Abe’s Washington Visit Shows US-Japan Relationship Evolving

By J. Berkshire Miller

As the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War approaches, many observers looked to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s recent visit to the US for signs that he would adequately address the historical grievances hampering relations with Japan’s neighbors, especially China and South Korea. Abe failed to meet expectations in Beijing and Seoul, but his visit did highlight the many fronts on which the US-Japan relationship is deepening, writes J. Berkshire Miller.

JAPANESE PRIME MINISTER Shinzo Abe embarked on an extensive trip to the US this past spring, including stops in Boston, New York, San Francisco and Washington, DC. The trip’s most important deliverables came at the outset with the announcement of new bilateral defense guidelines, a summit meeting with US President Barack Obama and an unprecedented speech before a joint session of Congress — a historical first for a Japanese leader. But the rest of the itinerary — especially in Boston and San Francisco — was also important in reaffirming and positioning favorable images of Japan more broadly in the US. In other words, this trip was about more than the US-Japan security alliance or work on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Rather, Abe’s visit to the US was aimed at solidifying Japan’s brand in Washington and further afield in the country.

EDGING CLOSER ON A TRADE DEAL

On the TPP, there was some progress on Japan-US bilateral negotiations during the lead up to Abe’s trip. Top trade negotiators for the two countries met just before the summit and narrowed their differences significantly. Despite this, notable gaps remain on key issues such as market access for US automobiles in Japan and further reductions of Japanese quotas on agricultural imports including rice, pork and beef. Tokyo and Washington, as the two largest economies in the trading pact, are the gatekeepers to any conclusion of the agreement, and their ability to complete bilateral negotiations will breathe new life into the TPP.

Moving towards a bilateral agreement between Washington and Tokyo on the TPP was a crucial deliverable before Abe’s trip to the US. There was hope for a bilateral agreement before President Barack Obama’s trip to Japan last spring, but this was dashed as the US and Japan failed to agree on a number of key issues. There is a renewed push this time around though, especially in light of China’s surprising success in recruiting many western countries — including key US allies in Asia such as South Korea and Australia — to join its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as founding members last month. Japan and the of reach for now due to opposition in the Senate. There is deep division on the bill and the TPP with several Democrats and a minority of Republicans opposed to granting the TPP.

HISTORICAL RECONCILIATION?

One of the most prominent aspects of Abe’s landmark speech to Congress was the attention paid to history — especially with regard to Japan’s conflict with the US during World War II. Notably, Abe said: “Before coming over here [to Congress], I was at the World War II Memorial. It was a place of peace and calm that struck me as a sanctuary.

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US, the two key holdouts from the AIIB, now have added urgency to blunt China’s momentum with an agreement on the TPP.

The second key variable on the TPP is the Obama administration’s ability to pass the Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) through Congress in order to fast track the trade negotiations. This is no guarantee, because there remains significant opposition in Washington — especially from Democrats, Obama’s own party. The conclusion of Japan-US negotiations ultimately depends on Obama’s ability to secure the TPA from both houses in the US. Several key Congressional leaders endorsed the bill in April but it remains out

The air was filled with the sound of water breaking in the fountains. In one corner stands the Freedom Wall. More than 4,000 gold stars shine on the wall. I gasped with surprise to hear that each star represents the lives of 100 fallen soldiers. I believe those gold stars are a proud symbol of the sacrifices in defending freedom. But in those gold stars, we also find the pain, sorrow and love for family of young Americans who otherwise would have lived happy lives.”

Of course, Abe was playing to his audience, but it is still important to note the respect paid to US soldiers “fighting for freedom” — many against Imperial Japan. From a US perspective, this state-
ment and other remarks helped to dull criticism of Abe as a historical revisionist regarding Japan’s role during World War II. The same sentiment was not shared by China and South Korea, which both felt that Abe stubbornly refused to apologize for Japan’s crimes in Asia during the war. Abe did address Japan’s activities in World War II, specifically in Asia, by noting his continued support for previous statements and also promised that he “will not avert his eyes” from history. But this was not far enough for Seoul and Beijing, which are expecting a more contrite apology.

In China, the state-run news agency Xinhua blasted Abe for unveiling “his historical revisionism ideology by using ‘actions’ instead of ‘aggression and colonial rule,’ and ‘deep remorse’ rather than ‘heartfelt apology,’ in an apparent effort to dilute the country’s wartime atrocities.”1 But, while China made sure to critique Abe’s remarks and failure to overtly apologize or reference catch words from the 1995 Murayama Statement, issued by Japan as an apology on the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, Beijing’s lobbying efforts against Japan have dropped off significantly since their fragile thaw over the past six months.

Seoul was equally unimpressed with Abe’s speech. Yonhap News Agency editorialized that “for Abe, it is too hard to say that I’m sorry.”2 Meanwhile, the Korea Herald opined that “Abe offered his typical vague acknowledgement of Japan’s wartime and colonial past and the word ‘apology’ was conspicuously absent in the speech.”3 The Korea Times went further, titling its editorial “Abe’s Shameless Speech.”4 Indeed, months before Abe’s trip to Washington, Seoul hired a US public relations firm to help pre-empt any triumphalism that he could expect after addressing Congress. South Korea was so skeptical about Abe’s speech that it heavily lobbed — through connections at think tanks and on Capitol Hill — to prevent Japan’s leader from having the moment altogether.

These historical strains will continue to be a factor in the US-Japan relationship going forward as Washington tries to engage both of its East Asian allies in a more effective and seamless manner. This is especially true with Washington’s desire for a more robust trilateral approach to deter North Korean provocations. The US frustration with the Seoul-Tokyo feud over history was on display earlier this year when Wendy Sherman, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, made a speech in Washington that caught Seoul’s ire. Sherman noted: “It’s not hard for a political leader anywhere to earn cheap applause by vilifying a former enemy. But such provocations produce paralysis, not progress.” From a US perspective, these words seemed innocuous — especially in light of the intractable views from the administration of President Park Geun-hye in South Korea over its relationship with Japan. In South Korea, however, Sherman’s remarks resulted in a diplomatic fracas, with Seoul calling for an official “clarification” from Washington.

The historical issue remains one to watch in the lead up to Abe’s planned release later this year of a statement to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. While Abe, on several occasions, has pledged to uphold previous statements on Japan’s past — including the Murayama, Kono and Koizumi statements — there is concern in Beijing and Seoul that he will water these down by leaving out key terms such as “aggression” or explicit mention of “apology.”

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AN EVOLVING DEFENSE RELATIONSHIP

The most significant announcement during Abe’s trip to the US focused on defense and security. Specifically, the US and Japan announced new bilateral defense guidelines — their first since 1997 — which reposition the alliance to cope with new and evolving security challenges. The revised guidelines have two main enablers: the host of security and defense reforms framed under the policy of “Japan’s proactive contribution to peace,” and the Obama administration’s rebalancing policy. These two bookends will serve as the foundation for an improved and forward-looking alliance.

While the US rebalance provides a political impetus, the Abe administration’s efforts to reform Japan’s antiquated security and defense sectors is the main facilitator for these new defense guidelines. Since re-taking office in late 2012, Abe has introduced a number of important changes, including: the creation of its first-ever national security strategy; the establishment of a US-style National Security Council; the passage of legislation on the protection of “specially designated secrets;” new defense program guidelines; changes to its overseas development assistance and arms export regulations; and, most controversially, the Cabinet decision last summer to reinterpret Japan’s constitutional right to collective self-defense.

These changes have enabled Tokyo and Washington to move forward on longstanding gaps in the alliance. For example, with the introduction of collective self-defense (which is still pending legislative approval this summer in Japan), Tokyo will now be able to take measures to defend the US if it came under threat. An often-cited example of this would be a missile fired from North Korea over Japan’s territory and aimed at a US naval asset. These changes, while seemingly common sense, remain very controversial in Japan, with nearly half of the population opposed to them. Moreover, the change — and the defense posture shift more generally — has been criticized by South Korea, which is concerned about “mission creep” and the perceived lack of clarification about the potential role that Japan’s Self Defense Force might play in South Korea’s defense.
Forces (SDF) could play in a contingency situation on the Korean Peninsula.

But aside from the debate about collective self-defense, there are many important changes to note about the new guidelines. First, there is now a more concerted effort to focus on threats to Japan’s national security in a “seamless” manner. This essentially means that Tokyo’s proposed legislative changes would erode the barriers to a more balanced security partnership with Washington. One key example of this is the creation of a new Allied Co-ordination Mechanism (ACM) to replace the previous Bilateral Co-ordination Mechanism (BCM). The ACM is a significant improvement that allows both the US and Japan to assess and act in a timely manner on threats — not limited to an armed attack on Japan. This is a noteworthy improvement over the burdensome BCM of earlier years, which was essentially unusable due to its high threshold for initialization.

The new defense guidelines are also important because they remove the geographic restriction limiting co-ordinated responses to threats in “situations in the area surrounding Japan.” This is a big step for the alliance and will permit a larger geographical scope for US-Japan co-operation beyond Japan’s immediate environment. Of course, while this change is important, it should also be couched with the realization that there are still domestic limitations and restrictions — bound in the constitution — on Japan’s SDF and its ability to engage in military activities abroad that transcend the scope of the “defense and security of Japan.”

These changes will also help the Japan-US alliance adapt to face emerging trans-national threats in the fields of space and cyber security. Moreover, with this renewed guidance, Tokyo and Washington will also look to strengthen their existing partnerships with other US allies in the region including Australia, South Korea and the Philippines.

**IS JAPAN BACK?**

In February 2013, only two months after his election, Abe made his first visit to the US and insisted that “Japan is back.” He seemed intent on debunking the notion that Tokyo would gradually allow its regional influence to slide to that of a “tier-two” power. Buttressing Abe’s point at that time were Japan’s bold economic policies — dubbed Abenomics — aimed at extricating Tokyo from its decades-long economic tailspin. Moreover, Abe promised to elevate Japan’s role in international peace and security matters through sweeping reforms.

Contrast this with Abe’s most recent visit two years later, and the verdict remains in doubt. Although Abe has been largely successful in pushing through reforms on the security side, his report card on the economic front remains incomplete. Despite some initial success with his “three arrows” approach (quantitative easing, economic stimulus and structural reform of the economy) there are still no concrete gains on the issue of structural reform — especially the role of women in the workplace, immigration reform and continued resistance to changes in the agricultural sector. These factors, along with hard demographic realities, will continue to shape Japan’s role in the region as well as its relationship with the US.

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