

The Two-Edged Sword of Nationalism

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Prime Minister Abe Shinzo spent the first year in office reassuring everyone, including Americans and Japanese voters, that he had learned an important lesson during his first, brief stint in office. He learned that the voters wanted him to focus on the economy and that he could not afford to let his foreign affairs and history agenda distract him from that. Indeed, he devoted much of his energy to Abenomics during his first year, helping him win an Upper House election this past summer that has given him control of both chambers—something that few of his recent predecessors have enjoyed.

Since the Upper House victory last summer, however, he has turned his attention increasingly to foreign affairs and history in ways that have aggravated relations with both Korea and China. Relations with China were already tense because of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute that has been on a slow boil since Prime Minister Noda “nationalized” the islands in 2012. But his decision to visit Yasukuni shrine in December, his recent appointments to the NHK board of governors, comments by these individuals and other Abe associates about a variety of history issues, and the recent news that the government will review the evidence behind the 1993 Kono statement on comfort women have all made clear that the Abe has decided he now has the political room to venture beyond economics and pursue the foreign affairs and history agenda that he kept on the shelf during his first year.

That Abe has reemerged as a nationalist is not surprising, since he has long been known to share with several of his predecessors a commitment to move Japan sharply in this direction. To understand what is driving Abe’s recent

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recommitment to these goals, to anticipate the ripple effects, and to inform policymaking in Washington in response, it is essential to place Abe's recent moves in a historical and comparative context by looking at earlier episodes in which Japanese prime ministers sought to achieve the goals Abe is pursuing. How did those episodes turn out? Is there any reason to think Abe's most recent push will turn out differently? And what can we learn from this comparison that might inform US or Japanese foreign policy?

The two predecessors who serve as points of comparative reference in this essay are Kishi Nobusuke, Abe's grandfather and Prime Minister from 1957 to 1960, and Nakasone Yasuhiro, prime minister during the mid-1980s. Each of these men, like Abe, were recognized by contemporary observers as "nationalists" who stood out for their opposition to the Yoshida doctrine views of other postwar Liberal Democratic Party leaders. Kishi and Nakasone pursued virtually the same agenda Abe is pursuing today.

Here is what all three have argued:

- It is unfair that Japan was subjected to victor's justice and singled out for criticism of its conduct of the war. Where the nation was falsely accused, it is the duty of the Japanese government to correct the alleged historical record.
- It is unfair that Japan was saddled with Article 9. The constitution was written for Japan by the American occupation authorities, and it is high time that Japanese revise it to make the document its own, and the section most in need of revision is the so-called Peace Clause, which imposes restrictions on Japan's security policy—including collective self-defense—that no other nation accepts.
- Japan should not have to apologize over and over. Instead, Japanese need to develop greater pride in the nation's history. History textbooks should be revised to emphasize Japan's achievements, and they should not dwell on episodes that cast Japan in a less attractive light.
- Japan should throw off the shackles of Article 9 and defeatism and provide for its own security.

That Abe is seeking virtually identical goals to those pursued fifty and thirty years ago tells us two things, even before we get into the details. First, Abe represents a deep current in postwar Japanese conservatism. While other conservative leaders were content to follow the path set by Yoshida, Abe represents a school of thought that was never content with the compromises he struck. Second, that fact that he is pursuing the same aims is evidence in itself that his predecessors failed in their attempts.

They failed because nationalism has proven to be a two-edged sword for all of the postwar prime ministers who have attempted to move boldly in this direction. Because the wounds left by Japan's wartime behavior are so deep in Korea and China, open expressions of nationalism by Japan's leaders has always provoked strong and hostile reactions from these neighbors. For most of the postwar period, the wounds were felt almost as deeply by the progressive camp at home, which also responded with protests. The resulting international and domestic turmoil in turn caused moderates inside Japan (including inside the LDP) to withdraw support for this agenda, forcing each of these prime ministers to scale back his ambitions. While Kishi and Nakasone set out to bolster Japanese pride and expand the range of security policies Japan could pursue, they ended up being forced to rely on pressure from the United States to modestly expand Japan's security role, apologize again for Japan's past actions, and watch their successors recommit to limits on Japan's security role—locking in the Yoshida doctrine rather than replacing it. The world has changed since 1960 and 1985, and there are therefore going to be some differences in how Abe's pursuit of these goals plays out, but fundamentally different outcome should not be expected. Nationalism is still a two-edged sword for Japan.

KISHI AND THE SECURITY TREATY CRISIS

Of all of the postwar nationalists, the issues involved were the most personal for Kishi. He had been one of the architects of the war. He helped steer the policies of the occupation government in Manchuria from 1934 to 1939. He served in Tojo's war cabinet as Minister of Munitions starting in 1941 and signed the resolution declaring war on the United States.

Not surprisingly, given this record, he also played a central role in the aftermath of Japan's defeat. He was investigated by the Tokyo war crimes tribunal and was imprisoned as a suspected class A war criminal for three years in Sugamo prison before being released without charge. And his name was on the list of politicians purged by the Occupation and forbidden from playing a role in postwar politics.

Whereas all postwar nationalists regard the treatment Japan received after the war as unfair—the victor's justice, or the blaming of Japan as solely responsible for atrocities, Article 9 stripping Japan of its ability to defend itself—for Kishi it was not just the way Japan was treated but also the way *he* was treated that was at issue. For this reason, when he was depurged and returned to politics in 1952, he devoted much of his energy to “reversing the excesses of the occupation.” Under Prime Minister Yoshida, he chaired a Diet committee set up to study constitutional revision.¹ Later, after helping to bring together all of the conservatives in the Diet under the banner of the new LDP and taking over as prime minister in 1957 with a large Diet majority, he made expanding the size of the military and revising the constitution his top priorities.

As he wrote, in a passage described by Richard Samuels as capturing the central concerns of the postwar nationalists, “If Japan is alone in renouncing war...she will not be able to prevent others from invading her land. If, on the other hand, Japan could defend herself, there would be no further need of keeping United States garrison forces in Japan...Japan should be strong enough to defend herself.”²

Given these objectives, it is ironic that Kishi's big push in the nationalist direction between 1957 and 1960 ended with the signing of a new version of the Security Treaty that reconfirmed Japan's reliance on the United States for its security and included only vague commitments calling on Japan to acquire the means to provide for the defense of the home islands. He was forced to give up his grand plan to negotiate a deal that would expand Japan's own security role and create a more balanced treaty by vehement opposition from the progressive camp, which marched in the streets in numbers running up to the hundreds of thousands, in a period known as the security treaty crisis. The Chinese government also raised angry objections to what it saw as Japan's reemergence as a military power, tied to its

new Cold War enemy: the United States. Moderates in Kishi's own party abandoned him and forced him to resign, and the LDP prime ministers who replaced him—Ikeda Hayato and Sato Eisaku—kept the focus on economic growth and off foreign policy. With college students and unionists still marching in the streets in the late 1960s, Sato moved to reassure the public that Japan had no intension of taking on new security roles by adopting the three non-nuclear principles and the three principles of arms exports—effectively institutionalizing the Yoshida Doctrine.

NAKASONE AND “THE TOTAL RESETTLEMENT OF POSTWAR ACCOUNTS”

That Kishi had failed to achieve his goals was fully apparent to a younger member of the nationalist caucus of the LDP: Nakasone Yasuhiro. Nakasone too had a personal stake in the revisionist agenda. He had been a young naval officer during the war and was a junior Diet member in 1951 when Yoshida brought the treaties he had signed in San Francisco before the Diet for approval. He was one of small group of conservatives who vocally criticized the deal Yoshida had struck on the grounds that it left Japan dependent and vulnerable. In the 1950s he was known as one of the most nationalist members of the Diet, going so far as to author two songs, “Song of a Constitutional Amendment” and “Song of National Independence,” both set to martial music reminiscent of tunes played during World War II.³ Nakasone further burnished his reputation as a nationalist in 1970 when he used his new position as director general of the defense agency to push for Japan to upgrade its military capabilities so that it could provide for an independent defense (*jishuboei*) not entirely reliant on the United States. He succeeded in rallying leading business groups and some other conservatives to his cause before, as Thomas Berger put it, “Japan’s opposition parties and left-wing intellectuals sounded the alarm that the government was preparing to lead Japan down the path to militarism and expansionism” and prompted moderates in the LDP, Foreign Ministry, and JDA to get cold feet. Prime Minister Sato immediately reined him in.⁴

These experiences clearly remained very much on his mind when Nakasone finally ascended to the prime ministership in 1983. Recalling the events at the time Yoshida had brought the peace and security treaties home from San Francisco, he wrote: "I cannot help but wonder, even now, about what might have happened had Japan made a different choice at that critical juncture. Ever since...I have made it one of my political goals to transcend the so-called San Francisco system."⁵

Given his views, it is not surprising that Nakasone made a "total settlement of the postwar accounts" (*senjo seiji no sōkessan*) the top goal of his cabinet. He aimed to visit Yasukuni shrine in a show of respect for soldiers who had given their lives in war to the country; reemphasize traditional Japanese values in the education system, including respect for the flag and anthem; expand defense spending beyond the one-percent of GNP ceiling (a budget rule that had been in place since 1976); and expand the roles and missions of the Japanese military. He was a strong supporter of revising Article 9 to allow Japan to be an equal partner in the alliance with the United States, but he did not list this among his immediate aims.

Despite concerted efforts to achieve these goals over his five years in office, however, Nakasone too ultimately failed to move policy in a nationalist direction. After visiting Yasukuni one time in his capacity as prime minister on the end-of-war anniversary date of August 15, 1985, Nakasone chose not to repeat the visit in subsequent years. He was able to require schools to raise the flag and play the anthem at beginning-of-year ceremonies, but the top-down method used to force compliance did little to foster patriotism among teachers or students. He was able to increase defense spending above the one-percent ceiling, but spending reached 1.004 percent for just one fiscal year (1987) before falling below the ceiling. Finally, Japan began acquiring advanced weaponry at an accelerated pace, but Nakasone was not able to expand the constitutional constraints on the Japanese military's roles and missions. As he left office in 1987, Nakasone himself admitted that it was "yet to be seen" whether his efforts to reshape Japan's international role would have a lasting impact.⁶

As in Kishi's era, Nakasone was forced to compromise by the reaction his visit to Yasukuni, textbook interventions, and security policy announcements caused on the part of Korea and China, the Japanese progressive

camp, and moderates inside his own party. Although Nakasone attempted to use *gaiatsu* from the United States as leverage (to overcome domestic opposition to increased defense spending) and as cover (to reassure Japan's neighbors that Japan would play a larger role within the confines of the alliance structure), neither constituency was reassured by this strategy. In fact, the prime minister's eager willingness to say "yes" to American demands caused them to worry more about the intentions of Nakasone and other nationalists—forcing the prime minister to compromise his ambitions significantly.

The concerns of the left in Japan are not surprising. They worried, as they had when Kishi renegotiated the security treaty in the late 1950s, that Nakasone would turn Japan into a submissive ally of the United States, dragging Japan into a U.S.-Soviet conflict.⁷ LDP moderates were not as vocal and explicit in expressing their concerns, but former prime ministers Miki, Fukuda, and Suzuki quietly pressed for compromise out of worry that Nakasone's open nationalism would cost them votes in upcoming elections.⁸

Yet Nakasone's rhetoric in Washington had the biggest impact on Japan's Asian neighbors. Although Korea was a common ally of the United States, criticism was most direct there. One influential Korean journalist writing for *Chosun Ilbo* reacted to Nakasone's suggestion that Japan help bottle up Soviet submarines by blocking the Tsushima Straits by recalling Japan's colonization of Korea a century earlier. Then too, he pointed out, Japan had been motivated to incorporate Korea into its security strategy by Russian encroachments. Alarmed by Nakasone's intentions, he called on the South Korean government to oppose Japanese "hegemony" over Korea.⁹ Later in the 1980s, the ROK actually began contingency planning for a possible future naval competition with Japan.

Chinese too had concerns about Japan's military expansion, but given the fact that China and Japan faced a common threat from Soviet expansionism during this period, the nation's leaders would probably have tolerated these moves were it not for Nakasone's simultaneous moves to break taboos such as the ones that prevented leaders from visiting Yasukuni Shrine in their official capacity and those limiting the use of the flag and anthem at formal school ceremonies. Chinese students, however, reacted to Nakasone's visit with alarm, organizing street protests in Beijing that

featured slogans such as “Down with Japanese militarism!” and “Down with Nakasone.” Similar demonstration subsequently broke out in Xian, Chengdu, and Kunming. The Chinese also communicated to the Japanese their strong wish that Nakasone not visit Yasukuni again the following year. Despite strong pressure from LDP conservatives, Nakasone obliged and opted not to visit. Explaining this decision, Chief Cabinet Secretary Gotōda Masaharu noted that the government had decided to “stress international ties and give appropriate consideration to the national sentiments of neighboring countries.”¹⁰

In the end, Nakasone failed not only to expand Japan’s defense roles but saw his efforts to demonstrate nationalist pride backfire. Far from breaking a postwar taboo, his visit had succeeded in making it more difficult for politicians to visit the shrine, which they had actually been doing for some time. No prime minister visited in his official capacity on the date of Japan’s defeat until Koizumi did so, on his sixth visit as prime minister, in 2006.

ABE’S NATIONALIST GAMBIT

Prime Minister Abe is thoroughly familiar with the experiences of these two nationalist predecessors. Kishi was his grandfather, and Nakasone was leader at a time when Abe was secretary to his father, Abe Shintaro, who was then serving as Foreign Minister. That he has nevertheless pressed forward in the past several months on every item in the nationalist agenda suggests that he thinks the dynamics that forced Kishi and Nakasone to give up on much of their agenda no longer apply. Clearly, the world has changed since the end of the cold war, and the LDP has changed too with the retirement of powerful moderates such as Miyazawa and Gotoda. Have these and other aspects of the environment in which Abe is operating changed sufficiently that we should expect a different outcome this time? Will Abe prevail where his predecessors fell short?

One aspect that has not changed, and has probably become more of a constraint, is the reaction of Japan’s neighbors. At the time when Nakasone visited Yasukuni, both Korea and China were much smaller economies than Japan. Both received substantial economic aid from Japan. And both were

under the authoritarian rule of men who didn't need to worry about winning elections. Both were also allies of Japan's against a Soviet Union that they each regarded as a mortal threat. All of these considerations clearly softened the official government response when students and others protested against Nakasone's visit and textbook disputes in the early 1980s. Even with all of these factors moderating the Asian protests, they were loud and clear enough that Nakasone was forced to scale back his nationalist agenda.

In the intervening years, Korea's economy has closed the size gap with Japan and China has surpassed it, and neither relies on Japanese aid. Korea is run by elected politicians who cannot afford to ignore anti-Japanese passions sparked by the decisions Abe has been making. Korea remains an indirect military ally of Japan's (with mutual ties to the United States), but has moved much closer to China than the ROK was to the Soviets in the early 1980s. Most importantly, China now regards Japan as a strategic roadblock to its aspirations to expand its defense perimeter beyond the first island chain. Instead of worrying that their protests might upset Japanese leaders, as they once did, Chinese leaders now find such protests useful (as long as they don't get out of control), since they help isolate Japan in the region and bolster popular support for the regime's investments in military capacity.

It is therefore not surprising that the protests in both nations have been at least as intense this winter as they were in the previous cases. The Korean media has covered the series of provocations non-stop since Abe visited Yasukuni on December 26, with particular outrage at the announcement last month that the Abe cabinet was organizing a review of the evidence that led to the 1993 Kono Statement acknowledging the role of the Japanese military in recruiting Korean and other Asian women to serve in brothels known as "comfort facilities." Upon hearing this news, Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se blasted the Japanese in a speech before the United Nations Human Rights Commission for the "impunity" with which Japanese leaders sought to "deny historical truth."¹¹ If the cabinet's review of the evidence leads to any backtracking from the Kono Statement, a rupture in relations between the two neighbors is likely.

Abe cannot have been surprised at the Chinese and Korean reactions to his recent moves. A decade earlier, when Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro visited Yasukuni, the reaction had been similar, leading the Chinese to

decline any meetings between the leaders of the two nations as long as the visits continued. Top-level visit resumed in 2006 only after Abe—near the start of his first term in office (2006–2007)—vowed not to visit Yasukuni during his term as prime minister. Chinese protests, which boiled over into riots targeting Japanese businesses, were even more heated after Prime Minister Noda announced that the Japanese government would purchase the Senkaku islands from their private Japanese owner in 2012. The ritual of anti-Japanese protest in China and Korea is so familiar at this point that Abe must have been able to clearly imagine what would happen if he visited Yasukuni Shrine and began reviewing the Kono Statement.

So if the foreign protests were fully expected, how does Abe expect to get a different result than his nationalist predecessors? The answer must lie in his reading of domestic politics. The progressive forces that turned out in the hundreds of thousands to protest the Security Treaty in 1960 are clearly no longer with us. A few of them, much older now, continue to turn out for protest marches in Tokyo, but the threat that student radicals might bring down the government is clearly gone. On the contrary, at least some among the youth of contemporary Japan appear to be frustrated with how Japan faces constant criticism for events that took place long before they (or their parents) were born. In the election for the Tokyo governorship in February, the nationalist candidate Tamogami Toshio won a substantial share of the youth vote. Another significant change in domestic politics is the decline in the moderate Yoshida doctrine wing of the LDP, the most prominent of which began their careers in the 1950s and 1960s and have now retired or passed away.

Abe may be hoping that the domestic reaction to foreign criticism, in this new era, will be the opposite of the one that held Kishi and Nakasone back. They were forced to compromise when the Japanese public became concerned about Korean and Chinese criticism. LDP moderates then intervened to reinforce limits on Japanese security policy and apologize for Japan's wartime wrongdoing. But in this new era, Japanese leaders seem to win public support by being strong in the face of foreign criticism. After all, Koizumi refused to stop visiting Yasukuni after Asian neighbors, and this did not keep him from winning a landslide election victory in 2005. Perhaps nationalism now provides a positive feedback loop, in which

nationalism sparks foreign criticism, which makes Japanese even more supportive of further nationalist steps.

If this is what Abe is counting on, it is worrisome. While tolerance of the Japanese public for foreign criticism has increased, some do seem to respond in the way Abe assumes. In the short term, Abe has been able to maintain his popularity (with cabinet support rates between 50 and 60 in recent polls) despite the Yasukuni visit and the foreign criticism that followed. The risk is that he will take this support to mean that he is free to proceed to the next step, a retraction of the Kono statement, and then to the next, constitutional reinterpretation to allow Japan to exercise its right of collective self-defense, and then to the next, stationing government officials on the Senkaku islands. At some point, Chinese and Korean criticism and actions in response will reach a point where the Japanese public will signal it is *not* ready for this level of conflict. An end game for Abe in which Korea and China simply accept the nationalist agenda Abe seems intent on pursuing does not seem possible. When relations get truly rocky, a new generation of moderates within the LDP will step forward, reiterate Japan's apologies and recommit to limits on Japan's security role. But the exercise—despite ending up back where we were—may leave behind substantial damage to Japan's relations with Korea and to the possibilities for a peaceful engagement with a rising China.

NOTES

1. Samuels actually uses the term "Right" in this section to refer to what I am calling the "nationalists"—Richard Samuels, *Machiavelli's Children: Leaders and Their Legacies in Italy and Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 230.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 229.
3. Kong Dan Oh, "Japan-Korea Raprochement: A Study in Political, Cultural and Economic Cooperation in the 1980's," Dissertation in Asian Studies at UC-Berkeley, 1986, p. 171.
4. Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism*, pp. 97–98.
5. Nakasone, *My Life in Politics* (typescript, 1982), quoted in Pyle, *Japan Rising*, p. 270.
6. Nakasone in 1988, quoted in Kenneth Pyle, *The Japanese Question: Power and Purpose in a New Era* 2nd edition (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1996), p. 188.
7. See, for example, the essays in the special issue of *Sekai* on "Hakusho: Gunjika sareru Nihon," December 1983, pp. 34–103; Igarashi Takeshi, "Farewell to the

Policy Recommendations

Ahead of President Obama's Asia visit, Washington should:

Dispatch senior officials to Tokyo to continue counseling him against revising the Kono Statement or visiting Yasukuni Shrine again. To drive home the level of concern in Washington, the United States should also ask Abe not to take the step of revising the interpretation of Article 9 to allow for collective self-defense. This last step is one the United States has been urging for many years, so a signal that the United States is worried that such a step in the current environment will exacerbate the tension in the region ought to be one that will get Abe's attention.

Invite Pulitzer-prize-winning historian John Dower to convene a team of respected American and Japanese experts to prepare for the US government a summary of the evidence on the role the Japanese military played in recruiting and deploying "comfort women" to serve Japanese troops during the war. The report should be expedited so that it is available to be issued when and if the Japanese government announces its own view of the evidence. In order to provide time for this report to be written and slow down the pace of revisionism in Tokyo, the United States should make it clear that any back-tracking on the Kono Statement prior to Obama's April visit will result in changes in Obama's planned schedule in Japan and Korea that will make it clear how displeased the U.S. is with this action.

- Peace-Loving State," *Japan Echo* 10:2 (1983).
8. Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism*, p. 141.
 9. Oh, *Japan-Korea Rapprochement*, pp. 202–203. See also Victor Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States – Korea – Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 193.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
 11. "Yun Presses Japan for Sex Slavery at UN," *Korea Herald*, March 5, 2014. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20140305001406>.