."¹⁹

Foreign Minister Aso also appears to take the history issue personally. Aso's father owned a mine in Kyushu that reportedly employed forced labor from China, Korea, and Allied countries during World War II.²⁰ Aso has garnered criticism both in Japan and the rest of Asia for arguing the benefits of Japanese

¹⁷The ironically named Yasukuni ("Peaceful Nation") Shrine memorializes by name the souls of more than 2.4 million Japanese war dead since the 1868 Meiji Restoration, the ended the feudalistic Tokagawa Shogunate and began Japan's era of forced modernization. Visits by Japanese leaders to the shrine became highly controversial both within and outside Japan following the 1978 enshrinement of 14 so-called "Class A" war criminals convicted by an international tribunal during the post-World War II American Occupation period. A war museum on the grounds of the privately run Shinto Shrine has exhibits and dispenses written material that seeks to deny various atrocities perpetrated by Japanese military forces such as the 1937 "Nanjing Massacre" and blames the United States for forcing the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Michael Judge, "The Struggle to Be 'Normal'," *International Herald Tribune (IHT)*, December 9, 2005.

¹⁸ Kishi and 19 other high level suspects were released from prison on December 24, 1948, the day after the hanging of those convicted by the Tokyo war crimes Tribunal. It was Prime Minister Kishi who bulldozed through the Diet the highly contested renewal of the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty in 1960 in the face of serious leftist riots and opposition from some conservatives in his own party who had a different set of concerns from the anti-US demonstrators.

¹⁹⁵ "The Abe Enigma," *Time Asia Edition*, October 30, 2006. <<http://www.time.com/time/asia/magazine/article/0,13673,501060918-1533514-2,00.html>>

²⁰ Christopher Reed, "Family Skeletons: Japan's Foreign Minister and Forced Labor by Koreans and Allied POWs," *ZNet*, April 30, 2006. <<http://www.king.org/listen/index.aspx>>

colonialism for conquered peoples, such as the modernizing education, developing economic infrastructure and initiating industrialization. Among other egregious examples of historical denial, Aso has insisted with a straight face that Koreans under Japanese colonial rule willingly adopted the Japanese language and Japanese names.²¹ It seems reasonable to assume that in seeking to create a new national historical narrative, Abe, Aso and other revisionists are at least partly influenced by the desire to restore the tainted reputations of their forbearers.

Many older Japanese, especially those who personally experienced the trauma of the war and the deprivation of the early postwar era, do not welcome the new nationalism. Along with younger Japanese who are apolitical and what remains of the political left, they continue to support pacifism and to value the democratic reforms introduced by the Occupation and the restrictions on the role of the military under the 1947 constitution.²²

Even within the LDP these concerns resonate sufficiently that finance minister Takigaki tried to score points in pre-election debates by asking Abe and Aso embarrassing questions about the issue of war responsibility. In a September 11 debate organized by the Japanese National Press Club, Tanigaki challenged Abe to give his view on the PRC line that the Japanese militarists alone bore responsibility for the war and that the Japanese people were also victims along with Chinese, Koreans, and other Asians. Abe angrily rejected the Chinese line as “classism,” that is, what he called an effort “to divide the Japanese into militarists and ordinary citizens,” which he said was “a view to which Japan did not agree.” Abe also responded that he was not qualified to make historical judgments about Japan’s World War II role.²³

ABE’S RISE AND THE DEEPER SOURCES OF JAPAN’S CHANGING SELF-IDENTITY

The broader internal and external circumstances that contributed to Abe’s dramatic rise resonate with the longer sweep of Japan’s interaction with China in the post-World War II era. These include fundamental shifts such as the end of the Cold War and the related decimation of the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), the juxtaposition of a rising, self-assured China with the post-bubble decline in

²¹ Both Taiwanese and Koreans were forced to speak and write Japanese. “Japan FM: Colonialization Helped Taiwan, *Reuters*, February 6, 2006; Editorial, “Japan’s Offensive Foreign Minister,” *New York Times*, February 13, 2006. <<http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=F40914FD395A0C708DDDB0894DE404482>>

²² Hiroyuki Sakai, “Constitutional Tampering Only Risks Progress.” Point of View, *Asahi Shimbun*, October 7, 2006.

²³ “Aso, Tanigaki Vie for 2nd Spot,” *Yomiuri Shimbun*, September 20, 2006. <<http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20060920TDY03004.htm>>

Japanese confidence, the passing from the scene of major figures in the China “pipe,” and other institutional and generational changes within the LDP.

Beyond specific policy issues, the Japanese public’s embrace of the young, brash, and openly revisionist-nationalist politician indicates growing acceptance of the need for a consciously Realist approach to regional foreign and security policy. The perception of a growing military and economic threat from China and the emergence of a nuclear-armed North Korea have been the main causes of this growing security consciousness. The Japanese public still opposes the use of military force except in strictly defined situations of self-defense, but otherwise the Japanese people have become increasingly accepting of increases in the capabilities of the Japanese military, such as the acquisition of a BMD capability, and the expansion of non-combat military cooperation with US forces.

In addition, both the public and the new generation of political leaders have been frustrated by Japan’s comparative lack of international recognition and respect and, in the view of many Japanese, an excessively subordinate and dependent alliance relationship with an increasingly unilateralist United States. These feelings have been reinforced by the feeling that the United States has been insufficiently supportive of high priority objectives such as gaining a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.²⁴ Overall public support for the alliance remains high, but those on the right tend to favor a more self-sufficient and independent military posture, while those on the left tend to fear being drawn into future Iraq-type situations that do not serve Japanese national interests.²⁵

Some analysts argue more broadly that the Japanese people remain “instinctively suspicious of the military both as an institution and as an instrument of foreign policy.”²⁶ While Abe himself has pledged to strengthen alliance cooperation, he also has called for a more broadly based military

²⁴ Despite public support from both the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, Japanese policymakers suspect that the caveats attached to US support since the Clinton administration effectively have made such support largely rhetorical. That is, American support for Japan’s bid has been secondary to the desire of the United States to maintain its influence by restricting the size of an expanded council. In mid-2005 the Bush administration declared that it only supported Japan’s accession among the so-called G-4 countries of Japan, Brazil, Germany and India which have supported each other’s accession and pushed to enter the Security Council as a bloc. Speaking candidly of U.S. support, then-foreign minister Machimura Nobutaka reportedly told group of Diet Members “I think they threw a difficult curveball that at first glance looks favorable, yet also problematic. Brian Knowlton, “Japan Cool to U.S. Support at UN.” *International Herald Tribune*, June 18, 2005. <<http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/06/17/news/nations.php>> Soeren Kern, “Why Changing the Security Council Threatens Broader UN Reform.”

²⁵ This concern appears to be a minority view among the public at large. A survey conducted by the prime minister’s office in 2006 reportedly found that 19 percent saw the risk of war resulting from inadequate Japanese military power, and 17 percent saw it as coming from being drawn into an American war. Hikari Agkimi, ““We the Japanese People” – A Reflection on Public Opinion.” *The Japan Institute of International Affairs*, May 22, 2006.

²⁶ Thomas U. Berger, “Focus on a Changing Japan – The National Security Dimension.” Testimony to the House International Relations’ Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, April 20, 2005. <<http://www.internationalrelations.house.gov/archives/aphear.htm>>

capability. All of these factors are likely to have significant implications for the future of the US-Japan Alliance.

OPPORTUNITY FOR A FRESH START: ABE'S OCTOBER 2006 TRIP TO CHINA AND SOUTH KOREA

That Abe was able to make state visits to both Beijing and Seoul within two weeks of his election underscores the eagerness of all three countries to reestablish head of state level contacts once Koizumi had left office. Although Abe had pledged prior to his election to improve relations with China and South Korea, his insistence at that time on reciprocity in resolving differences with both countries did not seem to augur well for success. His insistence that both countries' leaders would have to meet him half way implied that the PRC and ROK would have to recognize Japan's right to honor its war dead as it pleased. For both neighboring countries, stopping the Shrine visits had become the sine qua non of restoring summit meetings and state visits. Abe could expect no retreat on this point from either country, and he wisely did not try.

To facilitate his visit, Abe deftly abandoned his more controversial nationalistic positions. He reversed his previous position and affirmed that former Prime Minister Murayama Tomichii's 1995 apology for Japan's World War II aggression was still official Japanese policy. He acknowledged that all of Japan's wartime ministers bore some responsibility, including his grandfather. He also withdrew his past statements that the postwar international tribunals were illegitimate, while still maintaining the position that the 14 convicted Class A war criminals were not guilty under Japanese domestic law.²⁷

Abe backtracked further during his October 8 visit to Beijing. Most important, in a post-visit press conference, Abe related that he had told Hu that "from the viewpoint of solving political difficulties" he would handle the Yasukuni Shrine issue "appropriately," and he reiterated to the media that he would not say whether he had visited or would visit the Shrine. Abe also told the press that he believed he had gained China's "understanding" of his insistence on maintaining ambiguity about the issue. He sought to defuse the textbook issue by resurrecting an idea first informally agreed by the foreign ministers of Japan and China in April 2005. Abe proposed, and Chinese President Hu Jintao agreed to consider, the review of each other's textbooks and the possible establishment of a joint study on history. Finally, Abe said that he had extended invitations to both President Hu and Premier Wen Jiabao to visit Japan, and that both had accepted, though no dates were set.²⁸

²⁷ "Abe Endorses Murayama's War Apology," *Xinhua/Agencies*, Oct 7, 2006.
<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-10/07/content_702556.htm>

²⁸ Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Conference 22 April 2005.
<<http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/press/2005/4/0422.html#9>>; Office of the Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet., "Press Conference by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe Following His Visit to

It was rumored but officially denied that the three governments had carefully worked out how to deal with the Yasukuni Shrine issue prior to the visit, probably in vice-ministerial talks in Beijing soon after Abe's election and in a meeting in Tokyo between Foreign Minister Aso and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo.²⁹ Given the stakes, including the expectation of a North Korean nuclear test, it would have been extraordinary if they had not. By neither insisting on acceptance of the Shrine visits nor surrendering his right to make them, Abe saved sufficient face on all sides to break the existing deadlock.

The readiness of Beijing and Seoul to make a new start with Tokyo did not reflect a sanguine view of Abe's nationalism or reduced wariness about future Japanese policy. Rather both China and South Korea recognized that their important interest in reestablishing stable relations with Japan was reason enough for taking advantage of the opportunity to escape the double bind that resulted from their insistence that Koizumi cease visiting the Shrine. For the time being, both governments also seemed willing to give Abe the benefit of the doubt that his studied ambiguity about future visits to the Yasukuni Shrine means that he understands the consequences of a Shrine visit. Whether he might reverse course in the months ahead, either because of new frictions in Tokyo's relations with Beijing or for domestic political reasons, remains to be seen.

POSITIVE IMPACT OF NORTH KOREA'S OCTOBER 9 NUCLEAR

Somewhat ironically, North Korea's October 9, 2006 nuclear test served to create a new opening for reestablishing normal and even cooperative relations between Tokyo and Beijing, at least regarding the Korean Peninsula. Although Abe's trip to Beijing and Seoul was arranged prior to the DPRK's nuclear test—indeed he had already completed his visit to China when the test occurred—the rumors of a test had supplied common ground for substantive discussion.

Initially, at least, the three countries' leaders took a similar rhetorical approach to North's action. In an official statement immediately after the test, China condemned Pyongyang's action as a "brazen" affront to "the general concern of the international community" and expressed "its resolute opposition."³⁰ Later, China for the first time supported a UNSC resolution that imposed binding economic, financial, and nuclear-related trade sanctions on North Korea, but

China," October 8, 2006.

<http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/abespeech/2006/10/08chinapress_e.html>

²⁹ Hisane Misaki, "Abe's Multiple Policy Dilemmas." Asia Times Online, September 28, 2006.

<<http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Japan/HI28Dh01.html>>

³⁰ "Test Rattles Awkward Peace: Onetime Ally China Condemns 'Brazen' Actions As South Korea Enters Emergency Meetings," Edmonton Journal (from Bloomberg News and AFP), October 9, 2006.

only after working with Russia to defeat an even stronger US-Japan version that could have been cited at some future point as authorizing the use of military force. As passed, Resolution 1718 explicitly bars the use of force to enforce the sanctions.³¹

Significantly, China also reacted with unusual restraint terms after Foreign Minister Aso Taro and LDP policy Chief Nakagawa Shoichi remarked publicly that the time may have come to discuss the issue in view of the North Korean test.³² On October 17, Chinese government spokesman Liu Jianchao mildly expressed hope that Japan would remain “able to strictly carry out its [NPT] treaty obligations and appropriately defend the three-point nuclear principle.” He urged Japan to “adopt a responsible attitude” to support peace and stability in the region.³³ A few days later, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao also welcomed Abe’s assurances that Japan would not abandon its non-nuclear principles with the mild statement that this stance “benefits Asia.”³⁴

KEY FACTORS GOVERNING THE FUTURE OF JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS AND THE VIABILITY OF THE US-JAPAN ALLIANCE

The United States has a strong interest in the establishment of stable and cooperative relations between Japan and the PRC. American interests are not served if Japan becomes unnecessarily involved in an open regional rivalry with China. Unfortunately, the United States has only limited ability to influence the course of Sino-Japanese relations. The following issues are likely to constitute the main determinants of Tokyo’s future relations with Beijing as well as the United States’ other Northeast Asian ally, South Korea.

The Content and Context of Japan’s New Historical Narrative

By itself, the desire of the historical revisionists to create a historical narrative as the basis for restoring a sense of patriotism and pride among the Japanese people is understandable. Most countries’ official and popular histories gloss over issues that undermine their “national story.” Even during the height of the

³¹ “UN Security Council Passes Resolution Sanctioning North Korea,” *VOA News*, October 14, 2006.

³² “LDP, Komeito Officials Seek to Rein in Nuke Talk,” *The Japan Times Online*, Nov. 6, 2006.

³³ “China Urges Japan Not to Develop Nuclear Weapons,” *Japan Economic Newswire*, October 17, 2006.

³⁴ “China’s Wen Says Abe’s Nonnuclear Pledge Benefits Asia,” *Japan Economic Newswire*, October 23, 2006. China’s restraint was in marked contrast to its response when, after North Korea’s missile tests in early July 2006, Abe as Chief Cabinet Secretary asserted that in the face of pending missile attack from North Korea, the constitution would allow attacking North Korean missiles on their launch pads. At that time, a Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman said that the “threat” by Abe and other LDP figures was “extremely irresponsible and incomprehensible” and was “like pouring oil on a fire.” “Japan Is Pouring Oil on Fire with Strike Threat,” *China Daily*, July 13, 2006.

Friendship period, nationalism and recalcitrance about war responsibility always lurked just below the surface.

A significant problem with Japan's failure thus far to come fully to terms with its militarist past is that it limits the opportunity to learn from past experience in making future security policy decisions. In most countries, the failure to clearly understand the past is considered a potentially dangerous shortcoming, but this view is less widely held in Japan. Commenting approvingly on Abe's assertive nationalism, Takashi Sasagawa, an LDP lawmaker, observed "He's from the generation that doesn't know war... Not knowing war is his strength, because he can be on equal terms with other countries."³⁵

Constitutional Revision and Japan's "Normal Nation" Status

Prime Minister Abe appears determined to go through with his promise to hold a national referendum on revising Article 9 of the constitution. He has already fulfilled his commitment to elevate the Japan Defense Agency (JDA) to the ministry level and to gain Diet approval for legislation to authorize the export of some kinds of military weapons and hardware. Abe may well preside over Japan's full return to "normal country" status.

Giving substance to this constitutional policy creep would depend on additional steps that Japan has not taken thus far, especially the decision to boost its stagnant level of defense spending. Japan has long limited defense spending to one percent of GDP. At about \$42 billion annually Japan still has one of the world's top four defense budgets, but without a significant budget increase or a radical reallocation of priorities, Japan likely will have difficulty financing both the acquisition of two different US ballistic missile defense systems as well as a capability to conduct long-range precision strikes, whether by air or sea.³⁶

Although China's leaders railed against the alleged revival of Japanese militarism during the Koizumi era, it is questionable at a minimum whether a new historical narrative built partly on historical amnesia necessarily presages a return to pre-war style militarism. In fact, Japanese military spending has been relatively stagnant for a decade. Despite the assertion by Prime Minister Abe and other "hawks" regarding the "right" to make a preemptive strike on missiles about to be launched at Japan, the government has yet to make the necessary investment in an offensive capability. Japanese youth show no indication of rushing to the enlistment offices in a burst of new patriotism or jingoist passion.

³⁵ "Japan Takes A Step To The Right," *CBS News* (from *Associated Press*), September 20, 2006. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/09/20/world/main2024770.shtml>>

³⁶ Eric Talmadge, "Japan Rearming As Tensions Rise in Asia." *Associated Press*, October 30, 2006. <<http://www.theGlobeandMail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20061030.wjapann1030/BNSStory/International>>

Moreover, it is China, not Japan, whose defense spending is growing by double digits every year. The growth of revisionist nationalism and talk of acquiring a preemptive strike capability does, however, touch a still sensitive historical nerve in East and to a lesser extent Southeast Asia. The LDP as well as the more conservative wing of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) have stopped speaking in oblique language and now openly identify China and North Korea as threats to Japan's security.³⁷

Outcome of the 2007 Upper House Elections

Abe's ability to pursue a strongly nationalist agenda, should he choose to, could depend importantly on the LDP's ability to end its dependence on support from its coalition partner, the New Komeito, a small but highly disciplined party affiliated with the Nichiren Buddhist sect. The LDP routed the DPJ in the 2005 general election, and has a comfortable majority in the lower House of Representatives. But the ruling party depends on the New Komeito to maintain the two-thirds majority in the lower house necessary to pass legislation without requiring the assent of the upper House of Councilors. In the upper house, which has a similar role to the British House of Lords, the LDP is well short of a majority. This imperative is the main reason that the LDP has put so much emphasis on electing a popular and articulate Prime Minister who could lead the party to a clear majority in next year's upper house elections.

Despite its pacifist orientation, the New Komeito has moved rightward in recent years in response to concerns about the threat from North Korea's missiles and nuclear capability and Japanese domestic political realities. The party supported the dispatch of warships to provide non-combat logistical support of US and allied operations in the Indian Ocean following 9/11 and sending military units to support reconstruction in Iraq following the invasion in 2003. On the other hand, the New Komeito openly acknowledges and apologizes for Japan's imperial aggression and it disapproved of Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. Thus, although the party has grown more accepting of a wider role for Japanese forces and grown more supportive of the US-Japan alliance, it continues to oppose changing or reinterpreting Article 9 of the Constitution to permit collective security arrangements involving the possible use of force in support of US actions against third countries.³⁸

The New Komeito already has strongly supported Abe's initiative to repair relations with China, but the party will be in a position to block any future nationalist measures that it opposes. Winning next year's upper house elections and thereby breaking free of dependence on the New Komeito will be a critical determinant of how far Abe can go with his nationalist agenda.

³⁷ "What is Japanese FM's intention fanfaring 'China threat'?", People's Daily Online, December 23, 2005. <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200512/23/eng20051223_230393.html>

³⁸ New Komeito Home Page, Policy Detail: "Chapter 5: Strategies for International Peace Building, 2. National Security and Crisis Management System." <<http://www.komei.or.jp/en/policy/11.html>>

Japan's Ability to Achieve Sustained Economic Revitalization

In the longer term, the state of relations between Tokyo and Beijing could depend to a significant extent on Abe's ability to carry out continued economic reform. Mutual economic benefit provided the main underpinning of the long postwar era of Sino-Japanese friendship. China's subsequent emergence as an economic competitor played an important indirect role in the deterioration of relations, even in the face of growing ties of trade and investment. The reemergence of overt rivalry in the 1990s coincided with China's economic rise and Japan's post-economic bubble "lost decade."

Contrary to the projections of many economists, who argued that Japan could not attain an export-led economic recovery, China's surging economy almost single-handedly reversed Japan's period of minimal or negative growth. The Chinese riots threatened to undercut this nascent recovery and caused Japanese companies to begin to re-think their investment strategies. China remains a huge market and a major offshore manufacturing platform, but increasingly Japanese companies have been hedging against political risk in China by adopting a "China plus One" [Southeast Asian country] investment strategy.³⁹

China's emerging displacement of Japan as the regional "core" economy has increased anxiety both in the government offices and in the boardrooms of major Japanese companies. If current trends continue, China will soon become a larger trading partner with Southeast Asia than Japan, although the latter remains a far more important source of investment and technology.

IMPLICATIONS FOR US ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ABE GOVERNMENT

The emergence of a more assertive and nationalistic Japan raises important issues for US policy, both regarding the future of the alliance and U.S. policy towards China. On the positive side, the election of Prime Minister Abe offers a new opportunity for the United States to engage with the Japanese government on the issue of Japan's relations with China and Korea. Despite their concern with Abe's assertive nationalism, both China and South Korea have welcomed the opportunity to reestablish ties at the head of state level.

It also remains to be seen what steps Abe will take to follow up on the positive atmosphere surrounding his meetings with Hu Jintao and Roh Moo-hyun in the longer term, but the leadership transition gives the United States a fresh opportunity to emphasize its concerns about the deterioration of Japan's relations with China and South Korea. Although he speaks in more hawkish terms, Abe is much more the traditional consensus-seeking politician than the

³⁹ Shingo Konomoto, "Responses by Japanese Companies to Business Risks in China. Nomura Research Institute, NRI Papers No. 98, December 1, 2005.
<<http://www.nri.co.jp/english/opinion/papers/2005/np200598.html>>

stoic and dogged Koizumi. He also knows that the Japanese public puts a high value on reestablishing normal working relations with China.

Especially in light of the North Korean nuclear test, the time would appear ripe for the United States to reengage with its two main triangular relationships in the region. This should include renewed efforts to promote better ties between Japan and China, and between its two regional allies, Japan and South Korea. In both cases, a common exasperation with North Korea could facilitate efforts to promote confidence building, although China and the ROK will likely remain opposed to economic sanctions that would potentially lead to chaos in the North.

The United States has little leverage with the Abe administration over the broader issue of historical revisionism. Nonetheless, to the extent that Abe's assertiveness leads to a qualitative and quantitative increase in defense cooperation and the acceptance of new roles and missions, US officials and senior military may have an increased opportunity for dialogue on this issue.

Japan's Policy Toward North Korea

Japan's policy towards North Korea has hardened significantly since Pyongyang's July 2006 missile tests and the October 2006 nuclear test, reintroducing a persistent source of friction between China and Japan. After the July missile tests, although they agreed to "condemn" the North's action, China and Russia joined to block a strong Japanese resolution that included sanctions. As a consequence, both the United States and Japan adopted further economic and other sanctions unilaterally.

China took North Korea's October 2006 nuclear test much more seriously, but still refused to accept a US-Japan draft resolution that would have both included sanctions and authorized the use of military force to enforce them. China insisted that the resolution under Article 41 of Chapter Seven of the UN Charter, which is restricted to non-military sanctions. Publicly, China has said that will enforce sanctions but not to the extent that they might "increase tensions" or cause the Kim regime to collapse. It has been widely rumored that Beijing quietly has adopted a number of sanctions or warnings that make clear its displeasure with the tests and imply stronger action in the event of another test.⁴⁰

As of early November 2006 North Korea has formally committed to rejoining the Six-Party Talks. If these talks should one day lead to concrete progress towards an agreement that North Korea will abandon its nuclear program in return for economic benefits and security guarantees, Japan will face a moment of truth. Tokyo's past implied commitment that, upon normalization with North Korea, it will provide a financial aid package equal to that it gave South Korea when relations were normalized in 1965. That package is estimated to be worth about \$10 billion allowing for inflation since 1965.

⁴⁰ Foster Klug, "U.S. presses China for tough action against North Korea ahead of Rice trip to Asia." *Associated Press*, October 16, 2006.

Making a decision to normalize relations will require some kind of Japanese compromise on the issue of the Japanese abductees, Abe's signature issue. This cannot happen without some movement by North Korea. Without action by North Korea it is unlikely that any Japanese administration would be willing to move towards normalizing relations given the huge amount of political capital that would have to be spent, not to mention the wrenching emotional aspects of the situation.

To date Japan has generally sat on the sidelines and still regards a full accounting of the fate of the abductees and related actions by North Korea as the sine qua non of any agreement for it to participate in a deal and normalize relations with North Korea. At present, US support of Japan's position on the abductees has no practical cost. Should North Korea ever show willingness to reach an agreement to abandon its nuclear weapons capability, Abe could be forced to compromise on his signature issue. A compromise would be especially difficult and politically damaging if he has not made progress on the economic issues that are of greater concern to the general public.

The Taiwan Issue

How Japan deals with the Taiwan issue under a more assertive and more nationalist administration could be critically important to the maintenance of stable relations between Tokyo and Beijing. In general, LDP members on the political right have long been supportive of Taiwan.

Not only are trade and economic relations with Taiwan important, but the Japanese military and the Ministry of Defense appear to be showing more interest in Taiwan's strategic value. Okinawa is an hour closer by air to Taipei and Beijing than it is to Tokyo. Moreover, in recent years some Japanese, American and other strategists and observers have started to comment on the significance of Taiwan to anti-submarine defense. The argument is that Chinese submarines are vulnerable along its continental shelf in the South China Sea, but that on the east side of Taiwan the ocean deepens significantly.⁴¹ The US Defense Department has also begun to give more consideration to this particular strategic aspect.⁴² Especially because of the erratic behavior of Taiwan's president, Chen Shui-bian, elevating Tokyo's relations with Taipei could cause a significant negative reaction in Beijing.

Territorial Disputes

The dangers to US interests posed by tensions between Japan and China that have substantive content are serious. For instance, rising tempers over the competing claims to the deep sea resources around what Japan calls the Senkakus and China calls Daiyoutai, could lead to a future unwanted

⁴¹ Chris Rahman, "Defending Taiwan, and Why It Matters." *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2001, Vol. LIV, No. 4, 69-93.

⁴² Zalmay Khalilzad, et al, *The United States and Asia: Towards a New U.S. Strategy and Force Posture*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001.

confrontation that could jeopardize both the US-Japan alliance and US relations with China. For some time, both countries have been sending research vessels into the disputed area. The Japanese Coast Guard also has sent ships to monitor Chinese activities near or within Japan's 200-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The situation practically invites a bumping incident involving Chinese and Japanese ships that could escalate if neither side were willing to back down.

There are two related issues in dispute. The first is the ownership of the Senkakus/Daiyotai, which are occupied by Japan. The second concerns Chinese drilling near, and penetration into Japan's recognized Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The islands dispute is important because Japan seeks to use its occupation of the larger of these rocks to as a basis for extending its EEZ further towards Chinese territory, which goes against China's effort to claim the entire continental shelf off its shores, of which the islands are a part. China has proposed sharing the resources, but that would require Japan effectively to abandon its claim to the islands, and accept China's challenge to the Japanese EEZ.⁴³

Depending on interpretations of the 1972 Reversion of Okinawa agreement, Japan could invoke the alliance and request US support in the event of a military conflict. Even without invoking what it sees as treaty obligations, Japan would expect US support. Either situation would present the United States with extremely difficult policy choices.

Deng Xiaoping reportedly once declared that the dispute could be left to future generations. The very idea that there was a legitimate dispute angered Japan, but the issue was moot so long as China took no steps to establish its claim. Now, the vastly increased value of fishery resources and the presumed oil and gas deposits has made the question a much more urgent one.⁴⁴ At present, the tattered state of Japan-China relations and the high economic stakes makes progress on the issue unlikely and keeps alive the possibility of a clash.⁴⁵

Japan and the Issue of Nuclear Weapons

Without a doubt, the issue of whether Japan will maintain its non-nuclear posture is likely to be the single most important determinant of future cooperation on peace and security in Northeast Asia. Thus far, Abe and defense hawks in his circle speak mainly of obtaining a conventional strike capability as one means to defend against North Korean missiles. Nonetheless, concern that North Korea's demonstrated nuclear capability has the potential to tip the

⁴³ Mark J. Valencia, "The East China Seas Dispute: Ways Forward." Japanese Institute of Global Communications (GLOCOM), September 19, 2006.
<http://www.glocom.org/debates/20060919_valencia_east/index.html>

⁴⁴ Koji Taira, The China-Japan Clash over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, ZNET, September 20, 2004 <<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?itemID=6269>>

⁴⁵ "China, Japan gas talks end with no agreement," *Reuters*, Updated: 2006-03-07 17:24

balance in Japan towards acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, a development that would in all likelihood be followed by South Korea as well.

That said, in a 2003 Stimson Center book *Japan's Nuclear Option: Security, Politics and Policy in the 21st Century*, the co-editors Benjamin L. Self and Jeffrey W. Thomson concluded that because Japan maintains nuclear inspections and safeguards, has not maintained a surplus stock of plutonium on its territory, has not developed a bomb design, and has not produced appropriate delivery technology, a nuclear breakout is unlikely. There is still no indication that Japan is preparing to acquire a nuclear deterrent despite some calls for reviewing the issue following North Korea's nuclear test.⁴⁶ Prime Minister Abe has explicitly reaffirmed Japan's three non-nuclear principles -- not possessing, not producing and not permitting the introduction of nuclear weapons into Japan.⁴⁷

Confidence in the American nuclear umbrella will remain a major factor in whether Japan rethinks its policy on not possessing nuclear weapons; some in Japan appear to see U.S. credibility as having been diminished by the end of the Cold War. Until the collapse of the USSR, deterrence against Moscow's nuclear missiles and bombers was at one with deterring an attack on Japan. As long as American forces are stationed on Japanese soil and the alliance remains strong, Japan has reason to accept American assurances. Should this situation change, circumstances could be foreseen under which the value of the US nuclear deterrent could be brought into question, and calls for reopening the nuclear issue could intensify significantly.

The fact that Secretary Rice flew to Tokyo almost immediately after the North Korean test to reiterate the American commitment to Japan's defense suggests that the Bush administration is determined both to leave no doubt about the American commitment. Statements by Secretary Rice and other officials also implied that a decision by Japan to go nuclear would gravely threaten the alliance. To drive home the point, Rice made a second visit to Tokyo in early November 2006 and publicly exchanged mutual reassurances at a joint press conference with foreign minister Aso. It is likely, however, that Aso's statement that "The government of Japan has no position at all to consider going nuclear," was less categorical a statement than Rice was looking for.⁴⁸

CONCLUSION

Six decades after the end of World War II, Japan, China and South Korea continue to face each other uneasily. Despite their economic success and key

⁴⁶ Self and Thomson (eds.), *Japan's Nuclear Option*, 176.

⁴⁷ "On the Three Non-Nuclear Principles." Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA).

<<http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/disarmament/nnp/index.html>>

⁴⁸ Thom Shanker and Norimitsu Onishi, with David E. Sanger, "Japan Assures Rice That It Has No Nuclear Intentions." *New York Times*, November 6, 2006.

<<http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=F60815FA34540C7A8DDDA90994DE404482>>

roles in the global economy, both China and Japan are striving to become the leaders of East Asia.

For decades, Japan has defined its identity in relation to China and the rest of the world. In the full flush of the bubble economy, Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi, sensitive to the gap between Japan's surging dollar holdings and the realities of Japanese life such as housing that is cramped and not comparable to the standard of other developed countries, called for Japan to become a "lifestyle" superpower. The dollar value of its foreign aid also bolstered by the weakening dollar, Japanese leaders also talked about the country as an "ODA" superpower.

The three Northeast Asian powers – Japan, China, and South Korea – have many mutual interests, most notably their high degree of economic integration and need to keep North Korea in its box and maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Unfortunately, the fundamental international political, economic and geopolitical changes that were set in motion by China's rise make it unlikely that Tokyo and Beijing can achieve much more than controlled and peaceful competition. Arguably, Japan's inability to process its history in terms that are acceptable to the outside world is the primary obstacle to the achievement of the acceptance and respect that it seeks. Abe at least appears to understand that China is in a position to block his goals, such as obtaining a seat on the UN Security Council.

Because there seems little prospect that Japan and China can achieve anything more than the establishment of correct relations, a continuing political and security role on the part of the United States remains essential to regional peace and stability. Playing a stabilizing role requires simultaneously maintaining close alliance relations with Japan and a cooperative relationship with China. For better or worse, China has become critically important to the achievement of key US and Japanese goals such as denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula, as well as to Japan's politically important goal of gaining a full accounting of its citizens who were abducted by North Korea. Even with a strong US regional role, Japan and China appear destined to become rivals for regional power and influence. The United States is still the only Pacific power with the necessary incentive, experience, and wherewithal to play the role of a regional stabilizer.