



Abe Shinzo's diplomatic debut by Sheila A. Smith

In his first month as prime minister, Abe Shinzo appears to have repaired Japan's relations with its neighbors, strengthened the U.S. commitment to Japan's security, and presided over a successful UN Security Council determination to sanction Japan's main security concern, North Korea.

Gone are doubts about his ability to present a confident face to the world and to the Japanese public. Receding a bit are international worries about his conservatism and his "nationalist" proclivities. Eased too is the antagonism that characterized China-Japan relations at the end of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's time in office. Once his visits to Beijing (Oct. 8) and Seoul (Oct. 9) were over, Abe lost no time in convening his newly created Cabinet-level task force on Japanese abductees in North Korea, demonstrating again his commitment to an issue that is sensitive for most Japanese.

In many ways, North Korea created the opportunity for this triumphant first month. Abe's well-known "hard line" toward North Korea was proven prescient rather than excessive. Japan's willingness to sanction North Korea for its behavior, and to begin to create the legal framework for doing so, has proven to be a timely change in light of events of the past six months. First, in July, after Pyongyang tested missiles in the face of regional warnings, and then again in October, in response to the nuclear test, the United Nations Security Council has spoken unanimously on the threat North Korea poses to regional stability. Both times Japan (alongside the U.S.) has pushed for a hearty Security Council response, and both times Japan got this from Security Council members.

But in the wake of the nuclear test, Abe did not repeat his earlier claim, made as Chief Cabinet secretary after the July 5 missile tests, that Japan could take preemptive action should North Korea prove a threat, proving that he can temper his approach to crisis management when necessary. Abe also quashed speculation about Japan's own nuclear prospects in the face of this newly declared nuclear state in Northeast Asia. On Oct. 12, he stated clearly that North Korea's nuclear test would not change Japan's non-nuclear status.

Pyongyang's nuclear test could not have been better timed for Abe's effort to repair Japan's relations with China and South Korea. In going to China on his first international visit as prime minister, Abe was signaling his acceptance of China's rising place in Asian relations, and demonstrating the emphasis he has placed on improving China-Japan relations. Both Beijing and Tokyo had been working on a way to end the chill in their relationship, and the change in Japanese leadership was the opportune moment to begin repairing the damage. North Korea's threat and test greatly accelerated the shift toward a more forward-looking bilateral agenda of

addressing common concerns in Northeast Asia, as Abe wanted.

Abe was given credit for breaking the diplomatic impasse created by Koizumi. The early and cordial visit with Hu Jintao meant that both leaders agreed that the issue of Yasukuni Shrine visits needed to be put on the back burner. There were no secret deals, just an acknowledgment that both sides wanted the issue to go away for now. The two leaders of Asia's largest economies focused instead on shared concerns about regional stability, and a visit by Hu to Japan may come about in early 2007.

The North Koreans also made Abe's landing in Seoul much less bumpy than it might have been. President Roh Moo-hyun, who had resisted overtures from Abe prior to his ascendancy as prime minister, was urged by President Bush to find a way to open the dialogue with Abe. When Beijing accepted Abe's overtures, Seoul had to hurry to keep up. Arriving in Seoul on the day of the NK nuclear test, Abe's press conference focused mainly on the North, and left many questions open as to the longer-term prospects for Japan's relations with South Korea. In his press conference afterward, South Korea's president was pressed to defend his own policy of engagement with the North, and was forced to admit that this policy was ineffective. On future relations with Japan, he could only suggest that many issues remained unresolved.

Pyongyang's nuclear test allowed Abe to reverse trends in regional relations and simultaneously demonstrate the seamlessness of the U.S.-Japan security alliance. The White House issued a statement of support for Abe's Asian summitry, and once the visits were over, the two allies focused on addressing whether the alliance was ready to deal with a nuclear threat against Japan. On her visit to the region after the UN Security Council vote, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to defend Japan, saying "that the United States has the will and the capability to meet the full range – and I underscore full range – of its deterrent and security commitments to Japan." Rice gave the most forceful – and unambiguous – assurance of U.S. extended deterrence in recent memory for the alliance, and one that, given the circumstances, could be delivered without upsetting Beijing. (Rice delivered a similar message in Seoul and met there with her Korean and Japanese counterparts for high-level trilateral consultation.)

Alliance issues remain, however. Japan's unilateral sanctions, effectively halting all trade and visits by North Koreans to Japan, were quickly adopted. But the U.S. and Japan will need to work through how they will implement a maritime inspections regime for ships suspected of carrying dangerous materials and weapons parts in and out of North Korea. New laws passed by Japan to sanction transactions

with North Korea gave Tokyo the capacity to implement the kinds of sanctions the U.S. was looking for at the UN, and an opportunity to further operational cooperation begun under the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). The bilateral security mechanisms for dealing with “situations in the area surrounding Japan,” put in place in the late 1990s under the revised U.S.-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation, should provide Tokyo with the ability to proceed alongside the U.S. should interdiction of North Korean ships become necessary. But it is unclear how proactive a role Japan’s military or Coast Guard will be allowed in this effort.

There is another important diplomatic achievement that should not be ignored. Abe has watched Japan’s diplomats at the UN succeed in building unanimity in the response to North Korean behavior. Japan’s UN ambassador, Oshima Kenzo, presides over the UN Security Council this month, and provided yet another opportunity for the region and the world to see the role Japan might play should it become a permanent member. China’s concurrence in this approach marks a significant departure for Beijing’s handling of Pyongyang, and the creation of a framework for collaboration with Tokyo that signals an end to the divergence over North Korea policy. It looks like China may be ready to work with Japan within the UN, a departure from vociferous Chinese opposition to Japan’s bid for a Security Council seat that contributed to bilateral tensions in the past (although it would be a stretch to say that China is prepared to support a Japanese permanent seat anytime soon).

Indeed, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, Japan’s diplomatic priorities are aligned. As a statesman, Abe seemed calm and confident, and to a domestic audience sensitive to the behavior of North Korea and the implications for Japan’s security, he conveyed a sense of reassurance and a renewed commitment to work with Japan’s neighbors, the U.S., and the UN in determining how to respond.

This first month may have helped Abe demonstrate that his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) continues to be the preferred option for Japan’s voters, a key concern with Upper House elections being held next year. The LDP won two by-elections, one in Kanagawa and one in Osaka, held this month for vacant Lower House seats. Abe’s handling of the North Korea crisis and his successful summitry in Beijing and Seoul took the air out of the Democratic Party’s effort to make Asian diplomacy a campaign issue. So too did Abe’s embrace of a softer line on Japan’s wartime history in his early appearances in the Japanese Diet. He publicly endorsed the apology issued in 1995 by then Prime Minister Murayama for Japan’s wartime deeds, ending concerns within Japan that he would impose a more conservative rendering of Japan’s past on official policy.

But Abe will be tested in the months ahead. The multilateral management of North Korea’s nuclear test is far from over. Rice’s visits to Seoul, Beijing, and Moscow revealed the extent of the differences that remain in crafting a sanctions regime. Abe cannot afford the impression within the region that the U.S. and Japan are acting alone in implementing sanctions. At home, the delicate balancing between multilateralism and working hand-in-hand with the U.S. will be hard to sustain if tensions emerge among UN

Security Council members. Moreover, a failure to take collective action should North Korea conduct a second test or a long-range missile test would intensify the sense of vulnerability within Japan, and could restrict Abe’s ability to negotiate common approaches to the problem.

It is too early to judge whether Prime Minister Abe can be given full credit for all these accomplishments. Like Koizumi, Abe was provided a priceless opportunity as a result of events beyond his design or control. Sustaining this early success, and going further to build a cooperative regional agenda with his neighbors – in the face of a recalcitrant Pyongyang, festering territorial and resource competition in Northeast Asia, and the need to find an acceptable place within Japan for national commemoration of those who died in World War II – will continue to test Abe’s resilience, and ensure that Asian diplomacy will need to remain at the top of his agenda. Until next summer’s Upper House elections, he will need to tread carefully as he seeks to ensure that his diplomacy translates into electoral confidence at home.

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