

Report

Abe's Second Term: implications for Japan-China relations



Shinzo Abe, the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan's (LDP) leader, is back in power for his second stint as prime minister, six years after his first. Abe is known inside and outside Japan as an ultra-nationalist with often hawkish views on combating Chinese power in the region.

In light of the current diplomatic dispute over the ownership of the islands in the East China Sea, this research paper will examine the implications of Abe returning to power on relations with China. It is important to note that the islands dispute is in the context of growing Chinese economic and military power and influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

The paper will attempt to put Abe's ultra-nationalistic rhetoric within the context of his decision-making ability, history of Japan-China relations, and Japan's military and security subordination to the United States since the creation of the LDP by Yoshida Shigeru.

Creation of the LDP and the Yoshida Doctrine

Yoshida Shigeru, was arguably the most influential Japanese politician of the post-war era. Prior to U.S. Occupation, he had served in several important diplomatic posts, most notably as ambassador to Great Britain in 1936. Yoshida was opposed to Japan's alliance with Germany in the Tripartite Pact in 1940, and spent the World War II era as an ordinary citizen¹.

He came back in the aftermath of World War II as Foreign Minister and then Prime Minister of Japan². Yoshida engineered the creation of the LDP, to combat the threat from the political left and establish hegemony for the conservatives in Japan, often referred to as the 1955 System, and relegated the opposition to a 'permanent minority'³.

Under the "Yoshida Doctrine," post-war Japanese national and foreign policy throughout the Cold War was characterized by focus on economic growth and military dependence on the United States⁴.

Military dependence on the U.S.

Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, drafted by-in-large by American lawyers, stated that Japan would renounce war and the use of "force as a means of settling international dispute" and that Japan would not be allowed to maintain land, sea or air forces.⁵ While the 'pacifist' nature of Japan's constitution set limits on Japanese militarization, Japanese security was to be provided by the United States, with the signing of the United States-Japan Security Treaty in 1951-later amended in 1960- which was originally set up to codify "U.S. commitment to defend Japan against external aggression, in exchange for the U.S. use of Japanese military bases for Japan's defence and the peace and security of the Far East."⁶ Not only would Japan be militarily dependent on the U.S., it would also take the lead in foreign policy matters with its only significant international ally.

Despite the establishment of the Japanese Self-Defence Forces (SDF), Japan's security is still predicated on dependency on the U.S. military.

Relations with China

Japan's imperial legacy is the major reason for diplomatic friction with its most powerful East Asian neighbour China. Cold War tensions created further complication, in the aftermath of the war, with Japan aligning itself with the U.S. in recognizing the government in Taiwan as the official government of China. It was only after the United Nations admitted the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) into the organization, did the U.S. and Japan recognize the PRC as the sole government of China.

Despite the establishment of diplomatic relations, trade and economic cooperation between Japan and China since 1972, certain historical grievances continue to challenge the relationship: the visiting of Yasukuni Shrine –housing 14 Class A war criminals since 1978- by Japanese prime ministers; differing historical accounts of the Nanjing Massacre, in which approximately 250,000 Chinese were killed and 20,000 Chinese women were raped by Japanese soldiers between December 1937 and March 1938 ; and the territorial dispute over islands in the East China.

Japan's Iron Triangle and the Bureaucracy

Low military spending and stable and consistent economic policy were to ensure “high-speed [economic] growth.”⁷ Long-term economic planning came from strong- formal and informal- relations between LDP politicians, the bureaucratic elite in crucial ministries, and the *zaikai*, Japanese business elite are referred to as Japan's ‘Iron Triangle’⁸⁹. This relationship between the elites from the three institutions has been durable, yet of course not static, due to its modus operandi being “opaque, unaccountable and therefore hard to reform.”¹⁰

Gerald Curtis argues that the idea of Japanese political leadership is an oxymoron and describes the importance of the bureaucracy within the Iron Triangle¹¹. In the Japanese political system, it is the elite bureaucrats who draft law and determine national policy, not the elected cabinet.

DPJ's failed attempts at reform

The Democratic Part of Japan's (DPJ) victory in the 2009 elections broke the LDP's dominance on Japanese politics, having been in power from 1955-barring an 11 month period in opposition. The DPJ came to power with promises to reign in the bureaucracy and realignment in the U.S. Japan relationship. This meant shifting decision-making from the bureaucracy to the cabinet and a more equal relationship with the U.S. allowing Japan to play a crucial role in a regional community alongside South Korea and China.

The DPJ, however, was unable to keep its promises due to infighting, pressure from the U.S. and an unsupportive bureaucracy. Thus in the 2012 elections, the LDP and Shinzo Abe are back in power once again.

Shinzo Abe the ultra-nationalist

When Shinzo Abe first took office as Japan's prime minister in 2006, he became the first premier to be born after World War II. Although Abe's rhetoric was for Japan to regain

its independence, in actuality his measures were to reinforce “Japanese military subordination and integration under U.S. command.”¹²

Gavan McCormack, argues that Abe is only nominally conservative, and should be viewed as a radical ultra-nationalist during his first term in office which was “marked by [historical] denialism” over Japan’s war responsibility.¹³ Abe’s nationalistic rhetoric and ‘hawkish’ positions are said to be informed by his late grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, who was a member of the cabinet during the war and for three years was an “unindicted Class “A” war criminal, before becoming Prime Minister between 1957 and 1960.”¹⁴

The biggest diplomatic flashpoint highlighting Abe’s ultra-nationalism was over the ‘comfort women’ issue with his refusal to accept Japan’s full responsibility in setting up military brothels. Between 1932 and the end of the war, the Japanese Imperial Army set up military brothels in occupied China. It is believed that 200,000 women –from Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, the Netherlands and other nations- were forced or coerced into working in these brothels. The majority of these women came from Korea. According to Nicola Piper, there were four main reasons for these brothels:

First, to avoid rape of civilians (not out of concern for them, but because of likeliness of antagonism among Chinese civilians); second to avoid venereal disease among armed forces; third, to ensure greater security (private brothels could have been infiltrated with spies); fourth, to provide some kind of leisure to keep spirits up¹⁵.

Abe stated that there was no “evidence to prove there was coercion,” much to the furore of then South Korea’s Foreign Minister Song Min-Soon¹⁶. Despite the evidence to the contrary, the Japanese government during Abe’s leadership argued that the evidence does not suggest that the “military police broke into people’s homes and took them away like kidnappers.”¹⁷

Abe the pragmatist

There are others who view Abe’s first term in office in terms of pragmatism in terms of his foreign policy towards China and South Korea, rather than ultra-nationalism. According to Richard Katz and Peter Ennis, Abe is “often misperceived as an ultranationalist” and should be given credit for mending relations with China and South Korea with back channel dialogue, trips to Beijing and Seoul and, most importantly, not visiting the Yasukuni Shrine as prime minister¹⁸.

Abe’s predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi, had left relations with Japan’s neighbours in a difficult situation visiting the shrine six times despite being considered less nationalist. Shinzo Abe was responsible, despite his rhetoric, for steadying relations between Japan and its East Asian counterparts, especially China.

Despite being credited with rebuilding trust regionally, Abe’s first term was considered a failure and ended prematurely. Abe resigned after just a year in charge with the official reason given that Abe was suffering from ulcerative colitis.

Abe’s second term

Shinzo Abe and the LDP have returned to power in a precarious economic, political and security environment: a deflationary economy with high national debt; low public trust in politicians; and a worrisome regional context with territorial disputes with China and South Korea.

Security tensions in the region have been exacerbated with the Obama administration's 'pivot' towards Asia-Pacific – considered a part of the U.S.'s attempt to contain Chinese influence. Although U.S. bases in Japan have long been source of disagreement with China, a more assertive United States complicates bilateral discussions between Japan and China further.

On the economic front, Abe had been an advocate of Japan's traditional post-war bilateral strategy in the region, *Seikei Bunri*, the "separation of economics with politics" during his first term.¹⁹ Despite the disputed efficacy of the bifurcated foreign policy strategy, interdependency characterise economic relations even in challenging diplomatic periods. Trade between the two countries illustrates this as China was Japan's largest import and export partner in 2011²⁰.

This strategy, however, has been challenged with reports citing the recent territorial dispute over the islands in the East Asian Sea as a factor in suffering bilateral trade²¹.

East Asian Sea territorial dispute

Senkaku to the Japanese, Diaoyu to the Chinese, and Diaoyutai to the Taiwanese are five islets in the East Asian Sea claimed by all three countries with competing historical arguments over sovereignty. With numerous recent diplomatic incidences between China and Japan in relation to the islands, both sides have taken a hard-line nationalist stance against the other.

In September 2012, Japan's then Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda nationalised the three privately owned islands, in an attempt to avoid "China-baiters" like the then governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara taking control of them²². In the short-term at least, the move designed to calm tensions only heightened the situation with China claiming the move was an "anti-China conspiracy."²³

Shinzo Abe, as the leader of the opposition at the time, played into the nationalistic fervour by claiming he would take a tougher stance on China and that there was "no room for negotiation" over the islands²⁴. Yet, like his first term, the ultra-nationalistic rhetoric of Abe does not match his actions in power under scrutiny. Abe sent a letter to Xi Jinping, Chinese Communist Party General Secretary, calling for a summit to discuss the islands dispute²⁵.

Conclusion

Abe's decision can partly be explained by the limitations that the Japanese leadership is under with pressure from the United States, with reports of senior U.S. officials being sent to Abe to urge caution over his stance over the dispute²⁶. Being subordinate to the U.S. in terms of its security makes independent decision-making on foreign policy impossible. Further to this, Japanese politicians are limited in their decision-making

power by the bureaucratic and business elite in Japan – that together make up Japan's Iron Triangle.

In the end, despite the pragmatism of Shinzo Abe in display with the letter to Xi Jinping, his ultra-nationalistic rhetoric and historical 'denialism' points towards some uncomfortable ideas that inform him. The island dispute is a sign of troubled times ahead and Japan-China relations will continue to be fraught as Japan tries to find its solutions to growing Chinese power and influence. One thing is certain, however: Abe and the status-quo are not it.

**Samee Siddiqui is an interview producer at Al Jazeera English in Doha and an MA graduate from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. He specialises in Modern Japanese History and Politics and East Asian Politics.*

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