



Mr. Abe's aggressive agenda by Brad Glosserman

There is no mistaking Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's determination to transform Japan's foreign and security policies and reassert itself in the world. In the four months since he took office, he has made considerable progress in that endeavor. Yet the prime minister conducts a delicate balancing act that becomes more difficult as he moves forward: While he must seize opportunities as he forges this new role, he must also reassure doubters both at home and abroad that Japan will act responsibly, and that its new power and influence will be put to good use. That requires a vision of Japanese power and a national strategy to use it. While the primary burden is Tokyo's, the U.S., as its ally and partner, can play an important role in this effort.

Abe has pushed this "transformative" agenda since becoming prime minister. Upon settling into his new post, he visited Beijing and Seoul in an attempt to reverse Japan's deteriorating relationship with its two neighbors. In addition to his willingness to reach out to these key partners, the fact that his first overseas trip was to these two countries signaled a new priority in Japanese foreign policy. (Before anyone complains that he is downplaying the U.S.-Japan alliance, it should be noted that the trips were taken with considerable encouragement from the U.S.)

Japan has taken the lead in United Nations diplomacy to respond to the North Korean missile and nuclear tests. Abe has reignited Japan's bid for a UN Security Council seat, making it an agenda item on every meeting with foreign leaders. At last weekend's East Asian Summit and related meetings, Japan offered \$2 billion in aid to help developing countries in the region adopt greener, more energy-efficient technologies (perhaps the only concrete provision in the Cebu Declaration on Energy Security in East Asia); continued efforts to consolidate relations with ASEAN through the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement; and continued work to assist ASEAN countries build capacity in maritime security. The last item is especially significant, given the need for maritime security in this vital region and the sensitivities surrounding outside involvement in this effort.

On Jan. 9, the Japan Defense Agency became the Ministry of Defense (MoD). This is a long overdue development that could rebalance bureaucratic politics in Japanese defense decision-making. Other security policy changes are underway. While Abe's Cabinet has a national security advisor, a new position, the prime minister's office is studying creation of a National Security Council. The government is also considering a permanent law on the dispatch of Self Defense Forces (current deployments occur on a case-by case basis).

The creation of the MoD occurred on the eve of Abe's departure to Europe, another path-breaking trip that has been

largely ignored in the Western media. That four-nation trip included meetings with the heads of government in Britain, Germany and France, and a historic speech to NATO, the first ever by a Japanese prime minister. Talking to European leaders, Abe pressed Japan's UNSC bid, highlighted concern about China's military modernization, called on EU governments to maintain the arms embargo imposed in the aftermath of Tiananmen, and rallied support behind international efforts to get Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons programs, to negotiate seriously at the Six-Party Talks, and to address humanitarian concerns – the kidnapping of foreign nationals.

Abe's NATO speech deserves special attention. While playing down concern about the changes in Japan – creation of the MoD "does not mean an expansion of military spending or military strength" – he vowed to take a more activist approach to foreign policy: "While adhering to the principles of the Constitution, Japanese will no longer shy away from carrying out overseas activities involving the SDF, if it is for the sake of international peace and stability."

Abe promised to work more closely with nations "who share the same values as ours" to tackle world problems. Calling Japan and NATO "partners," Abe explained that they should pool their knowledge and experience in the fields of "peace building, reconstruction and disaster relief." He underlined the potential impact of problems in distant countries, such as Iran, Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq. This is especially important given traditional restrictions limiting SDF activities to "situations in areas surrounding Japan."

It's an ambitious plan and faces a number of obstacles. The first, as Abe observed in his NATO speech, is Japan's constitution. The prime minister has vowed to push for constitutional reform, but that promises to be a bruising and bloody political battle.

The politics of constitutional reform is a minefield, not least because the Japanese are so deeply divided about its wisdom. Not only are there profound splits about the need to loosen restraints on the SDF, the exercise of the right of collective self defense, and this much vaunted "foreign policy activism," but constitutional revision encompasses much more than Article 9, and Japanese are equally divided on those other issues.

In this setting, the prime minister has to be careful that he does not get too far out in front of the public. Abe's foreign policy agenda appears to be more conservative and nationalist than that of his predecessor and he is therefore much less likely to have the latitude Koizumi enjoyed. Moreover, his leash is shrinking: Abe's tenure has been tarred by political missteps – scandals – that have undermined confidence in his judgment and diminished his political capital.

While many in the U.S. welcome Japan's new activism and seek a more energetic foreign policy partner, Washington must be careful. While the U.S. should support Japan's new role, it must not be seen as pushing it. The perception of interference in this critical domestic policy debate would be the easiest way to poison public perceptions of the alliance in Japan.

One vital contribution the U.S. can make is helping Japan think strategically about its role and its foreign policy. "Junior partner" status along with public sensitivities about foreign policy activism have discouraged strategic studies and analysis in Japan. Yet a strategic mindset has never been more important as Japan embraces new responsibilities and gains new capabilities, and as the U.S.-Japan alliance modernizes to face new threats and responds to new international realities. The U.S. and Japan must work together to ensure that both sides understand each other and their expectations of each other if their alliance is to survive.

While this may sound simple, it is not. A real strategic dialogue must tackle the thorny issues that are the building blocks of an effective strategy -- deterrence, compellence, reassurance -- and the tools that make them work. Inevitably, that means Japan must at least discuss the role of nuclear weapons and the need and advisability of developing pre-emptive attack capabilities. That does not mean Japan will move in this direction -- far from it. (For the case why nuclear weapons are not in Japan's national interest, see "Straight Talk About Japan's Nuclear Option," *PacNet* 50A, Oct. 11, 2006) But the only way to make an intelligent decision about these options and to design a foreign policy that truly serves the national interest is to study them. Thus far, politics have made that impossible. A new, activist foreign policy demands a change.

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