

## **Abbott, Abe, and those submarines** by Rikki Kersten

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As Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott faced a leadership crisis last week, the policy ground shifted underneath Japan's defense and security policy-makers. The Feb. 9 announcement by Defense Minister Kevin Andrews that Australia's procurement of submarines will be subject to a "competitive evaluation process" intensified those political reverberations in Tokyo.

While Australia is feasting on a domestic political spectacle, Japan is contemplating the ruination of a carefully calibrated yet contentious strategy in Japan's defense and security policymaking circles. The joint development of Australia's next generation of submarines has acquired both symbolic and substantive significance for Japan's precedent-breaking cadre of security policymakers. The events of the last two weeks could undermine Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's government's objective to catapult Japanese defense thinking into a new postwar paradigm of limited autonomy and unqualified legitimacy for Japan as a global defense actor.

In both Australia and Japan, close security ties, which have been expanding and consolidating since the 2007 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, have become the personal crusades of both Prime Ministers Abbott and Abe. The security cooperation builds on the 2014 Economic Partnership Agreement and represents the future of the bilateral relationship as both leaders see it. The submarine collaboration that has been mooted by the press, explored by bureaucracies, and flagged by ministers in both countries represents the good faith commitment by both leaders to this shared vision.

Political complications abound: in Australia, great political damage threatens if the Adelaide shipbuilding industry is overlooked or excluded (and this threat crosses the political divide); in Japan doubts exist as to the wisdom of sharing the jewels of Japan's defense technology – the sophisticated silence of the *Soryu*-class submarines and the alchemy of its steel hull – even with such a firm friend as Australia.

For Japan, the symbolic significance of collaborating on a submarine lies in the fact that Australia is not the United States. Australia is considered to be a benign, reliable, and well-disposed partner that has moved beyond the negative past of WWII atrocities and into a positive future-focused friendship. It is the template for how Japan wants its postwar

foreign relations to be. Importantly, Australia's status as a democracy and a middle power lend a normative patina to the relationship: Abe wants to emphasize the stark contrast between democratic Japan and undemocratic China. Australia gives credibility to this signaling.

The substantive importance of a submarine deal for Japan lies in the management and strategic shepherding of rapid-fire policy change that is scheduled to unfold in 2015 – 2016. Driven by Abe's personal commitment and determination, the acceleration of security policy innovation in Japan was already evident in July 2014, when the Abe Cabinet passed its resolution reinterpreting the constitution to affirm Japan's right to collective self-defense. Abe's expanded security policy community – including the National Security Council, the foreign and defense ministries, the National Institute of Defense Studies, and a network of security policy intellectuals and advisors – has since been working on a suite of legislation that will lend the force of law to underpin this stance. These mutually reinforcing laws are to be submitted to the Diet in the summer session, which begins in May.

This policy trajectory was jolted into a state of urgency when the second Japanese hostage was murdered by Islamic State militants. Abe faced a dilemma: should he capitalize on the acute popular responses to this horror to build support for his security policy agenda, or should he quarantine the hostage tragedy to ensure a smooth legislative pathway for these bills?

Reactions to the murder of Kenji Goto have exposed a chasm between opposing attitudes toward new security policy in Japan. Those who want Japan to shed self-imposed restraints and enable Japanese forces to rescue hostages abroad want a permanent bill passed to that effect, and they want the existing Situations in the Areas Surrounding Japan Bill to be upgraded. Those who recoil from this argue that if offering even non-military assistance to nations combating Islamic State invites such horror, Japan should abandon "proactive pacifism" altogether. They argue further that moving closer to the US and shouldering more responsibility in the US alliance is not in the national interest in a world of global terrorism. This will complicate the renegotiation in 2015 of the guidelines governing the US-Japan alliance.

This is a nightmare scenario for Abe, who is planning a statement to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WWII. He wants decisively to end the postwar shackling of Japan as a normal defense actor, and he wants Japan to do so as an autonomous nation in its own right. Being trusted by a nation such as Australia with defense procurement is a vital emblem and foundation stone for Abe's agenda.

So ambitious is this agenda that Abe has moved to harness the current popular focus on security to announce his intention to put constitutional revision to a national referendum after the Upper House elections in mid-2016. The Abe administration

needs the security legislation to be in place, and for the electorate to deliver a two-thirds majority to his party in the Upper House, to put his cherished policy goal before a positively inclined populace.

Without Australia as a substantive partner, and without Abbott in his corner, Abe may find it more difficult to persuade even his coalition partner Komeito to sign up to the legislative agenda, let alone the Japanese voting public. Already leery of messing with the pacifist clause of the constitution, Komeito will not risk alienating its support base before the April 2015 nation-wide local elections by openly supporting contentious security policy changes. Australia's presence in the policy landscape would have softened the message for them, too.

For all of these reasons, when Tony Abbott suffers the pangs of leadership instability, his partner Abe Shinzo feels the sharp foreboding that a difficult, complicated, and historic lifetime ambition may be edging closer to the abyss.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*