

# The Rise of 'Abegeopolitics': Japan's New Engagement with the World

By Takashi Inoguchi

**Shinzo Abe's second time round as Japan's prime minister has been marked by global fascination with Abenomics, his attempt to revive the Japanese economy.**

**Just as significant, argues Takashi Inoguchi, has been 'Abegeopolitics,' the prime minister's drive to elevate Japan's international profile and pursue his view of the national interest even in the face of regional opposition. It has been a delicate balancing act.**

ON DEC. 26, 2012, Shinzo Abe returned to power after six years' absence from the premier's chair. Abe's ascent back to the top coincided with the nadir for Japan's long-suffering economy. The business cycle hit its lowest point in 2008, after the Lehman Brothers shock and the global financial crisis, but recovery was slow in Japan, and by the time Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda called for a general election in December, unemployment had not turned around. In addition, what the International Crisis Group called China's "reactive assertiveness" was sparked at virtually the same time when the Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands were nationalized by Noda.

The time was right for Abe to move into the leader's chair, and he made two external factors work for him as he staked a claim to the re-emergence of Japanese power. This was made most visible with his March 2013 proclamation of "Abenomics," the first arrow of which was the quantitative easing of Japan's monetary policy under Haruhiko Kuroda, the newly appointed Governor of the Bank of Japan. His slogan was goodbye to deflation.

Noda's nationalization of the Senkaku islands by purchasing three of them from a previous landowner was regarded as a prudent move in the face of Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara's campaign to buy the islands with public donations. But it gave Abe a major opening for his nationalist views. Although China proclaimed that its assertiveness was in reaction to Noda's purchase of the islands, Abe proclaimed that Japan's claim was in reaction to China's aggressiveness in territorial disputes. The Chinese Navy's use of fire-con-

trol radar targeted at the Japanese Coast Guard on Jan. 31, 2013, helped further Abe's drive for what has become known as "Abegeopolitics" (Inoguchi, 2014b).

## THE PURPOSE OF ABEGEOPOLITICS

Since taking office, Abe has displayed his love of travel, taking 49 trips in the year and half following his victory in December 2012. It is a strong contrast to most previous prime ministers, including his grand uncle, Eisaku Sato, who served between 1964 and 1972 and did not leave the country during his first year in office.

Abe's busy travel schedule is not without purpose. It is integral to his geopolitical approach, which has four major goals:

1) At a time when the United States, Japan's key ally, has been in an isolationist mood — or at least a mood of partial retreat from foreign engagements — Abe believes that Japan should make up for it as much as possible by pursuing what he calls proactive pacifist diplomacy under the principles of abiding by international law, pursuing prosperity, seeking peace non-violently and co-operating bilaterally and multilaterally with friends near and far.

2) While Abenomics, especially the quantitative easing of money supply, is considered a little risky in terms of its long-term ability to spur growth and keep the Nikkei stock index as high as possible, Abe believes keeping Abegeopolitics at center stage and filling the media with pictures of him shaking hands with world leaders is reassuring.

3) Abenomics has brought the yen-dollar exchange rate down, making Japan's exports more attractive but making its massive imports of energy, food and mineral resources more expensive and the country more vulnerable to price shocks. Hence Abegeopolitics should vigorously enhance Japanese exports, investment and technology transfers in world markets.

4) The ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu preached the doctrine of *yuanjiao jinggong*: associate with friends from afar and attack enemies nearby. In terms of Abe's approach, Japan should make hundreds of friends and vigorously cope with the two nations that make constant negative noises about Japan, China and South Korea.

Beyond these four broad principles, it is useful to look at the origins of Abegeopolitics, which run deep into Japan's post-World War II history. The roots of the strategy date back to 1945 and Japan's unconditional surrender and occupation by the allied powers. Before he became prime minister in 2006 for the first time, Abe published a book entitled *Towards a Beautiful Country: My Vision For Japan*, in which he reflects on his love for Japan and laments that its citizens have lost confidence and Japan has compromised its national sovereignty. Restoring confidence and vigor, he says in the book, would be his first priority as prime minister.

His reflections cover a wide range of thoughts on Japan, but history comes first. While his ideas may not be sufficiently articulated, he seems critical of what he believes are unnecessary compromises on national sovereignty made during and after the occupation: the constitutional ban on "collective self-defense," constraints on Japan's military, the US armed forces' extraordinary rights and semi-permanent status in Japan, reduced respect for the national flag and anthem and general obliviousness about casualties from World War II.

All this apparently comes from memories of his maternal grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, who began his long career a bureaucrat in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. With rapid war mobilization in the 1930s, he climbed the ladder steadily and was assigned a key position in Manchukuo, Japan's client state in occupied northern China.



Forceful style: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sets out his case for revising pacifist Japan's military rules of engagement at a press conference in Tokyo on May 15. He said he wants the armed forces to be able to enter battle in defence of allies — one of the most prominent policies promoted under "Abegeopolitics."

Photo: EPA/Kimimasa Mayama

He also became Minister of War Mobilization under Prime Minister Hideki Tojo; in 1944, he parted ways with Tojo on war policy and became instrumental in Tojo's resignation as premier.

After 1945, Kishi was sentenced to 3½ years in prison as a Class A war criminal. Once he was freed, he steadily rose in the newly established Liberal Democratic Party and became prime minister in 1958. Three policy achievements stand out about Prime Minister Kishi: signing and ratifying a revised US-Japan Security Treaty, normalizing diplomatic relations with Southeast Asian countries and consolidating the government-industry relationship. All three have a lot to do with the beginning of Japanese geopolitics. In the eyes of Kishi, Japan in 1958 must have looked like a continuation of US-occupied Japan. Two issues would have stood out: In addition to the close security relationship, the US was virtually the only country with which Japan had meaningful diplomatic relations, and industry was badly in need of government help for consolidation and expansion.

Just like his grandfather, Abe wants to broaden Japan's space for trade, investment, technology and diplomacy. His apprehension is that when the US is in an isolationist mood and China is in an assertive mood, Japan must be alert, astute and aggressive, even under the pacifist constitution.

The more recent inspiration for Abegeopolitics is from "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity: Japan's Expanding Diplomatic Horizons," an influential 2006 speech given by Taro Aso, who was serving in Abe's first cabinet as foreign minister at the time. It is also important to note two powerful bureaucratic agents for Abegeopolitics: Shotaro Yachi and Nobukatsu Kanehara. The two have been working together since 2006 in various positions; Yachi's current job is head of the National Security Policy Council, while Kanehara is deputy secretary general of the Prime Minister's Cabinet. Abe puts nearly boundless trust in them.



#### ABEGEOPOLITICS IN ACTION

Geopolitics may sound like old-fashioned strategic thinking in an era of globalization. But geographical continuity matters. In this context, three principal pillars of Japanese foreign policy are: 1) Consolidating defense and deterrence capability; 2) Transforming finite endogenous resources into something much greater through discovery and innovation; 3) Invigorating multilateral networks and institutions (Inoguchi, 2014 c). Pillar one has the strongest affinity with Abegeopolitics; pillar two is key to Abenomics; pillar three supports the idea of vigorous diplomacy.

Obviously, security issues are a key factor in Japan's current geopolitical approach. Japanese defense spending stagnated for two decades after the collapse of the bubble economy in 1991 as government revenue shrank and the

post-Cold War environment surrounding Japan was reasonably stable. For the latter observation, Timo Kivimaki (2014) and Benjamin Goldsmith (2014) have presented persuasive arguments to explain the East Asian long peace since 1980. This background is important to keep in mind when discussing Japanese defense capacity and the ability to deter external attacks. First, the government and the Bank of Japan took the policy of issuing government bonds to augment revenue shortfalls. Tax hikes were avoided at all costs. Second, the East Asian long peace since 1980 has seldom been recognized as dramatic, but it is very significant. Since the brief but bloody Sino-Vietnamese border war of 1979, for which official casualty figures have never been released by either side but which is believed to have claimed between 100,000-200,000 lives

(Inoguchi, 1980), there have been no significant wars fought in East Asia.

To take a longer-term perspective, let me start in 1938. During the Second World War period (1938-1945), war-related deaths — defined as the number of soldiers killed in wars, not including civilians — were about 5 million per year (SIPRI, 2014). During the Cold War period (1945-1989), war-related deaths were about 100,000 per year. During the Post-Cold War period (1989-2014), war-related deaths have been 10,000 per year.

Against this global picture, how does East Asia fare in terms of war-related deaths? Let me examine violent conflicts after the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, one by one:

- In 1988, China and Vietnam clashed again, less violently, over the Spratley islands resulting in an unknown number of deaths.

- In 1995, China and the Philippines confronted each other over territories, with the Philippines avoiding a fight; hence zero war-related deaths.
- In 2001, a United States Air Force reconnaissance aircraft was flying over Hainan Island when a Chinese fighter aircraft attempted to down it and failed, resulting in a collision. The Chinese pilot was killed; thus the war-related death toll is one.
- In 2010, South Korean Navy frigate *Cheonan* was sunk, presumably by North Korea, and 46 seamen were killed.
- Also in 2010, North Korea shelled Yeonpyeong island, killing two soldiers and two civilians.
- In 2012-2014, China and Japan contested over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands in the East China Sea with no deaths.
- In 2014, China and the Philippines clashed with no fatalities.
- In the 2014 standoff between Vietnam and China

perity. Although high economic growth was no longer possible, Japanese policy saw to it that stability and prosperity were maintained at home and abroad. The two keys are enhancing the alliance with the United States and invigorating the country's high-technology edge. Without the former, defense and deterrence effects would go down visibly. Without the latter, Japan could not work together with the sophisticated US armed forces. With both working positively, Japan's defense policies work well. The technological edge is vital to maintain operational readiness with the US. But if Japan's technological edge in military hardware were to go absent, it would be tantamount to Japan waving good-bye to the US. The reality is that both have evolved in tandem.

#### INTERNAL SELF-TRANSFORMATION

When one's living environment changes, adaptation takes many forms. It could be internal self-

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over a Chinese oil rig in the South China Sea, the rig was eventually withdrawn with no deaths.

Therefore, the East Asian long peace registered a minimal number of war-related deaths per year, compared with the global picture. East Asia is dramatically peaceful.

Against the backdrop of this long peace, Japanese defense policy has been evolving with steady reference to two key words: stability and pros-

transformation or an external effort to transform other actors and environments. Abenomics is meant to guide internal transformation. Most visibly and tangibly, the quantitative easing of the currency was undertaken to get rid of what Abe calls the deflation mind-set or resignation about stagnation. Whether monetary policy could transform one's mind-set as to growth can be disputed. A number of factors are widely believed to be nec-

essary to such change, including experiencing a long period of stagnation followed by a dramatic series of events taking place at home and abroad.

Events and actions originating from Japan's engagement or non-engagement with China, North Korea and South Korea in 2012-2014 seem to be sufficient to trigger internal self-transformation. China's double-digit growth of the last three decades has transformed the regional economic structure from Japan-centered to China-centered. Other countries in the region have deepened their intra-regional links, whereas China, Japan and South Korea have expanded their economic activities to a global scale. Most dramatic is the globalization of Chinese trade and investment. More dramatically for Japan, China and South Korea have become more anti-Japanese under new leaders Xi Jinping and Park Geun-hye, who both appeared in 2012. Abe came last on Dec. 26, 2012, as prime minister.

In autumn 2012, Noda, the Democratic Party of Japan prime minister, nationalized the Senkaku islands, which China vehemently opposed with anti-Japanese rhetoric and actions. Abe came in at the right moment, since he is critical of both Chinese and South Korean anti-Japanese statements and attitudes.

Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine one year later, on Dec. 26, 2013, triggered another series of events. To Abe, the first anniversary of his second ascent to power was an important day to demonstrate to his right-wing supporters that he is willing to visit the Yasukuni Shrine to honor the war dead, but the action, of course, infuriated both China and South Korea.

For Xi, Dec. 26, 2013, was also the centenary of Mao Zedong's birth, so on that day Xi visited the Mao Zedong Mausoleum in Tiananmen Square. The Yasukuni visit also came against the backdrop of still-simmering tension from almost a year earlier — the January 2013 incident when

the Chinese Navy targeted "fire-control" radar at Japanese Coast Guard ships, which was considered a major provocation. The Japanese Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard did not counteract but practiced restraint, even as Chinese Air Force planes maneuvered "unusually close" to Japanese reconnaissance aircraft (Inoguchi, 2014b).

These actions enhanced the anti-Chinese and anti-Korean mood at home, which Abe has been able to make use of but which he has tried to tone down and tame where necessary in order to retain vital economic interdependence among Japan, China and South Korea.

Most fundamental in the ongoing internal transformation is progress in research and development activities in science and technology. Abenomics has three roles: first, trying to kill the deflation-prone mindset using monetary policy and by encouraging consumption and investment; second, lowering astronomical government budget deficits by cutting non-priority items and expanding the budget for science and technology; and third, investing in research and development both in the government budget and in corporate portfolios, thereby sharpening Japan's edge in technology.

#### NETWORKS AND MULTILATERALISM

Shinzo Abe has set a record for making trips abroad as prime minister. As of August 2014, he made 49 trips abroad in 19 months. This is not travel with no purpose. He has been invigorating and building networks and consolidating Japan's influence in multilateral institutions. When Abe was prime minister for the first time, foreign minister Taro Aso made the ideas in his Arc of Freedom speech known to the world. The speech was interesting for a number of reasons: first, unlike many documents coming out of Japan, it is notable for its frequent reference to big words like freedom, rule of law, democ-

racy, human rights, free trade and open markets; second, while country-specific or region-specific agreements abound, he emphasized strategic and mutually beneficial partnerships; and third, he tried to mobilize votes for multilateral institutions like the United Nations Security Council and its permanent members.

Consolidating Japan's voice and influence in multilateral institutions has become a priority in Japanese foreign policy. Established organizations like the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are widely regarded as stagnant, inefficient and perhaps irrelevant. Japan wants to reinvigorate such organizations with fresh groupings such as the G4 (Japan, Germany, Brazil, and India) in the UN Security Council. Second, emerging economies have been vigorous in establishing and even overwhelming some older organizations. One of the recent examples is the new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank initiated by China and backed by the G-20.

Japan's concern is that its foreign policy has been tied to the alliance with the US and it has not fully appreciated the rest of the world in one way or another. While the deepening of globalization has made Japan's interests felt in every part of the world, it is widely recognized that Japan's soft power has been underutilized for its technological edge, economic might and cultural richness. The Japanese lack of proficiency in the English language has been noted as one of the major problems it has when working in multilateral organizations.

Abegeopolitics is an astute and agile adaptation to a serendipitous moment. The business cycle is on a nascent upward trajectory after two decades of recession at a time of Chinese and South Korean assertiveness and relative US isolationism. Whether Abe's ambitious approach to geopolitics will prosper during his second time in power will

depend on many factors. It will have to overcome many hurdles, like the massive accumulated government debt, the need to reinterpret constitution-related laws and successfully preventing the long peace in East Asia from exploding.

Can he do it? It is too early to tell, but the game is on and Japan is engaged, through Abe, in an invigorating adventure.

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