



Can Prime Minister Abe regain his foreign policy leadership? by Kazuhiko Togo

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The summer of 2017 will be a time to remember for Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. Since he returned to power in December 2012, his policies have appeared to be in good shape, and it looked like he would serve three full terms — nine years — as Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) president, leaving office in September 2021. In February, the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, a newspaper generally considered to back Abe, reported his support rating had reached 66 percent (his negative rating was 24 percent). But in July it dropped to 36 percent (negative ratings hit 52 percent), the *Mainichi Shimbun* put his support rate at 26 percent (his negative was 56 percent,) and *Jiji Press* had him at 29.9 percent (with negatives at 48.6 percent). This decline was created by domestic scandals.

Domestic scandals unfold

Media attention exploded in March around the Moritomo School in Osaka, which was known for running a kindergarten where prewar ideology is taught and where Mrs. Abe Akie, the prime minister's wife, was once honorary president. In June 2016, this school bought nearby state-owned land to build a grammar school — but paid just 14 percent of the officially-evaluated price. Parliamentary debate focused on “improper relations” between Abe and Moritomo School.

A second scandal erupted around the establishment of a veterinarian faculty in Shikoku, an initiative launched by a governor of the prefecture in 2007, and was responded to by Kakei Education, a comprehensive education enterprise located in Okayama city, which is not far from Shikoku. Universities with veterinarian faculties voiced strong opposition to the plan, but Kakei pursued the idea by including it in a Structural Reform Special Zone, a popular method implemented by many Cabinets. The Abe government adopted this idea to make it part of a newly established State Strategic Special Zone. In March 2017 Kakei Education's efforts were about to be rewarded but this matter too exploded when it became known that Kakei Kotaro, president of Kakei Education, was a friend of Abe since their school days. Media and opposition parties questioned whether Abe gave special treatment to Kakei, and the issue was dramatized by the alleged existence of memoranda within the Ministry of Education proving “undue pressure” from the Prime Minister's Office. Abe flatly denied that he gave any special treatment to Kakei, but throughout June and July most media

attention on parliamentary debates focused on Moritomo-Kakei.

The third scandal focused on Defense Minister Inada Tomomi, who was criticized for several matters. Media scrutiny began by exploring the existence of a “daily report” from Ground Self-Defense Forces in South Sudan. It has been assumed that the military situation described in the report was a “combat” situation, and thus too dangerous for the SDF to remain deployed, so it is alleged that some in the Defense Ministry did not acknowledge the existence of that “daily report,” and Inada was implicated in this “information scandal.”

In each case, a price has been paid. Kagoike Yasunori of Moritomo School was arrested for falsely acquiring a government subsidy on land acquisition; Kakei's approval has been delayed by the Council for Establishing Universities attached to the minister of Education; and a Special Defense Inspection Team was established within the Ministry of Defense and acknowledged efforts to try to hide the existence of the SDF reports. Inada resigned to take responsibility for the confusion, although her personal involvement could not be proven.

Public anger has been aroused not only by the substance of these scandals but also by accusations of self-righteous behavior of Abe and his entourage, who have not explained with humility what took place. Abe has now repeated that the government should face public criticism more seriously, with sincerity and humility.

One important new development has helped Abe. The composition of the new Cabinet, established on August 3, signaled that Abe and his associates will govern with more humility and restraint. The choice of Kono Taro (foreign minister) and Noda Seiko (internal affairs and communication minister), two influential politicians who belong to more centrist groups within the LDP, are symbols of this new attitude. Public opinion polls immediately after formation of the new Cabinet show a recovery in support: the *Yomiuri* had Abe's support rate at 42 percent (v. 36 percent in July), the *Mainichi* was 35 percent (July was 26 percent), and the *Asahi* put support at 35 percent (and 33 percent in July).

My greatest fear from March to July was that Abe's involvement in the handling of domestic scandals would mean that he would not pay attention to crucial foreign-security policy matters. I worried that the Japanese government might not take adequate foreign-security initiatives. At least three issues are worth analyzing: North Korea, Russia, and South Korea.

Missed opportunities?

North Korea launched two missiles with ICBM capability in July, precisely when Abe was preoccupied with domestic

scandals. The war of words between President Trump and Kim Jong-Un mounted sharply. Abe consistently argued that “now is the time to pressure North Korea.” But if an armed conflict starts, whether by accident or design, Japan might become a target of North Korean missile attacks.

Coordinated actions under the UN Security Council resulted in enlarged trade sanctions as agreed on August 5. But key countries are divided. The United States, while using harsh words to demand North Korean restraint, hinted at the necessity of negotiations. China, while agreeing to harsher trade measures, called for restraint by the US and stressed the importance of negotiations. Russia too underlined the importance of contacts and negotiations, and South Korea under new President Moon Jae-in has made proposals for contacts and negotiations, including an August 15 statement that “Military action at the Korean Peninsula can be decided by South Korea alone.”

Since Japan’s safety is at stake, at some time in this process Abe is bound to change course and turn toward dialogue. Paradoxically, since Abe’s public message has constantly been that he “opts for pressure now,” his shift may produce tangible results. Has Abe and his security team examined all available information to ensure that they don’t miss that turning point?

Turning to Russia, Abe is in a very serious stage of negotiations with President Vladimir Putin. A roadmap was established during Putin’s visit to Yamaguchi-Tokyo in December 2016, and the Japanese government has asserted that progress on the four islands is steadily moving forward. In reality, however, not a single systemic agreement has been reached. On June 1 and June 15, Putin made public statements expressing concern that the US-Japan security treaty might negatively affect Japan-Russia relations. Putin had expressed misgivings in the December meeting in Yamaguchi, but if his suspicions persist, the Russian bureaucracy will not be disposed to expedite the dialogue. Has Japan’s national security team done enough to eradicate Putin’s misgivings? If Abe’s hijacking by the summer’s domestic scandals prevented him from expediting negotiations, the price he and we the Japanese people have to pay might be enormous.

Then, there is South Korea. On May 10, Moon Jae-in was inaugurated as the president of South Korea. Considering that his election campaign criticized President Park’s 2015 Comfort Woman agreement as “shameful,” “wrong,” and that a “wrong agreement shall be remedied without fail,” his starting point was relatively restrained. Immediately after the inauguration, Moon sent his special envoy, Moon Hi-san, to Tokyo; he conveyed a message that the “majority of Korean people psychologically are not able to accept” the deal, but did not refer to abrogation or re-negotiation. He proposed the resumption of shuttle diplomacy as existed until the end of the Koizumi period, and the proposal apparently was warmly accepted. Several measures to further study and remember the issue would be implemented, but the situation does not seem to be explosive.

Still, nationalistic emotion is rising high as a result of the “Choyokou forced labor” issue. This started on July 26 with a Korea-wide preview of a movie on “Battleship Island” in

prewar Kyushu where Korean workers did hard labor in a coal mine. It developed with the erection of a *Choyokou* statue on Aug. 12 in Seoul and in Incheon. Finally on August 17 at the press conference marking 100 days since his inauguration, Moon gave for the first time Korean government support for the May 24, 2012 Supreme Court verdict that held the “right of individual citizens to sue companies that employed *Choyokou* remains valid.” This may contradict the Korean government’s longstanding position that “the 1965 grant assistance from Japan should be considered as including compensation to *Choyokou*.” Has Moon opened a Pandora’s box? If so, what is next and is Abe’s security team prepared for the challenge?

Final thoughts

It is not easy to tell how Abe’s foreign and security policy will evolve. My hope is that the humility and flexibility that is evident in the selection of the new Cabinet will help sustain Abe’s popularity, and give him time to listen and think very carefully, and come up with the optimum policy to serve Japan’s national interest and promote regional and global stability. A promising sign of Abe’s new humility and flexibility is already evident: no Cabinet member visited Yasukuni Shrine on August 15, 2017.

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