As Shinzo Abe takes over as Japan’s new prime minister, the country is facing a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape in Asia, one that requires bolder steps than previous Japanese governments have been willing to take.

The strategic incrementalism that has characterized Japan’s policymaking in the past must give way to a new, more dynamic diplomacy, writes Jonathan Berkshire Miller.

THE PAST DECADE has seen a dramatic shift in power dynamics in East Asia. Japan, South Korea, China and Russia all continue trading barbs over their territorial disputes, and let’s not forget a turbulent and volatile regime in Pyongyang, which only recently conducted its third nuclear test. Moreover, Japan and Russia face the prospect of decline as their societies continue to age and their economies fight to recover past dynamism. China and South Korea also face these challenges, but are a bit further behind on the decline curve due to somewhat different demographics. China’s quest to be a regional hegemon has created a situation that depends on — and indeed requires — an adversary. The US, of course, is a natural one, but Beijing too realizes the limits of its power and is wary of provoking Washington. It is more natural for China to look at Japan — due to history, politics and power — as a symbol of what needs to change in Asia.

How can Japan address such dynamic change in its backyard? Time will be an important test here. The past six months have resulted in leadership changes in Northeast Asia’s three most strategic countries. Following a near-certain grooming period, Xi Jinping has been appointed as president of China along with a narrowed set of six other members of the elite Politburo Standing Committee. In Japan and South Korea, quasi-conservatives Shinzo Abe and Park Geun-hye respectively were elected within one week. Some regional experts predict that these changes will lead to a “diplomatic reset” in Northeast Asia; others argue that conservative and nationalist forces in these countries will further strain ties, which have reached a nadir within the past year.

Reality lies in a nuanced view of the leadership changes — all sides will likely step forward on economic integration while quietly maintaining firm stances on the territorial disputes.

There is a possibility that new leadership could lead to a progressive foreign policy agenda that looks to change trajectory from the current toxic narrative. After all, the new leaders of all three nations have tacitly — and sometimes overtly — made their intentions clear about the importance of the trilateral relationship. Abe’s surprising landslide election and the rebirth of the Liberal Democratic Party provides an opportunity for Tokyo to reconsider its strategic relationships with South Korea and China. The territorial disputes over the Takeshima and Senkaku Islands will likely remain intractable, but that should not impede Japan from continuing to look at fresh and innovative ways of enhancing its essential economic ties with Seoul and Beijing.

MANAGING TENSIONS WITH BEIJING AND SEOUL

One of the principal challenges for the Abe administration will be assuaging regional tensions with China and South Korea. Despite having a mutual interest in soothing frayed ties, thus far Beijing has been unwilling to recalculate its strategy in the East China Sea. Meanwhile, South Korea is also carefully watching Japan’s domestic scene but seems to have a slightly more diplomatic approach to its dispute with Tokyo over Dokdo/Takeshima. Both countries are concerned about Abe’s defiance of their protests regarding visits to the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo, which honors Japan’s war dead, including some “Class A” war criminals from World War II. In fact, Abe visited the shrine as recently as this past October, when he was the leader of the opposition. The symbolism of a visit to Yasukuni will now be magnified, however, with Abe as prime minister — should he decide to pay a visit — and he will need to calculate the risk involved in making future trips.

Abe’s approach to Japan’s territorial disputes will also be an imposing challenge. In policy speeches leading up to the election, Abe indicated his firm view on Japan’s sovereignty over the Senkaku, Takeshima/Dokdo islands and the Northern Territories
(Southern Kurils). Indeed, after his election he remarked that the Senkakus “are the inherent territory of Japan… We own and effectively control them. There is no room for negotiations about that.” However, reality has surpassed rhetoric and it is no longer an effective policy for Japan to maintain simple business lines on the disputes. Diplomacy remains the only real option for Tokyo. But it will be important to watch how this approach is nuanced with Abe’s stated intention to revise the role of Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (SDF), which would provide a credible “silent hand” to any LDP policy.

The dynamic geopolitical architecture in East Asia is also forcing Japan to adapt its force posture to meet the new realities. Japan has repositioned the majority of its SDF to its southern islands (Kyushu). In previous years, Japan had positioned the SDF predominantly on its northern island of Hokkaido, as a result of tensions with North Korea and, to a lesser extent, Russia. Japan currently caps defense spending to 1 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP). However, there is significant pressure — both internally and externally — for Tokyo to increase defense spending in light of new responsibilities. Abe has indicated that he will revitalize Japan’s SDF in response to the changing environment and has also placed strong emphasis on having an island of security in East Asia.

The strategic triangle in Northeast Asia has been battered, but it has by no means been destroyed. On the economic side, relations are improving with the long-stalled China-Korea Free Trade Agreement (FTA) entering into formal negotiations earlier this year. This move was largely at the initiative of China, which did not want to lose out on the South Korean market as a result of its isolation from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a US-led free trade initiative in Asia, which Japan has formally said it will negotiate to join and which has elicited interest from South Korea.

Any change in the SDF’s role is often misconstrued as “remilitarization.” This is because there is still a considerable lack of awareness of the constitutional limits on the SDF, and this complicates some observers to assume that reforms equal rearming. In reality, the SDF is one of the most sophisticated and well-funded military projects in the world. Allowing it to participate in collective self-defense, maritime security and joint humanitarian missions should be seen as a positive move.

However, Japan is working from a different baseline because of legal constraints. This often causes knee-jerk reactions that frame Japan’s foreign policy as “shifting to the right.” Moreover, there is also confusion (perhaps intentional) over Japan’s role in East Asian security. One school of thought argues that Tokyo has no desire to take on additional defense burdens and feels it is safer to “free ride” on the US security umbrella. According to this narrative, this not only saves Japan money that it would otherwise spend on defense, it also provides Japan with diplomatic cover. However, this argument falls flat upon close inspection. In fact, it is often a yarn propagated by some US scholars and policymakers who aim to maintain America’s position as “security provider” for Japan. Free riding is a false concept here because the US also benefits heavily from having an island of security in East Asia.

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The CJK FTA, if realized, would benefit all parties in different ways. China would be able to combat pressure from, and dependence on, Western markets while simultaneously under- cutting the emerging TPP. The pact also would be a boon to Japan that would give it favoured trade status with its two most prominent trading partners in the region. South Korea would benefit too, because it would be able to erode competition from ASEAN and — ironically — Japan for access to the Chinese market. Unfortunately, nationalism and domestic politics continue to have the potential to play spoiler here and drag Northeast Asia’s new leaders into a prolonged diplomatic fist fight. It should be a top priority for Abe to work towards soothing these tensions to ensure this integration continues undeterred.

A NEW DIPLOMACY

One of the most significant shortcomings of Japan’s foreign policy in recent years is that Tokyo has done very little to assuage these misunderstandings. There is a genuine dearth of effective communications from the Japanese Foreign Ministry. This complacency, along with aggressive campaigning by South Korea and China, leads many to believe that Japan is aiming to resolve this problem through “radio silence.” Tokyo argues that this approach is diplomatic and avoids potential pitfalls involved in a tit-for-tat game with its neighbors. The same point is true with regard to the territorial spat. Japan remains insistent on its position that there is no territorial issue — a policy intended to strengthen the perception of Tokyo’s sovereignty.

But this inertia and lack of creative diplomacy is not sufficient, because Japan looks reactive while China and South Korea appear proactive. Tokyo can keep its principled position on these issues and still improve its communication to the outside world. One way is through greater utilization of social media such as Twitter. But it will be substance over presence here — the government should look at dynamic ways to use social media instead of just repeating lines from policy documents or press statements. Another method is positive outreach and scholarship on these ideas beyond the halls of government. Earmarking funds for the next generation of Japanese international relations scholars should be an imminent priority. This will also help nurture the current generation of young experts who are raising objections to such misleading narratives.

Pointing fingers at Abe’s cabinet is not helping matters either. This approach is flawed because it only looks at Japan’s tumultuous relations with Seoul and Beijing and neglects the bigger picture of Tokyo’s engagement with Asia as a whole. For example, trade with ASEAN is booming and Japan’s strategic relations with India and Australia are also evolving. This is not all a “China story” either or about encirclement and containment. Rather this is Tokyo’s approach to a diverse continent with varied interests. Luckily, this is an approach understood by several outside observers. Michael Auslin, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, recently stressed that Abe is likely to move towards a “more rational national security decision-making process and a military that can be more easily dispatched abroad for collective self-defense.” The problem here is that Auslin, and thinkers like him, are largely limited to a cadre of academic and bureaucratic elite.

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