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# Japanese Politics and Security in 2013: Back to the Future?

The re-election of Shinzo Abe has raised concerns that Japan's foreign policy will become increasingly nationalistic. Tom French disagrees, at least in the case of China. Abe's behavior towards Beijing will be pragmatic and leave the door open for compromise.

By Tom French for ISN

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The recent elections in Japan, in which the Democratic Party (DPJ) was soundly defeated by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), capped off a turbulent 2012 for Northeast Asia. The year saw territorial disputes across the region escalate, with confrontation between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands intensifying to its most dangerous level to date. Tensions also flared between South Korea and Japan over the Takeshima / Dokdo islands.

## Abe Returns

Returning to this security environment is Shinzo Abe, [Japan's seventh Prime Minister in six years](#). Abe faces many of the same issues he attempted to tackle in his previous stint as Prime Minister in 2007, namely a looming demographic crisis, a weak economy and poor relations with Japan's neighbors. While Abe did little to address the former two during his previous term in office, he is widely credited with having improved Japan's relations with its neighbors - one of his few successes in an otherwise moribund performance.

Abe's return has, however, prompted [concerns](#) outside Japan regarding his nationalist and revisionist attitudes, such as his questioning of Japan's wartime sexual enslavement of thousands of (mostly Korean) "comfort women". Yet, what many commentators overlook is Abe's pragmatism and ability to set aside his 'principles' in order to achieve results. Unlike some of his predecessors, Abe never visited the controversial Yasukuni shrine (which enshrines Japan's war dead - including convicted war criminals) while Prime Minister and largely avoided the insensitive public gaffs which hastened the downfall of a number of his successors. His readiness to separate his official role and private beliefs, combined with other measures such as early visits to China and South Korea, helped Abe improve Japan's relations with its neighbors during his first term in office.

Indeed, Abe appears keen to improve Japan's relations with its neighbors, most notably South Korea. After Park Geun Hye's victory in the recent presidential elections, Abe called South Korea "[Japan's most important neighboring country](#)". Previously, Abe [dropped plans](#) for a new public holiday centered on Japanese claims over the South Korea-administered Takeshima/Dokdo islands.

## Pragmatism before Rhetoric

It is also important to recognize that much of Abe's rhetoric is influenced by domestic political realities. Some of his more nationalist comments during the election campaign can be attributed to the necessity of securing the LDP's conservative base in the face of competition from the emerging Japan Restoration Party (JRP). However, domestic political pressures often cut both ways with Abe also having to face other political forces that have the potential to mitigate his nationalist rhetoric. One comes in the form of the LDP's coalition partner, New Komeito, a party that opposes constitutional reform and remains committed to pacifism. Another is the upper house election scheduled for July. Yet Abe remains aware that he largely owes his election to popular discontent with the DPJ rather than any great love for the LDP. He also recognizes that his nationalist beliefs are not shared by the vast majority of Japanese people. Accordingly, he is unlikely to pursue any overly controversial policies which could offend the masses of floating voters, at least until the July elections are a thing of the past.

The scale of the LDP's election victory has also raised speculation over whether Abe will attempt to revise Japan's postwar 'pacifist' constitution, as promised in the party's [manifesto](#). The LDP's [plans for redrafting the constitution](#) are relatively modest, focusing principally on legitimizing the existence of the Self Defense Forces (SDF) and the formal adoption of the national flag and anthem, but the requirements necessary to change the constitution are hard to meet. Constitutional revision requires the approval of two-thirds of both houses of the Japanese parliament, followed by a referendum. Currently, the LDP has enough votes in the lower house but it cannot win in the upper chamber.

Any movement on this issue is, therefore, unlikely until after the July elections. Given the still largely antimilitarist attitude of Japan's population, winning a constitutional referendum, especially one calling for the revision of the 'peace clauses', would also prove a challenge. This has, in turn, prompted discussion of the possibility of a vote on revising only [article 96 of the constitution](#) (which governs the rules on revision) to lower the bar and allow easier revision in the future. Nevertheless, even if sufficient support can be won for revision, the process leading up to changing the constitution would require many months of debate, planning and legislation, which would certainly extend into the later years of this parliament, if it survives its full term.

## Repairing Ties

In terms of external relations, Japan also faces some high-profile challenges. Relations between Tokyo and Washington have become strained over the past year following a series of alleged crimes by US servicemen and local protests over the deployment of the [V-22 Osprey](#) to the Futenma base, Japan's 'fourth territorial dispute'. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the Abe government will seek to rebuild the traditionally close ties the LDP maintained with the United States. Within the context of rising tensions with China, an improved US-Japan alliance is also seen as increasingly valuable by both partners. Accordingly, an [early visit](#) by Abe to the Whitehouse is highly likely, as are more [concrete moves](#) to finally relocate the Futenma base.

Closer co-operation between Japan, the US and its allies both [inside](#) and [outside](#) the region is also on the cards as the 'hub and spoke' system of US-centered alliances in Asia Pacific become more interconnected. Strategic use of Japanese development aid to [assist other maritime rivals of China](#) is one aspect of this trend. A further element of this movement towards the formation of a more closely integrated bloc is the US led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Abe has been reluctant to join these talks without an exemption for Japan's agricultural sector (which is likely to suffer if Japan joins) due to fear of alienating his party's rural base. However, given the overall boost accession would give the Japanese economy and relations with Washington, Japan may still come to the negotiating table.

## Conflict in the East China Sea?

While prospects for improved relations with the US and South Korea remain high, China will remain Abe's greatest foreign policy challenge. Although the change of government in Tokyo provided Beijing with an opportunity to de-escalate tensions, the number of infringements of Japanese territorial waters and airspace by Chinese vessels and aircraft has intensified over the past weeks. China has also recently announced that it [intends to geographically survey and possibly land on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands](#). This has prompted the [rebalancing](#) of Japanese capabilities around the islands, as well as the allocation of funds for the [expansion of the SDF](#) and [Coast Guard](#) by the new LDP government.

The future turn of events will largely depend on the extent to which China pushes Japan over the sovereignty of the islands. Chinese pressure has already provoked an expansion of the SDF and risks damaging economic ties. It may, in time, lead to the stationing of Japanese troops on the isles, or the greater involvement of the United States. However, Beijing's efforts to restrain the intensity of the protests which erupted after Japan's nationalization of the islands may point towards a gradual easing of tensions. However, it remains to be seen if China would be willing or able to curb further waves of nationalist protest in the event of a major escalation..

The new-old Japanese Prime Minister has a lot on his plate. At home, he has to deal with an aging population, a stagnant economy and a looming recession. Japan's relations with many of its neighbors are strained and territorial disputes with China have reached dangerous heights. However, alarmist reports regarding Abe's nationalist agenda often overlook that the Japanese Prime Minister is a pragmatist constrained by a variety of both domestic and international factors

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For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Japan, China, and the Tide of Nationalism](#)  
[China-Japan Tensions Over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands](#)  
[The Politics of Contestation in Asia](#)

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