Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe came into office in 2012 with a desire to transform Japan into a ‘beautiful country’ after two decades of stagnant growth and battered confidence.

Early and aggressive moves to boost the economy appeared to work, and the national mood lifted. But in April, another side of Abe re-emerged with force: an ideological, nationalist one that many inside and outside of Japan see as less than beautiful.

The Double Life of Shinzo Abe

By Cheol Hee Park

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is an unusual political figure in that he has assumed the position of prime minister twice in seven years. The fact that he has returned to office reflects the Japanese public’s high expectations of him. Ordinary Japanese share his aspiration for national renewal and ambition to transform Japan into a “beautiful country,” in his words.

But how Abe governs will depend on which of the two sides of his political character dominates — Abe the pragmatist or Abe the ideologue. His most immediate priority has been to breathe new life into the stagnant Japanese economy through policies that have been dubbed “Abenomics.” Thanks to a fiscal stimulus package and aggressive quantitative easing — which has pumped money into the banking system through central bank purchases of government bonds — the Japanese economy has begun to show growth after more than two decades of mostly recession. In this regard, Abe seems to have learned a lesson from his previous tenure as prime minister: what really matters is the economy and the quality of people’s daily life.

In a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington on Feb. 23, he declared, “Japan is back,” stressing that Japan is not and will not become a second-rate country. Ordinary Japanese responded positively to his pragmatic handling of the economy, as his unusually high approval rating of close to 70 percent indicates. Over the last two decades, Abe is the only Japanese prime minister whose popularity has gone up after assuming office.

While focusing on his economic agenda since coming into office in December, Abe initially maintained a relatively low profile in foreign affairs and security issues. He appeared eager to avoid troublesome controversies with Asian neighbors, and seemed intent on improving the state of the US-Japan alliance that had been battered during the rule of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).

Abe looked as if he were, indeed, the “cautious hawk” he was described as being by Columbia University Professor Gerald Curtis.

Revisiting Right-Wing Sentiments

However, from mid-April this year, possibly mesmerized by his high approval ratings at home, Abe made an abrupt ideological turn to the right. He allowed four of his cabinet members, including Deputy Premier Taro Aso, to pay a visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, where 14 A-class war criminals are enshrined. A total of 164 Japanese politicians have visited Yasukuni this year, the largest number to do so since the 1990s. Elsewhere, Abe himself repeatedly mentioned the possibility of revising the apology for Japan’s behavior in World War II made by then Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama in 1995. Also, at Abe’s initiative, the Japanese government officially designated April 28 as the Day of Sovereignty Retrieval, to mark the end of the American occupation in 1952. At a Diet committee hearing, Abe, in response to a question by an Upper House member, said that the definition of military “invasion” had not been internationally and academically fixed. The remark left open the suggestion that Japan may not have invaded neighboring countries in World War II, or even attacked the United States. On May 12, Abe was seen giving a thumbs-up from inside the cockpit of a Self-Defense Forces fighter jet that had the number 731 emblazoned on it – a gesture that some saw as insensitive, given that Japan’s Unit 731, a notorious chemical and biological research unit that conducted medical experiments on humans during the World War II, was responsible for the deaths of between 3,000 and 12,000 people, mostly Chinese.

Controversy heated up later when Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto made extremely controversial remarks regarding sex slaves in World War II, remarks from which Abe and his cabinet had to distance themselves. Hashimoto said that every country has mobilized sex slaves in times of war and he did not know why only Japan should be condemned. He even suggested that American soldiers stationed in Japan today are encouraged to go to prostitutes to release stress. Hashimoto also repeated a claim made by Abe that there was no element of coercion when Japan mobilized “comfort women” during the war, implying that the women voluntarily participated as semi-prostitutes. Even the
conservative Sankei newspaper criticized Hashimoto in an editorial, saying such remarks by a politician in the 21st century were a serious affront to the dignity of women. Alarmed by Hashimoto’s remarks, Abe’s government issued statements expressing sympathy toward victimized comfort women. In addition, it announced that the Abe cabinet would respect the 1995 Murayama apology.

The abrupt emergence of Abe’s ideological side alarmed many not only in Japan and neighboring countries, but also in the United States. Ed Royce, chairman of the US House Foreign Relations Committee, on May 15 explicitly criticized those in Japan who deny the existence of comfort women or justified the practice, saying they were ignoring history. Hashimoto, meanwhile, was forced to cancel a planned trip to New York and San Francisco because of opposition from civic groups and local government officials.

For now, Abe appears to be keeping his distance from Hashimoto, although Ishin no Kai, the political party led by Hashimoto and former Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara, has been regarded as supportive of Abe until now. Whether Abe will continue to keep the two controversial politicians at arm’s length remains to be seen.

**Trap of Nationalism**

To be sure, Abe’s pragmatic side, especially his handling of the economy, should be appreciated, because a revitalized Japanese economy serves the interests of many countries. An economically sound and socially vibrant Japan not only gives more confidence to the Japanese themselves, it also benefits the regional and world economy. However, Abe’s ideological approach to nationalistic issues may frustrate many in Japan and damage relations with neighboring countries, and with the US.

First, Abe’s hawkish stance toward historical and territorial controversies makes it very hard for South Korea and Japan, two key allies of the US, to co-operate sincerely. It also has the potential to push South Korea closer to China, at a time when Japan needs co-operation with South Korea to adapt to the changing security environment in Asia. In order to cope with a rising China as well as provocative behavior by North Korea, the need for co-operation between South Korea and Japan is greater than ever, but this will depend on whether Abe can avoid stirring up ideological controversy over such issues as comfort women. While the US and China are engaged in a charm offensive toward South Korea, in recognition of South Korea’s important role in East Asia’s power reconfiguration, Japan under Abe is sending signals that are offensive to South Korea. It is as though Japan’s leaders, driven by ideological preoccupations, are taking an inward-looking, worm’s-eye view of things, while losing a bird’s-eye view of the full East Asian regional landscape.

Second, Abe’s ideological outlook may embolden Japan’s right-wingers, making them more provocative and eventually decreasing the influence of Japan’s soft power. Japan has long been recognized as a country that advocates human rights. Denying the existence of comfort women, or seeking to justify the practice, is hardly consistent with that reputation. Most comfort women were deceived when they were first mobilized and did not know where they were heading when they were transported by the Japanese military. They served Japanese soldiers not out of free will, but under coercion by the Japanese military. They were neither free nor could they escape. This is definitely a serious violation of human rights as well as feminist values. Japan has to make an apology for these inhumane acts rather than distort the facts or even advocate such practices.

**Finding the Right Path**

There are two possible scenarios for Abe’s future course of action. One possibility is that he exploits nationalist issues until the July 21 Upper House election in order to mobilize and consolidate conservative voters, and then turns to a more moderate position after that. After the Upper House election, where Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is expected to gain a majority, there is no national-level election expected in Japan until July 2016. Because the LDP currently has an absolute majority in the Lower House, there is no reason why Abe would dissolve the Lower House until his party’s current leadership tenure ends in December 2016. The next Upper House election after July, meanwhile, is fixed for July 2016. This means that Abe’s tenure as a prime minister can theoretically continue until the summer of 2016.

As long as he does not commit any serious policy or personal blunders, he is likely to remain in the job for more than three years. Given the current political cycle, now may be the only time when he can use nationalistic and ideological issues to mobilize the Japanese electorate ahead of the Upper House election. Seen from this domestic political perspective, it is no surprise that Abe may be using these ideological issues for domestic political advantage. It remains to be seen, though, whether this appeal to emotional nationalistic issues will help the LDP to gain wider support from the public.

The other possibility is that Abe continues to pursue his personal ideological agenda even after the Upper House election. This scenario assumes that Abe is an ideologically committed politician who will pursue his convictions even in the face of opposition and conflict with domestic and external forces. If this is the case, repercussions from inside and outside Japan will give him more energy to fight back. Also, such a political climate would galvanize right-wing groups. A political coalition between Abe’s followers and the ideologically like-minded may lead to continued pursuit of their ultimate goal of constitutional revision, with a view to making Japan “a normal country.”

The first scenario supposes that Abe’s move to the right is temporary and is motivated by domestic electoral calculations. The latter scenario supposes that ideological re-orientation among conservative groups is a driving force in Japanese society, and that the movement is not temporary, but will persist. At this moment, it is not so easy to bet on which scenario is most likely.

If we look back at Japanese diplomacy over the past 15 years, there have been four strands of strategic thinking that have variously been pursued by different governments. One is strengthening the alliance partnership with the US at the expense of neighboring Asian countries. Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s diplomacy exemplified this approach. The second is balancing the US-Japan alliance with active Asian diplomacy. Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s diplomacy exemplified this approach. The second is balancing the US-Japan alliance with active Asian diplomacy.
Minister Yukio Hatoyama’s abortive attempt to realize an East Asian Community while establishing an equal partnership with the US represented this approach. The third is aimed at a rising China by embracing South Korea in the context of a deepening US-Japan alliance. Former Prime Minister Naoto Kan, during the DPJ regime, took this strategic path but did not see it bear much fruit. The fourth approach, which has been discussed but has not yet fully materialized, is asserting Japanese autonomy by loosening engagement with the US while taking a firm stand toward neighboring Asian countries. Ishihara’s way of thinking is close to this approach.

Diplomacy vs. Ideology
So far, Abe’s diplomatic strategy resembles Koizumi’s, although he has raised a more nationalist tone. This is why the ideological side of Abe has come to the surface. The record of Japanese diplomacy over the past 15 years teaches us that Abe-like diplomacy is not the only available option for Japan. Also, it implies that another way of strategic thinking may alternate in the future.

The success or failure of Abe’s diplomatic adventures will ultimately depend on how the Japanese electorate responds to his initiatives. If Abe continues to pursue his ideological side, he can be expected to face at least three challenges in coming months.

First, his ideological agenda may face a domestic backlash if he goes too far. Not all Japanese endorse his views. Opinion is still divided over the issue of constitutional change, although positive opinions are steadily on the increase. Although a majority of people in Japan agrees on the idea of elevating the nation’s sense of pride, opinions are divided over how best to achieve that. Abenomics, meanwhile, appears to have kick-started the economy and boosted domestic confidence, but whether it will lead to a consistent and sustainable economic recovery is not certain. Given this situation, there could be a backlash against hawkish ideological policies, if the economic situation unexpectedly deteriorates.

Second, Abe’s Japan will face incessant criticisms from China and South Korea, his two closest Asian neighbors, who certainly do not share his nationalistic views of history. There might be ebbs and flows of criticism depending on the intensity of Abe’s ideological initiatives, but China and South Korea will continue to raise questions about his hawkish agenda until the three countries establish stable ties among them. It will be a constant diplomatic challenge for Abe to avoid deterioration in relations with both countries, and even unexpected crises, while at the same time pursuing an ideological agenda.

Third, Abe’s pursuit of a hawkish agenda will eventually irritate even the US, Japan’s closest ally, not because Japan is unimportant but because Abe’s agenda betrays American values and norms. Abe and hardline conservatives around him suggest that Japan should change its constitution because the so-called peace constitution was enforced by the American occupation. This is a political attempt to reverse US-initiated reforms after the end of World War II. Abe’s argument that A-class war criminals are not criminals by Japanese standards is a challenge to the Tokyo Tribunal settlement, in which the US played a pivotal role. The US cannot side with Japan if the issue of comfort women is galvanized internationally. Thus, Abe has to navigate through a narrow space between his nationalistic way of revising the post-war system and the liberal norms and values that the US advocates.

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