

Japan under Abe: toward Moderation or Nationalism?

In July 2013, Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its coalition partner, the Kōmeitō, scored an impressive victory in the House of Councilors elections. Out of the 121 contested seats, the LDP won 65 and the Kōmeitō 11. With this victory, the LDP–Kōmeitō ruling coalition now controls 135 out of 242 seats (about 55 percent) in the upper house. This win follows the December 2012 triumph in the House of Representatives election, which brought Shinzō Abe and the LDP back to power by taking 294 out of 480 seats.

Prime Minister Abe deserves much credit for this twin victory. After his disappointing first tenure as prime minister in 2006–07, he learned from his mistakes and decided to focus on the economy for this term. Soon after assuming the prime ministership again in December 2012, Abe implemented a bold and risky plan to revive the Japanese economy by radically expanding the money supply and boosting spending. This had the immediate effect of depreciating the yen and raising stock prices. With the terms of trade improving for Japanese exporters, the economic mood in Japan lifted.

Abe also exercised restraint in dealing with a territorial dispute with China. In September 2012, Japan's central government—led by Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda—purchased three of the Senkaku Islands to prevent then-Tokyo Governor Shintarō Ishihara from buying them on behalf of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. Although Noda had sought to thwart the nationalist governor from making provocative moves on the islands, China protested the purchase as altering the administrative status quo of the islands, which it claims as part of the Diaoyu Islands, and dispatched official vessels for regular patrols near them. While remaining firm about Japan's sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands and supporting active coast guard patrols to counter Chinese intrusions into Japan's territorial waters, Prime Minister Abe refrained from escalating the conflict

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by not deploying personnel or constructing new structures on the islands. Although he did make a few provocative remarks about history, such as his April 2013 remarks in parliament in which he questioned whether or not Japan had engaged in aggression prior to World War II, Abe avoided igniting a new round of full-blown memory wars with its neighbors.¹

Japanese voters rewarded Abe this summer for this moderation and for his economic initiatives. The July 2013 election also solved the problem of a “twisted Diet,” which Abe was responsible for creating in the first place. Because of the LDP’s defeat in the 2007 House of Councilors election after his first go as prime minister, different party coalitions controlled the two houses of Japan’s national legislature, creating political gridlock. The LDP now enjoys a single-party majority in the more powerful House of Representatives and controls, with the Kōmeitō, a comfortable majority in the House of Councilors.

Because Abe need not face another national election until summer 2016, Japan may finally have a stable government after a succession of six prime ministers since 2006. Abe could become one of the rare Japanese prime ministers to serve four or more years. After World War II, only five prime ministers have served that length of time. If he can lead his party to another set of electoral victories in 2016, Abe could even become the longest-serving prime minister in Japan’s modern history—the record is currently held by Eisaku Satō, who served as prime minister for about 7½ years from November 1964 to July 1972. For this reason alone, understanding where Abe might lead Japan is critical for thinking about the

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future of Asia and U.S.–Japan relations.

Will the July 2013 electoral victory embolden Abe to pursue his nationalist agenda, or will he remain moderate and pragmatic? As some foreign observers fear, does Abe’s remarkable comeback reflect a rightward shift in Japanese politics, and will he ride a wave of populist nationalism to pursue constitutional and historical revisionism? Or conversely, if his policies fail to improve the Japanese economy, will he stoke nationalism to buttress public support?

As many U.S. analysts of Japanese politics have argued, domestic and international constraints should keep Abe on a pragmatic track.² Rational political calculations certainly point in this direction, but much will also depend on Abe’s political style and psychology as well as his beliefs. If he overreaches on his nationalistic agenda or provokes the international community because of arrogance, impatience, or irritation, his domestic public support could drop significantly, and his second tenure as prime minister could end in failure. Such a negative outcome would at the very least mean missing the opportunity of a “stable” Japanese government to revive Tokyo’s influence and to promote stability in East Asia.

At worst, Abe may leave both Japan and East Asia in a more precarious state and weaken the foundations of U.S.–Japan relations. At best, he could revive Japan’s economy and confidence, strengthen security cooperation with the United States, and promote better relations with Asian countries around China’s periphery, thereby helping to constrain Chinese assertiveness and encouraging China’s peaceful development.

“It’s (Still) the Economy, Stupid!”

The LDP may have won landslide parliamentary victories in the last two national elections, but public support for the LDP still remains soft. In the July 2013 national proportional representation (PR) constituency, in which citizens cast votes for a political party, the LDP received 34.8 percent of the votes, which is admittedly a substantial increase from the 24.1 percent they received in the summer 2010 national PR constituency. It also exceeds the 27.8 percent of the votes the LDP won in the PR prefectural block constituencies in the December 2012 House of Representatives election, which brought Abe back to power.³ Despite this upward trend, the public support for the LDP itself still is clearly not as strong as the numerical superiority in seats that the party now enjoys.

Furthermore, the LDP won not because of a positive assessment of the party, but because the opposition parties lacked appeal and were in disarray. According to a post-election public survey conducted by the *Asahi Shimbun*, 83 percent felt that a party that can effectively oppose the LDP is necessary. The same survey indicated that the majority of voters (60 percent) want Abe to emphasize the economy, employment, or social security. Only 9 percent wanted him to focus on foreign and security policy, and only 4 percent thought constitutional revision should take priority.⁴ This ranking of priorities in the Japanese public diverges from the political agenda that Abe initially articulated when he first catapulted to the front stage of national politics in the mid-2000s. For example, in his book *Toward a Beautiful Country*, which was originally published in summer 2006 right before he first became prime minister, Abe emphasized nationalistic themes about history and constitutional revision and the need to strengthen national defense.⁵

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Although public support for the Abe government remains relatively robust at about 57 percent, there continues to be public skepticism about the ability of “Abenomics” to improve the economic situation of average citizens. For example, according to an *Asahi Shimbun* survey conducted in September 2013, only 16 percent indicated that they felt that economic conditions have improved after the Abe government took office, while 80 percent did not sense any improvement. Moreover, 84 percent of those surveyed felt a great deal or some anxiety about a deterioration of the country’s public financial situation.⁶ In other words, if Abe’s policies do not produce tangible benefits for average Japanese citizens, support for Abe and the LDP could dissipate quickly.

Abe’s economic program has three “arrows.” He has already shot the first two by increasing the money supply and increasing public spending, but he must now hone the third arrow in his economic quiver: structural reform. He needs to implement measures that will enhance innovation, efficiency, competitiveness, and labor productivity. Participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations will give Abe some leverage to overcome domestic resistance to painful but necessary reforms. But this will prove politically challenging because he will have to relax regulations and reduce

spending that have protected and benefited vested interests of Japan's old economy—interests such as agriculture and small healthcare providers that backed the LDP's return to power. He will also have to make the social safety net more robust so that structural change in the economy can take place without even more severe social consequences. And he has to do this in the context of formidable fiscal constraints. "Abenomics" has given the prime minister political capital, but now Abe has to use a big chunk of that capital to follow through on structural reform.

Although increasing domestic demand through growth in household incomes will be essential for Japan's economic revitalization, Japanese exports and foreign direct investments will also remain important. China is still Japan's number one trading partner and a critical destination for Japanese investments. Even with the recent slowdown in the Chinese economy, reviving Japan's economy will be inordinately difficult if fractious political relations with China are allowed to damage Japan–China economic relations. Prime Minister Abe will encourage business efforts to expand trade with promising economies in South and Southeast Asia as well as elsewhere, but these alternative markets are unlikely to substitute for China in the foreseeable future. So far, trade and investment between Japan and China have been relatively resilient despite the problems in bilateral political relations. But if Sino–Japanese relations were to deteriorate further and lead to a more precipitous drop in Japanese exports to China, this would jeopardize Abe's growth strategy and thereby threaten his political survival.

Defense Policy and the Japan–U.S. Alliance

Given the rise of Chinese military power and assertiveness, Prime Minister Abe is committed to beefing up Japan's defense forces, tightening the alliance with the United States, and promoting security cooperation with Asian countries that share his concerns about China. He has reversed an eleven-year decline in absolute defense expenditures and is pushing legislation to establish a National Security Council modeled after the United States. The Defense Ministry is drafting a new National Defense Program Guideline (NDPG) as a follow-up to the December 2010 NDPG that the Kan Cabinet approved when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) was in power.⁷ The 2010 document enunciated the new concept of a "Dynamic Defense Force" concept, which stresses "readiness, mobility, flexibility, sustainability, and versatility" and the use of defense forces in "gray-area" military operations that lie between peacetime and wartime.⁸ Building on this "Dynamic Defense Force" concept, the new NDPG is likely to include the development of a rapidly deployable amphibious unit that can defend Japan's southwest islands from possible Chinese encroachments.

The Abe government will also follow through on a DPJ initiative to revise the Japan–U.S. defense cooperation guidelines. Japan last revised these guidelines in 1997, largely in response to North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. At that time, Japan agreed to provide rear-area support for U.S. forces during contingencies in "areas surrounding Japan" that could have a major impact on its security. Since then, the security environment has changed dramatically. The salience of cyber and space security, as well as the dramatic increase in Chinese military capabilities in Japan's immediate neighborhood, has challenged the distinction between frontlines and rear areas for U.S.–Japan defense cooperation. Moreover, tensions with China in the East China Sea

necessitate bilateral discussions on how to deal with “gray area” conflicts that might involve coast guard or paramilitary units.

Growing negative views of China among the Japanese public in the wake of Chinese assertiveness in the Senkaku Islands will make it easier for Abe to pursue his defense agenda, but he still faces constraints. First, the LDP’s coalition partner, the Kōmeitō, will act as a brake. The support base for the Kōmeitō is the lay Buddhist organization Sōkagakkai (Value–Creation Society), whose members tend to adhere to pacifist beliefs. This braking function is already apparent in watching the push by LDP hawks to have Japan acquire the capability to strike enemy bases which might threaten Japan with missiles: at Kōmeitō’s insistence, the July 2013 NDPG interim report backed off from explicitly mentioning such an attack capability and referred only to the need for a “comprehensive response capability.”⁹

Second, fiscal constraints and the growing cost of social welfare programs are likely to prevent the Abe government from increasing defense expenditures much beyond 1 percent of GDP. Absolute increases in defense spending will therefore depend on the success of Abe’s policies in expanding the economy. Radically restructuring Japan’s Self-Defense Force (JSDF) might be one way to get the necessary funds to buy big-ticket military systems like a new generation of fighter and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) planes. Japan currently spends much on personnel costs to sustain large garrison ground forces in northern Japan. Although such forces do play a role in domestic disaster relief operations, such as after the March 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, Japan should be able to reduce these garrison units and still respond to possible natural disasters, thereby freeing up funds to address external security challenges. But the large ground forces and their families provide a loyal electoral base for LDP politicians, and Abe will encounter strong political resistance from within his own party if his government attempted to reduce drastically the garrison forces and shift more defense expenditures to address air and maritime security challenges.

Third, the U.S. military presence in Okinawa will remain the Achilles heel of the U.S.–Japan alliance. This island prefecture, which is Japan’s smallest, hosts nearly 74 percent of the land area of bases in Japan used exclusively by the U.S. military and about 68 percent of U.S. military personnel.¹⁰ In 1996, the U.S. government agreed to return to Japan the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station at Futenma (because it is dangerously located in a heavily populated area), under the condition that the United States can construct an alternative facility. The Abe government has pushed Okinawa to accept the construction of a new air station at Henoko Bay. The vote in Okinawa during the July 2013 upper house election, however, does not bode well for Abe. Keiko Itokazu, the incumbent upper house member from Okinawa who campaigned vigorously against the planned Henoko base, defeated the LDP-backed candidate Masaaki Asato. Moreover, defying the LDP’s position at the national level, Asato and the Okinawa chapter of the LDP supported locating the Futenma replacement facility outside of Okinawa rather than at Henoko Bay.

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Given the intense opposition among Okinawans to building another U.S. air base in their prefecture, Governor Hirokazu Nakaima faces a tough decision on whether or not to accept the central government's landfill application so that construction of the new V-shaped air base on Henoko Bay can commence. If Nakaima denies the application, the ensuing deadlock might compel the central government to consider special legislation to override the Okinawa prefectural government's opposition. Even if the governor approves the landfill, constructing the new facility as planned could then become mired in tense grassroots protests, especially if the anti-base mayor in Nago City, Susumu Inamine, is re-elected in January 2014.

As long as Tokyo and Washington are unwilling to revise the existing plan, anger in Okinawa will mount and even weaken the prefecture's willingness to host strategically more important U.S. facilities, like Kadena Air Force Base. An explosion of anti-base protests in Okinawa would play to China's advantage in the Sino-Japanese face-off in the East China Sea. Despite this risk, Prime Minister Abe will hesitate to ask the United States to re-think the 2006 base realignment plan. He knows what happened to Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama when the latter tried to do so in 2009—Hatoyama asked that the Futenma replacement facility be located outside of Okinawa or Japan, but in the end capitulated to pressure from Washington. This contributed to Hatoyama's resignation in June 2010. Probably in Abe's mind, at a time of increasing Chinese assertiveness, the bilateral alliance is still not deep enough and Japan's Self-Defense Forces not strong enough for Japan to ask the United States to scale back its Marine presence on Okinawa beyond what is already in the works.

Constitutional Reinterpretation and Collective Self-Defense

To tighten the alliance with the United States, Abe is eager to reinterpret the constitution so that Japan can exercise the right of collective as well as individual self-defense. On the face of it, such a change appears common sense, since the UN Charter recognizes the collective self-defense right for all nations, and this right is mentioned in the U.S.–Japan security treaty. But since 1954, the Japanese government has declared that Article 9 of the constitution prohibits exercising the right of collective self-defense; and based on this interpretation, Japan has maintained an “exclusively defense-oriented policy” and refrained from possessing “more military force than is necessary for self-defense and that could pose a threat to other countries.”¹¹ Three conditions must be met before using force: “(1) when there is an imminent and illegitimate act of aggression against Japan; (2) when there is no appropriate means to deal with such aggression other than by resorting to the right of self-defense; and (3) when the use of armed force is confined to the minimum necessary level.”¹²

This constitutional doctrine, however, has not prevented Japan from expanding its security horizons in response to international developments such as the Cambodian peace settlement in 1991 or the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. By stretching the right of individual self-defense and by clarifying restrictions on the use of the force, Japan has managed to participate in UN peacekeeping operations, refuel naval ships of the United States and other nations in the Indian Ocean, and deploy ground forces to help Iraq's post-war reconstruction.

So why does Japan now need to overturn a relatively elastic doctrine that has been followed for nearly six decades? In April 2007, Prime Minister Abe appointed a blue-ribbon panel chaired by former Japanese ambassador to the United States, Shunji

Yanai, to examine four possible Japanese security roles. The first is defending U.S. naval ships that come under attack while engaging in joint operations with Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) vessels in international waters; second, intercepting a ballistic missile targeted at the United States; third, defending personnel from other countries participating in international peace operations along with Japan; and fourth, providing logistical support for international peace operations that might become an integral part of the use of force by other countries.

A year later, after Abe resigned as prime minister, the Yanai panel concluded that in order to perform the first two roles, Japan should reinterpret the constitution to permit the exercise of the collective self-defense right. It argued that the third and fourth roles would be facilitated if Japan could exercise the right of collective self-defense and participate in UN “collective security efforts.” The Yanai committee also advocated abandoning the doctrine that prohibits rear-area support for operations that are to be directly integrated with the use of force (*buryokukōshi no ittaika*), except in response to an attack against Japan.¹³ This doctrine was articulated in the context of the 1990–91 Persian Gulf crisis and war to establish the conditions in which Japanese rear-area support would be permissible under the constitution.

Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, who succeeded Abe in 2007, declined to pursue the Yanai committee’s recommendations. LDP doves as well as opposition party politicians criticized the panel for promoting back-door constitutional revision without open debate. Even some in the Japanese defense policy community questioned the analysis in the Yanai report. For example, they argued that JMSDF vessels could respond under the right of individual self-defense if a nearby U.S. naval ship were attacked, because it is hard to imagine the U.S. ship coming under attack without threatening the Japanese ship as well. Regarding intercepting ballistic missiles, critics pointed out that Japan does not have the capability to shoot down a missile headed for the United States, and that under such a scenario, Japan’s primary mission should be to defend U.S. bases in Japan as well as Japanese territory. Such an operation could be undertaken under the right of individual self-defense.¹⁴

Despite the above skepticism about the need to reinterpret the constitution, Prime Minister Abe revived the Yanai committee soon after his recent re-election. After the July 2013 upper house election, the vice-chair of the panel, Professor Shinichi Kitaoka, stated in press interviews that the committee, which resumed its activity in February 2013, would go beyond the four cases outlined in the June 2008 report and consider other security challenges, like cyber security and sea lane protection. With China’s growing military power and the intrusion of official Chinese vessels in the territorial waters of the Senkaku Islands, Kitaoka stressed the urgency of cooperating with the United States.¹⁵ To clear the way for constitutional reinterpretation, Abe appointed in August 2013 former diplomat Ichirō Komatsu, who is supportive of the change, as the new director-general for the Cabinet Legal Affairs Bureau.

The prime minister, however, is facing significant resistance to reinterpretation. According to an *Asahi Shimbun* survey, 59 percent opposed changing the interpretation of the constitution to permit exercising the right of collective self-defense, while only 27 percent favored such a reinterpretation.¹⁶ The Kōmeitō, the LDP’s coalition partner, has expressed its misgivings about reinterpretation; and former defense minister Toshimi Kitazawa has publicly opposed changing the current interpretation without stipulating the content and limits of collective self-defense.¹⁷ In order to overcome this resistance,

Prime Minister Abe may have to specify constraints on the use of force when Japan exercises the right of collective self-defense.

How will constitutional reinterpretation affect Japanese defense policy and U.S.–Japan security relations in concrete terms? Regarding the defense of Japan against Chinese encroachments or North Korean threats, Japan can fully cooperate with the United States under the current interpretation that restricts Japan to exercising individual self-defense. Permitting the exercise of the right of collective self-defense, however, could *theoretically* allow Japan to be fully integrated with the U.S. military regarding the use of force—even in scenarios and geographic areas that do not directly threaten the Japanese homeland and nationals, as long as they pose clear threats to the United States (such as Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks). Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that Japan will become like the United Kingdom and France in joining U.S.-led “coalitions of the willing” and fighting side-by-side in military operations in the Middle East or elsewhere.

Perhaps the greatest significance of constitutional reinterpretation will be to alter the basic psychology of the U.S.–Japan alliance. Reinterpreting the constitution to legitimize collective self-defense could encourage Japan and the United States to deepen operational planning and integration for contingencies beyond the defense of Japan proper. Reinterpretation would permit relaxing the current prohibition on rear-area support that is directly integrated with the use of force in scenarios that do not involve an attack on Japan. For example, Japan might be able to provide, outside of Japanese territory, rear-area support like the supply of ammunition and fuel to U.S. forces that would be directly linked to the use of force to defend the security interests of a country with which Japan has close relations. Japan might also be able to join international minesweeping operations in waters that may still be part of a combat theater or to interdict vessels during some military contingencies that involve the United States. Defense policy debates in Japan would thus shift from a focus on constitutional questions to concrete discussions of strategic objectives and means. As Abe himself has written, “the exercise of the right of collective self-defense does not mean that Japan will be subordinate to the United States, but rather that it will become equal to the United States.”¹⁸

Beyond Reinterpretation to Constitutional Revision

With the national elections, Japan inched a bit closer to the elusive goal of constitutional revision.

If he can stay in power long enough, Abe wants to be the first prime minister to lead Japan to revise the post-war constitution. In 2007, his government pushed through legislation establishing the procedures for a national referendum on a constitutional amendment proposal, if one were to pass the Diet in the future. With the national elections of December 2012 and July 2013, Japan inched a bit closer to the elusive goal of constitutional revision. According to surveys conducted by the *Asahi Shimbun* and Tokyo University political scientists, well over two-thirds of both houses

of the National Diet now support some form of revision. But this does not mean that Japan will formally amend the constitution anytime soon.

Despite broad support for the general notion of constitutional revision, Diet members who favor revision do not necessarily agree about what *kind* of revision should take place. For example, only 48 percent of the upper house members favored revising Article 9 of the constitution, which denies Japan the right of belligerency; and even 19 percent of the LDP members of the upper house opposed changing Article 9.¹⁹ The Kōmeitō is likely to resist moves by the LDP to push constitutional revision; and the lackluster performance of the new Japan Restoration Party (JRP) in the July 2013 election will not help Abe's revisionist agenda. The JRP, which was launched in September 2012 and openly campaigned for constitutional revision, won only 9 of the 121 seats up for grabs and garnered only 11.2 percent of the votes in the national PR constituency.

There is a similar lack of consensus at the public level. Since 1990, a majority of Japanese citizens have consistently approved of revising the constitution.²⁰ In a poll published by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* in April 2013, 54 percent of respondents replied that Japan's "constitution should be revised." Although a high number, it is lower than the all-time high of 65 percent in 2004.²¹ According to another poll published in May 2013 by the *Asahi Shimbun*, 54 percent also supported revising the constitution, while 37 percent opposed.²² At first glance, these polls seem to suggest that Japan's electorate would be receptive to the LDP's agenda of constitutional revision. But this is not the case.

Prime Minister Abe and a majority of Japanese citizens may share the same interest in finally revising Japan's post-war constitution, but their reasons for doing so differ greatly. Nor do they share the same sense of urgency. According to a *Mainichi Shimbun* survey conducted in August 2012, the main reason that the majority of respondents (60 percent) gave for favoring constitutional revision was a vague argument that the current constitution does not fit with the times. The next two most popular reasons were because the constitution had never been revised (17 percent) and because the United States had forced the current constitution upon Japan (10 percent). Only 8 percent of those who favored constitutional revision referred to the gap between the activities of the Self-Defense Force and Article 9.²³ Some of the political parties have articulated other constitutional amendment ideas besides changing Article 9. For example, the Kōmeitō supports an explicit reference to environmental rights; and the Minnanotō (Your Party) advocates a direct public election of the prime minister, a unicameral national legislature, and the establishment of a system of regional governments (*dōshūsei*).²⁴

Since Article 9's prohibition on Japan's right to initiate war is one of the pillars of its post-war national identity, it is telling that when the *Asahi Shimbun* asked voters to what degree they agreed with the statement that "Japan must not engage in war," 72 percent answered "quite strongly" and 18 percent replied "somewhat strongly."²⁵ Despite the best efforts of conservatives to change public opinion, the *Asahi Shimbun* found that 52 percent of Japan's citizens still oppose revising Article 9, while 39 percent express support.²⁶ Although these numbers are not as high as in the past, they nonetheless show that Article 9's anti-war message resonates with the Japanese public.

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Despite these public opinion trends regarding war, the LDP proposal to revise the constitution seeks to transform Japan's Self-Defense Force (JSDF) into a full-fledged

military by renaming it the National Defense Military [*Kokubō Gun*].²⁷ But what do Japan's citizens think about a regular military force that can engage in normal military operations overseas with the United States? Japan deployed its forces most recently in Iraq in a non-combat role, but such deployments garner little support from Japanese citizens. Asked what kind of overseas actions are appropriate for the JSDF, respondents to the May 2013 *Asahi* poll were told to select as many answers as they liked from a list of five choices. From this list, 94 percent chose "saving citizens of countries affected by natural disasters," 85 percent selected "evacuating Japanese from dangerous areas," 74 percent answered "participating in UN peace keeping operations." Only 20 percent responded "supplying fuel and weapons to the U.S. military," and a mere 7 percent said "fighting on the frontlines with the U.S. military."²⁸ Further emphasizing Japanese society's aversion to using the JSDF in regular military roles, 56 percent believe Japan should continue to interpret Article 9 as disallowing Japan to exercise the right of collective self-defense—even if its only ally, the United States, is attacked. These responses clearly show that a majority of Japanese still view the JSDF chiefly as an instrument for engaging in humanitarian assistance, not fighting wars.

Because of the lack of overwhelming public support for changing Article 9, Abe and the LDP have shrewdly proposed changing Article 96 instead, which stipulates that a two-thirds majority of both houses of the Diet and a majority of citizens are needed to pass an amendment. They would like to change that Article so that a simple majority of votes by each of the two houses and Japan's electorate would suffice to amend the constitution. Their calculation is that the public might be more receptive to changing Article 96 first, and with a lower hurdle for constitutional amendments, substantive amendments are more likely to pass later. But public opinion polls show no strong support even for altering the current requirements for constitutional amendments.

A *Yomiuri Shimbun* poll from April 2013 showed a clean even split among Japan's electorate, with 42 percent supporting and 42 percent opposing revising Article 96.²⁹ But, in a follow-up poll published in May 2013, support for revising Article 96 dropped to 35 percent and opposition rose to 51 percent.³⁰ This drop probably reflected the increasing public scrutiny given to the Article 96 amendment proposal and the growing criticism from Japanese constitutional scholars. Furthermore, an *Asahi Shimbun* poll from May 2, 2013, found that 38 percent supported changing Article 96, with 54 percent expressing dissent.³¹ A more recent poll released by the *Asahi Shimbun* in June 2013 shows similar results, with 37 percent supporting revision and 55 percent opposing.³² When one compares the number of LDP voters who support amending Article 96 with those of the electorate in general, it is especially apparent that the LDP and the Japanese public are not in agreement over Article 96's fate. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* reports that 47 percent of LDP voters support revising Article 96, while 38 percent oppose revision.³³ But even these numbers do not show an overwhelming mandate among the LDP's core voters for revising Article 96.

In a particularly revealing question, the *Asahi Shimbun* asked voters if they would support amending Article 96 with the knowledge that some see changing Article 96 as a means to make it easier to alter Article 9. Framed in this manner, 58 percent responded that they would oppose changing Article 96, compared to only 33 percent who said they would support revising it.³⁴

Also troubling to many Japanese are the LDP amendment proposals that would weaken the concepts of popular sovereignty and universal human rights in the present

constitution.³⁵ For example, the preamble of the current constitution begins with “We, the Japanese people,” goes on to proclaim that “sovereign power resides with the people” and that “government is a sacred trust of the people,” and refers to this as “a universal principle of mankind.” The first sentence of the preamble of the LDP revision proposal, however, begins with a reference to Japan as a country with a long history, distinctive culture, and a state that has received the Emperor as the symbol of national unity. Although the first sentence ends with a clause about governing under the sovereignty of the people, the emphasis on popular sovereignty is less predominant compared to the current constitution. Gone are the explicit mentions of government as “a sacred trust of the people” and of “a universal principle of mankind.” While mentioning respect for fundamental human rights, the preamble in the LDP revision proposal also calls for “respect for harmony” and alludes to “a nation where families and the whole society mutually support each other.” The LDP proposal weakens the articles in the current constitution that guarantee fundamental human rights: it changes the sentence “All of the people shall be respected as individuals [*kojin*]” to “All of the people shall be respected as persons [*hito*]” and by articulating an open-ended notion that people shall never violate the public interest or public order.³⁶ This illiberal character of the LDP’s revisionist agenda is likely to mobilize public opposition to changing Article 96.

The Historical Revisionism Agenda

Although his father was Shintarō Abe, who exemplified moderation and pragmatism while serving as foreign minister from 1982–1986, Shinzō Abe gets much of his inspiration from his grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi. A brilliant bureaucrat, Kishi was one of the architects of Japan’s imperial project in Manchuria and served as Minister of Munitions in the Tōjō Cabinet during World War II. After being imprisoned as a suspected Class-A war criminal after the war, Kishi became active in politics and served as prime minister in 1957–60. He revised the U.S.–Japan security treaty so that U.S. forces could not intervene in Japanese domestic affairs, and ensured the United States would have a firmer commitment to defend Japan. Kishi also sought to overturn what he saw as the excesses of U.S.-led reforms during the occupation era and to revise the post-war constitution, including Article 9.

Because of this legacy, Shinzō Abe not only wants to revise the constitution, but wants to challenge the Tokyo War Crimes Trial view of history that places the blame for the Pacific War entirely on Japan. Given his “revisionist” views on Japan’s wartime history, Abe was one of the leaders of a drive to rescind the 1993 Kōno statement of apology to comfort women that acknowledged the role of Japanese administrative and military personnel in coercive recruitment. He also supported pilgrimages to the Yasukuni Shrine, a Shintō shrine initially administered by the military where the souls of those who sacrificed their lives for the emperor have been apotheosized, consoled, and honored through enshrinement. Because Class-A war criminals are among those memorialized, the Shrine has come under fire from China, South Korea, and Taiwan as being unapologetic for the acts of WWII.

After becoming prime minister in 2006, however, Abe exercised restraint in translating these personal feelings to a political agenda. Despite his discomfort with the 1995 Murayama statement of apology for Japanese colonial rule and aggression, he decided to respect it because the Murayama statement was backed by a formal cabinet decision. He also refrained from overturning the 1993 Kōno statement and expressed his

apology to comfort women during his April 2007 visit to Washington, D.C.³⁷ Perhaps most significantly, he implied (starting in summer 2006) that he would not necessarily go to the Yasukuni Shrine, assuming a neither-confirm-nor-deny stance.³⁸ As a consequence, Abe was able to make his “ice-breaking” visit to China in September 2006, which led to a thaw in Sino–Japanese relations after several years of problems (due primarily to Prime Minister Junichirō Koizumi’s repeated visits to the controversial shrine from 2001 to 2006).

During his quest to return to power in 2012, Abe frequently expressed his regret about not making a pilgrimage to Yasukuni while prime minister the first time around,

Abe has come awfully close to triggering a new round of memory wars with China and Korea.

but he has so far exercised restraint after assuming the prime ministership again. Nevertheless, Abe has come awfully close to triggering a new round of memory wars with China and Korea in other ways. Although Abe himself has refrained from going to Yasukuni, 168 members of the National Diet visited the shrine in April 2013, which was the largest number since 1987. Among those making the pilgrimage were three members of the Abe Cabinet, including Deputy Prime Minister Tarō Asō. During a parliamentary interpellation in April 2013, Abe waffled on the question of whether or not Japan launched a war of

aggression. According to him, “the definition of aggression has yet to be established in academia or in the international community” and “things that happened between nations will look differently depending on which side you view them from.”³⁹ He proposed drafting a new war-related statement for 2015, the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, which would be more “future-oriented” than the 1995 Murayama Statement of apology. If such a statement were to downplay Japan’s past transgressions by focusing on the future, it would dilute the moral power of the Murayama Statement and inflame Asian countries that suffered from Japanese aggression and atrocities.

When Tōru Hashimoto, Osaka mayor and co-leader of the Japan Restoration Party, made his imprudent remarks in May 2013 about comfort women being necessary for soldiers to deal with the stress of war, Prime Minister Abe wisely distanced himself from his purported political ally. Abe used this opportunity to reiterate “his deepest regret for the pain and suffering experienced at that time by the comfort women.”⁴⁰ By echoing parts of the Kōno statement, Abe appeared to be signaling his intent not to challenge the statement itself. On the other hand, recent moves by local communities in the United States mobilized by Asian-American groups to erect memorials for comfort women have angered nationalists in Japan. Newspapers like the *Yomiuri* and *Sankei* have openly called for a review of the Kōno statement—a goal that Abe had explicitly championed in the past.⁴¹

During the most prominent national ceremony to remember the World War II war dead, held each year on August 15 at the Budōkan with the Emperor and Empress attending, Prime Minister Abe revealed once again his view of history when he spoke on this occasion in 2013. Breaking with a two-decade tradition of prime ministers expressing their condolences for the suffering that Japan inflicted on its Asian neighbors, Abe made no mention of Japan’s war responsibility and expressed no

remorse for those killed from other countries. This was even a departure from his own speech that he gave at the Budōkan ceremony in 2007. In 2013, he intentionally chose to restrict his expression of sorrow to the Japanese who died.

The longer Abe stays in office, the more his nationalistic supporters will expect him to go to Yasukuni, rescind the Kōno statement, and issue a new war-related statement in 2015 that would dilute the power of the Murayama statement. Abe's political heart will pull him in this direction, but he should resist the temptation. Although nationalistic voices in Japan may be loud and emotional, the majority of the Japanese public has a more penitent view about history. In a survey conducted in 2006 during the 60th anniversary of the Tokyo War Crimes Trial, 51 percent felt that Japan had not sufficiently apologized or compensated for the damage Japan inflicted on foreign countries and peoples through aggression and colonial rule, while 36 percent believed that Japanese apologies and reparations had been sufficient.⁴² In contrast to Abe's ambiguous views, a majority acknowledges past Japanese aggression. According to a September 2012 survey, 52 percent thought that the war between Japan and China during the 1930s and 1940s was a war of Japanese aggression, while 31 percent did not.⁴³ By not pursuing a "reversionist" agenda on history, Abe will undoubtedly disappoint the nationalists, but most Japanese will applaud his prudence.

It is understandable that Prime Minister Abe would eventually want to go to Yasukuni and console the spirits of Japan's war dead who gave their lives for their country. But to do so without provoking a diplomatic disaster with China and South Korea, he should first use his personal influence to reform the shrine and transform the Yūshūkan museum on the shrine grounds so that it does not glorify Japan's militarist past. Abe could also encourage Yasukuni to build on the cosmopolitan and pacifist vision of Fujimaro Tsukuba, who served as Yasukuni's head priest from 1946–1978. In 1965, Tsukuba constructed a small shrine called Chinreisha (Spirit Pacification Shrine) off the main sanctuary of Yasukuni to honor the foreign war dead from the Asia–Pacific war. Chinreisha can thus serve as the seed for an ideological transformation of Yasukuni that is more consistent with contemporary Japan's pacifist norms. It was only after Tsukuba died and was succeeded by a nationalistic priest in 1978 that Class-A war criminals were enshrined.

After learning of the enshrinement of Class-A war criminals, Emperor Hirohito refused to make a pilgrimage to Yasukuni again (it is certainly ironic that the emperor can no longer go to the main shrine that honors those who died on behalf of the imperial institution). As was proposed by a leading LDP patron of the shrine in 2007, the names of the Class-A war criminals could be removed from Yasukuni.⁴⁴ Abe could aid in this, and perhaps restore Yasukuni's status to what it was before the Class-A war criminal enshrinement in October 1978, a time when Japanese prime ministers could visit the shrine without provoking international controversy.

While many on the political right see self-criticism of their nation's history as masochistic, it is in Japan's strategic interest to promote historical reconciliation with its neighbors. The persistence of Korean animosity toward Japan because of historical issues, despite compelling reasons for promoting bilateral security cooperation, thwarted in summer 2012 a Japan–South Korea agreement for military information sharing and plans to sign a military Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement. Chinese populist nationalism, fueled by feelings that Japan does not sincerely acknowledge past aggression and atrocities, will make it much harder to manage the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island dispute.

Only by advancing historical reconciliation at the societal level can Japan take away the so-called “history card” that Chinese and Korean leaders use against Japan to distract from their own domestic problems.

Implications for the United States

Abe and the LDP’s return to power does not reflect a rise of Japanese nationalism.

Abe and the LDP’s return to power does not reflect a rise of Japanese nationalism, but rather public disappointment in the DPJ governments, the disarray of the opposition camp, and hope that Abe’s bold initiatives will reinvigorate the economy. If Abe were to stumble on the economic front, he will not get much political traction by pushing a nationalistic agenda of constitutional and historical revisionism. Japanese citizens on the whole remain cautious about revising the post-war constitution and feel remorse about Japan’s past militarist policies. Although Japan

will enhance its coast guard and defense force capabilities to counter Chinese encroachments around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, as well as increased Chinese military activities in the East China Sea and around Japan, this response will be measured and will not entail full-blown remilitarization with major offensive capabilities.

The United States should welcome this moderate realism from Japan. While the United States and Japan share concerns about China’s military build-up and its recent assertiveness, both countries also have a keen interest in encouraging China to become a force for regional stability and cooperation. Excessively hostile policies toward China by either Japan or the United States are more likely to provoke Beijing and trigger a downward security spiral than to foster restraint.

If Prime Minister Abe follows through on *reinterpreting* the constitution in a more limited way so that Japan can exercise its right of collective self-defense, Washington should seize this opportunity and work with Tokyo to enhance defense cooperation. But the United States should neither expect nor encourage Japan to use this constitutional reinterpretation to become like the United Kingdom or France in joining the United States in military interventions in places distant from Japan’s primary security interests. Such a role goes well beyond the public consensus in Japan.

In order to stabilize Okinawa’s willingness to host the most important U.S. military assets (especially Kadena Air Force Base), Washington should show more flexibility regarding the U.S. Marine Corps presence in the island prefecture. The current plan to construct a new Marine air base on Henoko Bay as a precondition for closing down Futenma Air Station will provoke a new deadlock, whether or not Governor Nakaima approves the landfill application. Allowing such a deadlock to retract the U.S. promise to return Futenma would anger Okinawans, with devastating results for the long-term stability of other U.S. bases on Okinawa. Fortunately, the deployment of the MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, with its long range and high speed compared to conventional helicopters, provides an opportunity to consider other Marine deployment options, including those on one of the main islands of Japan.

The United States does not need to involve itself in Japan's debate about constitutional revision. It is really up to the Japanese people to decide whether or not to amend the constitution and how to do so. Some of the points in the LDP's proposal for a new constitution are troubling from a liberal democratic perspective, but the Japanese people themselves are likely to block such moves on their own.

At the same time, however, the United States could do more to encourage the process of historical reconciliation in Northeast Asia. But this should not be done in a sanctimonious manner—the United States, too, contributed to Northeast Asia's tragic history during the first half of the twentieth century. The most constructive U.S. role would be to become a full partner in transnational dialogues about history with Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese, and to emphasize that reconciliation is a two-way street and an on-going, long-term process. Although states can establish an environment conducive for a reconciliation process to take hold, the heavy lifting will have to come from societal actors such as professional historians, religious groups, educators, journalists, private foundations, and nongovernmental organizations committed to reconciliation.

Embracing such a historical reconciliation agenda would offer the United States the most effective method to discourage Prime Minister Abe and his colleagues from pursuing a nationalistic brand of historical revisionism. At a time when Japan's security role and horizons are broadening, when the region is undergoing a profound power shift, and when the future of the Korean peninsula is more uncertain than ever, the task of reconciliation has become more urgent—not only for moral and educational reasons, but also for strategic ones.

The U.S. could do more to encourage the process of historical reconciliation in Northeast Asia.

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