

# Conservatism and historical interpretation: Japan rightward tilt as grounds for criticism

Friday 21 June 2013, by [Mainichi Shimbun](#), [TANAKA Hitoshi](#) (Date first published: 13 June 2013).

Since Shinzo Abe began his second stint as prime minister, observers in both Japan and abroad have been on high alert over Japan's political swing to the right. In this series, we ask politicians and intellectuals where they think the Abe administration is headed, and whether the direction aligns with national interests.

This installment features Hitoshi Tanaka, chairman of the Institute for International Strategy at the Japan Research Institute, who previously served as director-general of the Foreign Ministry's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau and deputy minister for foreign affairs. In 2002, he assisted then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi on his visit to North Korea.

***Mainichi* : It appears other countries are increasingly alarmed by Japan's rightward shift.**

Tanaka: At international conferences held overseas, alarms have been raised that Japan is undergoing an extreme tilt to the right. At the same time, some countries have expressed hope that Japan will break through its political stagnation as a result of the establishment of the Abe administration and its economic policies.

However, because of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's remarks about the definition of "invasion" and denials over leaving the 1995 Murayama and 1993 Kono statements alone, Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso and other officials' visit to Yasukuni Shrine, and Japan Restoration Party co-chief Toru Hashimoto's comments on wartime "comfort women," the sense that Japan is shifting to the right has been spreading.

***Mainichi* : Is it possible that some countries are taking advantage of Japan's conservative swing?**

Tanaka: Amid current tensions with China and South Korea over such issues as the Senkaku Islands and Takeshima, respectively, Japan's rightward tilt is giving China and South Korea an excuse to attack Japan, to take this opportunity to bash it.

***Mainichi* : How about the U.S.?**

Tanaka: The U.S. is attempting to rebalance its focus from the Middle East to Asia. It's not about the U.S. valuing or not valuing China, but more that American economic and political interests cannot be guaranteed unless East Asia becomes a stable region, making it necessary for the U.S. to confront China face-to-face.

However, the U.S. sees Japan as having become isolated in its dealings with China and South Korea, and recognizes that such a situation does not bode well for its national interests. There's an understanding that Japan's cooperation is necessary for the U.S. to be able to work constructively with China, and the current situation in which Japan and China are butting heads poses problems.

***Mainichi* : Prime Minister Abe seems to drop his claims down a notch when he receives**

## **criticism.**

Tanaka: I think he's trying to be realistic about things like the definition of "invasion," the statements by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama and Chief Cabinet Minister Yohei Kono, and revision of Article 96 of the Constitution. But by continuing in this way it becomes established that deep down, those conservative beliefs are his true beliefs.

He's created the impression that he will tone down his beliefs until the House of Councillors election and bring them back afterwards. Does that serve the nation's best interests?

**Mainichi : Cabinet Secretariat Advisor Isao Iijima visited North Korea in May, and it has been pointed out that neither the U.S. nor South Korea was sufficiently informed about the trip beforehand.**

Tanaka: It was the same when I took part in negotiations with North Korea, but because Japan has an agenda specific to itself, it doesn't necessarily consult other countries about everything. North Korea's abduction of Japanese nationals is an extreme issue in which Japan must negotiate and work out.

Meanwhile, the issue of nuclear development and missiles is not one that can be resolved by Japan alone, and Japan must work toward a solution while taking care not to damage its ties to other involved countries. As Prime Minister Koizumi always said, it is Japan's policy to resolve the issues of abduction, nuclear development, and missiles comprehensively. So I wouldn't say Iijima's visit was grandstanding, but it shouldn't be taken as (a betrayal of our allies).

**Mainichi : In Japanese foreign diplomacy these days, "keeping China in check" appears to be a predominant theme.**

Tanaka: I think Japan is right to strengthen its partnerships with Russia, India and Southeast Asia. But characterizing such cooperation as "value-based diplomacy" alienates China. I don't think it's right to forge these alliances under a slogan of "value-based" cooperation. Keeping China in check so that it doesn't achieve hegemony in the future is something you do quietly. Declaring for all to hear that you're working to contain another country is not foreign diplomacy. Politicians must talk about how important Japan-China relations are with courage.

**Mainichi : There are so many problems that need to be tackled.**

Tanaka: We've come to a point where Japan could be labeled a country driven by self-centered, parochial nationalism. I think a renewal of Japan is possible, and hope that it's realized through the power of Japanese politics. For better or worse, just a year ago, Japan did not attract this much attention from the international community. It's important not to put this attention to waste. (Interview by Tamotsu Takatsuka, Political News Department)

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\* Mainichi Shimbun, June 12, 2013:

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130612p2a00m0na015000c.html>