Shinzo Abe’s Nationalist Strategy

With his overt nationalism and his historical revisionism, Shinzo Abe has a plan for Japan.

By Kosuke Takahashi

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The world is now beginning to realize Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s true intentions. With his controversial visit to the Yasukuni shrine, which memorializes war dead, including Class A war criminals such as Hideki Tojo, he is no longer hesitant to reveal his true nature: without question, the most conservative leader in Japan’s postwar history. And he is a historical revisionist, notably with respect to wartime Japan. By encouraging a spirit of nationalism, Abe is hoping to engender self-confidence and patriotism among the Japanese public.

But what exactly is his future agenda? To understand Abe’s political ambitions, you need to understand their take on modern Japan.

For mainstream Japanese conservatives such as the Abe family, Tokyo has been shackled since it accepted the judgments of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, known as the Tokyo Trials. For one thing, as a defeated nation Japan has always been forced to take a servile position—militarily and diplomatically—toward the U.S., the World War II victor. And Japan has had to repeatedly bow its head to its neighbors, such as China and South Korea, to apologize for its conduct during the war.

Willingly or not, Japan embraced these two international restraints when it signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1951, hoping to return to the fold of the international community as an independent nation.

More than 60 years later, though, the Abe administration wants to free Japan from these perceived shackles. In his own words, he is seeking a “departure from the postwar regime” by “bringing back Japan.” Although Abe has never said from “what” he will bring back the nation, many Japanese believe what he meant is to bring back a militarily, diplomatically and economically strong Japan from the political and economic abyss of the past decades, and perhaps in the long term from the U.S. itself.

Although Abe’s popularity has recently tapered somewhat from the heady days early in this, his second stint as prime minister, many Japanese still support his nationalist program, because they feel that Japan lacks strength and needs to stand on its own feet, amid mounting nationalism in East Asia and a rising China.

So, to return to the question: What is Abe’s grand strategy? In fact, Abe has a three-year plan to accomplish his ultimate goal of having Japan “depart from the postwar regime.”

Abe’s Three-Year Plan

During the first year of his second term in office 2013, Abe proposed a move from “passive pacifism” to a “proactive pacifism” that encourages Japan to contribute more proactively to world peace and international cooperation. He then established a Japanese National Security Council (NSC). He also announced the first National Security Strategy (NSS) and the National Defense Programme Guidelines (NDPG) that introduced the concept of “a Dynamic Joint Defense Force.” This new concept emphasizes the Self-Defense Forces’ (SDF) joint operations and interoperability capability at sea, in the air and on land, and bolster the nation’s defensive posture in the southwest—in particular the Nansei island chain that includes Okinawa and the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea.

Over the last year, Abe’s government has also enacted a controversial secrecy law to prevent leaks of state secrets, after it was pressured by the U.S. to tighten the confidentiality of their shared intelligence on security.

Now, in his second year, Abe is trying to reinterpret the constitution to allow for the exercise of the right of collective self-defense. Abe will also formally abolish Japan’s decades-old ban on weapons exports this year. In January, his

1 http://thediplomat.com/2014/02/shinzo-abes-nationalist-strategy/?allpages=yes
administration revised textbook screening guidelines to give Japanese children a more patriotic take on modern Japanese history and to better reflect the government’s view on territorial issues such as on Senkaku Islands. Abe has also succeeded in placing four conservative intellectuals with whom he has very close ties on Japan’s public television NHK’s management board. Some of their comments have already stirred considerable controversy.

In this third year, 2015, Abe plans to change Article 9 of the U.S.-imposed pacifist constitution, accomplishing his final goal of escaping from the postwar regime.

This three-year plan seeks to boost national security and could lead to Japanese involvement in conflicts abroad in the future.

Shinichi Kitaoka, a former Japanese ambassador to the United Nations and a key Abe adviser, remarked recently that all of these steps are simply trying to bring Japan closer to a “normal country.” Kitaoka is now deputy chairman of Abe’s Advisory Panel on Reconstruction of the Legal Basis for Security, which is expected to recommend reinterpretting Japan’s war-renouncing Constitution to lift the self-imposed ban on the right to exercise collective self-defense in April.

Abe’s Historical Perspective

An attempt at bringing Japan out of the postwar regime in terms of national security issues will inevitably require the country to address the issue of its historical view, sparking a national debate on modern history.

In this context, Abe’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine is a manifest of his determination to accomplish his final goal. He needs to unite at least his conservative allies and supporters within Japanese political circles amid domestic and foreign opposition.

The most important question to come out of his visit to the shrine is whether Abe really thinks that Japan’s wartime leaders, such as Hideki Tojo and Abe’s own grandfather Nobusuke Kishi, a Class A war crimes suspect by order of the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, did the wrong thing or not during the war.

It is apparent that Abe believes they were innocent. His book Towards a Beautiful Country: My Vision For Japan, published in 2006, is revealing on this and other aspects of the prime minister’s thinking.

In the book, he says that Japanese war-time leaders bore the greatest share of responsibility, but pointed out that the majority of the public also supported the military strongly. He cited as an example of this strong public support, major newspapers that fed the war frenzy with front-page headlines like “(We) Should Fight Adamanlty.” He also notes that Class A war criminals were brought before the Tokyo Trials on charges of “crimes against peace” and “crimes against humanity,” based on concepts formed after the war, questioning the legitimacy of the trials. He goes on to note that Japanese domestic laws do not deal with Tojo et al as criminals; indeed, the government continued to pay their pensions after the war.

In this book, Abe quotes Father Bruno Bitter, representative of the Roman Curia, who, when asked by the supreme commander of the U.S. occupying force how to deal with Yasukuni Shrine, said, “Any nation has the right and obligation to pay tributes to the warriors who died for the nation.” Abe also makes the Arlington cemetery comparison, as he has done recently.

Of course, Abe is on record repeatedly defending Japan’s conduct before and during World War II. On April 23 last year, Abe even told the Diet that he does not believe Japan’s occupation of other Asian countries during the war can be considered “invasions.” According to Abe, that’s because there are no set international or academic definitions of the word “invasion.” He claimed, “It depends on the point of view of individual countries.” He later retracted his remark after his hawkish stance was criticized by China and South Korea, saying “I never say Japan did not invade.” An editorial in The New York Times titled “Japan’s Unnecessary Nationalism” was critical: “…it seems especially foolhardy for Japan to inflame hostilities with China and South Korea when all countries need to be working cooperatively to resolve the problems with North Korea and its nuclear program.”
Abe’s historical revisionism, combined with Japan’s military buildup, will continue to cause needless friction with China and South Korea. However, Russia and the U.S. may also grow worried that Abe’s approach will further shake the foundations of the postwar order. Russia’s concerns likely center on the disputed islands, called the Southern Kurils by the Russians and the Northern Territories by the Japanese, which it claims it acquired legitimately as a result of the war.

U.S.-Japan Relations

What kind of relations does Abe want with the U.S., Japan’s closest ally? Here, his views are very shaped by his grandfather Nobusuke Kishi.

Although this is not widely known outside Japan, Kishi sought an independent approach when it came to relations with the U.S., especially around the time the two nations revised the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty in 1960. Ukeru Magosaki, Japan’s former ambassador to Iran and Uzbekistan, told The Diplomat that Kishi was a politician who sought diplomatic independence, rather than one willing to accept diplomatic subservience to Washington.

Abe praised Kishi’s approach in his book Towards a Beautiful Country, saying “Grandfather at that time tried to fulfill the requirements of an independent nation by changing this unilateral treaty into a more equal one. Looking back, [Kishi] took a very realistic approach of strengthening U.S.-Japan ties to realize Japan’s independence.”

Now Abe is trying to do the same. He wants to enhance Japan’s role in the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty by authorizing the use of the right to collective self-defense so as to contribute to U.S. global strategy. He believes that by assuming a greater role in U.S.-Japan security cooperation and by placing the U.S.-Japan relationship on a more equal footing, Japan can better stand up to the U.S., such as on the issue of U.S. military bases in Okinawa. Again, his book provides evidence of this.

But his nationalistic behavior has ratcheted up already strained tensions with China and South Korean, particularly over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute. The U.S. surely doesn’t want to get involved in unnecessary military conflicts with a powerful and intractable rising China, its security treaty with Japan notwithstanding. As a consequence, more and more U.S. officials may rate Abe a security risk if he continues down his current path. That could very quickly force Abe to return his emphasis to continuity, rather than his departure from the postwar order.

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