



Abe's Half Year: Maintaining Hope for Situation after Election by Kazuhiko Togo

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A half year has passed since Abe Shinzo became Japan's prime minister. My initial assessment of Abe, that he was a "pragmatic and creative realist," proved to be right on the whole, with one potential exception in the area of historical memory. But 40 days of turmoil (from late April to the end of May) on historical memory issues was effectively controlled by Abe's Cabinet. After the July House of Councillors' election, in which the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is expected to win a substantial majority, Abe's future largely depends on whether he has learned from those 40 days of turmoil that he has no support either from the international community or from domestic voters for "narrowly oriented chauvinistic nationalism."

There are six areas where his pragmatic realism prevailed. First, Abe's concentration on social and economic matters, now labeled "Abenomics," was a fresh breeze, and his initial success using monetary policy to pull Japan out of a deflationary economy and end the psychological malaise was a success. Concrete tasks are mounting but it was a good start.

Second, Abe's China policy should also be commended as restrained, balanced, and strategic. China continues to intrude on the territorial waters of the Senkakus (48 times since September 2012). Whatever China's claim over these islands, nothing under the UN Charter justifies its declared policy of using force to change the status quo. But Abe with his policy of restraint continues to observe unilaterally the "tacit understanding" agreed with Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping not to "touch" the islands; several times he made the crucial policy statement that "the window of dialogue is open," while sparing no effort to strengthen Japan's deterrence capability, both physically and structurally.

Third, with the Japan-US alliance needing real consolidation, Abe made a courageous decision to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and on April 20 gained the approval of 11 member countries to join the negotiations. He is now in a position to concentrate his efforts on domestic opposition before and after the July election. On the thorny issue of US bases in Okinawa, Abe is preserving the long-agreed policy of responding to the strategic need of the US rebalance to Asia. But Abe is also trying to implement his policy with caution and take a step-by-step approach to meet resistance from the people of Okinawa, as witnessed by the April 5 roadmap agreement.

Fourth, with Russia, a country whose strategic importance for Japan is on the rise, there has been some

progress. President Vladimir Putin has shown no small interest in improving relations with Japan in his public statements, culminating in his March 2012 interview, when he proposed to expand economic relations and resolve the territorial dispute with the principle of a "draw." Abe ended one year of immobility on the Japanese side with an important visit to Moscow on April 29 and succeeded in maintaining Russian interest in improving relations with Japan.

Fifth, with South Korea, whose strategic value equals, if not exceeds, that of Russia, Abe took a cautious policy on Takeshima on Feb. 22, when he did not make the Shimane Prefectural Takeshima Day a National Commemorative Day.

Sixth, regarding North Korea, it was generally anticipated that Abe would opt for the toughest policy since his political power took shape during the Koizumi days when he took a "principled position" on the abduction issue. But even here Abe has done the unexpected by sending to Pyongyang Iijima Isao, special advisor to the Cabinet on May 14-17 to initiate talks with the North Korean regime. This trip might become the starting point of a shift by Abe toward a more pragmatic North Korean policy.

Finally on the issue of historical memory, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Taro Aso visited Yasukuni Shrine on April 21 during its Spring Festival. Immediate reaction from South Korea was the cancelation of Foreign Minister Yoon Byung-Se's visit to Japan, and from China was the cancelation of a visit to China by Komura Masahiko, vice president of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. Abe then made strong statements at the Diet on three successive days that "he was not going to inherit Prime Minister Murayama's 1995 Statement on apology in its entirety," that "the definition of aggression was not made clear in international society," and that "I shall not be bent by bullying."

These statements created a backlash in US media, where editorials in *The Washington Post* (April 26) and the *Wall Street Journal* (April 27) bashed Abe's revisionism. Faced with criticism by China, South Korea, and the US, Abe rapidly began toning down his language. On May 10, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide made an unambiguous statement that the 1995 Murayama Statement will be adopted in its entirety, although Abe intends to proclaim a future-oriented "Abe Statement" in the future. And when Takaichi Sanae, chairperson of the LDP Policy Committee, said that she wasn't comfortable with the use of the word "aggression" in that future-oriented Statement, Suga telephoned her and told her to follow the Cabinet line; on May 14, Takaichi responded publicly that she would follow Cabinet policy and withdraw her personal opinion.

Just as the issue of war responsibility was being handled, on May 13, Hashimoto Toru, mayor of Osaka and president of *Ishin no Kai* (Japan Restoration Party), in an

extraordinary press interview implied that when male soldiers are at war, organized efforts to provide women to satisfy their lust are natural, and that the practice has been adopted by many countries. This statement shocked the overwhelming majority of Japanese.

Abe already had gone down a dangerous path in a 2012 press interview when he gave the impression that he intended to revise the 1993 Kono Statement on comfort women and immediately came under sharp criticism Jan. 3 by *The New York Times*. Later in January, the LDP rapidly began expressing more humble views and on May 18 Suga said in a press interview that this government, like its predecessors, sides with the women who suffered. Hashimoto tried unsuccessfully to remedy the situation and all parties, including the LDP, have distanced themselves from his position on comfort women.

I have maintained for years that the silent majority of Japanese public opinion is much more contrite about Japan's pre-war deeds and that the narrowly oriented chauvinistic nationalist view, however vocal its supporters, is a minority. The 40 days that shook Japan from late April till the end of May have shown that I was right. I just hope that the position taken by Abe and LDP at the end of May 2013 will be maintained after the summer election.

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