Japanese Foreign Policy: 2006-2013, Responding to the Rise of China

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Trends of Foreign Policy Discourse: 2006-2012

Since Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2001.4 – 2006.9) left the office, the politics of Japan have fallen into deep malaise. From September 2006 until December 2012 (6 years and 4 months), Japan has had 7 Prime Ministers, 12 Foreign Ministers and 14 Defense Ministers respectively. Some analysts ironically characterized this trend as a ‘Japanese revolving door system’ as the average timeframe of Prime Minister’s survival was less than a year during this period1.

When Shinzo Abe was handed over the LDP’s leadership in 2006, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) dominated the lower house with 296 seats inherited from Koizumi’s miraculous triumph in the general election in September 2005. Yet the LDP’s downfall began during the first Abe administration when the LDP and its coalition lost their majority in the House of Councillors (Upper House) after the July 2007 elections. Since then the ‘twisted Diet’, where the ruling party does not have a majority in the Upper House, has constantly plagued Japan’s legislative process, leading to a long-term gridlock and deficiencies in key decision-making. Subsequent Prime Ministers, Yasuo Fukuda and Taro Aso were unable to find a breakthrough thus leading to the historical loss in the general election in September 2009.

The victory by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has brought the end of more than half a century of almost uninterrupted rule by the LDP2. Despite the high support rate by the public, DPJ was unable to capitalize political sustainability. Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama stepped down from his office after 8 months since investiture, due to the mishandling of U.S.-Japan security relations over the U.S. Marine relocation issues in Okinawa. His successor Naoto Kan stayed for 16 months but the public support and confidence towards the DPJ administration was deteriorated especially since the Great Earthquake in March 2011. With the decision to dissolve the lower house by his successor Yoshihiko Noda in December 2012, DPJ has let LDP win a landslide victory and regain power in the general election.

With such a low survival rate of top leaders in the past 6 years, it is highly difficult to generalize the foreign policy discourse in the Japanese government. Indeed, concepts and slogans for Japan’s diplomacy proposed by Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers are created and then replaced by another sequentially. Records of major foreign policy initiatives include: the Value-Oriented Diplomacy/the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity (by FM Taro Aso, 2005.10-2007.8), the Resonant Diplomacy (by PM Yasuo Fukuda, 2007.9-2008.9), the promotion of the East Asia Community (PM Yukio Hatoyama, 2009.9-2010.5), the Economic Diplomacy (FM Seiji Maehara, 2010.9-2011.3), the Network Diplomacy (by FM Koichiro Genba, 2011.9-2012.12), and Asia’s Security Diamond (by PM Shinzo Abe, 2012.12-present).

Does this seemingly whack-a-mole foreign policy discourse only suggest that there is deep confusion and inconsistency in Japan’s diplomacy? When responding to this question, finding the explanatory variable for the fluctuation of diplomatic concepts other than Japan’s domestic political instability is necessary. Indeed, Japan’s inconsistent policy on China has been showcasing the poor stability of its foreign policy discourse. This becomes clearer when we represent these trends of foreign policies in the past 6 years between China and the US on a graph. The horizontal axis represents ‘China-In’ (Japan’s diplomacy regards China as equal-footing strategic partner) and ‘China-Out’ (Japan regards forming the regional order without China, or regard China as second-layer actor), and the vertical axis represents ‘Strong U.S. Commitment’ and ‘Weak U.S. Commitment’. By plotting the milestones of Japan’s foreign policy concepts, one can find a U-shaped swing figure (see Figure 2).

In particular, there is a deep crevasse, either conscious or unconscious, in Japan’s diplomatic community on whether to regard China as an insider or outsider of the regional order in East Asia or Asia-Pacific. During the first Shinzo Abe administration, the concept of Value-Oriented Diplomacy explicitly declared the preference for coalitions among democracies as its diplomatic profile, and China was merely mentioned in this concept. The following Yasuo Fukuda administration avoided inheriting the concept of Value-oriented Diplomacy and conceptualized its policy as the Resonate Diplomacy, which implied that Japan prefers co-existence of strategic relations with U.S. and with China, which should not be mutually exclusive. It then created the basis for the President Hu Jintao’s visit to Japan and the Japan-China Joint Statement on “Mutually Beneficial Relationship Based
“The foreign policy agenda of Abe’s golden three years is a tough one”

on ‘universal values’ such as democracy, freedom, human rights, the rule of law, and the market economy as we advance our diplomatic endeavors”4. This slogan was associated with the geographical concept the arc of freedom and prosperity. The main goal of this policy was to enhance cooperation with other states pursuing democracy and market economies, with the arc extending from Eastern Europe through the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia all the way to the Russian Far East.

As Aso declared these two concepts constituted the new diplomatic pillar of Japan, the MOFA also campaigned at the front page of Diplomatic Blue Book of 20077. The Abe-Aso’s proactive diplomacy under the new concepts indeed enhanced new cooperation and partnerships. Japan embarked on seeking new strategic relations with Europe through NATO’s global partnership initiative, as well as engaging in Eastern Europe. Japan also placed importance on Australia, consolidating the security partnership by signing the “Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation” on March 13, 2007. Japan’s diplomatic outreach to India was also highlighted. The Prime Minister Abe and The Prime Minister of India Singh have signed “Joint Statement Towards Japan-India Strategic Partnership” on December 15, 2006.

Japan’s proactive diplomatic endeavors associated with Abe-Aso’s new concepts certainly created a wide-range of security partners along the ‘arc’. However, given the less emphasis on direct diplomatic approach towards Beijing, Abe-Aso strategy provoked strong negative reactions from China. Indeed, various voices from Beijing regarded this strategic concept as ‘China encirclement’ and insisted that it would lose the opportunity for further Japan-China reconciliation. The value-oriented diplomacy also lacked the synergy with the development of the U.S.-China relations. During 2005-07, the U.S. Department of State promoted the concept of China as the ‘responsible stakeholder’, which created the foundation of deeper economic and strategic cooperation between the two powers. While Japan aspired for a China-out diplomatic concept, the U.S. (and many other Asia-Pacific states) sought opportunities of China-in approaches.

Phase II (China In): 2008-2010
Mutually Beneficial Relationship / East Asian Community

As soon as Abe stepped down, citing his ill health in September 2007, the administration of his successor, Yosuo Fukuda, quietly but decisively removed this policy, concluding that democracy promotion and values-based diplomacy would not produce the expected results. Fukuda is regarded as a dovish personality with a pro-China background within the LDP and has been known as being critical towards Abe-Aso diplomacy. Soon after assuming the office, his foreign policy team refrained from succeeding the Abe-Aso ideological agenda, and then characterized
his policy as ‘resonant diplomacy (Kyomei Gaikyo)’
Fukuda
reiterated the importance of ‘active Japanese diplomacy towards Asia, in resonance with the U.S.-Japan alliance’. Obviously, the self-declared concept that Japan was ready to shift towards a ‘China-in’ diplomacy, compatible with strengthening its alliance with the U.S.
Fukuda’s call for the ‘resonant diplomacy’ came to fruition through the President Hu Jintao’s visit to Tokyo on May 6-10th, 2008. Japan and China came up with the joint statement on comprehensive promotion of ‘mutually beneficial relationship’ based on common strategic interests. This joint statement urged both governments to resolve bilateral issues through consultations and comprehensive sets of cooperation on the following five pillars: 1) enhancement of mutual trust in the political area, 2) promotion of people-to-people and cultural exchange as well as the sentiments of friendships, 3) mutually beneficial cooperation (energy and environment, trade and investment, cooperation in the East China Sea), 4) contribution to the Asia-Pacific, 5) contribution to the global issues.
After the historical landslide victory of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) at the general election on August 30, 2009, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama further manifested Japan’s ‘China-in’ diplomatic approach through the concept of ‘East Asia Community’. Hatoyama’s vision of East Asia Community, as he described in his speech, was nothing more than continuation of Japan’s approach towards community building in East Asia Summit, ASEAN+3 and Japan-China-Korea trilateral cooperation. However, the context of placing this concept brought about various criticisms from the U.S. and domestic conservative group as Hatoyama often mentioned about taking a distance from Washington and tilting more towards Asia, and key members of DPJ senior leaders expressed that the East Asia Community would not include the participation of the U.S.

Phase III: (China Out) 2010-present

Senkaku / Network Diplomacy / Asia’s Security Diamond

Hatoyama’s quest for the East Asia Community with ‘China-in’ notion was dramatically modified by Prime Minister Naoto Kan who succeeded Hatoyama after his resignation in June 2010. Washington’s deep mistrust on the Hatoyama administration’s foreign policy, especially over the issue of U.S. Marine’s Futenma relocation facility in Okinawa, as well as over his diplomatic tilt towards China, deteriorated the U.S.-Japan alliance management. Hatoyama eventually gave up all of his alternative options for the U.S. Marine relocation, and settled with the Henoko relocation plan, which was originally agreed by LDP before the DPJ came into power. With the significant loss of popularity, as well as a leave of its coalition partner the Social Democratic Party, Hatoyama decided to step down. The East Asia Community and ‘China-in’ notion also faded in diplomatic discourse, as Kan’s immediate assignment was to restore the trust from Washington.

Another game changer was encountering the Senkaku fishery boat collision incident in September 2010. It occurred in the morning of September 7th, when the Chinese trawler, Minjinyu 5179, operated in disputed waters collided with the Japanese Coast Guard’s patrol boats near Senkaku Islands. The collision and Japan’s subsequent detention of the captain resulted in a major diplomatic dispute between Japan and China. Chinese government suspended major official meetings and halted exporting rare earth minerals to Japan. After 10 days of diplomatic tensions between both countries, detained Chinese crew members were released by local prosecution office without indictment process. As a result, the media and the public criticized the Japanese government for weak-kneed response towards China and called for resolute attitude. The annual survey on public opinion about foreign policy in October 2010 ranked worst record of affinity towards China. The figure shows the sharp down fall of affinity from 2009 (38.5%) to 2010 (20.0%) and the uprising of no-affinity from 2009 (58.5%) to 2010 (77.8%)

When the balance of power in Japan-China relation shifted towards Beijing, the assertive nature of Chinese power increased Japan’s domestic political correctness to counter China. Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, who inherited the Prime Minister’s office in September 2011 after the resignation of Naoto Kan, promoted the network diplomacy with like-minded states in Asia. This includes the upgrading of strategic partnerships with the ASEAN on maritime security with obvious intention to collectively balance Chinese influence (to be discussed in later section).

The China-out foreign policy orientation is further manifested by the resurgence of LDP after the general election in December 2012, and by Abe Shinzo becoming, once again, Prime Minister. Soon after assuming office, Shinzo Abe revealed his diplomatic strategy entitled “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond” at the website of the Project Syndicate. In his article, Abe asserted, “ongoing disputes in the East China Sea and the South China Sea mean that Japan’s top foreign-policy priority must be to expand the country’s strategic horizons”. According to Abe, such horizons were explored through envisaging “a strategy where by Australia, India, Japan, and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific.” As this concept resembles the “arc of freedom and prosperity” in 2007, which emphasized the ties with continental Eurasia democracies, the “Asia’s Security Diamond” reiterated forming a coalition among maritime democracies in Asia. Curiously enough, Abe mentioned that Japan-China relationship “is vital to the well-being of many Japanese”, but as a prioritization of Japan’s diplomacy he reiterated, “Japan must first anchor its ties on the other side of the Pacific”. By the restoration of Shinzo Abe, the ‘China-out’ policy dynamics is seemingly further accelerated.
Golden Opportunity for the Abe Administration

After a landslide victory of the General election in December 2012, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its coalition partner Komeito Party have also secured a majority in the Upper House election on July 21. As a result, the LDP-Komeito coalition government led by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is entrusted with bringing a long-awaited stability to Japanese politics, most likely until July 2016. This was the first time in six years that one of the ruling parties obtain a majority in both the Upper House and the Lower House and effectively ending the distorted diet, whereupon the parties in power at the two Houses were constantly divided.

The result of two elections, which consolidated the political capital of the Abe administration more firmly than any other administrations in the past 6 years, will bring about a golden opportunity for Japan to advance its foreign policy goals. In general, domestic stability would create favorable conditions for making a grand bargain in diplomacy. This is not only because the internal stability generates strong bargaining power externally, but also because it creates better conditions for making concessions at home. If skillfully managed, Abe’s long-term leadership with the high supporting rate of the public may become a crucial foreign policy asset for playing a international/domestic two level game.

However, the Abe administration is facing an ever challenging geo-political environment surrounding Japan. China has heightened its wariness regarding the so-called rightward tendency of the Abe administration, and at this moment, no leads or gambits are at hand to motivate a Japan-China summit meeting. South Korea is seemingly rapidly tilting toward China, as demonstrated by President Park Geun-hye’s visit to China in June, and appears to be drawing away from Japan. Abe’s strong commitment to resolving the abduction issue with North Korea during the present administration is not readily to be achieved, either. Nor do negotiations with Russia on the Northern Territories allow optimism regarding agreement. Participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) can also be anticipated to involve domestic economic reforms that would create considerable repercussions.

The foreign policy agenda of Abe’s golden three years is a tough one. The solution of this agenda will require not only Japan’s diplomacy through assertion, but it will also require continuous negotiations that call for necessary compromises and concessions within Japan. The question is whether Japan will be able to develop the kind of pragmatic political environment that makes these offensives and compromises possible.

The Pragmatism of Abe Diplomacy for Forging ‘Favorable Balance of Power’

Is it possible, then, for this kind of pragmatism to be bearable under the Abe government? At the outset of the new administration, Prime Minister Abe himself announced, on an overseas website, the concept of a “security diamond” in Asia that is formed by Japan, the United States, Australia, and India, and he expressed the intention to engage in diplomacy that emphasizes such values as freedom, democracy, respect for human rights, and the rule of law. This conveyed the impression in Japan and elsewhere that the diplomatic ideology of values symbolized by the first Abe government’s “arc of freedom and prosperity” was making its appearance here with a greater determination to place checks on China.

As diplomatic policy actually played out, however, it increasingly displayed course corrections in more realistic directions. In January, Prime Minister Abe, Foreign Minister Kishida, and Finance Minister Aso visited the ASEAN nations and unveiled Five Principles of Japan’s ASEAN Diplomacy with a focus on economic and security cooperation. During Prime Minister Abe’s visit to the United States in February, in addition to confirming the solidarity of the Japan-US alliance, he joined in issuing a statement that TPP negotiations would not be predicated on the elimination of tariffs on all items. On that basis, he announced the intention to officially participate in TPP negotiations in March. In April, the Prime Minister announced the Joint Political Declaration between Japan and NATO, deepening the security partnership with NATO. During the Prime Minister’s visit to Russia, also in April, he tightened consultative ties on both economic and security matters, and confirmed the acceleration of negotiations toward a peace treaty. Then, during the Europe visit and G8 Summit in June, the Prime Minister again sought to strengthen relations, this time with the Eastern European countries, while also exerting himself to obtain international understanding and acceptance of ‘Abenomics’. These diplomatic efforts are guided by the multifaceted pragmatism of the Abe government, and they represent areas of great potential promise for the future.

The foreign policy doctrine of the Abe administration has now been frequently stated as “a diplomacy that takes a panoramic perspective of the world map”, in other words a bird’s-eye view of global affairs. In responding to changing balance of power in the Asia-Pacific, Tokyo recognizes the need to pursue multifaceted and strategic diplomatic relations that covers across and beyond the region. Under this concept, Prime Minister Abe in the eight months since entering office has tirelessly visited 20 countries in Southeast Asia, America, Russia, the Middle East, and Europe. He has made the Japan-US alliance the main axis of his approach while also strengthening relations with emerging economies and developing countries. Prime Minister Abe’s direction in this is discernible.
Difficulties in Building Relationships with China and South Korea

Evaluation of the Abe government’s eight months, however, cannot omit certain issues where results have not necessarily been achieved, which are the relationships with China and South Korea. Prime Minister Abe places Japan-China relations as “one of the most important bilateral relationships” and expressed that “the door to dialogue is always open”. However, both sides have not succeeded in generating the political environment that will bring about high-level Japan-China talks.

The prospect for normalizing diplomatic relations between Tokyo and Beijing remains dark. China’s intrusive behavior in violating territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands with patrol boats and other vessels has become highly frequent and there are no signs of scaling down the activities. If China demands Japan to reconsider the existence of the territorial issue in bilateral relations as a condition for holding a summit talk, the opportunities for dialogue will narrow down. The ‘shelving’ of the territorial issue referring to the 1970’s model may also not hold ground for Tokyo since it claims that there exists no issue to be shelved. The remaining potential for two governments, which needs skillful diplomatic managements, will be to tacitly agree to maintain the status-quo and not provoke an escalation.

Another issue is the conservative ideology in Japan in its regard to history. Prime Minister Abe expressed during the election campaign in late 2012 that it was his “great regret at being unable to pay respects at Yasukuni Shrine while serving as Prime Minister” during his previous term in office. Regarding the visits by Cabinet members to Yasukuni Shrine in April, Prime Minister Abe stated that “my Cabinet members will not yield to any intimidation.” Looking ahead to the 70th anniversary of the end of the war in Japan in 2015, Prime Minister Abe has suggested that he intends to reconsider former Prime Minister Murayama’s earlier anniversary statement expressing remorse and apology for Japan’s past aggression and colonial rule, and instead release his own, future-oriented Abe Statement. Given this context, the Prime Minister’s remarks that “the Cabinet does not necessarily inherit the Murayama Statement just as it is,” and that “the definition of invasion is unspecified” led to a backlash in China and South Korea.

At present, Prime Minister Abe has not specified whether or not he intends to visit Yasukuni Shrine to pay his respects during his term. He has also said that historical problems should be left to historians. From the perspectives of China and South Korea, too, if they make too much of Japan’s history problem as part of their Japan policy, they may risk losing the way to improved relations. Japan, China, and South Korea respectively will need to avoid politicization of the history problem, their key government officials and politicians will need to avoid causing friction by the gratuitous venting of emotions, and a political environment that enables the stable diplomatic pursuit of Japan-China and Japan-South Korea relations will have to be formed.

The Possibilities of Japanese Diplomacy

One wonders, then, what diplomatic objectives the Abe government will set for the coming three-year period, and what it will try to achieve. The following will discuss the principal objectives to be set and the possibilities for their realization.

The first of these is to deepen the alliance relationship between Japan and the United States and, as a part of that, to change the political interpretation of the collective self-defense. Japan and the US are looking for the formulation of new guidelines for a Japan-US defense cooperation that take the rise of China and uncertainties about the North Korea situation into consideration. In order to deepen Japan-US defense cooperation, therefore, the Abe government seeks acceptance for the exercise of the right of collective self-defense, to include security for US naval vessels on the high seas and missile defense of the United States mainland and islands. The Komeito Party, which is a member of the ruling coalition, has strong reservations about this change of interpretation, and is very likely to seek compromise by limiting the scope of exercise of the right of collective self-defense.

Expanding Japan’s duties and the allocation of its roles with regard to defense will also be an important agenda for the formulation of new National Defense Planning Guideline (NDPG). As tensions rise to the southwest of Japan, and particularly in the seas around the Senkaku Islands, the part Japan should play in a low-intensity conflict at sea is increasing. Seamless coordination by the Japan Coast Guard and the Maritime Self Defense Forces should be established by means of the NDPG that are slated to be drafted at the end of this year. On that basis, the system for crisis escalation management, including the role of US forces, needs to be strengthened.

The second objective is to strengthen relations with India, Australia, and ASEAN. These countries are the principal objects of a multifaceted strategic diplomacy, and efforts are being made to find ways of strengthening collaboration with them, especially on matters of maritime security. Attention is focused in particular on the implementation of joint military exercises, support for the building of maritime security capability (supplying equipment for that purpose, and making use of strategic ODA), and collaboration to strengthen the rule of law.

The third objective is Japan’s Russia diplomacy. The summit meeting between Abe and Putin in April this year yielded agreement on deepening Japan-Russia economic and security cooperation and accelerating peace
treaty negotiations, to include the Northern Territories issue. Japan-Russia relations appear to have started moving, all of a sudden, but it still will not do to be optimistic about peace treaty negotiations or resolution of the Northern Territories issue. However, Russia is actively pursuing a Japan policy on such matters as Far Eastern and Eastern Siberian development and energy exports. Meanwhile, Russia is also putting more into its shift toward Asia, including Japan, as a hedge in its China policy. These moves present important opportunities for dramatic improvement in Japan-Russia relations.

Finally, the fourth and most important issue here is Japan’s relations with China. Prime Minister Abe has long advocated improvement of mutually beneficial strategic relations with China. Even though eight months have now passed since he took office, however, he has still held neither a bilateral Japan-China summit nor a Japan-China-South Korea summit or foreign ministers’ conference. The Senkaku Islands problem and the history problem lie between Japan and China, and what the two countries are struggling over now is the preconditions for holding a summit. It is of the greatest importance for the security of the region that both Japan and China set conditions that are mutually acceptable and restore their summit-level diplomatic activity.

In a context of accelerating movement in US-China summit meetings and US-China economic strategy talks, the fact that political channels between Japan and China are not well established is cause for misgivings. The greatest topic for these three years will be whether the escalation of tensions between Japan and China can be held in check, whether a crisis management mechanism can be constructed, and whether mutually beneficial relations can be built in accordance with the reality of the two countries’ relationship of mutual economic interdependence.

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### Notes