

# Abe's Calculation in Japan's Right-wing Shift

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In the recent past, Japan has shown right-wing shift, employing aggressive policies in territorial and historical disputes and strengthening its forces through collective self-defense. Since Abe Shinzo came to office, Japan's right-wing shift is escalating further. Why is Abe Shinzo pushing for the right-wing shift? There may be two reasons. First, Abe Shinzo wants to stay in power for long by following the footsteps of Koizumi Junichiro. Since 1992 when the Japanese economy started experiencing slow growth, there have been fifteen prime ministers. During that time period, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lost power for the first time since 1955 and the average tenure of the prime minister was shorter than 1.5 years. However, the Japan New Party, the Japan Renewal Party, and the Social Democratic Party, which were in power from 1993 to 1996, failed to rejuvenate the economy, resulting in the LDP's return to power.

Koizumi Junichiro came to office in 2001. Due to the so-called "lost decade", the Japanese people were tired of economic difficulties. As no economic policies were working effectively, Koizumi appealed to nationalism by adopting right-wing shift. He repeatedly visited the Yasukuni War Shrine, although South Korea and China enragged. He did not value Japan's relationship with other Asian neighbors. Instead, he focused on the US-Japan alliance. To support US military efforts, Koizumi dispatched the Self Defense Force (SDF) to Iraq. By doing so, he intended to boost Japan's national pride. This policy move was well received and Koizumi stayed in power for five and a half years, which was the longest since 1987.

Abe Shinzo became Japan's prime minister after Koizumi, but he had to step down after only a

year later. When he came to office again in 2012, he must have studied why he did not last long and what made Koizumi stay in power for a long time. His conclusion seems to be following Koizumi's footsteps as the economy is still struggling with low growth and high unemployment. Just like Koizumi, Abe emphasizes the relationship with the US and does not seem to value Japan's relationship with South Korea and China. For example, in the recent 2 + 2 meeting (defense and state secretaries) in October 2013, Washington and Tokyo agreed to revise the 1997 Guidelines for the US-Japan Defense Cooperation. With the new agreement, the US and Japan enhanced their military alliance through Japan's collective self-defense. As Washington wants to reduce its military burden, the US supports Japan's increased military role in Asia. Conservatives in Japan has wanted to expand the SDF's capabilities and roles to become a "normal" country. With the agreement, Japan reinterpreted its constitution concerning the SDF. This change has raised significant concerns in South Korea and China as Japan is strengthening its military force.

The Abe administration has also signaled potential change in Japan's position in some historical issues, such as comfort women or enforced sex slavery. With the Kono statement in 1993, Japan publicly admitted its involvement in enforced sex slavery during World War II and extended a public apology, which made a significant contribution to the improvement in Japan's relationship with South Korea. However, Abe argues that the announcement was not based on the evidence of coercion and thus it needs to be revisited. The Abe administration has also employed aggressive policies in territorial disputes (e.g. Dokdo/Takeshima and Senkaku/Diaoyu disputes). In sum, his foreign policy is very similar to Koizumi's, meaning he wants to stay in power for long. Thus, his foreign policies target domestic audience.

Another reason for Abe's right-wing shift is boosting national pride. Abe Shinzo is the first Japanese prime minister who was born after WW II and many of his cabinet members were also born after WW II. They grew up with high national pride as the Japanese economy rose to the second largest in the world. Yet, the sluggish economy significantly lowered their national pride and this new generation of conservative political leaders has had a hard time accepting the change. To boost Japan's national pride and bring back the glory of their country in international arena, Abe wants to enhance its military role in international arena as the economy is not recovering quickly. The Wall Street Journal nicely summarized Abe Shinzo's move to the right as follows, "Abe's policies focused on denying the history of a war of aggression shifting from economic recovery and this change would reflect Japan's intention to strengthen their military power."<sup>1)</sup> As no opposition party can constrain the LDP and Abe's right-wing shift is largely appealing to the public, Japan's

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1) \* Yuka Hayashi, "Japan Leader Charts Path for Military's Rise," The Wall Street Journal (April 24, 2013)  
<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323551004578438253084917008>

right-wing shift is likely to continue.

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