

Abe's Diplomacy toward East Asia: Pursuit of Power Politics¹

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Introduction

The realist school in international relations emphasizes the continuity of power politics. According to the realist view, therefore, it is no surprise that Japan has been essentially facing the same strategic and security issues over the past fifty years. In his article published in 1963, Masataka Kosaka, a Kyoto University professor, summarized five major goals in the Japanese security policy as follows: (1) the cooperation with the US as the foundation for Japanese security, (2) the improvement of relations with China while maintaining the US alliance first, (3) the maintenance of peace and security on the Korean peninsula, (4) the development of Japan's defense abilities in the manner contributing to the stability of East

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Asia, and (5) the promotion of multilateral security cooperation which are not contradicted with the US-Japanese alliance system.² These five issues are still major goals for Japanese security today. Based on the perspectives Kosaka proposed, this article tries to define the security issues facing Japan today, and to evaluate the security policies of the Abe administration since Abe took his second prime minister's office in December 2012.³

Comparison with the Nakasone and the Koizumi administrations

As Abe won his third election of the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) president in September 2018, the Abe administration will be the longest government in the modern political history of Japan if he completes his third (and last) term up to 2021. The comparison of Abe with Nakasone and Koizumi, the two former prime ministers who also succeeded in taking office for more than four years,⁴ shows some similarities as a clue for its political longevity. The most

2 Masataka Kosaka, "Genjitsushugisha no heiwaron (Peace Initiatives by a Realist)," *Chuo Koron*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (January 1963), pp. 38-49.

3 Abe took his first office from September 2006 to August 2007.

4 The postwar Japanese constitution adopts a parliamentary cabinet system, in which the lower house of the Japanese Diet has an authority to choose and disqualify a prime minister. As the term of the lower house is four years (although the prime minister has a power to dismiss the lower house even during the term), it usually requires the victory of at least two consecutive general elections to stay in the prime minister's office for more than four years. Among 34 prime ministers in postwar Japan before Abe, only five of them succeeded in going beyond four years in office. They are Shigeru Yoshida (October 1948-December 1954), Hayato Ikeda (July 1960-November 1964), Eisaku Sato (November 1964-July 1972), Yasuhiro Nakasone (November 1982-November 1987), and Junichiro Koizumi (April 2001-September 2006).

conspicuous characteristic among the three political leaders is their strongly nationalistic posture, which is symbolically expressed by their obstinate visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine. Another common characteristic among the three leaders is that they were respectively from a small faction in LDP when they took the prime minister's office so that they needed support from other LDP factions and LDP's coalition partners.⁵ When Abe organized his second cabinet in December 2012, the upper house was under the control of the opposition parties. Even after the 2013 Upper House Election which resulted in LDP's landslide winning against the Democratic Party, LDP still needs seats of its coalition partner, Komeito, to control the Upper House.⁶ Although LDP succeeded in establishing its single majority in the 2017 general election, Abe still needs Komeito, a coalition partner whose collaboration is essential in the small district election system and for Abe's ambitious goal of constitutional amendment. Just like Nakasone and Koizumi, therefore, Abe should carefully manage with his coalition partner and the opposition parties in his policy making efforts despite his seemingly strong and nationalistic posture.

From a viewpoint of their diplomacy style, another common feature among Nakasone, Koizumi, and Abe is a strong personal tie with US presidents. Nakasone established the so-called Ron-Yasu relations, in which Nakasone and Reagan called each other by their first name, to symbolically demonstrate his support of the Reagan's security policy

5 Both Nakasone and Koizumi formed a coalition government. From December 1983 to July 1986, Nakasone's LDP allied with the New Liberal Party, which was separated from LDP in 1976 and subsequently joined LDP after the 1986 General Election. Koizumi, in his second cabinet, started the current two party coalition between LDP and Komeito.

6 Currently, as the result of the 2013 Upper House election, LDP occupies 115 seats out of 242 while Komeito keeps 20.

initiatives. Koizumi became the first Japanese prime minister who boarded with President George W. Bush on Air Force One, the special plane for the US president. Abe has also successfully demonstrated his personal ties with President Obama and Trump. When Obama visited Japan as a national guest in April 2014, Abe invited him to the cozy sushi bar in Ginza with only ten counter seats. Abe also became the first national leader who met Donald Trump when Trump was the president elect in November 2016. Since then, Abe has had a summit talk with Trump more than thirty times if online talks are included.

Japan when Abe took his second office in December 2012

While the five diplomatic issues Kosaka raised indicate the Japanese enduring strategic goals, the concrete political agenda facing contemporary Japan need some more clarifications based on international and domestic political situation of Japan at a particular moment. When Abe took his second prime minister's office in December 2012, he faced the five agenda as follows:

As of December 2012, both US-Japanese and Sino-Japanese relations were at their respective nadirs. During the Democratic Party administrations in 2009-2012, the US-Japan alliance never recovered its damage inflicted by Prime Minister Hatoyama who initiated the moving of the Futenma military base out of Okinawa and the promotion of the East Asia Community. The Futenma alternative out of Okinawa was a clear violation of the 1996 US-Japan agreement on the Okinawa military base issue whereas the proposal of his East Asia Community was regarded as an attempt to exclude the US from Asian affairs, hence both were unacceptable for the Obama administration. The damage on the US-Japan alliance in turn resulted in the Chinese

maritime advancement into the East China Sea. When the Noda administration nationalized the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in September 2012, all the ministerial level meetings between Japan and China had been cancelled thereafter.

As for the Korean peninsula situation, Japanese-South Korean relations were increasingly severe in 2012 while North Korea had repeatedly conducted nuclear missile tests since 2009. When the then South Korean president, Lee Myung-bak, landed on the Takeshima/Dokdo island for the first time as the incumbent president of South Korea and required the apology of the Japanese emperor over the Japanese colonial rule of the Korean peninsula, the governmental talks between Japan and South Korea were almost completely cut.

Because of the intraparty disagreements specifically on defense policy, the Democratic Party administrations could not make integrated strategies. The FY 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) drafted and adopted by the Hatoyama administration emphasized the importance of both the US-Japan alliance and that of multilateral security network with no indication of which of the two is a primary goal. The Guidelines also expressed a confusing message about China, proposing constructive cooperation with China while criticizing the Chinese military buildup in recent years.

The initiative of the East Asian Community, which was included in the Democratic Party's election campaign agenda in 2009, had been proposed by the Koizumi administration. Therefore, the East Asian Community was originally not regarded as a contradicting initiative against the US-Japan alliance. Under the Hatoyama administration, however, the idea of the East Asian Community was increasingly connected with the Democratic Party's mismanagement

of the Futenma movement, giving the Japanese exploration of multilateralism a connotation of anti-American move. Overall the Democratic Party government in 2009-2012 failed to promote Japan's security interests according to the all five criteria Kosaka proposed.

Abe's Recovery and Rebuilding of the US–Japan alliance

When the second Abe administration started in late 2012, the most urgent diplomatic issue for his government was to stabilize relations with the United States. In February 2013, Abe visited Washington to see President Obama. At that moment, the Obama administration had been requesting Japan's cooperation in three issue areas. They were; Japan's participation in TPP negotiations, the solution of the Futenma base issue by the original US-Japan agreement, and the promotion of US-Japanese security cooperation. Soon after his visit to Washington, Abe announced Japan's participation in the TPP negotiation process despite strong domestic resistance. The Abe government also managed with a compromise with the Okinawa prefecture on the Futenma relocation plan to Henoko. Although the Futenma relocation to Henoko has not been realized today due to the opposition of local communities, the Abe administration repeatedly demonstrated its determination to keep the 1996 agreement with the US government to realize the relocation to Henoko.

The recovery of US-Japanese relations required concrete Japanese commitments to the bilateral alliance. The fundamental mistake of the Democratic Party administrations was that they failed to introduce any concrete policy changes to strengthen the deterrent ability of the alliance. As of early 2013, the US-Japan alliance were facing three major threats to deal with; the Chinese maritime advancement into

the East and South China Sea, the development of North Korean nuclear missile technology, and the activity of international terrorist and criminal organizations. To demonstrate Japan's commitments to deal with these issues, Abe introduced a series of security-related legislations, i.e. State Secrets Law (December 2013), the Cabinet decision to admit the limited constitutionality of collective defense (July 2014), and Peace and Security Legislation (September 2015). Abe also agreed to the new security cooperation guidelines with the US in April 2015 to improve the threat management ability of the US-Japan alliance. Abe's security policy initiative stimulated anti-war sentiments of the Japanese public so that the Abe administration suffered from a sharp decline of support upon the introduction of each new security related legislation. In order to restore and maintain the domestic support to his government, Abe dismissed the lower house of the Diet in December 2014 that led to another LDP victory.

The restoration and improvement of the US-Japan alliance system during the Obama administration gave diplomatic assets for the Abe administration to deal with the Trump administration which has no hesitation in making a severe trade request even toward US allies. Having a summit talk with Trump more than thirty times, Abe has kept the US-Japan alliance system effective against the Chinese maritime advancement in the East and South China Sea and the North Korean nuclear missile threats. As the Trump administration tends to regard diplomacy as a deal with another country rather than as a strategy for international order making, however, the future US-Japanese relations may be destabilized specifically over bilateral trade issues. The primary security policy goal of the Abe administration continues to keep broad strategic cooperation with the Trump administration.

Sino-Japanese relations under the Abe administration

While Abe engaged in consistent efforts to improve and maintain US-Japanese relations, Sino-Japanese relations continued to be cold, if not colder, specifically after Abe visited the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013 despite the much prewarning from China. As Xi Jinping became a new Chinese leader almost simultaneously with the advent of the second Abe administration, Xi was also in the process of consolidating his power and authority in China. Regarding a history issue with Japan that can test his leadership, therefore, Xi had no room to be conciliatory toward Abe's Yasukuni visit. On the other hand, Abe's Yasukuni visit was criticized domestically. Even some LDP leaders as well as Komeito, the coalition partner of LDP, requested more diplomatic attention to care for relations with China and South Korea. Moreover, the US government unprecedentedly expressed a formal disappointment at Abe's visit to Yasukuni as an action that would aggravate already tense relations with Japan's neighbors. After all, Abe has refrained from visiting the shrine himself since then. When his cabinet members visited Yasukuni right after Abe's visit to the Pearl Harbor in December 2016, the US government again requested the careful management of history. As a result, in 2017 and 2018, no ministerial members of the Abe cabinet visited Yasukuni on August 15.

Although Abe's refrainment of Yasukuni visit is a result of the consideration of US relations, it also removed the biggest obstacle in Sino-Japanese relations. As Xi Jinping entered the second term in October 2017 by consolidating his domestic power base, he also began to explore better relations with Japan specifically because the Trump administration increasingly put pressure on China in the trade

issue. Since April 2018 when the Sino-Japanese high level economic talks were held for the first time in the past eight years in Tokyo, a new momentum has been added to the improvement of the bilateral relations specifically in trade and finance areas. At the high level talk, the two foreign ministers, Kono and Wang Yi, agreed to accelerate free trade negotiations among China, Japan, and South Korea. They also decided to have a high level talk on a regular basis.

In May 2018, in order to participate in the Sino-Japanese-South Korean trilateral summit, Premier Li Keqiang visited Tokyo for the first time since he took office in 2013. Abe and Li agreed to many issues such as the promotion of Sino-Japanese free trade, the expansion of the renminbi denominated bonds, the new negotiation on currency swap agreement, the introduction of the maritime and aviation communication mechanism, the bilateral cooperation for the Chinese one-belt-one-road initiative, and the relaxation of Chinese import restriction on Japanese food products. The two leaders are said to have dealt with relatively easy-to-agree items while sensitive issues such as the territorial dispute in the East China Sea, the Chinese military buildup in the South China Sea, the history problem, and the Taiwan issue, are all carefully avoided. However, specifically in the context of the North Korean nuclear missile development, it was a significant diplomatic achievement for Abe to improve relations with China that can exert an influence on Pyongyang.

Abe's policy toward the Korean Peninsula

While both US-Japanese and Sino-Japanese relations can be primarily managed through bilateral channels, the maintenance of peace and stability on the Korean peninsula is a strategic issue that

involves far more than Japan's relations with North and South Korea. Since the mid 1990s, the North Korean nuclear missile development has been the biggest security threat to Northeast Asia where three nuclear powers and Japan interact with the two Koreas. Although the denuclearization of North Korea is the common goal among all the major powers in Northeast Asia, their complex interests over the Korean peninsula as well as the legacy of the Japanese colonial rule of the peninsula often limit Japan's diplomatic role toward the Korean peninsula.

There are five policy choices available for Japan to promote the denuclearization of North Korea. They are (1) the deterrent ability buildup against North Korea by strengthening the alliance with the US; (2) the cooperation with China that has the ultimate influence on North Korean economy; (3) the security cooperation with South Korea; (4) the cooperation with Russia for the strict execution of the UN sanctions on North Korea; and (5) the exploration of a direct contact with North Korea. Among the five policy choices, the Abe administration primarily took the first choice. When North Korea increased the frequency of its nuclear missile tests in 2017, Abe gave a full support to the Trump administration that said "all the options are on the table, including the military one." At the UN Security Council, Japan also supported the US initiative against North Korea to adopt a series of four resolutions with increasingly strict sanctions. As the China-Japan and the South Korea-Japan relations were cooled down over the history issue, however, Abe failed to promote security cooperation with the two countries on the North Korean nuclear missile issue. Russo-Japanese relations always face the Northern Territory dispute whereas the abduction of Japanese citizens by North Korea makes it difficult for the Abe administration to explore

its own channel to talk to Pyongyang. As a result, toward the North Korean nuclear missile threat, the Abe administration relies on its alliance with the US and its own economic sanctions (with limited effectiveness because of its already limited economic transactions with North Korea) in addition to the UN sanctions.

Abe's defense policy posture

According to Kosaka, the strategic goal of Japan's military buildup is to keep the overall power balance in East Asia. In the current regional context of East Asia, the Japanese strategic goal is to deter the rising power of China by increasing Japan's commitment to the US-Japan alliance system. During the Democratic Party administrations, the Japanese military budget decreased to 4,713 billion yen in 2012. Since Abe took his second office, the Japanese military budget has increased for six consecutive years. In FY 2018, the Japanese military budget is 5,191 billion yen, an overall 10% increase compared with the 2012 budget.

The primary reason for the defense budget expansion is the introduction of updated military technologies such as a land based aegis system, Aegis Ashore, to respond to North Korean ballistic missiles and Chinese military modernization. Another reason for the increasing military budget is the procurement of US military equipment and services based on the US Foreign Military Sales (FMS). The budget for FMS was more than doubled, from 187 billion yen in 2014 to 410 billion yen in 2018. For the defense of remote islands from potential Chinese threats, the Abe administration plans to purchase forty two F35 fighter jets and seventeen Osprey helicopters over the next five years. Defense Minister Onodera says, "it is indispensable for

Japan to improve both quality and quantity of its self defense ability due to the increasing severity of Japanese security environments.”

In order to prevent a vicious cycle of security dilemma games triggered by the increasing Japanese defense ability and to stabilize power balance in East Asia, Japan should simultaneously engage in confidence building with its neighboring countries. It is in this context that the Abe administration’s attitude toward the history issue is particularly questioned. In fact, the strong nationalist image of Abe, that has been fixed by his Yasukuni visit in December 2013 and his periodical nationalistic comments on the history issues, has damaged the stability of diplomatic and security environments for Japan.

During his first administration in 2006-07, Abe’s comments on the comfort women issue already stimulated South Korea and China. When Abe took his second prime minister’s office in late 2012, Abe expressed his intention for his government to succeed the 1995 Murayama statement that expressed “deep condolence” over Japan’s colonial rule and aggression in the past. Regarding the 1993 Kono statement which expressed “apology and condolence” over the comfort women issue, Abe avoided expressing his position, saying that “the history issue should be reviewed by intellectuals.” Regarding the Yasukuni issue, Abe stated that he deeply regretted not having paid a visit to the Yasukuni Shrine during his first administration. Then, one year after the inauguration of his second administration, Abe visited the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013.

As stated above, Abe’s Yasukuni visit invited the US disappointment as well as Chinese and Korean resentments, damaging Japanese foreign relations much more than Abe had expected. In March 2014, in his statement at the budget committee of the Upper House, Abe expressed his government’s succession of the Kono statement,

saying that “the Abe administration has no intention” to review the statement. Moreover, in his statement to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of the Pacific War, Abe himself admitted “deep condolence” and “apology from the bottom of heart” over the “Japanese colonial rule” and “aggression” in Asia. The Abe statement included all the diplomatic keywords of the 1995 Murayama statement and the 2005 Koizumi statement to make it clear that the Abe administration finally succeed the positions of the past governments on the history issues.

The 2015 Abe statement was drafted by the 21st Century Design Discussion Group, Abe's private advisory organ, that included specialists in modern Japanese history and international politics. The statement based on academic studies restricted Abe's nationalistic posture and secured the general acceptance of the statement by the Japanese public. China and South Korea also refrained from criticizing the Abe statement. The Abe statement opened Japan-South Korea talks on the history issue, which subsequently led to the bilateral agreement on the comfort women issue in December 2015. Although his Yasukuni visit in December 2013 fixed a nationalist image of Abe, the Abe administration learned a lesson from the visit that Japan should avoid making the history issues a diplomatic problem with its Asian neighbors. As for the Yasukuni issue specifically, the Abe administration shows a restraining attitude as indicated by the fact that no ministerial members visited the shrine on August 15 in 2017 and 2018. However, Abe's periodical nationalistic comments on the history issues has kept Japan and South Korea from executing the bilateral 2015 agreement on the comfort women issue.

Abe's use of multilateral institutions for power politics

One of the noticeable characteristics in Abe's diplomacy is the large number of countries he has visited as a Japanese prime minister. As Abe took his second prime minister's office in December 2012, he immediately engaged in a "globe-perspective" diplomacy, visiting more than 20 countries in 2013 alone. As of January 2018, the number of countries Abe had visited reached 70, slightly over Xi Jinping's visit to 68 countries since 2013 when Xi became the Chinese leader. Abe has also effectively used gatherings of multilateral institutions, such as ASEAN and other regional and global organizations, to make a contact with other national leaders.

Abe's multilateralism is not an attempt of community building, but a practice of balancing power in Asia and the world. The subject of his balancing policy is China as indicated by the fact that Abe has concentratedly chosen China's neighboring countries in Southeast and South Asia to visit. Not like the East Asia Community proposed by the Democratic Party administrations, therefore, Abe's initiative of multilateralism does not contradict with the US-Japan alliance system.

Abe's practice of balance of power through multilateralism is also demonstrated by the fact that he left China and South Korea out of the immediate target of his global-perspective diplomacy during the early years of his second administration. In 2014, for example, Abe visited Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, respectively the first Japanese Prime Minister's visit in the last fourteen years and the last twenty four years. Regarding China and South Korea, however, Abe showed no sign of compromise on any diplomatic issues, including the history issues, that were prerequisite for setting up a summit meeting

with the two countries. Abe only made brief contacts with the leaders of China and South Korea at an international forum such as APEC or G20 while saying that “the window for dialogue (with China and South Korea) is kept open.”

Conclusion

Abe's diplomacy toward East Asia is overall successful in terms of the five strategic goals Kosaka set for Japan. Starting with the damaged US-Japan alliance during the Democratic Party administrations, Abe quickly recovered trust from the US by making concrete policy commitments, the biggest example of which is to admit the constitutionality of collective self-defense, to strengthen the US-Japan alliance system despite strong domestic resistance against his initiatives. Although his Yasukuni visit in December 2013 resulted in cold relations with China in the following few years, the Abe administration in 2018 began high level contacts with the Chinese government, exploring the possibility of holding an Abe-Xi summit meeting soon. As for the peace and stability of the Korean peninsula, and specifically for the North Korean nuclear missile issue, there are few policy options for Japan to take an initiative role. However, consistently supporting the US posture toward the North Korean missile issue, the Abe administration indirectly contributed to the US-North Korean talks. Japan's military buildup under the Abe administration strengthened Japan's deterrent ability against the North Korean nuclear threats through the US-Japan alliance. Although Abe's nationalist posture periodically caused criticism and concerns from China and South Korea, his 2015 statement, that expressed the Abe administration's succession of the

past Japanese government positions on the history issues, and the restraint of Yasukuni visit by Abe and his cabinet members, improved confidence in the intention of the Abe administration. Finally, Abe's use of multilateral institutions from a balance of power perspective is checking the rise of China while maintaining the US-Japan alliance system.