Abe Foreign Policy: A Good Start but Challenges Ahead

By Richard Bush, The Brookings Institution

Let us imagine that Chinese and Japanese foreign policy specialists were asked in late summer 2006 to predict the chances that the following would happen within six months:

- Prime Minister Abe Shinzo would visit both Beijing and Seoul within two weeks of taking office, without explicitly declaring his intentions concerning Yasukuni Shrine;
- Mr. Abe would meet again with Chinese President Hu Jintao and South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun in January at the East Asian Summit;
- The three countries would collaborate effectively on the North Korean issue;
- Military-to-military relations between Japan and China would resume by the end of 2006;
- The "history issue" would no longer preoccupy bilateral relations;
- A visit by PRC Premier Wen Jiabao would be planned for April 2007 and that China would have extended an invitation for Mr. Abe to visit China later in the year (again without an explicit Yasukuni commitment).

Our specialists would probably have given very low odds that all these things would happen. But in fact they have occurred. Clearly, Japan's foreign relations since the end of the Koizumi era have undergone a striking shift.

The explanation for this unexpected development has several elements. First of all, leaders and elites in China and Japan came to realize that the political stalemate of the late Koizumi period (created by the prime minister's visits to Yasukuni and by China's reaction) had become counter-productive and might even harm the shared economic interests of the two countries. Second, the two governments recognized that the succession to Koizumi created an opportunity to break out of that stalemate. Third, leaders took the initiative—and some risks—to try for a breakthrough. And fourth, skillful diplomats were able to bring it about.

Yet even if Japan's *relations* with China and South Korea have improved in the wake of Abe Shinzo's becoming prime minister, the challenges to his *foreign policy* have not disappeared. He may have been skillful in using ambiguity to set aside the Yasukuni issue, but he still has ambitious goals. Arguably he approaches those goals more systematically than did his predecessor. He was probably never the simplistic caricature of a right-wing chauvinist that the media made him out to be. But even if he is more pragmatic than people expected, he is still strategic in his approach. He still reflects a generational shift in Japanese politics and all that means in terms of national identity and Japan's role in the in the world.

Abe's foreign policy does contain elements of continuity with that of Koizumi and, in some cases, previous prime ministers: strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance as U.S. forces in Japan are realigned; resolving the Korean security threat through the Six-Party Talks; cooperating in global fight against terrorism; seeking a permanent seat on the UN Security Council; and providing overseas development assistance.

But Abe has new initiatives and special points of emphasis: breaking through the constitutional constraints on the right of collective self-defense; centralizing decision-making on national defense and foreign policy in the prime minister's office; and stressing the abduction issue in diplomacy with Pyongyang. Regarding relations with Beijing and Seoul, his early visits were designed to ease the mistrust with those countries and break the stalemate on summit meetings. The hope is that sufficient cooperative and interactive momentum can be created that will allow a stress on shared interests and management of the differences over history.

So far, initiative and finesse have marked the conduct of Mr. Abe's foreign policy. Aiding him has been Kim Jong Il's provocative behavior—the missile test in July and the nuclear test in October—and Beijing's palpable desire for a reduction of tensions. Yet significant challenges remain.

The first is North Korea. Although on balance Pyongyang's actions have facilitated unity among Tokyo, Washington, and Beijing, there is no guarantee they will provide glue in the future. Indeed, Kim Jong Il's near-term strategy will be to isolate the United States and Japan. We should recall, moreover, that before the UN Security Council passed the sanctions resolutions last year, there were fears that China would reject Japan's tough approach. A similar disagreement could come over what priority to place on the issue of abductions in the Six-Party Talks.

Of course, it is in the interest of regional peace and security that North Korea honors its commitment to dismantle its nuclear weapons and programs in return for security guarantees, economic cooperation, diplomatic normalization with the United States and Japan, and entry into the international community. Yet reaching agreement in the Six-Party Talks will be very difficult. More broadly, North Korea may decide to proceed with its nuclear weapons and missiles program—perfecting its devices, shrinking their size, and mating them to ballistic missiles—as the way to guarantee its security. If North Korea does so, Japan's sense of insecurity will deepen profoundly. How will it respond? The pressures to debate the nuclear option will certainly grow, with consequences for relations with China and the United States. (China, by the way, understands the danger that a nuclear North Korea will pose and the dilemma it will create for Japan, but it is fairly cautious about taking action itself to compel Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons.)

The second challenge will be maintaining the momentum of improved relations with China. To be sure, Japan and the PRC share common interests, particularly in the economic field. But each country has anxieties about the future security role of the other in East Asia. China worries about Japan's relaxing the limits on the Self-Defense Forces. Japan worries about China's non-transparent military build-up. The danger is that some time in the future these anxieties will form into a downward spiral of permanent hostility. Even though both sides have the best of intentions, each will have to demonstrate great skill to prevent a downward spiral. And we should keep in mind that the recent diplomacy has only set aside disagreements over history, not solved them. Whether they remain set aside (and so permit a continuation of positive momentum) is in part a function of the domestic political environment in each country. In this regard, this summer's Upper House elections in Japan and this fall's 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party will be occasions when domestic politics can come to the fore.

The third challenge could be the United States. This may seem like an odd statement, given that the closer integration of the U.S.-Japan alliance has been one of the success stories of the last six years. Looking forward, however, there are *potential* challenges to keep in mind. The first is managing the gap between American expectations and Japanese realities. This applies to issues like the implementation of measures pursuant to the realignment of U.S. forces in Japan, especially Futenma, and to the pace at which the Abe Administration might relax the existing limits on collective self-defense.

The bigger challenge will come if Washington and Tokyo experience a strategic divergence. Again, the prospects seem slim on the surface but not so small on further consideration.

First of all, there is the big unknown of what kind of international role the United States will undertake after its involvement in Iraq is resolved, as it will be. The American foreign-policy elite will assume (or hope) that the United States will continue to play an active global role. Whether the American public is willing to do so—and commit the required resources—remains an open question. There was a similar pull-back after the Vietnam, but it was easier for Washington to return to global activism in the late Cold War era than it might be in the current era. Time will tell. Clearly, a passive United States would change the dynamics in the Northeast Asian region.

Then there is the question of North Korea. Japan has been comfortable in the Six-Party Talks with Washington's relatively tough stance and the close diplomatic coordination. Both have spared Tokyo the prospect of diplomatic isolation. But it is no secret that, from the beginning, the Bush Administration's negotiating approach has been controversial among American Asia and arms control specialists, many of whom believe that a maximalist posture has had the perverse effect of facilitating North Korea's nuclear ambitions, rather than restraining them. What if Washington were to adopt an approach that was even more flexible than the one that it pursued during the summer of 2005 and appears to be pursuing now? Where would that leave Tokyo?

Finally, there is the issue of strategy towards China. Both the United States and Japan have essentially adopted a hedging strategy concerning China. We each recognize the value of cooperation with Beijing in the economic arena and on foreign policy issues like North Korea. Yet we also watch warily as China builds up its military power and expands its diplomatic influence and wonder whether this is the prelude to a challenge to the U.S. and Japanese position in East Asia. Because the future is uncertain, our governments have chosen to hedge against the downside risk and prepare against the possibility of competition. (Note that China has the same uncertainty about the United States and Japan. It sees the value of cooperation but fears containment. So it also hedges.)

It is likely that the United States will continue a hedging policy, balancing the twin emphases of cooperation and preparation. Maintaining that balance within the U.S. government while coordinating with Japan and reassuring China is no easy task. But we should not rule out the possibility that the United States might decide some time in the future that the danger of a China challenge was actually low and so did not require a hedging strategy (which, after all, does require significant military expenditures for forces in the Pacific). What if the United States essentially decided to accommodate to China instead of hedging? Where would that leave Japan? It would likely leave Japan with a greater sense of insecurity. If one adds to the picture a more moderate American approach to North Korea or, even worse, a clear North Korean decision to base its security on keeping and perfecting its nuclear weapons, then Japan's insecurity only grows. At that point, the value and credibility of the U.S. security commitment to Japan becomes a key issue.

Two matters do not seem to be such significant challenges. The first is the Taiwan Strait. The election campaign to succeed Chen Shui-bian has effectively begun, and who will take his place is far from clear. What does seem clear is that chances of a political initiative occurring on Taiwan that would challenge China's fundamental interests are declining. China has feared a constitutional change that would change Taiwan's legal identity (the functional equivalent of a declaration of independence), and so impel it to respond forcefully. That in turn would require the United States

to decide how to respond, and the U.S. decision could have implications for Japan. Yet the internal and external obstacles to such a development have remained in place and are liable to do so in the future.

The second is East Asian regionalism. How quickly, how deeply, and how robustly to pursue East Asian regionalism will present challenges, but they are ones that stem from the reality of the situation. Concerns of a few years ago that regional integration could divide the United States and Japan today seem unfounded.

In conclusion, Prime Minister Abe's initial performance in the foreign policy arena has been quite positive. It has repaired the tattered relationship with Beijing, which was not in America's interest, and created positive momentum. Abe's summit with Hu Jintao, along with the one with Roh Moo-hyun, helped facilitate the diplomatic responses to North Korea's nuclear test, both at the United Nations and at the Six-Party Talks. That sort of cooperation is a good model for great-power cooperation which, if it could be broadened, would provide a firm context for managing the inevitable problems in China-Japan relations. Yet there is no reason to be complacent. Ensuring that positive momentum will continue in the face of uncertainty, miscalculation, domestic politics, and a possible sense of insecurity will not be easy. ■

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