

A good start for Mr. Abe by Kazuhiko Togo

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It has been a week since Abe Shinzo formed his new Cabinet. Although it is much too early to give a full account of his foreign policy, the following five points indicate a promising start. Abe seems to have adopted policies based on pragmatic and creative realism, and not chauvinistic nationalism, as was feared by some before he took office.

First, Abe has gathered a strong and effective team to implement foreign policy based on pragmatic and creative realism. At the Cabinet level, the new foreign minister, Kishida Fumio, is known to have longstanding relations with Okinawa and has been taught well about Asia through his contacts with Ogura Kazuo, one of the best Asianist diplomats in the Japanese foreign service. Two key MOFA officials who were the dynamo behind Abe's success in his first Cabinet (2006-07) have joined the Prime Minister's Office. Yachi Shotaro, who then served as vice minister for foreign affairs is a special advisor to the Cabinet. Kanehara Nobukatsu, who served Yachi at the Directorate of Policy Planning and is known for shrewd strategic thinking, is now assistant chief Cabinet secretary. Together with some of the best and brightest Foreign Ministry officials, Yachi and Kanehara could provide a powerful advisory body to Abe.

Second, on the most urgent and dangerous issue of the Senkaku Islands, Abe's message at this point seems to be reasonably balanced. Abe asserts that Japan's deterrence capability should be strengthened. The 2010 National Defense Program Outline (NDPO) should be revised and defense spending would be an important part of the supplementary budget. Given China's position and the possible resort to force to change the status quo on the islands, Abe seems to have no other policy option. At the same time, Abe did not hint that he might begin changing the actual state of control of the Senkakus, such as "to consider permanent stationing of civil servants" as was stipulated in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) platform. His emphasis on "relations based on strategic and mutual interests," a policy adopted during his first Cabinet, is noteworthy. Continuing support for the 1995 Murayama Statement of apology and no declaration to visit Yasukuni Shrine are also encouraging. I doubt whether his statement that "the Senkakus is our territory so there is no room for negotiations" is the wisest language to start a serious dialogue with China, but Abe's language does not seem to have provoked the Chinese leadership.

Third, given tense Japan-China relations, the alliance with the United States naturally has unprecedented importance. Abe's choice to visit the US first is the right one. His firm direction to eradicate the unfair asymmetry under Article 9 of

the Constitution, i.e., in case of an attack on Japanese territory the US is obligated to defend Japan, but Japan is prohibited to do so in an equivalent situation, must be an encouraging sign to Obama. On Okinawa, given the extraordinary difficulty of moving the Futenma base to Henoko, Abe and Obama could have a serious talk to meet immediate imperatives and to establish long-term coordination. On China, in addition to his deterrence efforts, Abe could reassure Obama that his policy of dialogue is serious and he will mobilize all diplomatic skills to avoid military collision with China.

Fourth, another critical agenda item with the Americans is South Korea. Abe already sent a positive signal that he would not make Shimane Prefecture's Takeshima Day a National Day of recognition. Nukaga Fukushima, an LDP parliamentarian who has long ties with South Korea, is to visit Seoul on a fence-mending mission.

But what will he do with the comfort women issue? The Cabinet position on the 1993 Kono Statement as explained by the chief Cabinet secretary that "This issue should not be made a political or diplomatic issue; it is desirable that experts discuss it" was nuanced, to put it mildly. But remember that from March until June 2007 this single issue could have ruined Abe's international reputation: his statements were reported as making him a "comfort women denier." Recall, also, that it was the Yachi-Kanehara team at MOFA that succeeded in putting out the fire by advising Abe to go back to his position of "humility." And finally, there as the June *Washington Post* advertisement that called for justice for Japan that resulted in the first US Congressional Resolution requesting an unequivocal apology from Japan. Let us hope that again, Abe will listen to the advice from his wise men and find a solution based on constructive realism and humility.

Fifth, there is the Russian Federation. There is every reason to think that Abe inherited a vitally important and possibility-rich situation with Russia from his predecessor Noda. After the relationship hit its nadir under President Medvedev from late 2009 until September 2011, relations began to warm when Putin declared his intention to run for the presidency. Upon assuming the post of president in March 2012, Putin made abundantly clear that he intends to substantially improve relations with Japan, notably through strengthening economic cooperation and resolving the territorial dispute. Putin no doubt has a warm memory of Abe's first Cabinet, the result of Foreign Minister Aso Taro's support for a new "extraordinary idea" of dividing the territory in half, and by his own "Initiative for Strengthening Japan-Russia cooperation in the Far East Russia and Eastern Siberia" made at the Heiligendamm Summit in June 2007. The first telephone exchange with Putin shortly after Abe's assumption of power seemed to initiate a new relationship with real dynamism.

If Abe succeeds in 2013 in containing his difficulties with China and South Korea, strengthening substantially the fundamentals of the alliance with the US, and devoting the rest of his energy to finally resolve the territorial issue with Russia, Japan's international standing in one year's time shall be completely different.

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