

The Success of a Successor: Abe Shinzo and Japan's Foreign Policy

Bert Edström

SILK ROAD PAPER
May 2007



Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
Silk Road Studies Program

The Success of a Successor: Abe Shinzo and Japan's Foreign Policy

Bert Edström

© Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program –
A Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center
Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, 1619 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20036
Uppsala University, Box 514, 75120 Uppsala, Sweden
www.silkroadstudies.org

"**The Success of a Successor: Abe Shinzo and Japan's Foreign Policy**" is a *Silk Road Paper* published by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program. The *Silk Road Paper* series is the Occasional Paper series of the Joint Center, published jointly on topical and timely subjects.

The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and the Silk Road Studies Program is a joint transatlantic independent and externally funded research and policy center. The Joint Center has offices in Washington and Uppsala and is affiliated with the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University and the Department of Eurasian Studies of Uppsala University. It is the first Institution of its kind in Europe and North America, and is today firmly established as a leading research and policy center, serving a large and diverse community of analysts, scholars, policy-watchers, business leaders and journalists. The Joint Center aims to be at the forefront of research on issues of conflict, security and development in the region. Through its applied research, publications, teaching, research cooperation, public lectures and seminars, it wishes to function as a focal point for academic, policy, and public discussion regarding the region.

© Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2007

ISBN: 91-85473-38-3

Printed in Sweden

Distributed in North America by:

The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute
Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies
1619 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20036
Tel. +1-202-663-7723; Fax. +1-202-663-7785
E-mail: caci2@jhudig.admin.jhu.edu

Distributed in Europe by:

The Silk Road Studies Program
Uppsala University
Box 514, SE-75120 Uppsala
Sweden
Tel. +46-18-471-2217; Fax. +46-18-106397
E-mail: info@silkroadstudies.org

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to Svante E. Cornell, Research and Publications Director, at either of the addresses above (preferably by e-mail).

Sponsor of this publication



The Swedish Foreign Ministry

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	8
A Change in the Offing for Japan?	14
Abe Shinzo: Life and Political Career	18
Birthplace of Historical and Personal Significance	19
Abe's Political Hero: Kishi Nobusuke	20
A Slow Starter with a Rapid Career	24
Abe's Visionless Vision	27
Abe and the Koizumi Heritage.....	32
Abe and Foreign Policy	35
Will the Real Mr Abe Please Not Stand Up!.....	39
The Emergence of a New Prime Minister	42
Challenges Ahead	46
Doing a Fukuda	48
A Remarkable Encounter	52
Abe's Strange Fortune: North Korea's Nuke	55
Discussions in Seoul.....	57
Brief Interlude around a 'Taboo' Issue	59
Abe's Audacious Start	61
Wen Jiabao Visits Japan	62
To Washington on a Mission.....	64
Prospects and Priorities	68
Abe's First Priority: Muddle Through.....	68
Abe's Second Priority: Upper House Election.....	70
Abe's Dilemmas.....	74
Dilemma 1: Youth vs Inexperience	75
Dilemma 2: Ambiguity vs Fighting	76
Dilemma 3: 'Regime Change' vs US Relations	80
About the Author.....	82

Executive Summary

The election of Abe Shinzo as prime minister of Japan on September 26, 2006 bespeaks the emergence of a new generation of political leadership. He is the first prime minister of Japan born after the Second World War. His appointment symbolizes a regained Japanese self-esteem and assertiveness, which have gradually surfaced after the 'lost decade' of the 1990s. As the son of Abe Shintaro, one of Japan's political heavyweights in the 1980s until his untimely death in 1991, and the grandson of the nationalist Kishi Nobusuke (prime minister 1957–60), Abe Shinzo represents political 'blue blood'. He is inspired by his grandfather's 'fighting' spirit and devotion to the national interest. One of his key commitments as a politician is a pledge to change 'the post-war regime' in order to succeed where his grandfather did not.

Elected to the Diet (the parliament) in 1993, Abe's political career was somewhat lackluster for years. Eventually, he made a resounding breakthrough on the national political scene. He accompanied Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro on his visit to Pyongyang on September 17, 2002 and when it was confirmed that North Korea had abducted Japanese citizens, Abe urged Koizumi not to sign the Japan–DPRK Pyongyang Declaration that had been agreed upon beforehand. When this became known in Japan, Abe's action struck a chord among ordinary Japanese who felt anger over the abductions. The popularity that Abe gained in public opinion made Koizumi appoint him in 2003 to the powerful position of secretary-general of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in order to present to Japanese voters a strong vote-getting Koizumi–Abe *kombi* in forthcoming elections. In 2005, Abe went from being the Number Two in the LDP to being the Number Two in the government, when he was appointed chief cabinet secretary.

In the campaign for the presidency of the LDP that took place on October 20, 2006, Abe clarified the ideas he wanted to implement if elected premier. His political platform listed four broad national goals. The Japan that he wants to create is: (1) a country valuing culture, traditions, nature and history; (2) a

country of freedom and discipline; (3) a country proceeding along the way towards new growth and welfare by promoting innovations; and (4) an open country that is trusted, respected, and loved by the world and exerts leadership. To advance towards these national goals six concrete policies were proposed. Abe strives for (1) establishing political leadership; (2) working for an open economy and a society based on freedom and discipline; (3) creating a society that is safe and secure; (4) creating 'a strong and trusted Japan' pursuing assertive diplomacy; (5) instituting party reform so that the party can shoulder responsibility in a new era; and (6) departing from 'the post-war regime'.

Abe's ascension to the political throne may mean a change for Japan's foreign policy. It seems generally accepted that Koizumi's interest in foreign policy and defense was shallow before he became premier, and that as premier, his diplomacy boiled down to attending to three bilateral relationships in need of acute attention at the highest level of decision-making – North Korea, China and the United States. Abe represents a departure from the latter in this regard. His political career is very much colored by his focus on foreign policy. In fact, it was one such issue in particular – the North Korean kidnappings of Japanese citizens on Japanese soil – that helped him garner public support. In the political platform that Abe presented in his campaign for LDP party presidency, he advocated an assertive foreign policy and 'strategic dialogue' with like-minded actors such as the United States, Europe, and Australia.

During the campaign for the party presidency, Abe announced that he wanted to strengthen relations with China and South Korea; relations with which had become sour as a result of Prime Minister Koizumi's annual visits to the Yasukuni shrine, an act provocative to Japan's neighbours. As prime minister, Abe acted swiftly. Already on October 4, it was officially announced that Japan's new prime minister was going to Beijing to meet the Chinese political leaders.

The Japan–China summit on October 8-9, 2006 was a remarkable encounter. The joint press statement issued after the meeting stated: 'The Chinese side emphasized that the development of China is a peaceful development, and China would achieve development and prosperity together with Japan and

other countries. The Japanese side positively appreciated China's peaceful development and that its development has provided a great opportunity for Japan and the international community since it began to reform and open to the outside world. The Japanese side emphasized that Japan more than 60 years after the War, has been consistently following the path of a peaceful country, and would continue to follow this path. The Chinese side positively appreciated this.'

A conspicuous commitment by the two sides was that they 'would strive to build a mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests', albeit the meaning of 'strategic' is not entirely clear. To Japan, the Chinese recognition of Japan's post-war pacifism and that Japan 'would continue to follow this path' was reassuring.

That China expressed its will 'to enhance dialogue' on 'necessary and rational reform of the United Nations including the Security Council reform' was a major step forward for Japan in that Chinese opposition to Japan as a permanent member of the Security Council had hitherto effectively hindered the Japanese government from reaping any success in its bid.

In Abe's meetings with the Chinese leaders, North Korea-related issues loomed large. In the joint press statement after the summit, both sides expressed 'their deep concern over the recent situation on the Korean Peninsula, including the issue of nuclear tests'.

Important for Japan was that China expressed understanding of Japan's deep concern in regard to the issue of the abduction of Japanese by North Korea.

Directly after his meeting with the Chinese leaders, Abe flew to Seoul for a summit meeting with the leaders of South Korea, a country with which Japan's relations had deteriorated. Shortly after he landed in Seoul, information concerning North Korea's first nuclear test hit the world. The timing of the test was such that it was inevitable that it influenced the outcome of the discussions that Abe had with President Roh Moo Hyun of South Korea. As in the case of China, the row over Prime Minister Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni shrine was a bone of contention, but there were also others. While President Roh raised the history issue, North Korea's

nuclear test was uppermost on the agenda of discussions and, at the subsequent press conference, Abe stated that he did not think there was a difference of views between Japan and South Korea on the nuclear issue.

With his surprise visits to Beijing and Seoul, Abe made a flying start; his bold move in hastening there improved bilateral relations. His discussions with the political leaders of Japan's two neighbors revealed a surprisingly pragmatic approach and demonstrated his diplomatic skills. The Chinese leaders seem to have seen in Abe a political leader with whom they can do business. Both sides wanted to tread carefully in order to improve their relations, which had reached a nadir at the end of Koizumi's tenure.

This impression was strengthened when Prime Minister Wen Jiabao of China arrived in Japan on a three-day visit on April 11-13, 2007. An agreement signed by the two heads of government on this occasion did not bring up the historical issues that had sent bilateral ties to their lowest point in decades, but simply declared that both sides were 'resolved to face history squarely, advance toward the future, and jointly unveil a beautiful future for bilateral relations.'

Seven months after his surprise visits to China and South Korea, Abe headed for Washington on a two-day official visit. In many ways, Japanese-United States relations were better than ever when Abe took over after Koizumi, since Abe's predecessor had made resolute efforts to support the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq and in its anti-terrorism activities. What became a problem for Abe was that Japan's historical legacy of atrocities and horrors perpetrated by its military before its defeat in 1945 haunted his diplomatic initiatives. His and his government's handling of the problems of history was seen as not acceptable to a broad stratum not only in China and the two Koreas but also in Western countries like the United States. With Abe's visit to the United States approaching, he made a series of statements apologizing for Japan's past behavior. Arriving in Washington, his handling of contentious historical issues put him on the defensive and did not give him any opening to exercise the 'assertive diplomacy' that he had advocated in his political platform. His statements at the joint press conference with President Bush after their summit were cautious, except on the issue of

North Korea in regard to which both he and President Bush focused on efforts to pressure their adversary into abandoning its nuclear program.

As the new prime minister, Abe embarked upon the political program he had been elected on. His blitz visit to China and South Korea confirmed the impression that foreign policy was his forte, and he did not disappoint his supporters on this front.

Abe's prospects are complicated and he seems to have had two priorities after he got the top job in Japanese politics.

The first priority is to muddle through. As newly appointed prime minister, Abe was constantly clamped down on by journalists and representatives of the opposition parties in the Diet and cornered into confirming or disclaiming statements he had made in the past, which clashed with the policies of previous governments. In an obvious attempt to muddle through, Abe took a more conciliatory stance than before assuming his high office by modifying and revising his high-profile stance on a number of issues that had caused serious frictions with other countries.

The second priority for the new prime minister is to do reasonably well in the Upper House elections on July 22, 2007. It is the first major electoral challenge that Abe will face and represents a make or break situation for him as prime minister. Leading his ruling LDP-Komeito coalition to victory or failure in the elections will determine his political fortunes and whether or not he will be another stop-gap premier, or if he will be entrusted by the voters to push through his ambitious nationalistic political program and end 'the post-war regime'.

Abe faces three dilemmas as prime minister.

First, he was chosen as prime minister in large part due to his image of representing youth and freshness; but his youth and relatively short political career have also caused him to be regarded as inexperienced. Mistakes and gaffes have been made. One is in his approach towards handling the issue of 'comfort women' in such a way that he has been forced to bend over backwards and apologize repeatedly, which has only strengthened the impression of vacillation and made the issue stick. Another is his decision to

readmit nearly a dozen former LDP members, who had been expelled from the party when they rebelled against the party line on postal privatization. Abe's move may have been expedient but gave the impression that he backtracked for the sake of expediency.

Secondly, Abe reveres politicians who are 'fighting statesmen' willing to take an unpopular stand and stick to their convictions. His ideal is to be such a 'fighting statesman'; but this clashes with the conscious strategy of ambiguity that he used during his campaign for the LDP presidency and continued to use as the new prime minister.

Thirdly, at the same time as Abe wants to annihilate 'the post-war regime', he strives for improved relations with Japan's security underwriter, the United States. But 'the post-war regime' that he wants to see go down the drain, in the same way as his grandfather wanted to undo the solution found for organizing Japan's foreign and security policies after the Second World War, is part and parcel of the relationship with the United States. The dilemma that Abe faces is that getting rid of 'the post-war regime' might undermine the very relationship with the United States that he wants to strengthen.

A Change in the Offing for Japan?

The end of the Cold War is often described as a turning point of history, for the world and for world politics. In many senses, the years around 1990, when international politics underwent a transformation, was a period of reckoning also for Japan. Bearings that had been found solid in the post-war period ceased to be valid or were undermined. Such an assertion is valid not least for the country's foreign policy. Founded in the aftermath of the Second World War, the guiding principles of Japan's post-war foreign policy emerged during the protracted negotiations that the government of defeated and occupied Japan pursued with the US government over the peace treaty at the end of the 1940s and the early 1950s. Basically, the negotiations resulted in what has come to be called retrospectively 'the Yoshida Doctrine' after Yoshida Shigeru* (prime minister 1946–47, 1948–54). This 'doctrine' consists of three elements: (1) the basis is the alliance relationship with America which guarantees national security; (2) Japan should remain lightly armed; and (3) resources made available should be used for economic purposes by Japan as a trading nation.¹ This doctrine guiding Japan's foreign policy seemed so enduring that the political scientist Nagai Yonosuke proclaimed in 1985 – in what would become famous as a catchy slogan – that 'the Yoshida Doctrine is eternal'.² So far, Nagai's prediction has proven correct in its main outline: the United States is still Japan's security underwriter as was confirmed after the North Korean nuclear test in October 2006; Japan's defense expenditure is still comparatively modest in relation to the size of its economy despite that it has built up a strong military force; and investments

* Japanese names are given in traditional Japanese order: surname first, given name second.

¹ Kosaka Masataka, 'Nihon gaiko no bensho' [Scrutinizing Japanese diplomacy], in Aruga Tadashi et al., eds, *Koza kokusai seiji 4: Nihon no gaiko* [Lectures on international relations 4: Japanese foreign policy] (Tokyo: Tokyo daigaku shuppankai, 1989), p. 298. Since Yoshida did not pen down any doctrine, it is rendered differently by different authors. Kosaka Masataka (1934–1996) was a devoted Yoshida disciple and 'authorized' interpreter of Yoshida's ideas.

² Nagai Yonosuke, 'Anzen hoshō to kokumin keizai: Yoshida dokutorin wa eien nari' [National security and national economy: The Yoshida Doctrine is eternal], in Nagai Yonosuke, *Gendai to senryaku* [The contemporary era and strategy] (Tokyo: Bungei shunju, 1985), p. 63.

for military purposes are relatively small scale. In 1997, the well-known expert on Japanese foreign policy, Frank Langdon, assessed its development over the years. ‘What is striking about Japan’s behaviour’, he wrote, ‘is the extent to which it remains in close accord with the goals and approaches of the last fifty years despite the kaleidoscopic changes of domestic party politics and economic restructuring as well as changing regional and global conditions to which Japan is subjected in the nineties.’³ In an assessment of how this doctrine has fared, my conclusion continues to be that the development of Japan’s foreign policy up to the early years of this century is fully in agreement with the conclusion that Nagai drew in 1985.⁴

Nagai may be right but, since neither friends nor foes remain constants in international politics, it is certain that the doctrine will cease to be the lodestar for Japan’s foreign policy some day in the future. In a belated response to the end of the Cold War and the 1991 Gulf War, these momentous events heralded a period marked by insecurity and uncertainty for Japan. Not only did its economy slow down and experience low or no growth after ‘the economic bubble’ burst in 1990, it also threw Japanese politics into a state of flux after decades characterized by continuity and stability. In the 1990s, prime ministers came and went, but Japan’s political system and the general political line remained invariable with the same conservative political elite in power. The political scientist Inoguchi Takashi captured this state of Japanese politics by describing it as a ‘karaoke democracy’ where the performers are changed, but the song is the same.⁵

In a recent analysis, Kenneth Pyle, a leading authority on Japan’s modern history, argues that a turning point has occurred in Japan’s recent past.⁶ Now, in Japan’s modern political history, many events have been declared to be turning points, but upon closer inspection or in hindsight, they have faded away and not left any particular traces. Even events seemingly set to take on

³ Frank Langdon, ‘Japan’s Regional and Global Coalition Participation: Political and Economic Aspects’, The University of British Columbia, Institute of International Relations, *Working Paper* 14 (June 1997), p. 1.

⁴ Bert Edström, *Japan’s Evolving Foreign Policy Doctrine: From Yoshida to Miyazawa* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Bert Edström, ‘The Yoshida doctrine and the unipolar world’, *Japan Forum*, 16:1 (2004), pp. 63–86.

⁵ Inoguchi Takashi, ‘Karaoke seiji kara no dasshutsu’ [Departure from the karaoke politics], *This is Yomiuri* (February 1995), pp. 62–71.

⁶ Kenneth B. Pyle, ‘Abe Shinzo and Japan’s Change of Course’, *NBR Analysis*, 17:4 (October 2006).

the robe of a historic turning point have not lived up to expectations. In 1980, one of Japan's leading economists and economic historians, Nakamura Takafusa, wrote that measures taken to curb inflation in the aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis meant 'the complete end of the rapid economic growth which had continued for a period of over twenty years since the 1950s.'⁷ For him, the 1973 oil 'shock' – the Godzilla of all 'shocks' to have jolted Japan – was an important event qualifying as a historical turning point in all senses of the term. Nowadays, with Japan's economic predicament of the 1990s in mind, even such a dramatic event as the 1973 oil crisis with its far-reaching repercussions has faded and might even be seen as an 'apparent' rather than a 'real' turning point.⁸

The eminent scholar Pyle has discerned in Japan's recent development a turning point of historical significance. 'In the fifteen years after the end of the Cold War Japan struggled with the vast changes in its external environment. The nation was deeply disoriented by the end of the bipolar system on which its foreign policy and domestic political and economic institutions were predicated.'⁹ Now, he argues, Japan is undergoing fundamental change. One of the driving forces of the development of historical significance that he discerns is the emergence of a new political generation. Old dogmas of the Cold War period are still in place but have lost their relevance; the 'old left-right axis of the Cold War period is irrelevant to the new generation'. Born after the Second World War, they are not burdened by painful memories of the past. It is a generation of politicians believing that Japan must assert its own identity in international society.¹⁰

Pyle argues that the election of Abe Shinzo as new prime minister of Japan in September 2006 symbolizes a regained Japanese self-esteem and assertiveness that have gradually emerged after the long-drawn out and excruciating 'lost decade' was over and Japan began to recover from the economic doldrums it fell into when 'the bubble economy' burst in 1990. According to Pyle, it was an event that signifies that great changes are on

⁷ Takafusa Nakamura, *The Postwar Japanese Economy: Its Development and Structure* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1981), p. 233.

⁸ The useful distinction between 'apparent' and 'real' turning points is introduced by Maćiej Kanert in his 'Bukkyō Denrai: The True Turning Point', in Bert Edström, ed., *Turning Points in Japanese History* (Richmond: Japan Library, 2002), pp. 17–24.

⁹ Pyle, 'Abe Shinzo and Japan's Change of Course', p. 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

their way and bespeaks the emergence of a new generation of political leadership. To this long-term student of Japan's modern history, Japan's new prime minister emerges as one of the foremost representatives of this 'new generation', and Pyle quotes him to prove his case: 'As Abe writes in his recent book, this new breed of young politicians is deeply interested in policy issues and willing to cross factional and party lines to meet a commonly felt range of challenges and to develop their legislative agendas. Increasingly they are prepared to confront bureaucratic resistance to their proposals.'¹¹ This then begs the question: who is Abe Shinzo?

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Abe Shinzo: Life and Political Career

Abe Shinzo was born on September 21, 1954 as son of Abe Shintaro, a journalist who some years after Shinzo's birth began working as secretary to the foreign minister, who happened to be his father-in-law, Kishi Nobusuke, and continued to work for him when Kishi became prime minister in 1957. In 1958, Abe was elected to the Upper House and was a member of the Diet (the parliament) until he passed away in 1991. Eventually he became one of Japan's leading politicians and was seen as a serious contender for the post of prime minister. He was almost certain to have become premier in 1987. However, in spite of the fact that his faction had garnered the largest financial inflow among LDP factions in 1986, which in many cases has had a great effect on the outcome, he lost the race.¹² In the next round, he was the top contender.¹³ It is likely that in the end he would have succeeded if liver cancer had not claimed his life.

Abe Shinzo gained his education from the first grade to university through the Seikei Gakuen School System. It is a school guided by a philosophy of 'liberalism' and 'individualism'. After graduating from the Faculty of Political Science and Law at Seikei University, he enrolled in January 1978 for political science studies at the University of Southern California. Thus, he followed in the footsteps of an earlier Japanese premier, Miki Takeo (prime minister 1974–76), who pursued studies at the same university before entering politics. After his studies in the United States, Abe returned to Japan to take up a position at Kobe Steel in April 1979. His career as a 'salaryman' was cut short, however, when his father was appointed foreign minister in Nakasone Yasuhiro's (prime minister 1982–87) first cabinet. After having first resisted his father's enticements to join the family profession and enter politics, Abe gave in and agreed to join his father and

¹² Kitaoka Shinichi, *Jiminto: Seikento no 38 nen* [The LDP: 38 years of a ruling party] (Tokyo: Yomiuri shimbunsha, 1995), p. 231.

¹³ Jiji tsushinsha seijibu, ed., *21 seiki no shusho kohosei: Neo-riida jidai no makuake* [The prime ministerial cadets of the 21st century: The beginnings of an era of new leaders] (Tokyo: Jiji tsushinsha, 1989), p. 247.

worked for him as executive assistant. When Abe Shintaro was appointed chairperson of the General Council of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and subsequently became secretary-general of the party, his son continued to work for him as his private secretary. Working with his father gave him a keen insight and understanding of the working of Japanese politics, and when Abe Shintaro passed away in 1991, Abe Shinzo entered politics. In the 1993 Upper House election, he stood as a candidate for a seat in the Yamaguchi 1st District and was elected with the highest vote count. Thus, two years after his father's death, Abe succeeded his father as the representative for the same constituency that his father had represented.

Hailing from Yamaguchi, Abe is from a prefecture that had produced no less than seven prime ministers – more than any other prefecture. Two of them belonged to Abe's own family, his grandfather and great uncle, which gave Abe the distinction of being born into a family that is a political dynasty. Had his father not died prematurely, he almost certainly would have made it, too. For the traditionalists, wrote the BBC's Tokyo correspondent on the eve of Abe's appointment as prime minister, it was only 'right and proper he should take his turn to "inherit" the premiership'.¹⁴

Birthplace of Historical and Personal Significance

Abe's political career and political program have been influenced by his background. Like his father, Abe has built his political career in Yamaguchi on the western tip of Japan's main island Honshu. He was born in Tokyo but has inherited his devotion for his constituency, which has been reciprocated by its voters who have re-elected him with massive majorities in all subsequent elections. Yamaguchi sits at the heart of what was once Choshu, famous in Japanese history as one of the four fiefdoms which masterminded the 1868 overthrow of the Tokugawa shogunate that had ruled Japan for 250 years. What is important – even for Japan's modern political history – is that the rule of the shogunate was established when Choshu was defeated by Tokugawa in the battle of Sekigahara in 1600. The rule of the shogunate ended in 1868 and one saw the end of a two centuries-long period of seclusion – in posteriority known as *sakoku*, meaning literally 'chained country' – that

¹⁴ Chris Hogg, 'Japan's political "blue blood"', *BBC News Online*, September 26, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/5362392.stm>.

was adopted by the shogunate in 1639 as an effort to legitimize and strengthen its authority and defend the country. The rebellion against the shogunate was carried out in the name of Emperor Mutsuhito (after his death known as Emperor Meiji) and 'restored' him to power from being a symbolic figurehead residing in Kyoto. This 'revolution from above' brought back the Japanese emperor from obscurity to a position of importance after centuries of having been an isolated and purely symbolic figure. Since the name of the emperor's reign was Meiji, or Enlightened Government, the revolution is called the Meiji Restoration. Not only did it end Japan's isolation from the outer world but it also launched the country on its path of modernization and industrialization. It ended the draconian restrictions on contact with foreigners, which had hampered Japan's ability to acquire new technology and to develop. In contrast to most other countries in Asia, most notably China, and the ideas guiding the shogunate, Japan's new leaders staked out a new course, opening up the country to foreign interaction and setting out on a course of modernization of all aspects of society. One of Abe Shinzo's close collaborators, Okazaki Hisahiko, a former ambassador and head of an influential think tank, says: 'Abe has the tradition of Choshu behind him. He is concerned about the state, not just about the prefecture. Choshu people think in terms of Japan's national interest.'¹⁵

Abe's Political Hero: Kishi Nobusuke

Abe Shinzo grew up in an environment in which his father was largely away from home because of his work as a journalist and later politician. He has related how it was his grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, and not his father who took care of his upbringing and has told how the memory of his grandfather has shaped his political philosophy and world outlook.¹⁶ In July 2006, Abe published a book in order to promote his bid for the post of prime minister.¹⁷ Such activities are common in political campaigns when politicians are seeking election or re-election, and are intended to boost their candidacy and

¹⁵ David Pilling, 'The son also rises', *Financial Times*, September 15, 2006.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Abe Shinzo and Fukuda Kazuya, 'Kishi Nobusuke no fukkatsu' [The revival of Kishi Nobusuke], *Shokun* (September 2003); Abe Shinzo and Okazaki Hisahiko, *Kono kuni o mamoru ketsui* [The determination to defend this country] (Tokyo: Fusosha, 2004), pp. 183, 185-90, 193ff, 198-201; Abe Shinzo and Inose Naoki, 'Nihon yo, "Atarashii kuni e!"' [Japan! Towards a new country], *Shukan posuto*, January 13-20, 2006.

¹⁷ Abe Shinzo, *Utsukushii kuni e* [Towards a beautiful country] (Tokyo: Bungei shunju, 2006).

build up the stamina of their supporters. Unlike most other such books that few read, Abe's book became an instant bestseller. In the book, *Utsukushii kuni e* [Towards a beautiful country], Kishi emerges as Abe's hero. He writes admiringly about his grandfather's deeds and political philosophy. Kishi's personal history and his fate should be described in some detail since it has had a decisive impact on his grandson Abe.

Kishi Nobusuke (1896–1987) is generally considered to have been one of Japan's most important prime ministers in the post-war period. His background was that of an elite bureaucrat. After graduating from Tokyo Imperial University, he entered the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce in 1920 and soon became the leader of the 'new bureaucrats', who were skilled, had an interest in economic planning, and were willing to cooperate with the military. In 1936–39, he was a top bureaucrat in 'Manchukuo', the puppet state established by the Japanese military in northern China in 1932. As the deputy head of the Japanese colonial administration (the head was a Chinese puppet), Kishi was the uncrowned king of 'Manchukuo', and did his work so well that he was made vice-minister of commerce and industry in 1939–40 and deputy munitions minister 1941–44, having the responsibility for Japan's economic mobilization against the United States. Kishi was a member of the cabinet that made the fatal decision to start the war against the United States in 1940.

After the war, Kishi was jailed as a suspected war criminal and spent three and a half years in the Sugamo prison but was never charged. Released in 1948 he was offered a position in business. He was removed from the list of purgees in 1952 and was elected to the Diet as a representative of Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru's Liberal Party the next year. Expelled from the party in 1954, due to his anti-Yoshida intrigues, Kishi aligned himself with Yoshida's political arch-enemy Hatoyama Ichiro and was appointed secretary-general of Hatoyama's Democratic Party. By then Kishi had emerged as a leading politician in the conservative camp under the banner of anti-communism and support for constitutional revision, and he was to become an architect of Japan's post-war political system. He was one of the political strategists behind the merger of two conservative parties, giving birth to the Liberal Democratic Party, which has ruled the country with only a short break since its foundation in 1955. Kishi ran for the LDP party

presidency in 1956. He lost to Ishibashi Tanzan but was appointed foreign minister and served as government spokesman when Prime Minister Ishibashi fell ill soon after he had assumed office. After only two months Ishibashi had to retire due to ill health, and Kishi replaced him.

Kishi met a bifurcated public opinion as prime minister. He was admired by many, but he was also a controversial politician with a tarnished pre-war career that did not wash out. Despite his intellectual brilliance, he continued to be seen as a bureaucrat by the general public. Many sensed what one of his biographers wrote of him – he was ‘capable, when necessary, of using forceful measures to get his way’.¹⁸ Much of his success in politics was accounted for by his capacity for fundraising and backstage maneuvering.¹⁹ Neither did he try to avoid or dampen the controversies bred by his bureaucratic and aristocratic style. Indeed, his unflinching nationalist agenda divided Japan. In 1958, he made an attempt to ram through the Diet a highly controversial Police Duties Law, which was generally considered to be inspired from pre-war times, and tried to restore the pre-war ethics classes to education but failed – a nation-wide rally of groups was concerned that Japan was reverting to its authoritarian past and succeeded in thwarting Kishi’s attempt.

One of Kishi’s overriding goals was to undo the post-war solution for Japan that the Japanese government under Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru had accepted in negotiations with the US government and which had resulted in a highly unequal treaty, signed by Japan and the United States in 1951 when Japan was still occupied by the Allied forces. Like Yoshida, Kishi was born in the Meiji period and had been active before the Second World War, when Japan counted among the major powers of the world, and he longed for the day when the shame that was brought upon Japan with its defeat in the war would be erased. After prolonged negotiations with the US government, Kishi succeeded in reaching agreement with the Americans on a revised treaty. He saw revision as a success since it made Japan regain the national

¹⁸ Dan Kurzman, *Kishi and Japan: The Search for the Sun* (New York: Ivan Obolensky, 1960), p. 264.

¹⁹ It is significant that the chapter dealing with Kishi in Richard Samuels’s recent masterpiece carries the title ‘Putting Corruption in Its Place’. See Richard J. Samuels, *Machiavelli’s Children: Leaders & Their Legacies in Italy & Japan* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 225–59.

independence and dignity that Yoshida had 'sold out'. But instead of rejoicing, popular resistance was massive when the revised security treaty came to the Diet for ratification. Opposition to the treaty inside and outside the Diet mounted, the greatest mass demonstrations in Japanese history took place, and over ten million people signed petitions denouncing the revised treaty.²⁰

To secure ratification, Kishi called police into the Diet. He succeeded in pushing through ratification through an obstreperous Diet, but his parliamentary handling of the revision of the security treaty was seen as sly and undemocratic and the prime minister was condemned by wide strata of the population. The huge masses which rallied to protest the Kishi government's policy, the exceedingly bitter words in which he was denounced, and the pervasive anti-establishment currents that spread, were seen by conservative circles to threaten the very existence of the Japanese state. Many conservatives saw Japan teetering on the brink of a violent communist revolution.²¹ Kishi's inducement of popular wrath made him meet the same fate as Prime Minister Yoshida faced in 1954. Dumped by his party, he had to leave office.

The fact that Kishi could return to national politics and even become prime minister has given rise to his characterization in a standard work as 'the epitome of Japan's prewar and postwar political "continuity" - Japan's failure, in other words, to perform a thorough political housecleaning after the war': '[N]ot only was Kishi exonerated of all blame for his role after Japan's defeat, he also had the unbelievable luck to climb all the way to the top of the greasy pole while his erstwhile colleagues looked on in blank amazement.'²²

This evaluation of Kishi Nobusuke is grossly unjust according to Abe. He is inspired by his grandfather's devotion to the national interest in the face of the political storm that he encountered when he attempted to obtain

²⁰ George R. Packard, *Protest in Tokyo: The Security Treaty Crisis of 1960* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978).

²¹ Fujiyama Aiichiro, *Seiji waga michi: Fujiyama Aiichiro kaikoroku* [Politics, my way: Fujiyama Aiichiro's memoirs] (Tokyo: Asahi shimbunsha, 1976), p. 106.

²² Wakamiya Yoshibumi, *The Postwar Conservative View of Asia: How the Political Right Has Delayed Japan's Coming to Terms With its History of Aggression in Asia* (Tokyo: LTCB International Library Foundation, 1999), pp. 49f.

ratification of the revised treaty. In his book, Abe recounts with disgust how socialists, communists and other left-wing forces reviled his grandfather and how conservatism was equated with a reactionary revival of militarism by the intellectuals and the media. In a story he has told before in a book with Okazaki Hisahiko on defense issues, he relates his vivid memory of how angry crowds gathered around Kishi's home in Tokyo and shouted abuse at his grandfather, who was bouncing little Shinzo on his knee. Outside he heard the crowd shouting 'Down with Ampo' – 'Ampo' being the abbreviation for the security treaty – and Shinzo began to repeat the slogan: 'Down with Ampo. Down with Ampo.' His grandfather laughed quietly and said that those who protested had got it all wrong and that the boy must say: 'Yes to Ampo. Yes to Ampo.'²³

Having Kishi as his political hero has made Abe intensely aware of the defeat his grandfather met in the power struggle that unfolded in Japan in the aftermath of the Second World War, when others, not Kishi, got the best of it. Abe is impressed with the way in which his grandfather served Japan's national interest and has made it a lodestar for himself as a politician. One of the key commitments on Abe's personal political agenda is a promise to right what went wrong for his grandfather by making a change of 'the post-war regime' a key pledge on his political agenda.

A Slow Starter with a Rapid Career

After having been elected to the Diet in 1993, Abe's career was somewhat lackluster for years. With a grandfather who had once served as prime minister and a former foreign minister for a father and having himself worked as a secretary to a minister, he had outstanding connections in the political world. In the way Japanese politics works, he was entitled to a place in the sun owing to his ancestry but, nevertheless, he did not leave any particular distinguishing mark on national politics. The years went by and he seemed a bit left behind and did not exhibit the usual career of an up-and-coming political hopeful. It was not until July 2000 that he was assigned 'a post that was looking like a post',²⁴ when Mori Yoshiro (prime minister

²³ Abe and Okazaki, *Kono kuni o mamoru ketsui*, pp. 185f; Abe, *Utsukushii kuni e*, p. 22.

²⁴ Shiota Ushio, *Abe Shinzo no rikiryō* [Abe Shinzo's abilities] (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2006), p. 106.

2000–2001) appointed him deputy chief cabinet secretary in his second cabinet.

Abe's time came when Koizumi Junichiro became prime minister. When he formed his first cabinet in April 2001, after his resounding victory in the presidential election of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, he kept Abe as deputy chief cabinet secretary. In 2003, Abe got the job as secretary-general of the LDP, a post that brings with it ample opportunities for a politician with ambitions to promote his own career. By securing this important post, he took over the job that had brought fame and fortune on many predecessors. It was a step up the political ladder and gave him a strong hand in the internal power struggle in the LDP. It is common knowledge that this post made the office holder the Number Two in Japanese politics.²⁵ Not only had Abe's faction leader, Mori Yoshiro, held this post but also Abe's grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, and Abe's grand uncle, Sato Eisaku. Abe's faction leader, Mori, is a prime example of the power that lay in this office. When he was secretary-general of the LDP, he ran not only the daily business of the party but also could substantially influence the policies of the government. Obviously satisfied with Abe's performance, Koizumi gave him his first ministerial post in 2005 as chief cabinet secretary. This appointment made Abe go from being the Number Two in the Liberal Democratic Party to being the Number Two in the government. The appointment was a clear indication that Abe was seen by Koizumi as a strong candidate to replace himself when he stepped down. Soon, Abe was portrayed in the media as the political crown prince, who would come after Koizumi.

Before Abe made his resounding breakthrough as a politician on the national scene on the back of a foreign policy issue in 2002, he had won his spurs as a politician who profiled himself on welfare issues. A member of the Standing Committee on Health and Welfare of the Upper House from 1999 and director of LDP's Social Affairs Division, this made him a key member of the welfare *zoku*.²⁶ He made this choice consciously as welfare was an area

²⁵ See, e.g., Miyazaki Yoshimasa, *No. 2 no hito: Jiminto kanjicho* [Number two: the LDP secretary-general] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1981).

²⁶ *Zoku* is a key element of Japanese politics and has been defined by Sato Seizaburo as 'a group of leading MPs, organized around the interests of ministries and governmental agencies and who exert strong influence on them on a daily basis.' See Sato Seizaburo and Matsuzaki Tetsuhisa, *Jiminto seiken* [The LDP government] (Tokyo: Chuo koronsha, 1986), p. 92.

that would become more and more important due to demographic factors and, thus, was an issue area that was of great concern to voters and beneficial for a politician with ambitions.

Events were to make this welfare *zoku* instantly famous in a different context. Abe's breakthrough as a politician of national standing came in 2002, when he accompanied Prime Minister Koizumi on his visit to Pyongyang on September 17, 2002. During Koizumi's visit to North Korea for a meeting with its leader Kim Jong Il, confirmation was received that the North Korean abduction of Japanese citizens, which had so far been only rumor, had actually taken place. The anger felt by ordinary Japanese enabled Abe to strike a chord among the Japanese general public, when it became known that he had urged Prime Minister Koizumi not to sign the Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration that had been agreed upon in the discussions Japan had had with North Korea.²⁷ Abe found it outrageous that the North Koreans admitted their wrongdoing but did not apologize for it.²⁸ His strong objections to signing the document made this so far fairly unknown politician a political star.²⁹

After his breakthrough in public opinion, Abe made a rapid career in domestic politics. The political stardom of the new wonder boy of Japanese politics was taken advantage of in the domestic political power play by Prime Minister Koizumi, who appointed him to the powerful position of secretary-general of the Liberal Democratic Party a year later, in order to present to Japanese voters the strong vote-getting Koizumi-Abe *kombi* in upcoming elections.

Rising in the party hierarchy, Abe's voice carried more and more weight. Steadfastly defending Koizumi against his critics, Abe was the most loyal among loyalists to the prime minister and became a trusted lieutenant to him. Koizumi's main concern was to ensure that his reform efforts were not laid to rest when he retired. While the denunciation of North Korea became Abe's signature issue, it is obvious that Prime Minister Koizumi began to see in Abe a young and promising politician who could be trusted to carry on the

²⁷ Shiota, *Abe Shinzo no rikiryō*, p. 108.

²⁸ Abe Shinzo, 'Nihon was nattoku shite inai' [Japan does not accept], *Voice* (December 2002), pp. 40-49.

²⁹ Hoshi, *Abe seiken no Nihon*, p. 97.

flame of reform. Abe's unswerving loyalty to Koizumi displayed on his various assignments indicated that he was the man to continue the reform work that Koizumi had initiated. Soon after Abe's resounding political breakthrough, he was mentioned as a likely future prime minister.

Being deputy chief cabinet secretary at the time of his breakthrough and soon to be appointed chief cabinet secretary, Abe emerged as a national politician, and the media and political commentators listed him as the top candidate for succeeding Koizumi.

Abe's Visionless Vision

In an interview for the September 2005 issue of the monthly *Chuo koron*, the prime minister-to-be presented his thoughts on what policies he saw as necessary. Seen as a serious contender for the post of prime minister after Koizumi, it was no longer enough to present an image of a politician that had only one issue on his political agenda. Accordingly, Abe dealt with both domestic and foreign policy issues in the interview. Its title revealed what he saw as the key issue of national politics: 'For a big reform it is necessary to create a majority faction in the party'.³⁰ According to Abe, Koizumi's leadership and authority can be credited to the single-seat electoral district system which was implemented in 1996. In contrast to the former medium-sized electoral district system, which allowed multiple LDP candidates to be elected resulting in higher susceptibility to intra-party conflicts, the new electoral system that had been introduced slates one official candidate for each party, thus providing the party leader and the caucus with greater authority. The result of this was that the ruling party was able to leverage its public support instead of having various party factions competing for the support. Abe argues that the traditional process of getting a majority vote within the party every time a new issue arises was ineffective.

According to Abe's assessment, Japan's position in international affairs had so far been to leave rule-making to other countries and to play it safe and avoid conflict. However, his opinion is that the country should adopt a more robust leadership role in the global community and increase its involvement

³⁰ Abe Shinzo, 'Okina kaikaku no tame ni wa tonai tasuhabatsu keisei mo hitsuyo da' [For a big reform it is necessary to create a majority faction in the party], *Chuo koron* (September 2005), pp. 104-9.

in international rule-making. He envisions improved Japanese relations with China, India, and the United States. The China–Japan Friendship Treaty is vital in serving Japan's national interests, and Japan should execute a stronger strategic approach while maintaining a balance between the respective interests of the two nations. He views economic relations with India as having the potential for growth and argues that they should be improved. Since Japan experiences increasing insecurity, its interests are tied to those of the United States.

What is striking about this interview is that Abe does not emerge as a one-issue politician that he is generally described as, but rather as a national political figure with a comprehensive program for Japan. Being the candidate for the top job in the political business, first things should come first; so in the interview he deals first with domestic politics before he moves on to his forte, foreign policy. But there is an element lacking that is surprising considering that Abe is a political candidate, who aims at taking over after his boss and therefore wants to be seen as a statesman-to-be. What is missing is his vision – that compelling narrative about where he wants to take Japan – that is a *sine qua non* for politicians with ambitions to become prime minister. Vision is an important concept in present-day Japanese politics, and politicians with ambitions have often presented their ideas or political platform as a 'vision'. It was the economists, or rather the powerful Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), who began releasing long-term 'visions' in the 1970s and the habit of 'visioneering' was taken over by politicians in the 1990s. After the upheavals that began in Japanese domestic politics in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War, and the 1991 Gulf War with its miserable outcome for Japanese foreign policy, it became a must for political hopefuls aspiring to the top job to have a vision for Japan as their political lodestar. Thus, when LDP politicians had pulled themselves together after the disastrous outcome of the 1993 general election, which caused the LDP to hand over the reigns of power, the announcement of the candidacy for the post of prime minister by a politician was almost without exception accompanied by the presentation of his 'vision' and the release of a book detailing this vision. In fact, the issuing of books by political candidates to promote their candidacy has become one element of political campaigning. Readership, of course, was often limited to members of the politician's

koenkai, or support organization(s), and the aim of the publication was very much to foster unity among *koenkai* members and cement the bonds between the politician and his supporters.

In the *Chuo koron* interview, Abe touches upon the tasks for a future government but the story he has to tell contains no vision – that compelling narrative that can move voters – but relates more to the rather mundane issue of party unity. That is not to say, however, that he fully avoided talking about his vision. As any responsible politicians with high-flying ambitions, he had presented his political vision a couple of months before, when he gave a speech in May 2005 at the Washington-based Brookings Institution. His speech was entitled ‘Miles to Go: My Vision for Japan’s Future’. He ends his speech by quoting former Senator Daniel Patric Moynihan: ‘Politics is almost always in some measure an argument about the future’, and Abe commented: ‘I interpret his reference as meaning that politicians should listen in a discerning way to voices that tell of the future, and have the courage to put into practice ideas that create the future. That, I think, is the nature and character that is demanded of politicians of our generation.’³¹

The ‘vision for future Japan’ presented in Abe’s Brookings speech came down to two elements: (1) how sustainable growth can be achieved; and (2) how Japan can make an international contribution, an issue that he said ‘is linked closely with the problem of Japan’s constitution and national security. [...] When, after a national debate, we write a constitution with our own hands, that will truly mark the completion of Japan’s independence. And as a result of that, it will become possible for Japan to make an even greater contribution to the international community.’³²

In a curious way, Abe’s vision was aiming at the future but at the same time it was not forward-looking. In a sense his ideas were aiming at the future since they were to be implemented once he took over the helm, but they cannot be said to be a fresh and pioneering effort, nor a vision that a political hopeful can be expected to entice voters with. As a vision, what he presented was thin and colored by the demands posed by Japan’s domestic political situation and the demands he faced as a prime ministerial candidate. His first

³¹ Shinzo Abe, ‘Miles to Go: My Vision for Japan’s Future’, *CNAPS Roundtable Luncheon*, May 2, 2005, www.brookings.edu/fp/cnaps/events/abe20050502.pdf - 2005-05-02.

³² *Ibid.*

national goal, sustainable economic growth, reflected Prime Minister Koizumi's economic reform program. Therefore, its inclusion should be no surprise. As Abe admitted in another interview, any candidate to succeed Koizumi had to heed to the prime minister's program and priorities.³³ This requirement was not only a must because a candidate who wanted to prevail must get the blessing of the man who ruled and would have a say over who came after, but also because it was a precondition to getting the sympathy of voters. Abe portrays himself as a guardian of the prime minister's key idea, economic reform, and the one who would see to it that reforms continued to be implemented after Koizumi had departed. In the same way, the second pillar of Abe's vision – 'how Japan can make an international contribution' – was not a new and thrilling idea but instead was something that had persisted from the beginning of the 1990s, when it was the rallying cry in the aftermath of the outcome of Japan's action during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, which threw its diplomacy into havoc. Abe's 'vision of Japan's future', as presented to his US audience, takes its starting point not in the future but in the past.

In 2006, Abe published his first book, *Utsukushii kuni e* [Towards a beautiful country]. It is not a political manifesto, he says, but published by a political candidate as a move in his campaign for office. Thus, the book was one element of his campaign for succeeding Koizumi. It is a slim volume divided into seven chapters and gives valuable insights into Abe's upbringing, detailing which factors have been important as inputs into the process that has molded his mind and formed his personality.

The book begins with a preface describing how Abe's ideal is to be a 'fighting politician' and ends with a commentary, the gist of which is to indicate that he is not the youth he is so often described as. He remarks that he is often struck by comments he remembers from his childhood that 'youth' says this or that which has made him feel that he does not belong to this youth any longer.³⁴ This comment is perhaps put in as an antidote to the frequent comments about Abe being young and, therefore, inexperienced.

³³ See 'Abe Shinzo-Noda Noriko-Aso Taro: Renzoku intabyu' [Interviews of Abe Shinzo, Noda Noriko, Aso Taro], *Bungei shunju* (September 2005), p. 96.

³⁴ Abe, *Utsukushii kuni e*, p. 230.

A peculiar trait of the book is that the key idea represented in its title – that Abe aims at a ‘beautiful Japan’ – is not discussed in its own chapter or treated at length. Despite the fact that creating a ‘beautiful Japan’ was the main theme of his campaign for becoming premier, this lack of elaboration makes this key concept no more than an elegant and nice-sounding political slogan. The non-existence of a clarification of his key political concept can be seen also in the political platform that he announced when he declared his candidacy for party presidency. Entitled *Utsukushii kuni, Nippon* [Beautiful country, Japan], none of its six themes clarifies the meaning of that elusive ‘beautiful’ that he made the banner of his campaign.³⁵

Looking at the pledges found in Abe’s political platform makes interesting reading. Four broad national goals are listed. The Japan that he wants to create is: (1) a country valuing culture, traditions, nature and history; (2) a country of freedom and discipline; (3) a country proceeding along the way towards new growth and welfare by promoting innovations; and (4) an open country that is trusted, respected, and loved by the world and exerts leadership. To advance towards these national goals six concrete policies are proposed. Abe strives for (1) establishing political leadership; (2) working for an open economy and a society based on freedom and discipline; (3) creating a society that is safe and secure; (4) creating ‘a strong and trusted Japan’ pursuing assertive diplomacy; (5) instituting party reform so that the party can shoulder responsibility in a new era; and (6) departing from ‘the post-war regime’.³⁶

The order of the six pledges is not accidental and the space given to each of them not at random. Establishing political leadership – the initial imperative interest – is to connect to one of Koizumi’s strong points: his leadership and unsurpassed ability to keep national politics on a track reflecting his priorities. By following suit, Abe showed Koizumi and voters that he was a loyal follower of the prime minister. But lurking beneath the surface is also the link to Abe’s father and grandfather. The key importance of Japan being trusted by the international community was one of Abe Shintaro’s basic ideas on foreign policy. In a book issued to promote his candidacy for re-election in 1986, he surveyed what he had accomplished during his three-and-

³⁵ *Utsukushii kuni, Nippon*, downloaded from Abe Shinzo’s homepage, <http://www3.s-abe.or.jp/>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

a- half years as foreign minister and his basic ideas on foreign policy. The first one he brings up is the importance for Japan of pursuing a foreign policy that contributes to the 'trust of the world'.³⁷ The link to Abe's grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, is also conspicuous. Abe Shinzo's pledge to make a new start departing from 'the post-war regime' constitutes a rephrasing of Kishi's overriding goal as prime minister, to eliminate what he saw as a nationally demeaning system put in place by his political arch-enemy Yoshida Shigeru.

Abe and the Koizumi Heritage

When Abe spoke of his 'vision for Japan's future' in his speech at Brookings, it comprised two supporting legs, one of which was 'how sustainable growth can be achieved'. After the burst of the 'economic bubble' in 1990, Japan had had to endure the 'lost decade' of the 1990s, which constituted a sizeable part of the period during which Abe had been a politician at the national level. Given this fact, the stress on sustainable growth might be seen to constitute a fairly natural part of the political platform of a young and promising politician involved in national politics. But at the same time, where did this fairly dull exhortation fit in with a 'vision' that was intended to lure voters? In a way, it made sense since the Japanese voters worried more about daily income, unemployment, pension, health care and education for their children than about fancy pies in the sky, bold ambitions and challenging ideas put up to be materialized sometime in the unknown future. It was also a natural element of a loyal assistant to Prime Minister Koizumi, whose political program centered on the necessary economic reforms to get Japan's economy in order.

In many ways, Koizumi's drive and deeds were instructive for political hopefuls. His masterly handling of the media, with his skilful management of news and information, would build support for him among not only the rank and file of the Liberal Democratic Party but, more importantly, among those who would later stand at the ballot box. His bold and sometimes seemingly adventurous handling of politics made him able to secure support from voters who were tired of the ruling party's unwillingness to effectuate

³⁷ Gaiko kenkyukai, *Abe gaiko no kiseki: 21 seiki ni mukete no sozoteki gaiko* [Records of the Abe foreign policy: Creative foreign policy for the twenty-first century] (Tokyo: Kozaido shuppan, 1986), pp. 9-12.

reforms long overdue. Fresh in the memory was Koizumi's promise that he was prepared to destroy his own party if it did not accept his reform plan and how he received such tremendous support in public opinion for his challenge so that the party bigwigs could not stop him from becoming premier; and how he had gone directly to the voters over the heads of other LDP leaders to garner support for his policies; how he had outmaneuvered the political factions of his party, the parties within the party that used to be the powerhouses essential for the stakes of LDP MPs; and also how he brought about a centralization of policymaking and strengthened the role and power of the Prime Minister's Office in political decision-making. The balance sheet when he retired showed that Koizumi had not destroyed his party, but that he had had a go at the factions and had largely demolished the power positions of their leaderships. The premier's strengthened power position that he had gained made it possible for him to show LDP power-wielders and bigwigs who was the master in the LDP house. This was amply demonstrated when he formed his cabinet and made his appointments irrespective of factional politics and took policy decisions much more independent of the traditional power centers of the LDP party councils.

A key element behind Abe's quick elevation in the party hierarchy and the government was his loyalty to Koizumi. Loyalty that could not be put in question was the *sine qua non* for any politician that had ambitions to come after Koizumi, and here Abe had demonstrated that he was a master at playing his cards right. One such move to demonstrate his loyalty to Koizumi's ideas and policies was to make his political platform enunciate his pledge to work towards strengthening the role of the prime minister and the Prime Minister's Office.³⁸ This was hand-in-glove with Koizumi's political stance.

To stress continuity with Koizumi represented not only courteous politeness on the part of Abe towards his benefactor but also a basic precondition for the policies of a future Abe government. Koizumi was the third-longest serving prime minister in post-war Japanese politics after Sato Eisaku's seven years and seven months in the heydays of Japan's rapid economic growth and Yoshida Shigeru's seven years and two months in the aftermath of the Second World War. Koizumi's 'maverick' appeal of, first, a politician

³⁸ Abe, 'Okina kaikaku no tame ni wa tonai tasuhabatsu keisei mo hitsuyo da'.

clashing with the entrenched power wielders in the Liberal Democratic Party and, then, elected leader of this party but still revolting against its policies laid down by the party councils and coryphées, boosted his popularity, not least because he had been elected on a platform that spelt out his disagreement with the party's policies and his firm belief that they had to be changed, and that he was the man to do so. He was outstanding in his ability to fend off attacks from political opponents and, in each election, his opponents were defeated and forced to succumb.

If there was one thing that Koizumi's long reign proved is that the Japanese voters are for reform. Koizumi's stubborn will to reform made him popular and his declaration before his first election as party president that, if his party did not accept his reform plans, he was prepared to crush the party was greeted with enthusiasm. His unprecedented support in his first election as premier and the steady voter support he received throughout his five years in power is evidence that voters approved of his reform zeal.

The results of the snap election in September 2005 cannot be misunderstood. When Koizumi was unable to pressure his plan of privatization of the postal service through the Diet because of stubborn resistance from too many LDP MPs, he expelled those MPs from the party putting up resistance and called for a snap election that resulted in a resounding victory for him.³⁹ Voters gave Koizumi overwhelming support for his reform plan and his success made it possible for him to get the newly elected Diet to accept the proposal that had been rejected before.

It was not so much the proposal of the privatization of postal services that caught the imagination of the electorate but Koizumi's stubborn will to push through reforms. His resolute action was an exemplary demonstration of a politician who was driven by a fighting spirit. The prime minister's performance must also have been reassuring to Abe with his ambition to be a 'fighting politician'.⁴⁰ In an interview with him by a journalist, who was publishing a series of interviews with politicians who might come after Koizumi, Abe took note of the premier's stalwart determination and will to fight for what he thought was the right cause: 'Prime Minister Koizumi laid

³⁹ J. Sean Curtin, 'Koizumi on the home straight', *Asia Times*, September 28, 2005, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Japan/G128Dho3.html>.

⁴⁰ Abe, *Utsukushii kuni e*, p. 4.

his hands on the post as chairman and premier at his third attempt. His firm belief that his own ideas of “postal privatization” and “small government” were not mistaken, and that he could not realize them if he did not become prime minister made him continue his challenge [to become prime minister].⁴¹

Abe and Foreign Policy

One of Japan’s most experienced politicians, Ohira Masayoshi (prime minister 1978–80), remarked once that when the man at the helm changes, foreign policy technique and execution change.⁴² This idea seemed singularly applicable when Abe was to take over after Koizumi. Abe differs from his predecessor on foreign policy style and stance. Koizumi was heralded as a bold reformer and elected on a political platform, which focused on sweeping structural reform and the removal of barriers to economic recovery.⁴³ It seems to be generally accepted that Koizumi’s interest in foreign policy and defense was shallow before he became premier.⁴⁴ However, his fate became the same as that of other national leaders who professed no particular interest in foreign policy – once elevated into office, foreign policy becomes a key matter. Thus, as prime minister he had to involve himself. In spite of this, only a few foreign policy issues came directly into the visor of his policymaking and those that did come into focus and had to be acted on and decisions taken about were elevated onto his political agenda in a rather ad hoc fashion.⁴⁵ The reason seems to be that Koizumi took decisions based on his own political ideas and judgment of the political situation.⁴⁶ In a survey of his foreign policy by *Yomiuri shimbun* journalists, they describe his diplomacy as revolving around three bilateral relationships in need of acute

⁴¹ Interview of Abe Shinzo, in Shinohara Fumiya, *Dare ga Nihon o sukuu no ka: Posuto Koizumi-yuryoku seijika ni miru ningenyoku* [Who will save Japan? Personal capabilities seen in influential post-Koizumi politicians] (Tokyo: Chichi shuppansha, 2006), p. 9.

⁴² Tanaka Rokusuke, *Ohira Masayoshi no hito to seiji* [Ohira Masayoshi: The man and his politics] (Tokyo: Asahi sonorama, 1981), p. 9.

⁴³ Aurelia George Mulgan, *Japan’s Failed Revolution: Koizumi and the Politics of Economic Reform* (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, Asia Pacific School of Economics and Management, 2002).

⁴⁴ Otake Hideo, *Koizumi Junichiro popyurizumu no kenkyu: Sono senryaku to shuho* [Research into Koizumi Junichiro’s populism: Strategy and methods] (Tokyo: Toyo shimposha, 2006), p. 157.

⁴⁵ Author’s interview of Iokibe Makoto, President, National Defense Academy of Japan, November 18, 2006.

⁴⁶ Otake, *Koizumi Junichiro popyurizumu no kenkyu*, p. 158.

attention at the highest level of decision-making – North Korea, China and the United States.⁴⁷

Abe represents a departure from this casual treatment of foreign policy. Indeed, he assigns great weight to it. The foreign policy commitments spelt out in his political manifesto for the LDP presidential election comprise the most comprehensive part of his political program that he hoped would help him garner support. Not unexpected, there is a section on economy, as can be expected from a candidate coming after a premier who has the power to influence who will replace him and who also has indicated that whoever wanted to do so had to continue the work for economic reform that the prime minister had initiated. Yet in spite of this, the section on economy is less detailed. Abe's keen interest in foreign policy is also revealed in a book released in April 2006, when the LDP presidential election campaign was getting into gear. The book consists of thirteen chapters, each on a particular topic, comprising a debate on various political issues. The participants in the debate include Abe and a number of professors or journalists well-known as Abe protagonists. One of the installments stands out from the rest: the chapter on Japan's foreign policy only includes one participant, Abe Shinzo.⁴⁸

Abe had forged a political career very much colored by his focus on foreign policy. In fact, it was one such issue in particular, as has been already mentioned – the North Korean kidnappings of Japanese citizens on Japanese soil – that helped him gather support among the general public, and, subsequently, gain a say in national politics and climb rapidly up the political ladder. In expounding an interest in foreign policy, Abe follows in the footsteps of his father and grandfather who both served as foreign minister. Still, he is unusual as a politician in Japan where politicians with foreign policy as their strength have rarely made it to the top spot. His father, Abe Shintaro, is a prime example. When he emerged as a serious contender for the post of premier at the end of the 1980s, he portrayed his role as Japan's pre-eminent voice in the world – not the other ministerial posts he had held – as his key merit, and his activities as foreign minister were clearly worked

⁴⁷ Yomiuri shimbun seijibu, *Gaiko o kenka ni shita otoko: Koizumi gaiko 2000 nichi no shinjitsu* [The man who turned foreign policy into a fight: The truth about the 2000 days of the Koizumi foreign policy] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 2006).

⁴⁸ PHP kenkyusho, ed., *Abe Shinzo taidanshu* [Collection of discussions with Abe Shinzo] (Tokyo: PHP kenkyusho, 2006).

out to strengthen his position in the power struggle in the Liberal Democratic Party.

That a politician whose career was built to a large extent on a foreign policy issue could reach the top spot makes the political situation facing Japan seem to resemble the situation immediately after the Second World War, when the international situation, not domestic politics, was of decisive importance for Japanese politicians. In the aftermath of the war, three premiers had their main qualifications as former diplomats (Shidehara Kijuro 1945–46, Yoshida Shigeru 1946–47, 1948–54, Ashida Hitoshi 1947–48). Their ascension to power was due to the need for a defeated Japan to be able to handle the challenges ahead posed by the fact that Japan's bid for empire had been crushed and evinced the serious misreading of the international situation that Japan's political leadership in the pre-war and war years was responsible for.⁴⁹ Paramount for occupied Japan was not insights into the wheeling and dealings of domestic politics, but rather a thorough understanding of the world and insights into international politics. Yoshida is the prime example of how the primacy of foreign policy was decisive for political decision-making at a national level in the aftermath of the war: he had worked as a diplomat all his life, was largely ignorant of domestic party politics and did not hesitate to admit that he disliked party politics and party politicians.⁵⁰

Still, the immediate post-war period and the situation of today differ. While the three premiers mentioned above were basically appointed on the strength of their foreign policy credentials, Abe did not make it to the political top spot just because of his foreign policy agenda – which could be stripped down to his assertive stance toward North Korea over the issue of the abduction of Japanese citizens. His march towards the post of prime minister became a success story because the new assertiveness he gave voice to tapped into the thinking of a large cross-section of Japanese society, who found it liberating after years of Japanese self-effacement in international political matters.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Kitaoka Shinichi, *Kokusaika jidai no seiji shido* [Political leadership in the era of internationalization] (Tokyo: Chuo koronsha, 1990), p. 11.

⁵⁰ Soma Masao, 'Yoshida Shigeru naikaku (Dai 45-dai/Dai 48-dai-dai 51-dai)' [The Yoshida Shigeru governments (/Japan's/ 45th, 48th to 51st], in Shiratori Rei, ed., *Nihon no naikaku (III)* [Japanese governments, vol. III] (Tokyo: Shinhyoron, 1981), p. 93.

⁵¹ Pyle, 'Abe Shinzo and Japan's Change of Course', p. 9.

In the political platform that Abe presented in his campaign for party presidency, he advocated an assertive foreign policy [*shucho suru gaiho*] for Japan. One of his commitments he expounded upon expressed how he wanted to implement this idea in regard to China and South Korea. He clarified that he wanted 'to strengthen the relations of trust with neighboring countries like China, South Korea, etc'. It came right after his pledge to strengthen the alliance relationship with the United States, which was an indication of the key importance that relations with these neighbours have in Abe's eyes. His rather matter-of-fact formulated pledge on strengthening relations with China and South Korea was a concretization of his foreign policy pledge that he aimed at 'establishing strong solidarity with an open Asia' [*hirakareta Ajia*]. 'Hirakareta' means 'open' but can also be rendered in English as 'more liberal' and shows that Abe aims at pursuing Japan's traditional policy of supporting a liberal economic order. But there is more than that. One of the pillars of his political thinking is that it rests on *hirakareta hoshushugi*, or 'open conservatism'. In his book, Abe explains what he means by 'conservative'. 'For me', he writes, 'conservatism is not an ideology but an attitude [*shisei*] when thinking about the Japanese and Japan.'⁵²

There are two noteworthy aspects of Abe's commitment. The key word is *rentai* or 'solidarity'. To refer to *rentai* was a conspicuous link to what Japanese consider the noblest of ideas guiding Japan's foreign policy and one which forms the basis of Japan's relationship with Southeast Asian countries. In making *rentai* an element of his political platform and indicating that it is the key idea for the regional policy of his administration, it should be noted that he mentions relations not with Southeast Asia but 'neighbouring countries like China and South Korea, etc.'. The 'etc', then, masks what use to be in the centre of Japanese idea of pursuing foreign policy based on solidarity, which is not China or Korea but Southeast Asia. Abe's phrasing of his commitment shows his intellectual debt to Kishi Nobusuke. It should not be forgotten that it was Abe's nationalist grandfather, with his roots in Japan's pre-war imperialistic past, who elevated *rentai* to a central position of Japan's post-war relations with Asia. When he presented the three 'grand principles' of Japan's foreign policy in 1957 – which continue to be referred to

⁵² Abe, *Utsukushii kuni e*, p. 18.

as the basis for Japan's foreign policy even today – one of these 'principles' was that Japan is 'a member of Asia'. Kishi stressed the need for invigorating 'Asian diplomacy' [*Ajia gaiko*], which was an outflow of 'Asian solidarity' [*Ajia rentai*], a concept with heavy overtones from pre-war Asianism.⁵³

To promote *rentai* with Asian countries like China, South Korea, 'etc.', was complemented by a commitment in Abe's political platform that he wants to promote 'strategic dialogue' with like-minded countries such as the United States, Europe, Australia 'and so on' [*nado*]. The expression used for 'like-minded countries' are countries united by values [*kachikan o kyoyu suru kuniguni*]. It strongly resembles Kishi Nobusuke's priority on cooperation with 'the free countries' [*jiyu shokoku*].⁵⁴ But Abe's commitment was even closer to his father's, Abe Shintaro, political manifesto launched as a move in his fight for the LDP presidency twenty years before Abe made the same attempt. In 1986, Abe Shintaro outlined his ideas on a 'peaceful and creative foreign policy' for Japan of which the first is to promote 'cooperation, collaboration and solidarity with free countries'.⁵⁵ It is hard not to see Abe Shinzo's commitment as more or less a carbon copy of his father's ideas, testifying to the endurance of ideas on foreign policy he has inherited from his illustrious relatives.

Will the Real Mr Abe Please Not Stand Up!

During the campaign leading to Abe's election as chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party and subsequently prime minister, he seemed to undergo a metamorphosis. This young politician, known as a hard-hitting political slogger on contentious political issues, who in the past had gone furthest of all in his condemnation of North Korea and outshone others in his rock-solid loyalty to Prime Minister Koizumi and his right to pay homage at the Yasukuni shrine, began to tone down his direct manner. From sharp and clear-cut one-liners that could not be misunderstood, Abe began to excel in equally chiselled ambiguous statements. It was clear that he was trying to keep contentious issues at arm's length. Without shying away from past commitments, he began jockeying for space by declining to say whether or

⁵³ Edström, *Japan's Evolving Foreign Policy Doctrine*, pp. 95ff.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵⁵ Abe Shintaro, *Shinnihon sozoron* [A treatise on the creation of a new Japan] (Tokyo: Asahiya shuppan, 1986), pp. 281ff.

not he would continue the prime minister's practice of visiting the Yasukuni shrine in an obvious attempt to protect his options and in order to make a new start and open the avenue for a future change of governmental policies. Even when he was challenged on his home ground – the right-wing revisionist view of history and unbending unwillingness to blame earlier generations of Japanese for wrongdoings – he did not stray from the strategy of ambiguity he had adopted to fit expectations he met during the campaign for party leadership, where even many members of this conservative party voiced concern. In a debate shortly before the party was about to vote on who was going to replace Koizumi, one of his competitors, Finance Minister Tanigaki Sadakazu, tried to score a political point by challenging Abe to give his view on the argument of the Chinese government that it was the Japanese militarists alone that had responsibility for the war and that the Japanese people were also victims along with the Chinese, Koreans, and other Asians. Abe angrily rejected this idea and saw it as an effort 'to divide the Japanese into militarists and ordinary citizens', which he said was 'a view to which Japan did not agree.' He also said that he was not qualified to make historical judgments about Japan's World War II role.⁵⁶

Abe's political platform also toned down his signature issues: constitutional revision and denouncing North Korean policies. Although they were duly part of his platform, they were not particularly emphasized. More important probably was that his platform evinced that Abe was to continue Koizumi's reform agenda, as well as tackling the problem of growing income disparities that had been identified in opinion polls to be a serious issue of concern among voters. A well-informed analyst observed that '[t]hough these goals are seemingly contradictory, Abe and the LDP leadership understand that the party's survival depends on both reducing dependence on—without alienating—its traditional "old economy" support base and realigning itself with the "new economy" winners and urban voters.'⁵⁷

Put simply, to launch himself as a candidate for the office of prime minister on a platform preaching his signature issues would have verged on making his candidacy meaningless. Not only would Abe have lost Koizumi's support,

⁵⁶ 'Aso, Tanigaki Vie for 2nd Spot', *Yomiuri shimbun*, September 20, 2006; as quoted in Richard P. Cronin, 'Afterword', in Benjamin L. Self, *The Dragon's Shadow: The Rise of China and Japan's New Nationalism* (Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 2006), p. 99.

⁵⁷ Cronin, 'Afterword', p. 96.

since what mattered to the prime minister was that his reform work was continued. Disregarding pork barrel issues is not popular among Japanese voters, used to seeing those who they elect to be members of the Diet as their representatives having the duty to fix benefits for their home constituency. Denouncing North Korea and standing up against Chinese bullying was fine but what was worrying to voters, who were going to cast their votes in upcoming elections, was that too outspoken policies threatened economic gains for Japan and themselves. Abe's political platform and his campaign were intended to reassure voters in general as well as party members, primarily those who were going to cast their votes for the party presidency on September 20, 2006, that he understood the difference of being a candidate for the top job and being the incumbent.

What Abe did in preparing for the vote to be taken by his party was to present a two-forked strategy. His credentials as a nationalist with a tough stance on international issues were well established after years of prolific political activities among rightist circles and statements that had made him a high-profile politician. The political platform he presented to voters and to those who were going to make the choice on behalf of the party over who was going to succeed Koizumi was designed to show that he had a comprehensive and realistic program that could expunge his image as a one-issue politician. His campaign was an effort to tone down the problem that the agenda that had made him a serious contender for the post of prime minister was, at the same time, not wholly to the liking of Japanese voters. Abe was known as a right-winger in the conservative party but his strategy after he began to be seen as a possible successor of Koizumi was to move in the direction of Koizumi's ideas. A study by Kabashima and Okawa shows that having served under Prime Minister Koizumi in a number of key posts, and after having been mentioned as a likely successor to Koizumi, 'Abe's policy orientation began to shift decisively in the direction of reform. One might call it the "Koizumification" of an old-school LDP politician.'⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Ikuo Kabashima and Chihiro Okawa, 'Abe's Dilemma', *Japan Echo*, 34:1 (February 2007), <http://www.japanecho.co.jp/sum/2007/b3401.html>

The Emergence of a New Prime Minister

The fact that Koizumi was going to step down, having occupied the top post for the maximum period according to the statutes of the Liberal Democratic Party, was a foregone conclusion but at the same time it was a surprise. Elected premier on the strength of his solid backing among ordinary Japanese, as revealed by opinion polls, his popularity figures in polls taken after his first election to prime minister are unsurpassed. While support later decreased in the way it always does for a prime minister, he continued to have an unusually strong backing among those polled, and the Liberal Democratic Party performed consistently well in parliamentary elections during his period in power. The results in the 2005 snap election that Koizumi organized to quell intra-party opposition to his plans for postal privatization were impressive and demonstrated a keen ability to grasp the trends of the time, *jidai no nagare*, which is such an invaluable asset of any politician, including in Japan. His strong backing among voters made it natural for the idea to be brought up that Koizumi's period at the helm should be extended – much in the same way as had been done when Nakasone Yasuhiro was to retire and had his period as premier extended by one year. But Koizumi is an unusual politician in many ways and retired as he had said he would do.

As in most Western countries, elections in Japan are decided on issues that matter most to voters, which traditionally have been inherently domestic in nature; thus, voter preferences guide the outcome of the struggle in terms of the problems of making ends meet and pork barrel issues.⁵⁹ This was also the case in the snap election that Koizumi had initiated in 2005 to solve the problem of the dogged resistance from within his own party against the deregulation of the postal savings system, which was the focal point of his arduous striving for economic reform. In the same manner, the campaigns of politicians to replace the incumbent premier used to have a domestic focus.

⁵⁹ Haruhiro Fukui, Shigeko N. Fukui, 'Pork Barrel Politics, Networks, and Local Economic Development in Contemporary Japan', *Asian Survey*, 36:3 (March 1996), pp. 268–86.

In contrast, however, the contest to succeed Koizumi embroiled candidates fighting over a political agenda topped by foreign policy.⁶⁰

A number of candidates were expected to run and put up a respectable show. Eventually, four candidates filed their candidacy, two of which were billed as favorites for the post. In the end, Abe emerged as the frontrunner challenged by his predecessor as Koizumi's chief cabinet secretary for four years until 2005, Fukuda Yasuo. Like Abe, Fukuda represented political blue blood as son to Fukuda Takeo, one of post-war Japan's leading politicians, who crowned his career as prime minister at the end of the 1970s. He is famous for 'the Fukuda Doctrine' that he presented in 1977 – in response to rising anti-Japanese sentiment in Southeast Asia – which declared that Japan would not become a military power and would try to build heart-to-heart relations with countries in the region as an equal partner.

The campaigns of the LDP hopefuls soon came to focus on a few issues. The contest to succeed Koizumi became a debate over how to repair Japan's tattered relations with its Asian neighbors, notably China and South Korea, with which relations had soured as the result of Prime Minister Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni shrine to honor Japan's war dead. In a sense, this focus on foreign policy-related issues played into the hands of the two leading candidates, who both had foreign policy as their forte. This was especially true of Abe, whose political career was built on his strong, and popular, stance regarding North Korea.⁶¹ Fukuda's strongest card to play in an attempt to get the upper hand in the fight for the position of prime minister was seen to be the legacy of his father's foreign policy and, in a number of speeches and on trips to other countries, he mobilized this asset.⁶²

The two candidates presented voters with distinct alternatives on issues that became the centre of their respective campaigns. While Abe called for a strategic dialogue with India, Australia and other democracies in Asia, as

⁶⁰ Daniel Sneider, 'Japan's Succession Battle: Choice of a successor to the prime minister could signal Japan's approach to foreign relations', *YaleGlobal Online*, July 6, 2006, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=7738&page=1>

⁶¹ A poll taken by the *Asahi shimbun* on October 11, 2006 showed that domestic opinion in Japan favored stressing pressure over dialogue by a large margin, 62 per cent to 26 per cent. Quoted in 'From the editor', *Japan Echo*, 33:6 (October 2006), <http://www.japanecho.com/sum/2006/330601.htm>.

⁶² Hoshi Hiroshi, *Abe seiken no Nihon* [The Abe government and Japan] (Tokyo: Asahi shimbunsha, 2006), pp. 48ff.

well as with the United States, based on common values, Fukuda saw it as important to further integration of the region through economic partnership and called on Japan, China and South Korea to cooperate towards this end. Abe became the beacon for those who saw China as the principal national security threat to Japan and believed that it was crucial to stand up to what is seen as Chinese bullying. The key for Abe and his compatriots was to strengthen the alliance with the US, even at the cost of ties to Asia. Fukuda became the spokesman for the view that the conflict with China, created by Koizumi's visit to the Yasukuni shrine, caused Japan's influence to wane to the benefit of China and resulted in Japan becoming dangerously isolated from Asia. The stance of the two candidates was also miles apart on Abe's two pet issues: North Korea and constitutional revision. While Abe was a resolute hardliner on the issue of North Korea, Fukuda, on the other hand, pushed for negotiations; secondly, while Abe saw constitutional revision as the key issue for himself and Japan, Fukuda expressed a cautious line and argued that hasty steps should be avoided since they could alarm Japan's neighbors.⁶³

Also in other respects, the two frontrunners presented contrasting positions on what emerged as key issues of the campaign. Before he resigned from the government, Fukuda had been Koizumi's most senior minister and a trusted trouble shooter. One of the problems he tried to tackle was the controversial issue of the fourteen convicted Class A war criminals who are enshrined at the Yasukuni shrine and the lack of remorse over the war displayed at the shrine's museum. The Yasukuni shrine had become a symbol of Chinese pressure on Japan, and Fukuda decried the defiant rhetoric in Japan surrounding the shrine. 'Discussions in Japan have escalated too far', he said. 'Voices raised here reach China and South Korea, creating a vicious cycle.'⁶⁴ To Abe, who had paid visits to the controversial shrine himself and was a member of a group of leading LDP politicians who staunchly defended the prime minister's right to visit the shrine and pay homage to the war dead, visiting the Yasukuni shrine is something that is deeply personal to the

⁶³ Hisane Masaki, 'A two-horse race to succeed Koizumi', *Asia Times*, June 9, 2006, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Japan/HF09Dho1.html>

⁶⁴ Sneider, 'Japan's Succession Battle'.

Japanese; to these politicians, the problem was China's interference in what was an internal Japanese matter.⁶⁵

To the surprise of many, when most political commentators were just waiting for Fukuda to announce officially that he was a candidate, he announced his withdrawal. North Korea of all countries had assisted Abe. On July 5, when the campaign for LDP president was in full swing, seven Taepodong missiles were fired by North Korea, which played in the hands of Abe with his hawkish stance on North Korea.⁶⁶ Fukuda cited his age, 70, but also hinted to reporters that his decision 'stemmed from fear of a possible foreign policy rift with Abe over visits to Tokyo's contentious war-related Yasukuni Shrine'.⁶⁷ The verdict as reflected in opinion polls could not be questioned. Abe's lead was substantial and the other candidates were trailing far behind. Fukuda's announcement left the field wide open for Abe. With Foreign Minister Aso Taro and Finance Minister Tanigaki Sadakazu as the two candidates left, and who were trailing in opinion polls, it was a foregone conclusion that the fight was no longer a fight but that Abe was going to win.

A total of 403 Diet members voted at the Liberal Democratic Party headquarters while party members from across the country, who were allocated 300 votes, voted at party prefecture branches until September 19. On September 20, 2006, it was announced that Abe had won the election to become the 21st president of the LDP, paving the way for him to become Japan's prime minister. His win was comfortable gaining 464 out of 703 votes, while Foreign Minister Aso received 136 and Finance Minister Tanigaki 102, respectively. Voting became a preview of the handling of the election of the prime minister by the Diet since 403 Diet members participated in the voting at the party congregation and 267 of them chose Abe, while 69 went with Aso and 66 selected Tanigaki. A joint plenary meeting of members of the Liberal Democratic Party of both houses of the Diet later approved Abe's election as new party president.⁶⁸ On September

⁶⁵ A prolific spokesman for this view is Abe's advisor Okazaki Hisahiko. See, e.g., his 'Ending Chinese interference', *The Japan Times*, August 21, 2001.

⁶⁶ Hoshi, *Abe seiken no Nihon*, p. 54.

⁶⁷ Masami Ito, 'Fukuda not to run in LDP presidential poll', *The Japan Times*, July 22, 2006.

⁶⁸ 'To no ayumi - sosai senkyo' [Party progress - election of the chairman], *LDP homepage*, September 20, 2006, <http://www.jimin.jp/jimin/jimin/ayumi/index.html>

26, 2006, Abe became the youngest prime minister of Japan in the post-war period.

'In the end', writes a knowledgeable observer of Japanese politics, 'the most critical factors in Abe's successful bid for the LDP presidency appear to have been the support of his predecessor, Koizumi, and the hope within the party that his popularity and telegenic persona would give the party its best chance for victory in next year's Upper House parliamentary elections.'⁶⁹ Thanking the support he had received when he was chosen to be president of the Liberal Democratic Party, Abe commended his predecessor without whose support he would not have been able to get his hands on the top job. He also touched upon the importance of the upcoming Upper House elections in July 2007, which will decide whether he will be more than a stop-gap premier.

In his first press conference as LDP president, Abe told that support had been greater than he had expected at his first challenge for the post, and that he felt the responsibility to live up to expectations and repay the support he had received from those who voted for him. He also said that he was determined to continue reforms and engage in nation building aimed at creating a new and beautiful nation adapted to the twenty-first century.⁷⁰ In a nutshell, he set the parameters that would define the policies of his government and, in thus doing, established the goal of continuing the economic reform that had been initiated by Koizumi and pursuing his nationalistic program to restore pride, respect and dignity of his country and its citizens.⁷¹

Challenges Ahead

On the eve of his ascension to prime minister, Abe was advised on how to address the challenges ahead by one of his predecessors, Nakasone Yasuhiro (prime minister 1982–87). Since his retirement, Nakasone had continued his political work and is generally considered to be one of the 'wise men' of present-day Japanese politics. Even though Nakasone is no longer a Diet member or leader of any political faction, his opinion and views carry

⁶⁹ Cronin, 'Afterword', p. 92.

⁷⁰ 'Kitai, shien ni kotae, sekinin hatastu', Abe shinsosai ga hatsu no kisha kaiken' [Responding to expectations and support, assuming responsibility: First press conference of new chairman Abe], *LDP homepage*, September 20, 2006, <http://www.jimin.jp/jimin/jimin/sousaio6/sousai/news/20060920b.html>.

⁷¹ Hiroko Nakata, 'Abe takes helm of LDP, vows to stick with reforms', *The Japan Times*, September 21, 2006.

considerable weight in Japanese politics. In 2002, he was forced to retire from active political work as a Diet member, when Prime Minister Koizumi asked some LDP octogenarians, among them Nakasone, to retire from politics in line with a new LDP age limit of 73 years for political candidates. Nakasone, aged 85, refused but to no avail and angrily accused Koizumi of age discrimination and referred to an agreement with the LDP leadership that he would be accepted as the party's candidate in his constituency as long as he wished.⁷²

According to Nakasone, the task for Abe as the new leader is to 'present a broad vision, underscored by realistic policies, that puts the nation's past, present and future into perspective.' The outgoing prime minister was criticized by Nakasone for having done 'almost nothing to build a new nation. In other words, he largely failed to develop a new vision of Japan and chart a new course for it to follow.' This was the task for the new premier for whom Nakasone saw three challenging tasks ahead: (1) Revision of the Constitution and establishment of a national voting system for that purpose, and revision of the Fundamental Law of Education; (2) formulation of fiscal reform guidelines that leave the door open to tax increases, including a rise in the consumption tax; and (3) reorientation of foreign policy toward Asian neighbors, which was in a state of paralysis. Beyond that, he discerned a need for Japan to transform itself from an economy-centered nation to one that places greater emphasis on education and culture, and for the new premier to lead the Liberal Democratic Party to victory in next summer's Upper House election. In the area of foreign policy, Nakasone argued that normalizing Japan's frayed relations with China and South Korea was an urgent priority for the new administration. Last but not least, he did not hesitate to advise the new party president and prime minister-to-be to act cautiously: 'During the past several years I have repeatedly warned against extreme nationalism. Nipping it in the bud is the duty of political leaders.'⁷³

To Nakasone, the challenges that confronted the new government and the tasks that lay ahead had occurred because the Koizumi government had devoted a great deal of energy to specific projects such as the privatization of

⁷² Audrey McAvoy, 'Koizumi sparks public feud by ousting old guard', *The Independent*, October 24, 2003.

⁷³ Yasuhiro Nakasone, 'Abe must bring both vision, pragmatism to the job', *The Japan Times*, September 21, 2006.

the postal services and highway corporations, but in so doing had 'neglected to address the central challenge of governance: re-establishing Japan's identity by overcoming the "aftereffects" of the post-war Occupation.' The key task of the nation's leader was to explain to the people in clear-cut language what kind of country Japan should become in the twenty-first century.⁷⁴ The message from one of the LDP's most experienced and astute thinkers was clear – vision and pragmatism should be the keys for the work that would commence.

With Nakasone's standing as one of the three 'great' prime ministers, which the Liberal Democratic Party had produced in the post-war period, the advice he offered Abe could not be taken lightly. After all, Nakasone was the one who headed the government during Japan's golden days of the 1980s.

There were some points that were likely to ring a bell for Abe. It is not hard to surmise that Nakasone had studied the political platform that Abe had presented when he announced officially that he was a candidate to succeed Koizumi. The challenges that confronted the new government according to Nakasone's analysis were remarkably similar to what was part of Abe's platform and suggested that Abe was already on the right track in the eyes of Nakasone. Nakasone's plea for the necessity for Japan to switch from being an economy-centered nation to one that placed greater emphasis on education and culture was close to one of Abe's key priorities: the necessity of according greater priority to education. Nakasone's view on the considerable political risks that the pushing of constitutional reform and education reform entailed for Abe was also certainly something that could not easily be dismissed. Being well-known as an ardent nationalist like Abe, Nakasone's warning over extreme nationalism could not be taken lightly either.

Doing a Fukuda

The new prime minister made an audacious start in foreign policy. In his advice to Abe, Nakasone pointed out the need to exercise restraint in order to forestall an explosion of nationalism. In Japan's case, he said, it was important 'to deal properly with the Yasukuni issue'. In Koizumi's campaign for prime minister in 2001, he promised a group affiliated to the shrine that he

⁷⁴ Ibid.

would visit every year if they supported him in his challenge to become prime minister; when elected, he kept this promise, disregarding the angry reactions in China and South Korea and the potentially damaging effects his visits could have on bilateral economic relations with these countries. Nakasone suggested 'that Japan initiate unofficial contacts with China and South Korea in order to hold a trilateral summit as soon as possible'.⁷⁵ Given that Japan's relations with China and South Korea had deteriorated as a result of Koizumi's visits to the temple, the prospects that such a visit would actually materialize did not seem particularly good. Indeed, since Abe was Koizumi's heir, prospects for improvement seemed less likely than the possibility of worsening relations.

A subtle move by Prime Minister Koizumi went largely unnoticed. In an incisive analysis of his last visit as prime minister to the Yasukuni shrine, the China specialist Kokubun Ryosei shows that amidst the anger that Koizumi knew his visit would result in, he wanted to signal that he was 'visiting the shrine just like any ordinary citizens. It was presumably the ultimate display of his concern over the response from China, South Korea, and other Asian countries, yet it bore no fruit whatsoever. On the contrary, China only voiced even stronger criticism.'⁷⁶ The Chinese government saw no hope in Koizumi changing his mind and continued to refuse to have anything to do with him.

Abe's announcement in the campaign for party presidency that he wanted to strengthen relations with Japan's neighbours seemed hypocritical given that he had built his political career to no small degree on voicing nationalistic values and lambasting what he saw as other countries meddling in what were Japan's internal affairs. The latter was also Koizumi's view and something that he stood up for and in which he had been strongly supported by his loyal political lieutenant, Abe.

As prime minister, Abe stuck stubbornly to his strategy of ambiguity when he was confronted by hordes of journalists, and it paid off. On October 4, it was officially announced that Japan's new prime minister was going to meet

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ryosei Kokubun, 'Changing Japanese Strategic Thinking toward China', in Gilbert Rozman, Kazuhiko Togo, Joseph P. Ferguson, eds., *Japanese Strategic Thought toward Asia* (Palgrave, forthcoming), p. 137.

the Chinese political leaders in Beijing in the next couple of days. It was a political volte face that stunned the Japanese and took the world by surprise. The visit had been agreed upon in secret negotiations that had been going on for some time before Abe was elected.⁷⁷

A custom adhered to by most Japanese prime ministers for decades has been to direct their first official visit abroad to the United States. That Abe chose to go to China and South Korea and not Washington on his first official visit abroad was 'a daring political and diplomatic move on Abe's part [and] is indeed wrought with intense symbolism in Far Eastern diplomacy, which the Chinese and South Koreans would have clearly noted and appreciated.'⁷⁸ His visit was announced shortly after he had declared that he abided by the Murayama statement on Japan's colonial rule and atrocities before and during the war.⁷⁹ It is likely that his conspicuous backtracking from his statement as a candidate to the LDP presidency influenced the decision by the Chinese and South Korean governments to welcome him, in spite of his previous statements that were highly provocative to them. Abe's right-wing apparition and strongly-worded statements on many issues enunciating nationalism and staunch support of Prime Minister Koizumi did not prevent them from giving Abe a chance.

There were precedents to the volte face enacted by the two sides. The situation when Abe was to take over after Koizumi resembled the circumstances when Tanaka Kakuei replaced Sato Eisaku in 1972. In the aftermath of 'the Nixon shock' – the announcement in 1971 that President Richard Nixon was going to visit in China – the general mood among the Japanese was that Japan was on its way to being left behind and so that it too had to normalize relations. To the Japanese, the 'shock' was not so much the change of US China policy, but the fact that the Japanese government was not informed; the Japanese prime minister was informed only minutes before Nixon's announcement was made.⁸⁰ Sato was a staunch supporter of Nixon's

⁷⁷ You Ji, 'Abe and China: A New Opportunity', Glocom Platform, Commentary, October 21, 2006, http://www.glocom.org/debates/20061031_ji_abe/index.html.

⁷⁸ Eric Teo Chu Cheow, *Sino-Japanese Relations: Conflict Management and Resolution*. Silk Road Paper (December 2006), p. 28.

⁷⁹ Masami Ito, 'Abe noncommittal on war stance: But Asia may not warm to "humble" lack of clear position', *The Japan Times*, October 4, 2006.

⁸⁰ See, e.g., Mainichi shimbunsha seijibu, ed., *Tenkanki no 'Ampo' ['Ampo' in a transition period]* (Tokyo: Mainichi shimbunsha, 1979, pp. 115ff.

Cold War policies and was taken aback by the move but adjusted and made peace overtures to the Chinese leader, even sending a personal emissary to Beijing. But the Chinese government cold-shouldered him and went in for Sato's likely successor, Tanaka Kakuei. China's rough treatment of Sato was one factor behind his downfall, and a month after Tanaka came to power, bilateral relations between the two countries were established, when Prime Minister Tanaka went to Beijing on an official visit and met Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai.

Japanese commentators saw in Abe's surprise choice of destination in his first trip abroad as prime minister an emulation of his grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, whose first tour abroad as prime minister in 1957 was to six Asian countries.⁸¹ But in the Japanese political context it is more reasonable to point to a close collaborator of Kishi's, Fukuda Takeo (prime minister 1976–78). Fukuda began his political career in 1952 as a Diet freshman by joining Kishi's political faction and became his political disciple.⁸² Fukuda was a close associate of the hard-liner Kishi and considered a staunch conservative, and developed Kishi's *rentai* idea by launching *kyocho to rentai*, or 'collaboration and solidarity', as his political banner, not only in foreign policy but also in domestic politics.⁸³ Fukuda's performance made him widely seen as the one to take over as prime minister after Sato Eisaku in 1972, but he lost the race to Tanaka Kakuei. The bitter fight resulted in enduring ill will between the two politicians. Tanaka's great feat as premier was his success in quickly normalizing relations with China only one month into his reign. Formal diplomatic relations remained to be opened, however, and Fukuda later revealed that when he was appointed prime minister, he made up his mind to sign a peace and friendship treaty with the People's Republic and could do so in August 1978.⁸⁴ Fukuda's anti-communism was well-known and gave him room to maneuver, and he prided himself as maybe the only one who could have achieved the feat by virtue of his ability to neutralize the staunch

⁸¹ See, e.g., Reiji Yoshida, 'To fathom Abe, just look at his grandfather: Kishi pushed the agenda of today decades ago', *The Japan Times*, December 28, 2006.

⁸² Edström, *Japan's Evolving Foreign Policy Doctrine*, p. 90.

⁸³ Shiratori Rei, 'Fukuda Takeo naikaku (Dai 67 dai)' [The Fukuda Takeo government (Japan's 67th)], in Shiratori Rei, ed., *Nihon no naikaku, III* [Japanese governments, vol. 3] (Tokyo: Shinhyoron, 1981), p. 181.

⁸⁴ Urata Susumu, *Hyoden Fukuda Takeo* [Fukuda Takeo: A critical biography] (Tokyo: Kokusai shogyo shuppan, 1978), p. 66.

adversaries to the treaty in the LDP, who by and large were assembled around him.⁸⁵ Abe resembles Kishi's long-term political disciple and ally Fukuda in that entrenched anti-communism in Fukuda's case and Abe's image of being a staunch defender of nationalistic values and defender of the prime minister's right to visit the Yasukuni shrine, not least against Chinese interventions and denunciations, opened the avenue for their bold moves.

But it also seems likely, not least given the target of the visit, that Abe's blitz visits to China and South Korea emulated former Prime Minister Nakasone. When Abe met Nakasone, after having been named president of the Liberal Democratic Party, Abe's political *sempai* advised him to attend to the frosty relations with China and South Korea, and it is not unlikely that Nakasone's own way of handling problems in relations with these neighbors came up as a subject of discussion. Soon after Nakasone became prime minister, he announced that he was going to South Korea to meet its political leaders in order to solve problems that made relations at that time a thorn in the side of the Japanese government. Preparations for his visit had been handled by a secret emissary.⁸⁶ That Nakasone's surprise visit had been very productive and helped overcome seemingly tough problems damaging bilateral relations with South Korea was certainly well-known to Abe, who worked as a secretary of his father who was foreign minister in Nakasone's government at the time.

A Remarkable Encounter

Abe's visit to China on October 8-9 was remarkable in the fact that it took place. Even more striking was the outcome of the discussion at the summit. Section 5 of the joint statement reads: 'The Chinese side emphasized that the development of China is a peaceful development, and China would achieve development and prosperity together with Japan and other countries. The Japanese side positively appreciated China's peaceful development and that its development has provided a great opportunity for Japan and the international community since it began to reform and open to the outside world. The Japanese side emphasized that Japan more than 60 years after the

⁸⁵ Fukuda Takeo, 'Waga shusho jidai' [My time as prime minister], *Chuo koron* (October 1980), pp. 293f.

⁸⁶ Maki Taro, *Nakasone seiken - 1806 nichi* [The 1806 days of the Nakasone government], vol. 1 (Tokyo: Gyosei mondai kenkyusho, 1988), pp. 58ff.

War, has been consistently following the path of a peaceful country, and would continue to follow this path. The Chinese side positively appreciated this.’ This was an outflow of that it had been agreed that both sides ‘would face past history squarely, advance towards the future, deal appropriately with issues which may influence the development of Japan–China relations [...]’.⁸⁷

Considering the fact that clashes over the interpretation of the joint history of the two countries had resulted in strained relations, the outcome of the tackling of ‘the issue of history’ made by the two sides showed that this issue is not so much about history but a matter of politics. To Japan, the Chinese recognition of Japan’s post-war pacifism and that Japan ‘would continue to follow this path’ was reassuring. But when scrutinized at close hand, the handling of the issue of history did not engage with the tricky question of how to interpret the pre-war and war period. In a sense, it was an adoption also by the Chinese of Abe’s strategy of ambiguity – not speaking up but using softened language. The issue of history is a touchy one and the two sides seem to have agreed to handle this hot potato by starting ‘joint research of history by Japanese and Chinese scholars’ and leaving it at that for the time being.⁸⁸

A conspicuous commitment by the two sides, as revealed by the joint press statement, is that they ‘shared the view that the two countries would strive to build a mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests’. In Abe’s political platform he had committed himself to work for ‘a strategic dialogue’ with the United States, Europe and other countries based on common values, but now he seemed to go even further in the case of China, speaking up for bilateral relations founded on ‘common strategic interests’. What kind of common strategic interests Japan and China had is left out and whether these interests are important elements for the two countries, or minor ones, is not specified. Furthermore, the English version published by the Japanese foreign ministry leads the reader astray. In the Japanese text, the two sides had agreed to make efforts to build mutual

⁸⁷ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, ‘Japan–China Joint Press Statement’, October 8, 2006, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/jointo610.html>.

⁸⁸ The group held its first meeting December 26–27, 2006 in Beijing. See the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, ‘The First Meeting of the Japan–China Joint History Research Committee’, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/meeto612.html>.

relations based on 'common strategic benefits'. Having the same interests and working for joint benefits differs, however, since countries may have different interests but still be able to reap joint benefits by exchange and collaboration. The joint press statement reveals a continuation of the strategy of ambiguity that Abe had developed in the final stage of the LDP presidential race.

One bone of contention, Taiwan, is not mentioned but taken care of by the formulation that both sides share the view that they 'would continue to observe the principles enunciated' in a number of agreements signed by the two countries from 1972. It reiterates the pragmatic handling of this sensitive issue that has characterized their dealings since Tanaka's discussions with Mao and Zhou in 1972. It was a clear indication that Abe, as head of the Japanese government, was honoring the agreements signed by his predecessors and it indicated a continuation of his policies since becoming premier to distance himself from the strongly worded statements of his pre-premier candidacy days.

A major step forward for Japan was that China expressed its will 'to enhance dialogue' on 'necessary and rational reform of the United Nations including the Security Council reform' in that Chinese opposition to Japan as a permanent member of the Security Council had effectively thwarted the Japanese government's successful bid.

For Abe personally, a precious gift from his Chinese hosts was that he could report at his press conference after the meetings with Chinese leaders that they 'expressed their understanding of the high level of concerns that the Japanese people have' with regard to the North Korean abduction of Japanese citizens and that he had 'gained the understanding of the Chinese side', when he explained Japan's position in regard to the abduction issue. On the Chinese side, they could focus on that Abe recognized that China exerted leadership in the negotiations with North Korea. It was in realization of the fact that, in dealing with North Korea, Japan's strong-handed policy of using sticks and no carrots, named the policy of 'dialogue and pressure', had not worked, which made the Japanese government conclude that united international action was needed if negotiations were to progress, and that chances were greater to reach results if the Chinese could be persuaded to use their influence to talk the North Koreans out of their provocative policies.

With its focus on the cooperation and promotion of mutually beneficial exchanges and the lack of interest from both sides in tackling head on the issue that symbolized deep-seated disagreement – the contentious issue of the Yasukuni shrine – the meeting in Beijing must be seen as an important step forward in untying the knot that Koizumi's repeated visits to the Yasukuni shrine had resulted in. While Koizumi stated repeatedly that he went there to pray for peace, the result was to fan the flame of conflict and aggressive nationalism. Thus, by deliberately exercising restraint in expressing statements provocative to the other party, the Japanese and Chinese governments had started on the arduous way back to normalized relations.

Abe's Strange Fortune: North Korea's Nuke

Shortly after Abe had landed in Seoul, on the way from the airport, information reached him of North Korea's first nuclear test.⁸⁹ It was an event that sent shock waves across Northeast Asia. Seen from Tokyo's horizon, it was truly disturbing that Japan's close and hostile neighbour had conducted a nuclear test. A seasoned former vice minister for foreign affairs-turned-analyst had captured the feelings prevailing in Japan somewhat before – North Korean nukes was 'a truly nightmarish and totally unacceptable development' which would subject Japan to 'an agonizing choice between accepting the position of easy victim of nuclear blackmail or developing its own nuclear capacity, which would trigger internal turmoil in Japan.'⁹⁰ The prospects of such a scenario had made Abe recount in an interview, when he had won national fame as a front figure against North Korea, that a nuclear test was an event that had drastic and serious repercussions not only for Japan but for East Asia and the world.⁹¹

The North Korean announcement was probably intended to remind China and Japan of the continued importance of their impoverished but heavily armed neighbor. This reminder was superfluous, however, since North Korea was in any case a key issue on the agenda of the discussions that Abe had just concluded with the Chinese leaders. Yet, a problematic aspect was that the

⁸⁹ Wakamiya Yoshiyumi, *Wakai to nashonarizumu* [Reconciliation and nationalism] (Tokyo: Asahi shimbunsha, 2006), p. 12.

⁹⁰ Yutaka Kawashima, *Japanese Foreign Policy at the Crossroads: Challenges and Options for the Twenty-first Century* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2003), pp. 86ff.

⁹¹ Interview of Abe Shinzo, 'Kimu Jon Iru kara Nihon o mamorimasu' [Defending Japan from Kim Jong Il], *Bungei shunju* (June 2003), pp. 168–75.

North Korean nuclear test showed that in the end not even China, which was alleged to have considerable influence in Pyongyang, could sway the North Korean regime in regard to this issue. In Abe's meetings with Chinese leaders, North Korea-related issues loomed large. In the joint press statement after the Japanese–Chinese summit, both sides expressed 'their deep concern over the recent situation on the Korean Peninsula, including the issue of nuclear tests'. During the press conference, Abe's concern was graphically demonstrated, when he repeated no less than six times that a nuclear weapon's test by North Korea cannot be 'tolerated'. As important was that he was careful to point out that the Chinese leadership was equally concerned. Thus, a windfall, and good for Japan, was that the North Korean nuclear test made Japan and China have common interests vis-à-vis North Korea. The prospect of a nuclear-armed neighbor that might force Japan to reconsider its non-nuclear policies was alarming for China and threatened to result in an arms race in which there were only losers. A tangible effect of the North Korean nuclear test, therefore, was that it contributed to more amicable Japanese–Chinese relations. Notwithstanding this, Abe's heavy-handed stance aimed at pressurizing Pyongyang into accepting Tokyo's demands had failed and it was fairly obvious that the success of the intensified pressure on North Korea that he announced in Seoul was uncertain. Going it alone presented no prospects of success for Japan. The test was also a slap in the face of China since President Hu Jintao had expressed his concerns in talks with Abe. North Korea's nuclear adventurism worries China, which has lived up to its promise in the summit talks with Abe that both sides would cooperate in achieving the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. What was seen was how China joined in international pressure on Pyongyang to make it reconsider its nuclear policies. The Japanese side recognizes that China exerts leadership in dealing with North Korea and Abe would later express his gratitude to China.⁹² Given the race for regional leadership that China and Japan have engaged in, this was no small concession from Japan and one that was certainly welcomed by Beijing.

⁹² 'Li: China to help on abduction issue', *Asahi shimbun*, February 17, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200702160469.html>

Discussions in Seoul

When Abe arrived in South Korea, he came to a country with which Japan's bilateral relations had worsened. As in the case of China, the row over Prime Minister Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni shrine was one bone of contention but there were also others. The Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910 ceased only when the Second World War ended. Diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea were established in 1965, but historical encounters had left scars and problems that continue to linger. Attempts had been made in the past to solve outstanding issues. The most significant step in the eyes of both the Japanese and South Korean governments was the 1998 state visit to Japan by the then President Kim Dae-jung. His visit made history since it resulted in a solemn declaration that it was time to leave history behind. His declaration came after his discussions with the then Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo, who went out of his way to apologize to the Korean people for past Japanese misdeeds. There remained many contentious problems in bilateral relations, but the most reprehensible for South Korea were Koizumi's annual visits to the Yasukuni shrine, which were contrary to the spirit of the agreement reached during Kim's visit. The South Korean government was harassed by popular protests over Koizumi's actions and had, like China, cancelled top-level meetings with Japan.

With the North Korean announcement of a nuclear test, Abe's worst-case scenario had materialized but at the same time it made his new stop on his diplomatic travels much less bumpy than it might have been. The timing of the North Korean nuclear test was such that it was inevitable that it would influence the outcome of the discussions that Abe was about to have with President Roh Moo Hyun, since it posed a grave problem to both countries that overshadowed the historical issues and other irritants. Apart from being seen as a direct security threat to Japan and South Korea, the nuclear test threatened the nuclear non-proliferation system and was a glaring demonstration that the different strategies employed by the main players had failed – the US strategy of pressure had not been able to stop North Korea's exploding the device; Japan's strategy of 'dialogue and pressure' had not hindered what Japan considered a serious threat to its security from materializing; South Korea's strategy of 'dialogue' had also been unsuccessful; and even China's displeasure at North Korea's nuclear

adventurism had not prevented Pyongyang from emulating India and Pakistan (and itself) in exploding a nuclear device.

Like during his press conference after the Japan–China summit in Beijing, Abe repeatedly stressed that North Korea's nuclear test could not be tolerated and said that he and President Roh had agreed that the test 'constitutes a grave threat to the security of Japan, the ROK, and the neighboring countries, and also a threat to the peace and stability of the international community.' In his answer to a question about the 'discrepancy with regard to the attitude of the two countries' towards North Korean nuclear weapons, Abe said: 'Between ourselves, President Roh Moo Hyun and I, I do not think there is a difference of views. We have fallen in step together.'⁹³ At a press conference after Abe's visit, President Roh told that his government would find it increasingly difficult to push ahead with its 'sunshine policy' of engagement with the North, which focuses on dialogue rather than pressure.⁹⁴ That bilateral relations continued to be strained, however, was graphically shown by the fact that the two political leaders held separate press conferences after the summit.

Three aspects of Abe's comments at his press conference about North Korea's nuclear test were particularly striking. The first was his comment that the Japanese government 'shall immediately embark on consideration of harsh measures', which showed that he did not waver on his previous policies and which, furthermore, saw the South Korean president as his ally. The second was that he indicated that the Japanese government was going to consult with the United States, South Korea and China, on 'the measures to address the situation'. Thirdly, without further ado and not waiting for the result of these consultations he told that he had instructed his government to 'request the UN Security Council to immediately launch consultations with a view to taking firm action on North Korea's nuclear test issue.'⁹⁵

⁹³ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'Press Conference by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe Following His Visit to the Republic of Korea', October 9, 2006, http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/abespeech/2006/10/09_koreapress_e.html.

⁹⁴ Hiroko Nakata, 'Abe, Roh jointly blast Pyongyang as threat to the world', *The Japan Times*, October 11, 2006.

⁹⁵ Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 'Press Conference by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe Following His Visit to the Republic of Korea', October 9, 2006, http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/abespeech/2006/10/09koreapress_e.html.

Unlike during Abe's summit meeting with Chinese leaders, history was brought up in his talks with President Roh. Like Kim and Obuchi, Abe and Roh agreed to foster 'future-oriented' relations between Japan and South Korea. Nevertheless, Roh told Abe that Japan needed to face up to its past and told his guest that Japan must address the Yasukuni issue and its handling of women, who had been forced by the Japanese military into prostitution during the war. Abe repeated his message to the Chinese that he would handle the Yasukuni shrine issue 'appropriately'. The sex slave issue was a touchy issue that Abe had tried to deflect by distancing himself from his own statements before becoming premier, when he had denied even the existence of the sex slaves. He told Roh that his government was going to operate under the 1993 government statement by the then Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei, which admitted the Japanese military used sex slaves.⁹⁶ Roh left it at that and did not press either issue further.

Brief Interlude around a 'Taboo' Issue

The North Korean nuclear test was an alarming problem for the Japanese government and a heated debate commenced in Japan. Not only were North Korean nuclear weapons seen as a direct threat to Japan's national security but the prospects of an arms race were also worrying, since the test threatened to make other countries embark on acquiring nuclear weapons and spur China into upgrading its nuclear capabilities. A debate was initiated with the participation of leading politicians like Foreign Minister Aso Taro and Nakagawa Shoichi, the chairman of one of Japan's power centres, the LDP's Policy Research Council. The debate became turbulent. On October 15 Nakagawa initiated the row when he declared: 'There exists a logical argument that the possession of nuclear weapons lowers the probability of being attacked, and thus it would be appropriate to debate this.'⁹⁷ When Foreign Minister Aso was confronted by representatives of the opposition parties in the Diet, he declared that the government did not intend to breach the three non-nuclear principles, but announced it was important that the

⁹⁶ Nakata, 'Abe, Roh jointly blast Pyongyang as threat to the world'.

⁹⁷ 'Jimin seichokai "Kaku hoyu no giron hitsuyo": Shusho wa sangensoku o kyocho' [LDP PARC: Debate on nuclear weapons necessary: Prime minister emphasizes the three non-nuclear principles], *Asahi shimbun*, October 15, 2006, <http://www.asahi.com/special/nuclear/TKY200610150124.html>.

issue of nuclear armaments could be freely debated in Japan.⁹⁸ After a couple of days, Prime Minister Abe seems to have found it necessary to calm down the debate on what used to be a 'taboo' issue for Japanese politicians. He reiterated Japan's intention to abstain from nuclear weapons and declared that debate on the issue was over.⁹⁹ The debate continued, however, and in a debate in the Diet on November 8, Abe refused to put a lid on intra-party discussion.¹⁰⁰

Important for the way in which the Japanese government tackled the existential threat that North Korean nuclear weapons are seen to constitute, was the reaction of the US government. President George Bush made a statement on October 9 that the United States has the will and the capability to meet the full range of its deterrent and security commitments to Japan.¹⁰¹ Fully aware of how the Japanese perceived the threat from what they saw as a reckless and hostile neighboring country, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice headed for Japan. At a joint press conference with Foreign Minister Aso Taro, she reiterated President Bush's commitment and said that, 'it is extremely important to go out and reaffirm, and reaffirm strongly, US defense commitments to Japan and to South Korea.' Aso seems to have been convinced by the American security guarantees and dismissed the possibility of Japan going nuclear. He stated that 'as far as Japan is concerned, we, the Government of Japan, has no position at all to consider going nuclear. There is no need to arm ourselves with nuclear weapons either.'¹⁰²

⁹⁸ 'Kaku hoyu "giron wa daiji": Aso gaisho, kokkai de hatsugen' [Foreign Minister Aso comment in the Diet: Debate on possession of nuclear weapons 'is important'], *Asahi shimbun*, October 19, 2006, <http://www.asahi.com/special/nuclear/TKY200610180447.html>.

⁹⁹ 'Aso keen to explore nukes, but Abe says debate is "finished"', *The Japan Times*, October 18, 2006, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20061019b3.html>

¹⁰⁰ 'Abe says "no" to nukes but allows discussion', *The Japan Times*, November 9, 2006, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/print/nn20061109a2.htm>

¹⁰¹ Usinfo.stat.gov, 'U.S.-Japanese Alliance Reaffirmed in Face of North Korean Threat. Rice, Japanese foreign minister discuss implementation of U.N. resolution', October 18, 2006, <http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2006&m=October&x=20061018153438ajesrom1.699466e-02>.

¹⁰² U.S. Department of State, Secretary Condoleezza Rice, 'Remarks With Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso After Their Meeting', October 18, 2006, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/74669.htm>

Abe's Audacious Start

With his surprise visits to Beijing and Seoul, Abe made a flying start. Judging from his earlier words and deeds, many had feared that the new prime minister would implement a rightist political agenda, but such concerns seemed ungrounded. His discussions with the political leaders of Japan's two neighbors revealed a pragmatic approach and showed his diplomatic skills, and his bold move to rush there improved bilateral relations. The Chinese leaders seem to see in Abe a Japanese political leader they can do business with. The meeting demonstrated that both sides want to tread carefully in order to improve their relations, which had reached a nadir at the end of Koizumi's tenure. Developments after Abe's visits show that his strategy of ambiguity worked and that China responded by not scolding Japan à la President Jiang Zemin during his state visit in 1998, but rather played it safe and tried to keep pace with Abe's strategy. Thus, Abe's well-publicized strategy of ambiguity was reciprocated by moves from the Chinese government. The anti-Japanese demonstrations in several Chinese cities in 2005 showed how easily popular anti-Japanese feelings can flare up and get out of control, including becoming a threat to the ambitions of the Chinese government itself. Improved relations with Japan lie in the interest of the Chinese government as an element in its effort to promote China's economic, industrial and social development in which Japanese technology and investment plays an integral part.

The British specialist on China, Christopher R. Hughes, has discerned a strategy on the part of the Chinese government to present what he has characterized as 'a somewhat sanitized version' of Abe's views and stated intentions inside China to take advantage of the potential 'new' starting point presented by Abe's rise to power.¹⁰³ Hughes argues that the Chinese government has monitored and controlled information that has reached the Chinese public in order to tone down aspects of Abe's political views and stated intentions that are offensive to Chinese public opinion. Hughes points out that the strategy of the Chinese government is viable because the state controls media content in China. He claims, furthermore, that the Japanese

¹⁰³ Christopher R Hughes, 'Japan in the Politics of Chinese Leadership Legitimacy: Recent Developments in Historical Perspective', paper presented at the conference *Rivalry and Realpolitik: China-Japan Relations at the Start of the Twenty-first Century*, St Antony's College, December 13, 2006, pp. 10ff.

government has collaborated tacitly, which he argues is shown 'in the way Abe has adopted a kind of double-talk since becoming prime minister, in which his [speeches] are structured in a way that allows positive messages about developing good relations with China (and South Korea) to be easily separated from sensitive issues concerning his plans for Japan's domestic politics.'¹⁰⁴ The evidence presented by him for this rather far-reaching claim is not convincing, however, since the only cases given are those where reports disseminated in China have disregarded statements made by Abe, or parts thereof, when they have contained elements thought to be offensive to the Chinese general public, or where Chinese media have abstained from reporting ambiguous statements by Abe on visiting the Yasukuni shrine.¹⁰⁵

The collusion that Hughes surmises exists between the Chinese and Japanese governments seems to me spurious and lacking in evidence. But Hughes does demonstrate that information on Abe disseminated in China has been 'carefully monitored and censored', which indicates the interest of the Chinese government in improving its sour political relations with Japan. Beijing seems to have been satisfied 'that Abe had come to realize that Japan's national interest lies in having good relations with China',¹⁰⁶ and gave him the benefit of doubt, deciding to 'listen to his words, watch his action', as the Chinese saying goes.

Wen Jiabao Visits Japan

That the joint efforts by the Japanese and Chinese government to improve relations and abstain from remarks hurting the other party had paid off, were demonstrated when Prime Minister Wen Jiabao arrived in Japan on a three-day visit on April 11-13, 2007. Wen's visit turned out to be rich in symbolism with symbols consistently chosen to improve relations. An agreement signed by the two heads of government did not bring up the political and historical issues that had sent bilateral ties to their lowest point in decades but simply declared that both sides were 'resolved to face history squarely, advance toward the future, and jointly unveil a beautiful future for bilateral

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pp. 10f.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

relations.¹⁰⁷ The use of ‘beautiful’ was certain to flatter Abe but also to appeal to Abe’s supporters of whom many were inherently skeptical to overtures to China.

Nevertheless, it was hard to avoid the issue of history and Wen chose to take the bull by the horns by bringing up this conflictual issue in his speech to the Diet. To be invited to deliver a speech in the Japanese parliament is an honor not shown to many foreigners and it was the first ever given by a Chinese premier. Wen chose his words carefully. ‘Japan’s aggression caused great sufferings and tremendous human and economic losses to the Chinese people. The deep scars left in the hearts of the Chinese people are beyond description.’ But Wen made a declaration that showed the great distance from the days of Jiang Zemin’s virulent denunciation during his state visit in 1998. Demonstrating diplomatic finesse, Wen noted that Japan had apologized for its wartime atrocities and that its people had also suffered but said that the country’s leaders had not done enough to demonstrate its remorse. ‘To reflect on history is not to dwell on hard feelings but to remember and learn from the past in order to open a better future’, he said, urging Japan to turn its apologies and commitments into concrete actions.¹⁰⁸ Avoiding bringing up specific issues such as the 1937 Nanjing massacre as well as Japanese denials that its military forced Asian women into sexual slavery in the 1930s and 40s, Wen abstained from rubbing salt in the wound. And to point out that the Japanese people had also suffered surely touched the right chord; the victim mentality of the Japanese is well established if one remembers the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Chief Cabinet Secretary Shiozaki Yasuhisa, the government’s top spokesman, commented that Wen’s speech ‘sounded very forward-looking. He made proactive remarks about wide-ranging topics.’ Ota Akihiro, who is the head of the New Komeito Party, which forms the coalition government with the LDP, said that Wen ‘made it clear that the historical issue is not a grudge matter and

¹⁰⁷ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, ‘Japan–China Joint Press Statement’ (Provisional Translation), April 11, 2007, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/pv0704/joint.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Chinese Government’s Official Web Portal, ‘Premier Wen calls for future-oriented Sino-Japanese ties’, April 12, 2007, http://english.gov.cn/2007-04/12/content_580597.htm.

that China has highly credited Japan's postwar development and is willing to take a future-oriented stance.'¹⁰⁹

The conspicuous absence of a heated discussion over historical issues in the discussions held by Wen and Abe made it easy for both of them to declare post festum the Chinese visit a success. According to Wen: 'The China-Japan relationship is developing in good fashion. However, it can't be said that every issue has been settled. Some points still require processing and time to resolve. We have to resolve the issues properly, making full use of rare turning points.'¹¹⁰ Abe reciprocated Wen's niceties by declaring that he saw the visit as a success; the leaders of the two countries had reached much consensus and effectively boosted the building of the nations' strategic relationship based on common interests.¹¹¹ At least his positive evaluation was widely reported in the Chinese media, even though it seems to have been largely overlooked in the Japanese press.

To Washington on a Mission

Seven months after his surprise visits to China and South Korea, Abe headed for Washington on a two-day official visit. Before paying his visit to Japan's security underwriter, he had gone to no less than four Asian and four European countries. The considerable delay of this visit – that used to be the first port of call for a new prime minister – was a strategic delay according to a news agency report.¹¹² But this then begs the question: what strategy? According to the report of the news agency, it was to 'broaden the country's diplomacy'; but this does not make much sense since broadening Japanese diplomacy could wait until after the customary visit to the United States. It seems more likely that the worsening relations with China and South Korea needed attention and Abe took the chance to make an audacious start. But his political heritage is also likely to have played a role. As previously mentioned, Abe's grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, chose to go to Asian

¹⁰⁹ 'Japan gov't, top lawmakers laud Wen's speech', *Japan Policy & Politics*, April 16, 2007; Justin McCurry, 'Chinese premier urges Japan to confront its history', *The Guardian*, April 12, 2007.

¹¹⁰ 'Wen: Trip to Japan a success', *The Yomiuri shimbun*, April 14, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/world/20070414TDY01002.htm>

¹¹¹ 'Abe says Wen's Japan visit successful', *People's Daily Online*, April 21, 2007, http://english.people.com.cn/200704/21/eng20070421_368493.html.

¹¹² Shingo Ito, 'Abe heads to US after strategic delay', *AFP*, April 23, 2007, http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/0070424/wl_asia_afp/japanusdiplomacy.

countries before the United States when he became premier and many saw Abe's trip to China and South Korea as a case of emulating Kishi's actions. But the order of Abe's targets for paying official visits was also a subtle signal of his determination of working for his pre-eminent goal of instituting an end to 'the post-war regime', which implies an end of the post-war solution to Japan's foreign and security policy with Japan being subordinate to the United States. Kishi's trip to Washington in 1957 was made in order to establish relations of equality in bilateral relations and end the still prevailing legacy of the occupation period with the United States being the superior and Japan the subordinate party. In an irony of history, Abe's visit re-confirmed a diplomacy reminiscent of the system of *sankin kotai*, practiced under which samurai lords were obliged to pay regular visits to the shogunate in the feudal era.¹¹³

The strategy of ambiguity that enabled Abe to improve Japan's relations with China and South Korea was not the same success vis-à-vis the United States. In many ways, Japanese-US relations were better than ever when Abe took over after Koizumi, since Abe's predecessor had made resolute efforts to support the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq and in its anti-terrorism activities. What became a problem was that Japan's historical legacy of atrocities and horrors perpetrated by its military in the past haunted Abe, and his and his government's handling of the problems of history was seen as not acceptable to broad strata not only in China and the two Koreas but also in Western countries like the United States. Several high-ranking US officials issued warnings that attempts to revise history would have a negative impact in the United States.¹¹⁴ With Abe's visit to the United States approaching, Abe made a series of statements apologizing for Japan's past behavior.¹¹⁵

Abe's handling of contentious historical issues put him on the defensive and did not afford him any opening to exercise the 'assertive diplomacy' that he

¹¹³ Kamiya Fujiya, 'Nichibei shuno kaidan no kiseki' [Records of Japan-US summit meetings], in Kamiya Fuji, ed., *Nihon to Amerika kyocho to tairitsu no kozo* [The structure of conflict and collaboration between Japan and the United States] (Tokyo: Nihon keizai shimbunsha, 1973), pp. 178.

¹¹⁴ 'Denial Reopens Wounds of Japan's ex-sex slaves', *New York Times*, March 8, 2007; Yoichi Kato, 'U.S. experts concerned about Prime Minister Abe's remarks about comfort women issue', *Asahi shimbun*, March 10, 2007; as quoted in Congressional Research Service, 'Japanese Military's "Comfort Women" System', Memorandum, April 3, 2007, mimeo, pp. 4f.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

had advocated in his political platform. The agenda he brought with him to Washington was topped by North Korea. Before his departure, he declared that he would press Bush on the issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea, amid worries in Tokyo that Washington would remove Pyongyang from its list of terrorism sponsors before the deeply emotional issue of abductions had been resolved.¹¹⁶ His statements at the joint press conference with President Bush after their summit were cautious, except on the issue of North Korea where he and President Bush focused on efforts to pressure their adversary into abandoning its nuclear program.¹¹⁷ A strange element during the press conference is related in the *New York Times*: 'Standing next to Mr. Bush, Mr. Abe said that he had "deep-hearted sympathies that the people who had to serve as comfort women were placed in extreme hardships" and expressed his "apologies for the fact that they were placed in that sort of circumstance." Mr. Bush called Japan's wartime sex slavery a "regrettable chapter in the history of the world," adding, "I accept the prime minister's apology."¹¹⁸ A comment by a South Korean newspaper seems appropriate: 'Why did Abe apologize to Bush, as opposed to the elderly women who are still living with the nightmares of being forced into sexual slavery, and what authority does the U.S. president have to accept such an apology?'¹¹⁹

Whatever Abe's plans were, his meeting with President Bush did not produce any spectacular results, except for that it confirmed that both sides tried to convey the message that the US president and the Japanese prime minister felt comfortable in each other's company and that the friendship that Bush and Abe's predecessor Koizumi liked to demonstrate would continue.¹²⁰ A commentator in the *Asahi shimbun* summarized the outcome of

¹¹⁶ Oliver Knox, 'Bush, Abe to discuss NKorea, Iraq, Japan's global role', *AFP*, April 25, 2007, http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20070425/pl_afp/usjapandiplomacy_070425200833.

¹¹⁷ 'Bush and Abe end U.S.-Japanese summit with show of friendship, cooperation on North Korea', *International Herald Tribune*, April 27, 2007.

¹¹⁸ Norimitsu Onishi, 'Sex Slave Dispute Follows Abe Even as He Bonds With Bush', *The New York Times*, April 29, 2007.

¹¹⁹ 'Abe, Bush in Apology Farce' (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, April 30, 2007, <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200704/200704300023.html>

¹²⁰ Hiroaki Matsunaga, 'Shinzo, George get cozy on first-name basis', *The Yomiuri shimbun*, 29 April 2007.

the summit that Prime Minister Abe had indulged in ‘a defensive inward-looking foreign policy’.¹²¹

¹²¹ Kato Yoichi, ‘Mamori no uchimuki gaiko’ [A defensive inward-looking foreign policy], *The Asahi Shimbun*, 29 April 2007.

Prospects and Priorities

Abe's First Priority: Muddle Through

When Abe assumed his post as prime minister, the question posed by political observers, the electorate and fellow politicians was how he would handle the Koizumi heritage. He was very much seen as a 'one issue politician' despite his background as a welfare *zoku* and his record of scaling the political ladder. As Japan's new premier, Abe embarked on the political program he had been elected on. As any responsible politician, he had a domestic and an international agenda, but, for a start, he put his stock on foreign policy. His blitz visit to China and South Korea confirmed the impression that foreign policy was his forte, and he did not disappoint his supporters on this front. With foreign policy and domestic policy two sides of the same coin, successes and drawbacks will spill over. The success that his visits in Beijing and Seoul constituted made him better equipped to fend off attacks from opposition party representatives.

The challenges encountered by Abe as the incumbent are different from those he met as a candidate for political office. As newly appointed prime minister, he was constantly clamped down on by journalists and representatives of the opposition parties in the Diet and cornered into confirming or disclaiming statements he had made in the past, which clashed with the policies of previous governments or were generally right-wing and/or provocative, and also whether he as prime minister abided by these statements.

In an obvious attempt to muddle through, Abe took a more conciliatory stance than the one he had represented as the young and bold politician before assuming high office. It was to continue the strategy that he had adopted when it became likely that he had a fair chance of taking over after Koizumi. To the surprise of many, Abe followed up this conscious strategy of ambiguity from the presidential campaign by modifying and revising his high-profile stance on a number of issues that had caused serious frictions with other countries. During his election campaign, Abe suggested that he

would not repeat the apology for Japan's wartime actions made by every prime minister since 1995, but as prime minister he expressed remorse for Japan's past aggression and the suffering it had caused across Asia by siding with Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi's apology from 1995 on colonialism and aggressive war; Abe accepted the statement made in 1993 by the then Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei that recognised the use of 'comfort women' by the Imperial Army before and during World War II; he acknowledged that his grandfather Kishi Nobusuke and other wartime leaders bore grave war responsibility; and he was quick to intervene and put the lid on the debate when some of his ministers, among them political heavyweights like Foreign Minister Aso Taro and Nakagawa Shoichi, sought to initiate a discussion of a Japanese nuclear deterrent after North Korea made its nuclear test. Abe's actions were such that *The Guardian* reported that 'Mr Abe has behaved as though his recent incarnation as a neo-nationalist was little more than an embarrassing memory'.¹²²

His popularity figures have dropped but not to the level of being catastrophic. A poll taken by the *Asahi shimbun* and published on September 26 and 27, 2006 showed that his cabinet enjoyed an approval rating of 63 per cent, which was the third-highest approval rating on record for a Japanese prime minister, while the non-support rate was as low as 18 per cent.¹²³ These figures subsequently plunged quite rapidly. In another poll taken on December 12, 2006, Abe's public support had dropped to 47 per cent and the non-support rate had increased to 32 per cent.¹²⁴ According to the *Asahi shimbun* poll, the major reasons for the drop in support was the vagueness of Abe's policy positions on issues and his decision to readmit a group of dissenters into the Liberal Democratic Party, who had opposed Koizumi's postal privatization plan. Abe's decision to let them back into the party was a move in preparation for the then upcoming Upper House election, but it was also a signal that this high-profile revolting against the party line in the recent past had been forgiven by the party leadership. Abe's decision, however, was met with resistance among party activists and officials. While

¹²² Justin McCurry, 'Abe gets in touch with his pragmatic side', *The Guardian*, October 30, 2006.

¹²³ 'Asahi Shimbun Emergency Opinion Polls on the Inauguration of the Abe Cabinet', September 26-27, 2006, The Mansfield Asian Opinion Poll Database, <http://www.mansfieldfdn.org/polls/poll-06-10.htm>.

¹²⁴ 'Abe Cabinet support sinks to 47%', *The Asahi shimbun*, December 12, 2006, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200612120159.html>

to voters, therefore, it might be a signal of the dilution of any continuation of reform from Koizumi's legacy, it has also inserted an issue into the party itself that can be potentially very conflictual, dividing some seniors used to pork barrel politics from more reform-minded juniors. Figures turned more positive for Abe in later polls. Having dipped even further after the December poll, a poll taken by the *Mainichi shimbun* showed a jump of eight points to 43 per cent at the end of April 2007. The upped support was accompanied by an even bigger fall of nine percentage points of non-supporters.¹²⁵

Abe's Second Priority: Upper House Election

Abe lives dangerously. He struck a chord in the hearts of ordinary Japanese by his outrage at North Korean abductions and became a political star with this as his main plus but, perceived by many voters to have one sales point only, this may make the average voter lose confidence in him, particularly if he cannot point to any move that is positive. As prime minister, his strategy of ambiguity by keeping his rhetoric largely short on details paid off. His strategy of ambiguity has been successful but will it last? The 2007 Upper House election on July 22, 2007 is the first major electoral challenge that Abe will face. It is a make or break situation for him as a national political leader but also for incumbents and political hopefuls. These elections will be a test case whether the young premier's performance has satisfied the electorate. Leading his ruling LDP-Komeito coalition to victory or failure in the Upper House elections will determine his political fortunes and whether he will be another stop-gap premier – so common after the political upheaval at the beginning of the 1990s – or if he will be entrusted by the voters to push through his ambitious nationalistic political program and end 'the post-war regime'. If he has to leave as a result of poor results for the LDP-Komeito coalition government, his grand pledge of instituting a change of 'the post-war regime' will come to naught.

When Abe was elected LDP president which, given the parliamentary situation, made him more or less automatically prime minister, it was not his political credentials as a hard-hitting nationalistic right-winger pounding at

¹²⁵ 'Support for Abe skyrockets, Mainichi poll shows', *The Mainichi shimbun*, April 30, 2007, <http://mdn.mainichi-msn.co.jp/national/news/20070430p2a00mona01000oc.html>

North Korea and staunch defender of Prime Minister Koizumi's right to visit the Yasukuni shrine that counted most. What was on the minds of those who voted for one of the LDP presidential candidates was, rather, their assessment of the prospects for success for themselves and their party that the candidates for party president would be able to offer in the Upper House elections. Abe's strategy of ambiguity had beneficial effects on relations with important neighbors but was less suitable in the domestic context, because the electoral fate of political candidates rested to a large extent on the party picking the right man to lead it to victory. Was he the man who would have the greatest potential to make them elected or re-elected in the upcoming elections? For Koizumi, to pick Abe as his successor was to pick a man who could be trusted to carry on reforms, but he also had electoral prospects for the LDP in mind. To LDP candidates, it was hardly Abe's signature issues that could be counted upon as a key sales point for themselves but his presumed ability to lure voters to vote for LDP candidates in upcoming elections. They respected Abe's bold stance but had to pay attention to bread and butter issues, which were what mattered to their supporters and which, accordingly, were important for their election or re-election. The public's concern over income, regional and other variants of economic inequality was so strong that Abe, as a candidate for the highest office, had to acknowledge that it is necessary to do something about growing economic inequality, and he made it part of his political platform.¹²⁶ As MPs or members of the Liberal Democratic Party active at a local level, LDP candidates had to face voters concerned over Abe's ability 'to find solutions for the almost five percent unemployment rate, large public debt and a growing social gap that calls for a better welfare system and Japan's aging population that is expected to retard economic growth significantly.'¹²⁷

Abe's prospects in office are not good if he fails to deliver. If the LDP does not fare well in the upcoming elections, Abe will have to do the same as a number of his predecessors – take the responsibility for his party's electoral performance – and leave. Party members know that Abe is acutely aware of

¹²⁶ Hoshi, *Abe seiken no Nihon*, p. 87.

¹²⁷ Suvendrini Kakuchi, 'Shinzo Abe Will Boost Patriotism, Ties With US', *Inter Press Service News Agency*, September 21, 2006, <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=34835>.

the responsibility of the prime minister to retire after a poor show in elections.¹²⁸

What should worry LDP candidates most is that Abe's personal agenda as a politician is not entirely pleasing to the electorate. On the one hand, his image of being a young and daring politician who stood up for treasured values was positive to a large swathe of the Japanese population. On the other hand, while his strong stance on North Korea met respect and sympathy, his domestic agenda prioritizing patriotism is not particularly enticing to the majority of Japanese, who worry more about issues like wages, unemployment, taxes, and Japan's weak social security system, and who voted for Koizumi to support his fight with the LDP's old guard out of disaffection with the old political economic structure. Abe's agenda as a politician, revealed not least in his political platform publicized in his campaign for the LDP presidency, is out of sync with voters, who prefer progress on bread and butter issues to nationalistic standpoints provoking neighbors important for Japan's healthy economic development.¹²⁹ The strategy of ambiguity that Abe developed as the LDP presidential election neared was needed in order to still worries among party members over the negative effects that his nationalistic stance might have on Japan's external relations.

An insight that was voiced by many Japanese prime ministers in the post-war period is that 'domestic and foreign policy are two sides of the same coin'.¹³⁰ The veracity of this saying was strikingly demonstrated by events and developments during Abe's first weeks in power, with the obvious interplay between domestic and foreign policy. His trip to China and South Korea was a skilful move, which pacified a public opinion that had become increasingly worried over the worsening relations with China, whose economic growth process fuelled Japan's own economic growth; this was

¹²⁸ Abe Shinzo, 'Hoshu saisei no tame kanjicho o jisu' [I leave as secretary-general for the sake of a conservative rebirth], *Bungei shunju* (September 2004), pp. 156–62.

¹²⁹ Ikuo Kabashima and Chihiro Okawa, 'Abe's Dilemma', *Japan Echo*, 34:1 (February 2007), <http://www.japanecho.co.jp/sum/2007/b3401.html>

¹³⁰ A case in recent memory is when Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo characterized politics in this way when he voiced his concern over the effects on the Japanese economy of the 1997–98 Asian economic crisis that wreaked havoc on the economies in the Asia-Pacific. Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 'Policy Speech by Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi to the 143rd Session of the Diet', August 7, 1998, <http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/980810-143diet.html>.

particularly salient given the fact that Japan's 'lost decade' was still fresh in the memory. Abe's move also robbed the opposition parties of an opening for criticizing him for hawkish tendencies. The pragmatism demonstrated by Japan's new prime minister gives him a strong hand in the encounter with voters in the upcoming general elections.

Abe's masterly move of making a blitz tour to China and South Korea demonstrated his best side not only to voters but also party strategists and political candidates on the LDP ballot. With his political career carved out in international affairs in the sense that it related to Japan's external relations, his strength as a politician is in a field usually not seen as engendering strong vote-getting potential. However, polls show stronger support among Japanese in general for sticking to the gains obtained by Abe's visit to China than paying visits to the Yasukuni shrine that are provocative to Japan's neighbors.¹³¹ A rift within the party over visits to the shrine would be detrimental to the prospects of a success for the Liberal Democratic Party in the Upper House election. The success that Abe garnered with his trips to Beijing and Seoul makes it seem less likely that Abe will risk this success by visiting the contentious war-related Yasukuni shrine. Furthermore, the partner of the LDP in the ruling coalition, the New Komeito, warned Abe a few days after he had become prime minister that he should not visit the Yasukuni shrine, and the warning was issued once again later.¹³² Since the support of the new Komeito is crucial for the LDP by the virtue of the fact that the proven ability of the Komeito to steer the votes of its supporters to parties it want to support in a way that decides the outcome of the elections, Abe can not afford to alienate the LDP's coalition partner too much.¹³³

¹³¹ 'LEAD: 83% happy with Abe's China trip, opposition to Yasukuni visits rises', *Japan Policy & Politics*, October 16, 2006.

¹³² Masami Ito, 'Give Yasukuni a miss: New Komeito: Ota of LDP's junior partner sends hawkish Abe camp a clear signal', *The Japan Times*, September 30, 2006; 'Soka Gakkai's new chief urges Abe to shun Yasukuni', *The Japan Times*, November 18, 2006.

¹³³ Author's interview of Okazawa Norio, professor of political science, Waseda University, March 14, 2007.

Abe's Dilemmas

When Koizumi Junichiro was first elected as prime minister of Japan, his support rate was astonishing and has not been surpassed since; and he continued to enjoy solid support throughout his time in power. His support was based on the fact that he was seen as a politician who was set to effectuate economic reform, seen by most Japanese as badly needed. When Abe succeeded him, it was on the coat tail of a Koizumian reformist. But his allegiance to economic reform is something that emerged after he began to be mentioned as a likely successor to Koizumi and it is openly questioned how deep his allegiance to the ideas of economic reform really is. In a move to counter the claims that he is ignorant on the economy, a book was issued to present his ideas on economic policy. In a postscript the author of the book states that the book is a companion volume to Abe's *Utsukushii kuni e* but not written by Abe, since it was put together when he was working on his book and could not find time to write another book.¹³⁴ The aforementioned book on economy is authored by a top economic strategist and Abe's political foes can easily claim that the author is not so much giving voice to Abe's views but formulating them himself. In the stream of books about Abe since he emerged as a key contender for the post of prime minister, the book on his economic policy was not a success.

Abe is not a prolific author in contrast to many other leading politicians. That the book on economy was not authored by Abe can be taken as indicating a lack of knowledge of economic matters, a singular deficiency of a politician's capability that has to be mended. But it is part of a wider problem encountered by Abe. As prime minister he faces three dilemmas, which are detailed below.

¹³⁴ Fujita Tsutomu, *Abe Shinzo no keizai seisaku o yomu* [Understanding Abe Shinzo's economic policies] (Tokyo: Indekkusu-komyunikeshon, 2006), p. 219.

Dilemma 1: Youth vs Inexperience

There is a paradox linked to the election of Abe Shinzo as prime minister of Japan. Aged 52 and five days when he assumed office, he was the fifth youngest premier that Japan has had since the country started modernizing one and a half centuries ago. He is a political leader who has been entrusted with political responsibility at the very centre of political power but is seen very much as a one issue politician and politically untested. As chief cabinet secretary, he was entrusted with the responsibility to work for turning the prime minister's ideas into practical policies and proposals to be handled in the Diet and not so much launch his ideas and programs of his own.

For a start, Abe won his political laurels in his stance vis-à-vis North Korea; but he has come to gradually expand his political platform. Still, he was a fairly unknown political entity even when he succeeded Koizumi. Being the youngest post-war premier with a rapid political career meant, inevitably, a lack of experience which makes him vulnerable to attacks from political foes both within and outside of the Liberal Democratic Party. Abe is quite aware of this fact and has tried to play it safe since he was elected. He has continued his strategy of ambiguity, launched when it had become clear that he was the strongest candidate to take over after Koizumi, combined with a pragmatic approach. He has not bent on the issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea since it is his signature issue, but on others he has tried to muddle through by exercising ambiguity, as on the Yasukuni shrine issue, or apologizing, as in the case of the 'comfort women.'

With his age making him seen to be representing youth and freshness, his brief stint in key political offices, with only one senior governmental post on his curriculum vitae before he became premier, made viable a general view of Abe as captured by the former British Ambassador to Japan, Sir David Wright. He points out that Japan's new prime minister would 'lack experience with only 15 years in Parliament and no experience of any of the great cabinet portfolios.'¹³⁵ Abe's merits were bettered somewhat by the fact that he worked in politics as a secretary of a minister for a decade before he was elected member of the Diet. Still, mistakes have been seen from Abe as prime minister. One is his way of handling the issue of 'comfort women' in a

¹³⁵ Sir David Wright, 'Japan: recovered and under new direction with Prime Minister Abe', *Asian Affairs*, 38:1 (March 2007), p. 24.

way that forced him to bend over backwards and apologize repeatedly, which has not given him any credit but only made the issue stick. Another is his decision to readmit nearly a dozen former LDP members, who had been expelled from the party when they rebelled against Koizumi's postal privatization. It was a move that 'may have been expedient, but it hurt his public-approval rating', and when he made a concession to the road-building lobby, his popularity was tarnished since it gave the impression that he backtracked for the sake of expediency.¹³⁶

Dilemma 2: Ambiguity vs Fighting

Being the grandson of his admired grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, and having him as his political hero, Abe learnt at an early age to treasure an unwavering personality. He reveres politicians who are 'fighting statesmen' willing to take an unpopular stand and stick to their convictions. In the preface to his bestselling book, Abe writes of his admiration for political fighters 'who work for the country or the nation without bothering about criticism' and lashes out against those non-fighting politicians who are but turncoat opportunists. His own example of a 'fighting politician', given in his book, is the British MP Arthur Greenwood, who spoke up in the British parliament against Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy towards Hitler in 1939.¹³⁷

Abe states in *Utsukushii kuni e* that ever since he was first elected to the Diet his political ideal has been to be a 'fighting politician' – to listen to the people and speak up for Japan. Unfortunately, he has found that 'fighting politicians' are a rare breed in Japanese politics and always have been; when he spoke up on the issue of the Japanese who had been kidnapped by North Korea, he was ridiculed as a 'rightist reactionary' and few MPs wanted to join him, he says.¹³⁸ A reader of Abe's book would interpret that he considers himself to have been such a 'fighting politician', at least insofar as it concerns the inflamed issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea.

Lee Jong-won, a political science professor at Rikkyo University, credits Abe with being a 'fighting politician' – at least he quotes him approvingly to that

¹³⁶ Richard Katz and Peter Ennis, 'How Able Is Abe?', *Foreign Affairs*, 86:2 (March/April 2007), p. 78.

¹³⁷ Abe, *Utsukushii kuni e*, p. 4.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 4f.

effect. Lee has noted a parallel between Abe and his predecessor Koizumi in their approaches to politics. Shortly before Abe was appointed prime minister, Lee wrote a commentary on a book published by the Japanese newspaper, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, entitled “The Man Who Turned Foreign Policy Into a Fight”; the book concerns Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro’s approach to diplomacy during his five years in office. Lee goes on to claim that Abe ‘is also a man who advocates that kind of approach. He has just published a book, “Becoming a Beautiful Country,” about what he hopes to accomplish in office, and it begins with the words, “a politician who fights.” The book is a militant declaration in which he says Japan has too many convictionless, fight-eschewing, overly cautious politicians.’¹³⁹

The similarity between Abe’s and Koizumi’s approaches that Lee discerns seems eye-catching. However, that similarity would seem more superficial. The ‘fight’ of Abe and ‘fight’ of Koizumi are not the same. Lee takes note of that the word used to describe Koizumi’s approach is the word *kenka*, which ‘is usually translated as “fight,” but the nuance it carries is closer to a “fistfight” or “verbal scuffle” among little schoolboys.’¹⁴⁰ The word that Abe uses for politicians he finds inspiring is *tatakau*, which is far from denoting some ‘fistfight’ or ‘verbal scuffle’ among little schoolboys but rather a samurai fighting a war and battling with swords. The similarity in Abe’s and Koizumi’s approaches that Lee discerns seems spurious. The translation into English might be ‘fight’ but the connotations of the two words differ.

There is a dilemma that Abe faces. His ideal of how he should act as a politician clashes with his image of being the Mr Nice Guy of Japanese politics and with his strategy of ambiguity. What is required from him as a national leader differs from what was needed from him as a politician on his way up and as a candidate for political office. He has become prime minister because, for one, he went out of his way to show his support for Prime Minister Koizumi, who in many ways turned out to be Abe’s benefactor and, second, he clarified his unambiguous support for Koizumi’s reform efforts. It seems fairly evident that Koizumi saw Abe as a guarantor that his reform work would continue also after he had retired as prime minister. But Abe is

¹³⁹ Lee Jong-won, ‘Foreign Policy as a “Fight”’: Abe and the future of East Asian relations’, *The Hankyoreh*, August 24, 2006, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_editorial/151252.html.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

not Koizumi. While Abe's political benefactor was a 'maverick' politician, basing his strong standing among ordinary people and often clashing with the power wielders in the Liberal Democratic Party, Abe's leadership style is different. Despite that his image of being a handsome and nice guy that polls show lured many voters, Abe does not have the unique charisma and originality that endeared Koizumi to the public but is often described as fairly dull with lackluster speaking skills.¹⁴¹ Watching him on television, it is easy to see why he has this reputation.

It would be hard to claim that Abe has lived up to his ideal of being a 'fighting politician' after his appointment as prime minister. Rather, he continued on the track of ambiguity that he devised at the end of his campaign for the party presidency. Judging by his moves in the first weeks in the prime minister's office, Abe cast himself as a sensible moderate – not the radical right-winger that was his image. His pragmatic handling as prime minister of divisive issues distanced himself from what was seen to many as a provocative stance on high-profile issues, which indicated that as prime minister he felt the need for becoming more of a middle-of-the-road politician. Another indication that he realized the need for demonstrating moderation was that he distanced himself from the group of right-wing scholars, journalists and politicians, who had supported him and helped him reach his position and were seen as his brain trust. The networks he had built up over the years as a back-bencher – and later as a politician moving upwards in his party and the government – were known as notoriously right-wing.¹⁴² When he formed his government it is obvious that he continued his strategy as a candidate by abstaining from elevating his right-wing politician friends to important posts. Nakagawa Shoichi, who was made chairman of the LDP's Policy Research Council, was the only exception. Thus, Abe's appointments showed a clear move in the direction towards the political middle. In an interview in November 2006, Iokibe Makoto claimed that the premier had quietly discarded his right-wing advisors who no longer had

¹⁴¹ Ikuo Kabashima and Chihiro Okawa, 'Abe's Dilemma', *Japan Echo*, 34:1 (February 2007), <http://www.japanecho.co.jp/sum/2007/b3401.html>

¹⁴² A survey of Abe's networks is given in a five-part series of articles on 'Abe jinmyaku: Jiki seikenzo o saguru' [Abe networks: Searching for the image of the next cabinet], *The Mainichi shimbun*, August 29–September 3, 2006; and in Tawara Yoshifumi, 'Abe seiken no seisaku to sono burentachi' [The policy and brain of the Abe government], in Tawara Yoshifumi et al., *Abe Shinzo no honsei* [The real character of Abe Shinzo] (Tokyo: Kinyobi, 2006), pp. 6–50.

access to him.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, rumors had it in March 2007 that Abe continued his contacts with them but, if true, it was done very much behind the scenes.¹⁴⁴

After his success in foreign policy during the first weeks, Abe has stuck to what seemed a winning formula and his ardent supporters among conservatives and right-wingers have not objected to him straying away from issues dear to them. But there may be a limit when the cards are called. One control station is in mid August, when Abe has to show his cards on the Yasukuni shrine: will he go there like Koizumi did, or not? If he goes, relations with China and South Korea will return to the state they were in during the Koizumi era. What is more, he will put them back to a state which, in his own words during his Beijing trip, will 'decide relations between the two countries for a hundred years'. If he does not go, he is likely to lose the support from those who helped him reach the top spot and without whose support he might have to leave office.

Abe's leadership style is the anti-thesis of how his political hero Kishi acted and resembles his father's approach to politics. While Abe is a proponent of ideas that link him to his grandfather, his political style and persona have much more in common with his father than with his grandfather. Koizumi's style as prime minister was different. He did not see any problem in bulldozing his way in politics and thus creating enemies whom he then defeated by using his strong hand, his support of the electorate, or by ransacking the machinery of the Liberal Democratic Party. This is not Abe's cup of tea. Rather than bulldozing his way and bullying the opposition in the party, his ideal is to be leader acting like a conductor of an orchestra.¹⁴⁵ One of his basic instincts as a politician according to himself is to act in a way so enemies are not created.¹⁴⁶ This may be hard to believe for those who have

¹⁴³ Author's interview of Iokibe Makoto, President, National Defense Academy of Japan, November 18, 2006.

¹⁴⁴ A well-known political science professor told me in a conversation on March 10, 2007 that he had been one of twelve guests at a dinner with Abe two days before. Among the dinner guests were some ultra-nationalistic right-wingers. The professor further told me: 'I really did not like that Abe meets them'.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁴⁶ Interview of Abe by Shiota, quoted in Shiota, *Abe Shinzo to rikiryō*, p. 17.

followed him and only seen the nationalistic politician with strong views, but it is more reasonable to contend for those who have watched him closely.

There is a parallel between Abe's political hero Kishi and Abe's political benefactor, Koizumi, in that both represent politicians motivated by a grand idea; this is probably one factor behind why a political blue blood like Abe Shinzo joined a 'maverick' premier falling out with his party and basing his position on abject opposition to party bigwigs and faction leaders. What Koizumi's success implies is that the old style of running politics à la LDP with factional infighting and downright power games has had its heyday and is irrevocably over. According to a seasoned observer of Japan's modern political history, 'Abe may not be as skilful as Koizumi in his appeals to mass opinion, nor so outspoken as Koizumi in his determination to reduce bureaucratic power, but he will continue the same direction.'¹⁴⁷ Like Kishi, Koizumi was a 'strong' premier who ran the show but, unlike Kishi who fell from grace by being too highhanded, Koizumi demonstrated his capacity by staying in power despite intra-party opposition. Koizumi was an unsurpassed genius of taming the media and securing support from public opinion and his performance was instructive to Abe and is something for him to learn from and try to emulate. Koizumi's strength and skill at winning support cannot easily be copied, but Abe has to try.

Dilemma 3: 'Regime Change' vs US Relations

When Koizumi began to groom Abe as a potential successor, a key aspect was that Abe's image as a welfare *zoku* had been overshadowed by his popular and strong profile on a key foreign policy issue. Koizumi secured the top job because of his unbending will to reform – which pleased voters – and wanted his successor to continue. Accordingly, in Abe's political platform, the weight allotted to reform is noticeable as can be expected of a political candidate who was dependent on the blessing of the one he wants to succeed and whose credo is reform. But there is a difference. While Koizumi targeted the economy for his reform plans and was supported by voters, Abe targets 'the post-war regime' as his main concern for reform which is, by and large, not supported by a majority of Japanese.

¹⁴⁷ Pyle, 'Abe Shinzo and Japan's Change of Course', p. 26.

Abe has grown to be the foremost spokesman among nationalists voicing frustration of being perpetually under the control of the United States. One of the LDP's objectives since its foundation in 1955 has been to revise the post-war pacifist constitution, which is seen by conservatives as a must for Japan to regain true independence. Behind this urge lingers nationalism. Over the years, the fact that Japan was turned into a pacifist country with a constitution written by Americans has been painful for conservatives. Conservatives find the characteristics of Japan's nationalism to be about Japan's lost or suppressed identity, which has served to flame their dissatisfaction with the post-war system as it was erected in the aftermath of the Second World War. The determination to put aside what they see as a politically demeaning approach is strong in the Liberal Democratic Party. Abe is one of the politicians who has fanned the nationalistic fire and he has committed himself to institute a departure away from the 'post-war regime', a pledge to be realized with a new constitution worked out by the Japanese and fitting the image of the Japanese nation of the 21st century. To Abe and his nationalistic friends, the national subordination of Japan under a foreign power and the fact that the constitution is written not by Japanese but foreigners is a national shame and something to be eradicated in order to enable the Japanese to straighten their back and decide their own fate. This was the goal of his grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, and, to Abe, it is a goal that is as acute now as it was in the 1950s, when Kishi tried to undo what had been brought onto Japan by the Allied forces and their Japanese collaborators.

At the same time as Abe wants to annihilate 'the post-war regime', he strives for improved relations with Japan's security underwriter, the United States. But 'the post-war regime' that he wants to see go down the drain, in the same way as his grandfather wanted to undo the solution found for organizing Japan's foreign and security policies after the war, is part and parcel of the relationship with the United States. The dilemma that Abe faces is that to get rid of 'the post-war regime' might undermine the very relationship with the United States that he wants to strengthen.

About the Author

Bert Edström has a Ph.D. in Japanese Studies from Stockholm University (1988), and a M.S.Sc (1974) and B.A. (1971) from the same university. Before joining the Silkroad Studies Program, he was working as a consultant and independent researcher. His publications include *Japan's Evolving Foreign Policy Doctrine: From Yoshida to Miyazawa* (1999) and *Japan's Quest for a Role in the World: Roles Ascribed to Japan Nationally and Internationally, 1969-1982* (1988). He has edited and contributed to several books and collections, among others *Turning Points in Japanese History* (Japan Library 2002), *Distant but Close: Swedish-Japanese Relations through Ages* (2001), *Interdependence in the Asia Pacific* (Swedish Institute of International Affairs 2001), and *The Japanese and Europe: Images and Perceptions* (Japan Library 2000).