

East Asia Security Quarterly

Views from Tokyo and Washington, D.C.
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CIGS Foreign Policy and National Security Team wishes you a very calm, happy and pleasant new year. Although this edition was supposed to be finalized by December 19, we decided to cover Prime Minister Abe's visit to Pearl Harbor on December 27. We will continue sending the Quarterlies throughout the year of 2017.

1. Japan-Russia Relations

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe met with Russian president Vladimir Putin in his home prefecture Yamaguchi on December 15-16. The two leaders agreed to begin bilateral discussions on the "joint Japan-Russia economic activities", including granting the Northern Territories the status of "Special Economic Zone". However, the settlement of the Northern Territories issue was not explicitly mentioned in the brief press statement which was released after the meeting.

The meeting was received with mixed reaction both inside and outside Japan. The predominant narrative so far has been that Putin was a winner in the summit, as he walked away the meeting with the prospect of big economic investment by Japan in the Russian Far East. In contrast, Abe has been portrayed as walking into the meeting with Putin with the prospect that was too optimistic. Abe and his advisors are also criticized as having raised the expectation for a possible breakthrough on the Northern Territories issue and essentially for failing to have Putin clearly commit himself to working with Japan to resolve the issue.

Looking strictly through the lens of Japan-Russia bilateral relations, these criticisms can be justified. However, in the context of Abe's larger goal in the Japanese foreign policy, these criticisms can be refuted as too narrowly focused on the relations between Tokyo and Moscow. In a sense, Japan's conventional approach, that has been exclusively focused on Japan-Russia bilateral relation, has prevented the Japan-Russia relations from moving beyond the legacy of World War II symbolized by the Northern Territories issue.

In fact, Abe's decision to meet with Putin at this time is consistent with his goal of moving Japan beyond so-called "postwar regime" and diversifying Japan's diplomatic portfolio. Since assuming the Prime Minister's office in December 2012, Abe has taken the opportunity to break away from the conventional wisdom of Japan's postwar foreign policy. Striking a deal in December 2015 with the South Korean government on comfort women issue that involved Japanese government's funding a foundation to be established in South Korea. Bringing sitting US president to Hiroshima. Moving forward with the economic activities with Russia, while keeping the door open for negotiations on the Northern Territories issue (but not necessarily wedded to the idea of conventional "four-island return" solution). And finally Abe's own visit to Pearl Harbor at the end of 2016. These can be all rationalized as Abe's efforts to move Japan beyond the legacy of World War II.

2. Trump National Security Team

On the other side of the Pacific, the United States also seems to have entered a period of questioning the conventional wisdom of its own foreign policy. Take president-elect Donald Trump's recent moves on Taiwan, for instance. For the first time since 1979, a US president (president-elect in this case) has directly spoken with a Taiwan president. Shortly after the phone call, Trump said during his interview with FOX news that he personally does not understand why the US has to continue to abide by "One China policy" if China does not work with the US on trade and other issues. Compared with then US president George W. Bush's statement shortly after taking the office that explicitly mentioned the US responsibility to defend Taiwan, Trump's phone call with Tsai Ing-wen, followed by his statement during the interview, is potentially an even clearer departure from the conventional US position on Taiwan.

China demonstrated its displeasure against Trump's actions by seizing a US underwater drone in the South China Sea. Although China agreed to return the drone to the US, it was a clear tit-for-tat on the part of Beijing, retaliating against incoming president's actions vis-à-vis Taiwan. Trump's reaction to China's return of the drone—he essentially tweeted that the US should 'refuse' to accept the return, because Beijing has no business seizing it in the first place—suggests his lack of sensitivities to these subtle (not so subtle in this case) diplomatic signals from Beijing, leaving concerns about the risk of escalating tensions between Washington and Beijing under the Trump administration.

This suggests that the US foreign policy under the Trump administration will likely to

be unpredictable, and that none of the conventional wisdoms can be taken for granted. Such uncertainty will be aggravated by the fact that there seem to be at least three competing forces among Trump's foreign policy and national security advisors, which will constantly jockey for leading the agenda. These groups can be roughly divided into (1) die-hard Trump supporters, (2) conservative hardliners whose highest priority in national security policy is redesigning US engagement in the Middle East and Islam extremism, and (3) traditional Republican foreign policy experts. What is worrisome for US allies and partners around the world, including Japan, will be that the group that they are most familiar with—traditional Republican foreign policy experts—will likely be the least influential among the three, and that the Trump administration's core national security team is comprised of a wealthy businessmen whose modus operandi has been transactional and at least two retired generals whose interests lie predominantly in the fight against Islamic extremists in the Middle East.

3. PM Abe's Visit to Pearl Harbor

On December 27, 2016, Prime Minister Abe visited Pearl Harbor to “offer prayers for the repose of the souls of those who perished there.” President Barack Obama welcomed him in a joint ceremony, calling his visit “a reminder that even the deepest wounds of war can give way to friendship and lasting peace.”

Anybody who watched this moving scene, either on site or live on TV, must have felt something solemn and genuinely humane in his/her heart. Mr Abe's visit to Hawaii and Mr Obama's visit to Hiroshima six month earlier make a historic significance not only for the Japan-U.S. relations but also for the entire Asia-Pacific region.

Some in Japan, however, don't seem to share such human feelings or susceptibility. They call Mr Abe's visit “a dovish act that masks a hawkish intent,” referring to “Mr Abe's revisionist tendencies” as well as “rightwing instincts” or his attempt in “defusing fears about militarism reawakening in Japan.” Those remarks are not only groundless but also irrelevant.

In fact, Mr Abe stated to the contrary. He said in Hawaii that “since the war, we have created a free and democratic country that values the rule of law and has resolutely upheld our vow never again to wage war. We will continue to uphold this unwavering principle.” The overwhelming majority of the Japanese echo his words. Mr Abe also stated that “The goodwill and assistance you extended to us Japanese, the enemy you had fought so fiercely, together with the tremendous spirit of tolerance were etched deeply into the hearts and minds of our grandfathers and mothers.”

President Obama reciprocated and said that “Our presence here today—Prime Minister Abe’s presence here today—reminds us what is possible between nations and peoples. Wars can end. The most bitter of adversaries can become the strongest of allies. The fruits of peace far outweigh the plunder of war,” he said.

As Mr Obama wisely hinted, it takes two (not one) to reconcile. Japan and the United States, after having fought a most fierce war in the Pacific 70 years ago and after decades of sincere efforts to deepen mutual trust, can now further elevate the level of mutual reconciliation to another higher level.

As Abe stated, “What has bonded us together is the power of reconciliation, made possible through the spirit of tolerance.” “There is no end to the spiral where hatred creates hatred. The world needs the spirit of tolerance and the power of reconciliation now -- and especially now.”

Prime Minister’s historical visit to Pearl Harbor in 2016 shall be long remembered as another reminder that “it takes two to reconcile.” If the two democratic and mature parties are mutually tolerant enough, the two can further reconcile each other. That’s what Japan and the United States have shown in Hawaii to the rest of the world.