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A View from Tokyo on Regional Political-Military Developments
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Dear Readers,

Since the issuance of our last EASQ, the world seems to continue its “Back to the Future” slide--the world has yet to come up with a measure that is effective enough to convince Russia to change its current assertive course vis-à-vis Ukraine, as the tensions in the East and South China Sea continue. The most notable development in the last several months was the renewed sense of threat that the West has begun to feel from ISIS (ISIL) which, although it began as one of Al-Qaida-affiliates, is now considered to be more threatening and barbaric than Al-Qaida. The world was shocked by the brutal beheading so far of two American and two British journalists. The increasing publicizing by ISIS (ISIL) of its brutality has forced US President Barack Obama to make the biggest “Back in the Future” decision during his presidency—re-engagement by US military’s conventional offensive force in the Middle East.

In his speech on September 10, 2014, Obama justified his decision to authorize US airstrikes against ISIS (ISIL) targets in Iraq and possibly Syria, as well as the dispatch of additional US military advisors to Iraq, by arguing that the missions that he authorizes are limited in its scope, they include no ground combat troops, and they are in response to the direct threat to American people and facilities, as the world has seen in the execution of the two journalists. He also emphasized that while American forces will be adding strength in countering the advances by ISIS (ISIL), the on-the-ground work of repelling their offensive must be shouldered by Iraq and other Arab countries in the region. Still, his decision to authorize airstrikes sent a clear message that US, whether like it or not, will not be able to completely disengage from the Middle East. And no matter how Obama tries to differentiate his decision to that made by then President Bush almost a decade ago, Obama decided to re-engage US military in Iraq. The success or failure of the initial operations may deeply affect the results of the mid-term

elections in November, determining whether Obama can remain politically relevant for the remainder of his term.

Across the Pacific, the Japanese government issued a cabinet decision on July 1 which is undoubtedly one of the most important decisions in Japan's postwar history. It decided to change the interpretation of Article 9 of Japan's constitution to allow her to exercise her right of collective self-defense under a limited set of circumstances. While the details are still premature to assess, the decision triggered a great deal of impact both inside and outside Japan. The fact that Prime Minister Abe's approval rating was not all that much affected by this decision may suggest that the public attitude toward the issues in Japan's security policy may be more realistic than the ideological positions taken by some of their elected officials. Abe's approval rating even went up when he reshuffled his cabinet on September 3, appointing five women for cabinet positions. However, difficult decisions on politically unpopular issues such as US-Japan trade negotiation for Japan's participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement and the further rise of consumption tax await Abe in the fall, driving some to speculate Abe might dissolve Diet and call a Lower House election in December, while his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) enjoys the position of overwhelming strength to completely marginalize the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) to ensure the LDP-led government will continue for the foreseeable future.

It seems that the reputation of China as a bully is being well established. The Chinese government's effort to tone-down its rhetoric and behavior, particularly on territorial disputes, may have come "too little, too late". As far as the US-China relations are concerned, in particular, the Obama administration appears to have settled on its assessment of Xi Jinping and his government as a challenger to the status quo in the international system. The behavior by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) in recent months cement such US views toward China.

South Korea seems to be unsettled by China's seemingly softening position toward Japan. Japan's resumption of direct talks with North Korea on abduction issues also seemed to have nudged Seoul to change its attitude toward Japan. Most of all, as the tension between the US and China continues to rise, Seoul has been facing increasing pressure from Washington to be more pragmatic in its policy toward Japan. As a result, Seoul seems to have belatedly begun to change course. President Park Geun-hye's speech on August 15, while still referring to a resolution to the comfort women issue, was considerably softer in its anti-Abe rhetoric. However, many in Tokyo worry that the damage has already been done, and South Korea

would be too optimistic if she thinks that Japan will immediately respond to the softening of Seoul's attitude toward Tokyo.

In Southeast Asia, the region continues to grapple with the political changes in some of the major players in the region, such as Indonesia and Thailand. Vietnam, although China's drilling of the oil rig in the area of overlapping claims in the South China Sea has stopped, continues to feel pressure from Chinese maritime activities.

We hope you will find this short overview and the following analyses of the security developments in East Asia helpful.

<Tokyo>

On July 1, the Abe cabinet issued the most important cabinet decision in postwar Japanese security policy. It declared that the Article Nine of Japan's constitution does not prohibit her from exercising the right of collective self-defense, and that the Japanese government should revise the existing set of laws that the government of Japan's national security policy to legislate this new interpretation.

Outside Japan, the announcement was met largely with favorable reaction. The United States, Australia, Southeast Asian countries and many other responded positively to the decision. The predictable exception was China, which heavily criticizes the decision as the sign of resurgent of Japanese militarism, and the Koreans, who remain cautious on Japan's expanding security role. This, combined with the other decisions by the Abe government on a completely unrelated set of issues such as the review of the process to shape the 1993 Kono Statement - not the revision of the statement itself - as well as the mounting criticism against the Asahi Shimbun for its thirty some years overdue retraction of an article that was instrumental in igniting the comfort women issue outside Japan have all been taken as the symptoms that demonstrate that Prime Minister Abe has been leading Japan to the far right.

However, these criticisms are not well-founded. With respect to the cabinet decision on the right of collective self-defense, what the criticism misses is that the decision is only the beginning of the process. In order to implement the July 1 decision, more than twenty laws need to be revised—and the government has not even submitted the proposed revision to these laws. The domestic legislative process to implement the decision will unfold over the next twelve to eighteen months, and only then can one begin to understand how restrictive the proposed reinterpretation of the constitution on the right of collective self-defense will be.

In regard to the developments on comfort women issue including the government's review of the process leading up to the Kono Statement and the Asahi Shimbun's retraction of its reporting, it is regrettable that they have been portrayed as the examples of the Abe government's attempt to deny Japan's responsibility in this issue. Despite these developments, Prime Minister Abe has steadfastly stated that his government has no intention of revise or reject the Kono Statement itself.

Japan's response to the continuing tension between Ukraine and Russia, as well as the worsening situation surrounding ISIS (ISIL) in Iraq and Syria, continue to present challenges. The Ukraine-Russia tension tests the Abe government's commitment to international norm such as no use of force should be allowed to alter the status quo or to resolve differences among states. Although the Japanese government seemingly continued to seek an opportunity for President Vladimir Putin's visit to Tokyo in this fall, the prospect is declining rapidly. The ISIS (ISIL) challenge is also complicated. On the one hand, it is almost certain that Japan will be asked to do more, including enhancing refugee assistance or other types of humanitarian measures, to the people who have been suffering from the brutality of ISIS (ISIL) rule. On the other hand, the Japanese government likely wants to maintain low profile on this issue, at least while a Japanese citizen that has been held by ISIS remains in hostage.

<Washington>

The biggest news during this period is President Obama's decision to expand the scope of US military engagement in the efforts to "degrade and destroy" ISIS (ISIL). In his speech on September 10, Obama justified his decision as he argued how ISIS (ISIL) has grown into an organization that poses direct national security threat for the United States.

However, by calling them "terrorists" and referring to the authorized US military actions as "counterterrorism operations," Obama still attempted to differentiate his decision from President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq. He consistently insisted that US military will not engage in ground combat operations, and the airstrikes will be limited in scope. At the same time, however, he admitted that the US military operations against ISIS (ISIL) will take time to prove its effect, and that the United States is in a long haul to achieve its ultimate goal of destroying ISIS (ISIL).

His decision to expand US military engagement came as the US public turning increasingly nervous about the threat by ISIS (ISIL). Although the general public are still reluctant to see US "boots on the ground", the beheading of two American journalists has greatly contributed to turn the tide of US public opinion to support expansion of US military engagement in Iraq

short of sending in ground combat troops. Ironically as well, Obama's decision has greater support among Republicans than Democrats who are increasingly anxious about the risk of being punished for Obama's mistakes in the mid-term elections in November.

Indeed, Obama has much to worry about domestically for the political landscape he and his administration will have to navigate after the mid-term elections. The Republicans are expected to do well in the elections, most likely winning the majority in the Senate in addition to maintaining the majority in the House of Representatives.

<Republic of Korea >

President Park Geun-hye's political position continues to get weaker domestically, as her government continues to be blamed for its mishandling of the sinking of *Sewol*. While her political party did surprisingly well in the local elections last June, her popularity seemingly continues to suffer. Furthermore, by summoning the Sankei Shimbun Bureau Chief for the reporting critical of President Park, despite that it was based on the news report by the South Korean media including the Chosen Ilbo, Seoul was met with strong criticism in international media.

Externally, President Park's insistence on emphasizing the comfort women issue in her government's relations with Japan began to invite criticism from Washington. Washington began to communicate its wariness of Park's obsession with the history issue with Japan and demonization of Abe more explicitly, particularly after Xi Jinping's visit to Seoul, during which Xi pushed Park to form a "united front" against the resurgence of Japanese militarism. At the same time, South Korea witnessed Japan continue to enhance its defense relations with the United States through the revision of the Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation, resumed dialogue with North Korea on abduction issues, and began to quietly explore the possibility for Abe's meeting with Xi at the November APEC Summit in Beijing.

Realizing that its single-focus on comfort women may have actually resulted in weakening of South Korea's diplomatic influence, Seoul seems to have belatedly but gradually begun to change its approach toward Japan. President Park, in her speech on August 15, talked about her hope to begin future-oriented relationship with Japan in 2015. Although the comfort women issue was still mentioned, the overall tone of the speech was considerably restrained compared to the one last year. Senior diplomats of the two countries have also resumed dialogue. For instance, South Korean foreign minister Yun Byong-se met with Japan's Ambassador Bessho at a Japan-Korea friendship event in Seoul.

However, South Korea’s demonization of Japan—which actually began toward the end of Noda government—disillusioned a great number of people in Japan, many of whom sincerely believed in the importance of Japan-South Korea relations. As the dialogue among the officials resume, the prevailing “Korea fatigue” in Japan may present challenges for Japan-South Korea relations.

<China>

Since Beijing’s surprise announcement to designate Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea in November 2013, China finds itself increasingly isolated, as demonstrated by the mounting criticism against China at this year’s Shangri-La Dialogue. Adventurism by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has most recently been demonstrated in several occasions in which the PLA may not comprehend the protocols shared by the militaries of modern nations. For instance, the deployment of spy ships when China was invited to participate in RIMPAC exercise in July 2014 stirred intense criticism within the US Navy, triggering many calls for not inviting the PLA Navy back to RIMPAC again. Its jet fighters interception of US Navy’s P-8 at a dangerously close range on Aug. 22 also made people think whether the PLA has forgotten the lesson from the 2001 Hainan Island incident. At least in diplomacy, however, Beijing seems to have toned down the rhetoric on its territorial claims in the South and East China Sea. It also has muted criticism against Prime Minister Abe, triggering a speculation that Xi Jinping is considering to meet with Abe when the two attends the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Beijing in November.

<Southeast Asia>

Southeast Asia continues to see political instability among its major players. In the presidential election in August, Joko Widodo won a very close election and became Indonesia’s third democratically-elected president. However, despite his campaign promise for greater accountability and transparency of the government, his cabinet appointments so far have been described as disappointing by many outside the country. Widodo’s agenda includes enhancement of Indonesia’s vibrant economy, to reverse the trends of slowing-down economic growth rate, by attracting foreign and domestic investments. Major policy promises such as cutting massive fuel subsidies or improving underdeveloped infrastructures need a strong political leadership. As a popular civilian leader, he definitely needs a competent government that can deliver major promises, which will become an important benchmark for the consolidation of democracy in Indonesia.

In Thailand, the provisional government by the military continues to hold onto power, raising questions about whether democracy in Thailand can be revived. On August 25, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, the leader of the recent coup, was appointed as prime minister by the Thai legislature that the military appointed, stirring international criticism. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry regarded the coup as a “negative implication for the U.S.-Thai relationship” and indicated a review of the bilateral military relations, assistance and other engagements, consistent with the U.S. law. It is still uncertain whether the U.S. and Thailand conduct Cobra Gold, a region-wide multilateral military exercise scheduled early next year. Thai National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the ruling junta in Bangkok, issued a three-stage roadmap, which indicates at least 15 months before Thailand returns to full democracy. As many analysts assume that the roadmap can be much longer than 15 months, there are fears of losing influence on Thailand to China, as experienced in immediate aftermath of the coup in 2006. Japan and the neighboring ASEAN countries are seemingly pursuing pragmatic approaches through constructive engagement and by maintaining trade and investment in Thailand.

In the meantime, China’s exertion of its pressure in the South China Sea continues to be felt in maritime Southeast Asia, particularly in Vietnam which saw tension with Beijing rose as China unilaterally began drilling with a huge oil rig in the disputed water area, and intensified harassment of Vietnamese ships. Although China stopped drilling in face of mounting international criticism, Vietnam is very much aware that the lower level of Chinese maritime activity may be temporary, only to be ramped up again once the APEC summit meeting in Beijing concludes.