



Terrorism, old grudges, and Japan's renewed position in the world by Lully Miura

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The hostage taking by ISIL terrorists of two Japanese nationals came to a predictable and tragic end. The incident has exposed longstanding splits in Japan about the appropriate security role for the country, pitting pacifists who want to maintain a low profile against conservatives, such as Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, who believe Japan can and should do more. The Abe government must do more to win the Japanese people over to that position.

Yukawa Haruna and Goto Kenji were initially held for a ransom of \$200 million, a demand that shifted to a hostage exchange with a convicted terrorist in Jordan. The Japanese government repeatedly said it would not negotiate with terrorists while coordinating with the Jordanian and other Middle Eastern governments for the hostages' release. The ordeal came to a grim conclusion when footage of the two's beheadings was posted on the Internet.

This is not Japan's first encounter with terrorism. Japan struggled against extreme communist groups such as the "Japan Red Army" during the 1970s, and against religious extremism during the '90s. It has also experienced terrorism in the Middle East from abductions to attacks against Japanese businesses. However, the impact of the latest hostage situation seemed more sensational as a result of the cruelty and provocative propaganda that accompanied the killings.

The atrocity shocked the nation. There was unanimous condemnation of the terrorists by the government, opposition leaders, and the media. However, the left quickly began to question the administration's handling of the situation and its motives. Concerns about the hostage situation quickly became concerns about how the tragedy may change Japan. This is a sad reminder that old grudges between the left and right still stir distrust even when innocent lives are at stake.

The Abe administration has maintained solid support from the public. Snap elections in late 2014 gave a two-thirds majority to the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-New Komei coalition in the Lower House. This strength mainly reflects the administration's efforts and partial success in combatting deflation and a sluggish economy. It is no secret that Prime Minister Abe has ambitions to use this renewed mandate in foreign policy. Opposition leaders and the liberal-leaning media have strongly criticized the administration on this point.

Japan has an unfortunate Cold War legacy when it comes to security-related issues. Conservatives, including Abe and

the current administration, seek a larger role for Japan, one that better reflects its economic presence as well as heightened tensions in the region. This renewed role is modest by any Western standard, but it isn't seen that way by the administrations' liberal critics. Japan's liberals basically oppose any deviation from the pacifism that is embodied in the constitution.

The debate over Japan's position in the world and its security implications are primarily symbolic. In reality, the majority of conservatives are committed to continuing Japan's path as a pacifist nation, and most liberals don't seek to abolish Japan's military. Still, fighting over symbols can be a risky, emotion-laden business.

The administration's liberal opponents fault it for provoking terrorists, pointing to Abe's recent visit to the Middle East and Israel knowing that two hostages were held captive. Abe's speech in Cairo, which laid out Japan's commitment of \$200 million to assist countries facing ISIL's threat, became the focus of this accusation. Critics charged that despite Abe's humanitarian focus, the terrorists may have "misunderstood" Japan's intentions. The administration quickly dismissed these accusations and reaffirmed its commitment to stand against terrorism, and ISIL in particular.

This is déjà vu to those who have followed Japan's security debates. Whether in hostage situations, UN peacekeeping, or how to support US military campaigns, the focus of Japan's debate is invariably less about the issue at hand and more about Japan's pacifism and its identity. It is also true in this case. Others believe that this time could be different. If one looks beyond the superficial display of Cold War sentiments, there are signs of real change, which is a product of both domestic politics and bureaucratic reforms that have occurred in the last few years.

There is a growing realization among the Japanese public that an overly liberal interpretation of the world is naive today. The rise of China is no longer a distant trend only discussed in economic circles. Many Japanese were shocked at images of a Chinese vessel ramming Japanese Coast Guard vessels in 2012. Security concerns have shifted the electorate to the right, questioning the long-held belief that if Japan does no harm then no harm will come to Japan.

This shift in the electorate is magnified by structural change in Japanese politics. During its three years in power (2009-2012), the center-left Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) took a realistic stance in foreign policy. Although there was talk of a more liberal position, including a new interpretation of the US-Japan alliance, the DPJ could not deliver. Relationships with neighboring countries, especially Korea, worsened during the DPJ's term in office. One lesson to be drawn from this period is that the liberal foreign policy

platform believed possible since the Cold War was not a real option.

After the LDP, returned to power in late 2012, the coalition it leads has won back to back landslide election victories. The DPJ now holds less than a third of the seats held by the LDP, and there seems to be a fundamental debate about what the party should stand for. There is also a new phenomenon of smaller parties to the right of the LDP. Among these parties, The Japan Innovation Party, commonly known as “Ishin” is the most important. Ishin identifies itself with a reformist economic agenda and the overhaul of Japan’s centralized government structure. Although it has little to no experience in foreign policy, its sentiment seems to be close to the LDP if not to its right. All this suggests stronger support for the Abe administration’s more realistic foreign policy.

The second change is bureaucratic reforms to strengthen the prime minister’s role in foreign policy. Traditionally, the prime minister’s leadership was restricted by legal and conventional norms. Many of these restrictions were lifted during the late 1990s and early 2000s to speed up decision making and facilitate much-needed reform. These reforms became relevant in domestic economic policy during the Koizumi administration. Koizumi leveraged this new power to push through reform against objections from vested interests that mainly came from within the LDP, his own party.

Since taking office for the second time in 2012, Abe has been eager to expand this trend to foreign and security policy, enabling a more presidential-style of leadership. He established a National Security Council and appointed seasoned diplomats and defense experts to directly support him. Decision making that once occurred across the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense is now more concentrated in the prime minister’s office.

Abe has used his strengthened leadership to put forth an ambitious foreign policy he calls “proactive contribution to peace.” He has visited more countries than any past prime minister. Many of these visits to Africa, South America, South Asia, and the Middle East were to countries that have historically been low on Japan’s priority list. The main message that Abe stressed was that “Japan is back.” After more than a decade of economic contraction and cutbacks in foreign assistance, Japan is now willing to take a more proactive position on issues concerning the world.

The change is not only about presence but about substance as well. Japan’s foreign policy was once almost entirely dependent on its ability to provide economic development assistance. This strategy came naturally given Japan’s rise as an economic giant in the postwar era, and the self-imposed restrictions regarding security issues. This is starting to change as well. From the spread of terrorism and gender inequality to the fight against Ebola, Japan is now more directly focused on global threats to long-term peace and prosperity. It has also lifted restrictions on its ability to assist countries help defend themselves, most notably against maritime disputes that have spread across Asia.

The motives behind this new stance are mixed. There is the obvious motivation to sincerely contribute to a liberal world order and enhance Japan’s position. There is also a

domestic agenda to provide a new way of thinking about pacifism that isn’t unrealistic or naive.

The hostage situation demonstrated that a larger role for Japan does not come without risk. It also ignited old grudges over how to think about Japan’s role in the world. The administration seems ready and willing to take a new direction. It should follow up with a vision that explains how its citizens and the world are better served by the new Japan.

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