

Does Abe's Rightward Shift Threaten His Legacy?

by Andrew L. Oros

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Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo passed the one-year mark of his term in office Dec. 26, and the two-year mark if one includes his previous term from Sept. 2006-Sept. 2007 – a bar only three others have passed since 1989. Abe hopes to continue serving until the next mandated national elections in July and December 2016. If he succeeds, he will be only the fourth man in postwar Japan to serve over five years as prime minister – joining notables Yoshida Shigeru (of the Yoshida Doctrine), Sato Eisaku (who shared a Nobel peace prize for Japan's non-nuclear policies), and Koizumi Junichiro (who anointed Abe as his successor in 2006). Abe's decision to visit to the Yasukuni Shrine on the one-year anniversary of his second term illustrates rightist tendencies and influences that may keep him from achieving that ambition and implementing his policy agenda.

The first year of Abe's second term as prime minister suggested that he learned important lessons from his rocky first stay at the Kantei. In contrast to sometimes controversial statements, he pursued moderate policies that showed a strategic calculation to incrementally implement a multi-year plan for economic and security reform.

As a result, Abe achieved much in the past year. He led his party to victory in elections in both houses of Parliament. "Abenomics" produced sustained economic growth. He enacted important national security-related policy, including an end to a 12-year decline in defense spending (enacting a modest 0.8 percent increase), the creation of a National Security Council, the publication of Japan's first formal national security strategy document, and the passing of an official state secrets law. To use one of Abe's catch phrases, "Japan is back."

Still, despite a focus on the economy and moderation in security policies, fears persisted within and especially outside Japan that the "real" Abe – the "hyper-nationalist" conservative according to publications as diverse as the *New York Times* and the *China Daily* – had not yet emerged. Even prior to his recent Yasukuni visit, there were sound bites and actions to confirm these fears. On multiple occasions Abe questioned the traditional narrative and official apologies over Japan's wartime history. He has long advocated a return to government-sponsored "patriotic education," including in

Japan's first national security strategy document. He made multiple visits to the Yasukuni Shrine before becoming prime minister, a place associated with Japan's wartime past as the locus of the state-sponsored Shinto religion that deified the emperor and which enshrines the souls of Japan's war dead, including 12 Class-A war criminals sentenced by the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal. Moreover, Abe's Cabinet and informal advisors include individuals far more nationalist than Abe himself, judging from their statements and actions.

Abe's actions during his second term substantially departed from the preferences of this hyper-nationalist conservative world, however. His administration exercised notable restraint in the face of near daily incursions by China into Japanese-administered territory from his first day in office. When a Chinese warship locked its weapons radar on a Japanese destroyer, his government lodged a diplomatic protest, and told the Diet that it was "extremely regrettable." Constitutional revision, development of offensive military capabilities, and retracting government apologies for Japan's wartime conduct were not pursued. In contrast, Japan's first formal national security strategy is anchored by the concept of "proactive pacifism" and seeks increases in defense spending of 5 percent over five years that will only restore spending to 2001 levels after years of cuts.

Make no mistake: Abe seeks to increase Japan's military capabilities and activities abroad. He seeks to revise Japan's postwar constitution to enable such activities, and passed legislation in his first term as prime minister (in May 2007) that moved Japan one step closer to constitutional revision by setting out procedures by which a required national referendum on the issue would take place. To date, however, Abe's new national security strategy and policies can scarcely be labeled hyper-nationalist. What accounts for the disparity between words and deeds and what does this portend for Abe's actions in 2014?

Abe seems to have learned two lessons from his first term as prime minister (which ended abruptly, reportedly for health reasons). The first is that no leader can achieve all his policy objectives at once. Leaders must be strategic in implementing change. A second lesson is that voters prioritize the economy, and a weak economy undermines Japan's international power and prestige. Thus, to achieve the dramatic reforms in the security arena that Abe seeks, Japan must first get its economic house in order.

This focus on the economy characterized the first year of Abe's second term, particularly his "three arrows" strategy for economic growth. Abe surprised many by having Japan join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade negotiations prior to the July 2013 Upper House elections. Japan's participation in TPP negotiations are hoped to lead to elusive "third arrow" structural reforms that market analysts and many Japanese

voters would like to see. Such reforms are more likely to be enacted if Abe can maintain power for several years. Still, according to economic analyst and visiting fellow of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, Doug Rediker, “the economy is a means to an end. A strong economy is a necessary precondition for a Japan that asserts itself in the world.”

Ironically, a more moderate course is the only way that Abe can achieve his long-term goal of a more assertive Japan. Abe needs a two-thirds majority in both houses of the Diet to enact constitutional changes he seeks – such as explicitly authorizing a postwar military force and allowing it to work with other militaries for “collective defense” (i.e., fighting wars outside Japan to preserve “international peace and stability”). Barring an unlikely about-face from the LDP’s coalition partner, the New Komei Party (NKP), the only way for Abe to achieve constitutional revision is for the LDP to win more seats in the next national elections. Those gains are not likely if Abe alienates moderates, and Abe already alienated many voters in December by pushing the controversial State Secrets Law through the Diet, which pushed the support rate for his Cabinet below 50 percent for the first time. The official visit to Yasukuni also is unpopular with voters, according to numerous public opinion polls conducted both prior to the December visit and after.

Abe also needs international support to achieve his agenda. Japan’s continued economic growth is jeopardized by worsened relations with China, its number-one trade partner. Koizumi’s annual visits to Yasukuni led to widespread anti-Japanese rioting in China, many of which targeted Japanese businesses in China. China’s anger at Abe’s December visit to Yasukuni creates further obstacles to improved Japan-China relations, relations already at a historic low-point politically – though on the economic front there are signs of recovery from set-backs related to the “nationalization” of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the fall of 2012, according a recent posting by Richard Katz to ForeignAffairs.com. Even if Abe’s December Yasukuni visit does not immediately lead to new economic disruptions, it adds fodder to China’s public perception of a rising militarist Japan.

Abe’s desire to take a growing security role in the region is also threatened by ill-will among Japan’s allies and partners generated by his Yasukuni visit. At the October 2013 “2+2” Security Consultative Committee meeting, plans for negotiating new US-Japan Guidelines for security cooperation were announced, but those plans are predicated on a shared strategic understanding between Japan and the United States. Further inflammatory actions – including questioning the postwar settlement underlying the San Francisco Peace Treaty – would jeopardize deepened US-Japan defense cooperation, even if present plans such as the Futenma Relocation Facility at Henoko move forward. Progress in Japan-Australia and Japan-Philippines security cooperation is also being jeopardized.

Abe’s Yasukuni visit has created an unnecessary distraction from the true challenges Japan faces in 2014: continued economic reform, successful conclusion and implementation of the TPP; de-escalation of tensions over territorial disputes with China and South Korea; and

implementation of the new national security strategy anchored in the idea of “proactive pacifism”. Enacting successful policies in these areas will require support from moderates within and outside of Japan whom Abe alienates by succumbing to his more nationalist tendencies. The Dec. 26 Yasukuni visit suggests that a more conservative and nationalist Abe will emerge in 2014 – unless the strong negative reaction to his visit pushes him back onto a more moderate path. Abe’s rightward shift threatens a legacy that is within his grasp.

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