

Shinzo Abe and the Reality of Japanese Democracy

BY *Daniel Sneider*

In Japan's postwar history, few prime ministers have matched the political power commanded by Shinzo Abe. Since assuming office in December 2012, the conservative leader has built an unassailable two-thirds majority in the lower house of parliament for the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) coalition. Within the LDP Abe has no serious challengers, and opposition parties remain unable to mount a serious bid for power. Boosted politically by Japan's economic recovery, Abe had, until recently, enjoyed the highest approval ratings of any prime minister since Junichiro Koizumi.

On the policy front, Abe returned late this spring from a triumphant visit to the United States, where he announced the new Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation and carried off a historic and well-received address to a joint session of Congress. Abe confidently told U.S. lawmakers that he would pass a package of security legislation by summer that would finally allow Japan to play a substantial military role alongside its ally.

Only months later, as the summer comes to a close, the picture has significantly changed. Abe's approval ratings have plunged more than twenty points, with more voters now disapproving than supporting his cabinet. The prospect of a turnaround in the elections for the upper house of parliament next summer is fueling talk of Abe stepping down from power. Support for opposition parties, including the discredited Democratic Party of Japan, is slowly rising, with potentially significant implications for key issues in the U.S.-Japan alliance.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Prime Minister Abe was overly confident that he could use his political capital—accumulated from his early economic success and the public's yearning for strong leadership—to pursue his security agenda. The cabinet resolution in July 2014 on collective self-defense reinterpreted the constitution—in effect amending it by administrative fiat—to allow Japanese military forces to assist the United States and other countries even if Japan is not under direct attack. Tokyo also arm-twisted the LDP governor of Okinawa to give the green light to a controversial new airbase for the U.S. Marines.

The revised defense guidelines would break through some long-standing obstacles to operational coordination between the two militaries. Most importantly, the guidelines would create a formal mechanism to facilitate joint contingency planning for a variety of situations, ranging from North Korean missile launches to a Chinese challenge to Japanese control of the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. They also call for bilateral and multilateral cooperation with regional partners, such as Australia, India, and the Philippines, which could draw Japan into joint defense of maritime security in the South China Sea.

Abe, however, has failed to persuade the Japanese public of the necessity of this potentially transformative security policy. Even after months of debate, almost two-thirds of Japanese do not back the security bills. They do not believe the government's protestations that it has no plans to become involved in combat operations overseas. The debate in the parliament has been extended into an extra fall session. After two months, the ruling coalition forced a vote in the lower house, using its two-thirds majority. But the drop in Abe's approval ratings tracks precisely to what most Japanese see as an exercise in anti-democratic arrogance.

All of this takes place against the backdrop of Abe's long-awaited statement on the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. The contents of the statement reflect an internal dialogue between Abe's personal revisionist views of the war and his role as prime minister. With his domestic support slipping and economic tremors from China growing, he was under pressure from within and without, especially from the United States, China, and South Korea, not to worsen tensions in the region. The result was a compromise document that failed to clearly apologize for wartime criminality and aggression but also left long-standing statements of previous prime ministers intact.

MOVING FORWARD

A weakened, though still strong, Abe will likely push through his security legislative package this fall. But he and his officials have been compelled to commit to prior Diet consultation on any force deployments and to the use of the military only in noncombat situations. In debate, Abe admitted that deployment to foreign territory or waters for the use of force remains clearly unconstitutional.

Abe has rediscovered the limits on power imposed by the reality of democracy in Japan. Japanese public opinion, manifested as much through civil society and the media as by political parties and elections, remains anchored in a consensus that is at its core pacifist and resistant to a broader security role, certainly one that would employ Japanese forces as an adjunct to U.S. global or even regional policy. Even conservative realists who favor this role are wary of drifting into a de facto containment strategy against China. There is thus a danger that Abe has created expectations, especially after his Washington visit, that he cannot fulfill.

The United States for its part needs to have a more realistic understanding of what can be accomplished in security cooperation and more broadly in alliance

relations, given political realities in Japan. The potential implications include the following:

- The Abe government may not have the ability to deliver implementation of the planned construction of a replacement facility for the Marine air base at Futenma on Okinawa. Strong resistance from the local government has already led to a postponement, and there is a danger that anti-base sentiment on the island could escalate and threaten support for more strategic facilities such as Kadena Air Base.
- Even if the security legislation finally is approved, the Ministry of Defense will likely be extremely cautious about taking practical steps to implement the changes, especially when it comes to joint operations and contingency planning and the promotion of a more robust security role for Japan in the region.
- The completion of U.S.-led negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership with Japan may bog down, as politicians in the LDP dependent on rural voters may exert greater pressure on Abe. If the Japanese economy continues to slow, as new data shows, the room for maneuver by the prime minister may significantly narrow.
- It is possible that Abe may not survive through the next year's elections, leading to a change in the premiership from within the LDP and perhaps the return of more unstable leadership in Japan. While the prospect of a less powerful prime minister may worry some in Washington, there could be the benefit of a potential shift to a more centrist LDP leader who is not burdened by the baggage of historical revisionism and who may be freer to improve ties with South Korea. ♦

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