



Understand Abe, but Focus on Japan by Grant Newsham

Grant Newsham (gnewsham78@gmail.com) is a Research Fellow at the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies, with 20 years of experience in Japan as a diplomat, business executive, and US Marine Corps Liaison Officer to the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force.

There is rising concern that Japan risks entrapping the United States in a conflict with China as a result of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's "right-wing" policies. Abe's views should be placed in perspective: there is a genuine basis for concern, as well as a basis for progress and optimism.

Some of Abe's actions, particularly his Yasukuni Shrine visit, are mystifying and frustrating to those who value the Japan-US alliance. Equally difficult to justify are the routinely provocative comments about comfort women and Japan's behavior during World War II and the decade leading up to it by NHK directors' and other Japanese officials. These actions are less mystifying if one understands the thinking behind them, however.

Abe and a slice of Japan's ruling class believe Japan did a noble deed with its war to throw off the white man's yoke in Asia and free the colored races (their words, not mine). Moreover, they believe that the Tokyo War Crimes trials were illegitimate, and the Nanjing Massacre and other "alleged wrongdoings" were just that -- "alleged." And, they reason, if Japan did do anything wrong, everybody did such things during the war.

Abe and that small slice of the ruling class believe that as long as Japan accepts this "masochistic" view of history (again, their word, not mine), Japan will never regain its independence and respect -- its own self-respect and the respect of other nations.

Thus, actions such as Abe's Yasukuni visit convey that the current administration in Tokyo does not accept past apologies and admissions of "guilt"; these are intended to refute the "self-humiliation" that restrains Japan. Abe considers it principled leadership to take such actions, and deems them worth doing even if they provoke criticism.

One aspect of Abe and his allies that is seldom recognized is their resentment over Japan's loss in World War II (which, they believe, they were tricked into) and being occupied. Equally irksome is that their Constitution (and democracy!) was foisted on them by Americans.

They hate the idea of foreigners controlling Japan -- from some, I have even heard regret over US-imposed democracy. They believe that Japan is a Confucian society, run by an elite class (them) for the good of everyone else. Although most of these people would like to continue the relationship -- including the military relationship -- with the United States,

their resentment is a troubling undertone and must always be kept in mind. This explanation is key to the debate over "why" Abe does what he does. It's not that hard to figure out: just ask him and his people. But Americans normally fail to ask.

This apparent lack of familiarity with Japan's conservatives is in line with my long-held observation that America's "foreign policy class" (diplomats, think tank researchers, journalists, academics, bloggers), seems to only talk to a relatively small number of Japanese elite and media. A prominent Cabinet minister told me shortly before being selected for his position, "You Americans *always* talk to the wrong Japanese." (I'd just told him that the Japanese always talk to the wrong Americans.) It may seem like "Diplomacy 101," but at times we have forgotten that communication with *all* elements in Japan's political arena is vital to improving mutual understanding.

Do the ideas of Abe and hardline rightist resonate with the Japanese at large? Not really. Importantly, in what passes for Japan's ruling class, there are many people who do not possess this resentment about World War II, nor totally agree with Abe and his supporters. They appreciate the US and want a sound relationship, albeit a more equal one.

The US needs to better cultivate and support these people. Talking to them regularly would go a long way. This would enhance their position in the Japanese hierarchy, and would help the US to better understand Japan. Japanese politicians, officials (active and retired), academics, and media often express frustration at not being able to offer their insights. They either have no access to or are sometimes obstructed by Japanese officials bent on controlling the dialogue. The US side -- PACOM, the Pentagon, and the Washington foreign policy world -- should have a reasonable open-door policy and do more to welcome this community into the conversation

Track-two dialogues, think-tank discussions, and seminars are helpful communications channels, but can be improved by a concerted effort to include scholars, officials, and others who aren't fluent in English, which is a vast majority of this group. Going beyond the relatively small group of English-speaking Japanese would broaden understanding in both directions. Interpreters are expensive, but the payoff is considerable.

Americans should step back and consider Japan from a broader perspective and not focus too much on a particular administration. Prime ministers come and go, and most of them have their peculiarities. Don't fixate on particular comments. Some of former Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio's ideas caused as much consternation as anything Abe has said. There is more to Japan than a prime minister and his curious ideas about history.

Finally, understand that neither Abe nor Japan have any intention of picking a fight with China or anyone else. Ultimately, Japan represents a higher manifestation of civilized, responsible behavior, individual freedom and consensual government than most of its neighbors, particularly the China, North Korea, and Russia.

Japan seldom explains itself well; it can use US help. For example, Chinese and Korean assertions that Abe has taken Japan to the verge of 1930s militarism have been allowed to take hold. The US government should help Japan challenge this false assertion. Instead of publicly expressing “disappointment” over Abe’s Yasukuni visit, US spokespersons might have highlighted Japan’s last 70 years of exemplary behavior and declared our relationship will not be undone by the Yasukuni visit. If necessary, complaints should be made in private.

If the US is serious about achieving its national security objectives in Asia, it must look beyond the quirks of the Abe administration and build a relationship with Japan similar to the “special relationship” we’ve had with the British. Japan has its quirks, as do we, but our two countries are still the best hope for freedom and prosperity in Asia. The key is to focus on Japan, rather than Prime Minister Abe.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.