

April 04, 2013

Abe's first 100 days

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Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is off to an impressive start. With his package of economic measures known as "Abenomics," stock prices have increased, the yen has weakened and support ratings for the Abe Cabinet have soared.

His recent visit to the United States was also successful, although it was not as dramatic a success as he portrayed it to be. Abe did not restore an alliance in crisis as he claimed. There was no crisis. The U.S.-Japan alliance has deep roots; it survived Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama and it was strong under Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda. And it remains strong as a result of Abe's interaction with President Barack Obama.

Abe took a forward looking stance on joining negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade arrangement. His subsequent announcement, months before the Upper House election and despite strong opposition from interest groups important to his Liberal Democratic Party that Japan would join the negotiations, took courage and was well-received in the United States.



Jan. 28, 2013 photo, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe delivers his policy speech during an

opening session at the lower house of parliament in Tokyo. Abe told a television talk show Tuesday, Jan. 29 that Japan and the international community will need to impose "quite severe measures" against North Korea if it conducts a nuclear test. (AP Photo)

On the Futenma relocation issue, the government is pushing forward with its request to the Okinawa prefectural government for an environmental assessment report. It is unclear if the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma can be moved to the Henoko area of Okinawa. Even if it can be accomplished, the political cost to the United States in Okinawa will be very high. In my view, it would be far better to give up the Henoko option. But there is no doubt that the U.S. government appreciates the efforts Abe is making to resolve this issue.

THE CAUTIOUS HAWK

Since becoming prime minister, Abe has taken a cautious stance on history issues, in particular, on the question of reviewing the statement released in the name of Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono in 1993 that expressed remorse and the government's responsibility for the suffering endured by women who were forced to provide sex to Japanese soldiers before and during World War II. It has been reported that the Obama administration made it clear that it would publicly criticize the Abe administration should it decide to review the Kono statement.

I believe Abe understands that this issue has the potential to harm relations not only with South Korea, but with the United States as well. It is good that he is avoiding repeating comments he made before becoming prime minister that the government bears no responsibility for forcibly recruiting so-called comfort women. It would be better if he forthrightly apologized, but at the minimum it is important that he avoid saying anything that would only worsen Japan-South Korean relations.

THE THIRD ARROW

If Abe is able to maintain the momentum of these first three months in office, the LDP should score a major victory in the Upper House election.

What then would he do after the election?

In order for Abenomics to be successful, he will have to push through structural reforms that can produce sustainable growth. That is not going to be easy or accomplished quickly. There is a long list of things that need to be done. The question is whether there is the political will to do them.

One big unknown is whether Abe will continue to focus on the economy after the Upper House election and shoot the so-called third arrow of Abenomics. The first two--fiscal stimulus and his demand that the Bank of Japan adopts a 2 percent inflation target--will only be effective if he moves on the third arrow of structural reforms. His window of opportunity is from this coming fall to next spring. There will be no national election for three years after this summer's Upper House election. If he moves quickly with painful reforms, his popularity may suffer initially, but if in two

to three years the economy is significantly improved voters will see him as a hero.

If Abe emerges victorious in the Upper House election and shifts his focus to constitutional revision and a nationalist agenda that would raise controversial issues of history, patriotic education, Yasukuni Shrine visits and so on, there are almost certain to be two negative consequences.

One is that foreign investors would conclude that the political leadership needed to force tough decisions about economic reform is not going to be forthcoming and leave the market. The stock market has been driven up by foreign investors and it can be just as easily be driven down by their selling Japan.

Right now it looks as though Japan may have a stable government and a prime minister who stays in office for more than a year. Abe is enjoying overwhelming public support and for the first time in many years the mood in Japan is positive and optimistic.

So far so good, but from here on out Abe's ability to retain public support will depend on results.

Let's not forget that when Junichiro Koizumi was prime minister no one expected that four years later the LDP would be out of office and the Democratic Party of Japan would come to power. And no one expected three years ago that the DPJ would be rejected by the voters in the next election and the LDP would be back in power stronger than ever. How long Abe lasts in office and how successful his economic strategy proves to be depends in large part on what he does over the next six to 12 months.

The second is that if constitutional revision and history issues are placed on the front burner, tensions will arise not only in Japan's relations with South Korea and China, but also with the United States.

CONSTITUTIONAL REVISION AS A FOREIGN POLICY PROBLEM

Foreign interest in and concern about the constitutional revision debate in Japan derives from uncertainty about what the revisionists' motives are.

Abe has called for "getting free of the postwar regime" (sengo regime karano dakkyaku). But what does it mean when a prime minister calls for regime change in his own country? Constitutional amendments are normally made to fix defects in a Constitution, not to negate the principles and the spirit that the Constitution enshrines. But the driving force behind Abe and the LDP's drive for constitutional revision is to replace the Constitution drafted by the United States during the postwar U.S. occupation of Japan with a new and different one.

Despite its origins, the Constitution has been embraced by the Japanese people. It has enjoyed broad public support for more than 60 years. So it is no surprise that people wonder and worry about the intentions of those who advocate wholesale revision.

The hurdles to constitutional revision are set very high in just about every democracy. The

requirements for constitutional revision in Japan--a two-thirds vote of all members of both houses of the Diet and majority support in a public referendum--are not especially onerous compared to other countries. In the case of the United States, an amendment to the Constitution is adopted only if it obtains a two-thirds majority in both chambers of Congress and approval by the legislatures of three-fourths of the 50 states.

James Madison, one of America's founding fathers, warned in the Federalist Papers of the danger that democracy could lead to the majority ignoring the wishes of the minority, thereby creating a "tyranny of the majority." The difficulty of constitutional revision, the tradition of the filibuster, indeed the separation of powers itself were intended to protect the rights of the minority and prevent the concentration of power.

"Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely," as Lord Acton said in 1887. Changing Article 96 to make it easier to amend the Japanese Constitution, and retaining an electoral system that in the context of Japan's social structure eviscerates the opposition, raise important questions about governance that are not in my view being adequately addressed in the debate about reform.

NORMAL COUNTRY?

Abe recently gave an interesting interview with the South Korean monthly magazine Chosun. In response to criticism that the stance taken by the prime minister and LDP calling for the exercise of the right of collective self-defense and the creation of a national military is ultra-rightist, Abe retorted that these positions are the same as those taken on national security issues by every other country, including South Korea. In that sense, all he is aiming to do is make Japan a normal country. He went on to say that if his positions were considered ultra-rightist, then all the nations in the world would have to be considered ultra-rightist.

There are many people who agree with Abe though the Japanese public as a whole evinces no enthusiasm for the changes in security policy that Abe has advocated. But the idea of Japan becoming a so-called normal country continues to meet intense criticism and resistance from Korea and China. Why?

One reason no doubt is that talking about the supposed dangers of Japan having a more powerful military free of the current constraints on its roles and missions serve important domestic political purposes in both countries.

It can rally nationalism to support the government and deflect dissatisfaction with the government by channeling it into anti-Japanese protests. It also is true that even 70 years after the war, Japan's aggression and wartime cruelties have been neither forgotten nor forgiven.

Japanese government leaders have apologized numerous times, but these apologies have been qualified and undermined by subsequent statements by conservative leaders. Japan's "apology diplomacy" has not succeeded in building relationships of trust with those who were the victims of Japanese aggression in Asia.

But it seems to me that the essential problem Japan faces in its relations with its Northeast Asia neighbors is not the inadequacy of its apologies but the absence of a regional security structure in East Asia. And the two are intimately linked. If there were no NATO and no European Community and Germany opted to become a "normal country," the first to fear the consequences, and to warn about the danger of the resurgence of prewar German militarism would be Germany's neighboring countries.

The first secretary-general of NATO, Lord Ismay, once remarked that the purpose of NATO was "to keep the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down." Recently, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, in a speech in Jakarta, noted that East Asia has been at peace even though as he put it, "There is no formal, overarching security structure, no NATO, to make sure that historical wounds are healed." It is interesting that a deputy U.S. defense secretary should emphasize the importance of NATO not in terms of containing the Soviet Union but for its role in helping heal wounds between Germany and its neighbors, an implicit comparison to still open wounds that trouble relations between Japan and its neighbors.

'CORK IN THE BOTTLE'

Japan through no fault of its own was not embedded in a regional security structure in East Asia after the war. The assurance that Japan would not once again become a threat to the region was based not on a regional structure as in Europe but on the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and the constitutional constraints on the Japanese military. Henry Kissinger stressed the restraining role of the security treaty on Japan in his conversations with Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai and so did Gen. Henry Stackpole when he referred to the security treaty as the "cork in the bottle" of Japanese rearmament.

From the time that John Foster Dulles and Yoshida Shigeru negotiated the postwar peace settlement, the United States wanted Japan to do more in its own defense. The United States did not want to keep Japan down but rather urged it, unsuccessfully, to stand up. The U.S. interest in seeing Japan do more in the common defense has only increased with China's growing military power and the decline in America's economic strength.

It is not surprising then that China and Korea should view the possibility of major change in Japan's security strategy as upsetting the status quo in Asia and threatening their interests.

Japan is not a normal country. It is Japan, not China, that experienced a truly "peaceful rise" after World War II, something that people around the world view with admiration. Japan has every reason to take pride in its not being a normal country.

The challenge to Japan today as I see it is not to become a normal country, a course that can only exacerbate the security dilemma in the region--the dilemma that policies adopted for self-defense are perceived by others as being driven by aggressive intent--but to engage in the slow and difficult process of building a security community in East Asia.

The concept of a security community, which was conceived by the international relations scholar Karl Deutsch in the late 1950s, refers to a system of relations among countries in which resort to war to settle disputes is virtually unthinkable.

The European Community is a security community; so are relations between the United States and Canada and the United States and Mexico. ASEAN has evolved impressively toward becoming a security community.

Building a security community means deepening economic and cultural ties, developing extensive networks of human relations across diverse sectors, fostering dialogue among experts on matters of mutual concern, expanding consultations on peace and security issues both at the governmental level, and even more importantly through so-called track two and track one and a half diplomacy, that is involving knowledgeable people from outside government who have more freedom to discuss sensitive issues than people in official governmental positions.

A COMMUNITY OF TRUST

Building a community of trust means avoiding rhetoric that implies that the relationship is at heart an ideological struggle. Abe has acted with caution but his rhetoric puts too much emphasis on so-called common values.

It is understandable that Chinese interpret talk about building relations with neighboring countries that embrace common values as a code language for isolating China. The issue of common values is more complicated than the "arc of freedom and prosperity" that former Prime Minister Taro Aso proposed and that Abe's rhetoric echoes. For one thing, common values do not underlie the TPP: Vietnam, a communist country, is a member; and even among the democracies, there are deep differences in values. The difference in values between Americans and Japanese about the right of employers to fire workers at will is just one example.

Relations with China are not now and should not be allowed to become like relations with the Soviet Union. The region needs pragmatism and realism, not an ideological struggle and an Asian cold war. Obama has been careful to avoid the language of ideological competition in his comments about China. Abe, too, would be well advised to be more circumspect in expressing his enthusiasm for value diplomacy.

In my view, he also would be well advised to give up the fiction that there is no territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Japan needs to make a greater effort to shore up international support for its position on the Senkaku Islands and it needs to find a way to put this dangerous issue back on the shelf. The way to do so is to recognize that there is a dispute, express confidence that an objective judgment would confirm the legitimacy of its claims and call for the issue to be submitted to adjudication by the International Court of Justice. China is almost certain to reject the ICJ's jurisdiction. Nonetheless, a Japanese willingness to talk with China about the issue would provide an opportunity for the Chinese leadership to back away from its aggressive and dangerous stance. If it were not to do so, U.S. support for Japan would become stronger than it is at

present.

Whether called an East Asian Community or an East Asian security community, Japan has a potentially critical leadership role to play in strengthening regional ties. That, it seems to me, is a much more positive role that would contribute to regional peace and stability and prosperity than becoming a normal country.