

Japan: Abe's diplomacy dogged by history, territorial disputes

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Despite six months of active foreign diplomacy, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe faces an uncertain path to improving ties with China and South Korea as territorial disputes and disagreements on wartime history continue.

Whether Abe and his top Cabinet ministers opt to visit war-linked Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo on the Aug. 15 anniversary of Japan's World War II surrender or during the shrine's autumn festival in October will be closely watched, since such visits would certainly inflame the already frayed ties with its former war victims.

Some pundits say that even if the ruling Liberal Democratic Party wins the House of Councilors election on July 21 and achieves the kind of stable government Japan hasn't seen in years, Abe would still need to maintain a balancing act between Japan's domestic and diplomatic interests.

Since taking power in December, Abe has pursued an active foreign policy anchored by the Japan-U.S. security alliance. He has visited 13 countries, including the U.S., Russia and various nations in Europe, as well as Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

He has particularly promoted "economic diplomacy" by pitching civilian nuclear technology directly to leaders in the Middle East and Eastern Europe in the belief that nuclear exports can be the "ace in the hole" in reviving Japan's economy.

In a televised address on June 26, the prime minister said he will concentrate on reviving the economy by trying to end nearly two decades of deflation before Upper House seats come up for grabs again in 2016.

"Over the next three years, during which I will have gained political stability, I will basically concentrate on it," Abe said. "Because a country can't maintain its national power if it has lost its economic power, such a country can't exert its power in diplomacy or national security."

In a policy speech in January, Abe said his diplomacy is based on "the fundamental values of freedom, democracy, basic human rights and the rule of international law," a comment apparently directed at China, which has become increasingly assertive in making its territorial claim to the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.

But Japan's ties with its giant neighbor remain as strained as ever, and no summit between Abe and new Chinese President Xi Jinping seems likely in the foreseeable future.

Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who attended ASEAN-related meetings in Brunei through Tuesday, didn't even make brief contact, let alone sit for a one-on-one meeting.

Standoffs continue over the Senkakus, claimed as Diaoyu by China and Tiaoyutai by Taiwan, with the Japan Coast Guard and Chinese surveillance ships shadowing each other.

"The biggest challenge for Japan is how it can work with China constructively" in a way conducive to the emergence of a nonhegemonic China, said former Deputy Foreign Minister Hitoshi Tanaka in a recent lecture at the Asian Affairs Research Council.

Tanaka, who now heads the Institute for International Strategy, a Tokyo-based think tank, took a cautious view of Abe's foreign policy, saying it would not be "very wise" to upset China by pursuing what amounts to strategic containment.

Tokyo's relations with Seoul have also stayed tense since last August, when then-President Lee Myung-bak became South Korea's first leader to visit the pair of Korean-controlled islets Japan claims.

Hopes of mending ties with South Korea were dashed in April after Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso and several other Cabinet ministers visited Yasukuni Shrine, a symbol of Japanese militarism, and Abe suggested the same month that the word "aggression" is defined differently by different countries, drawing strong reactions from Seoul.

The foreign ministers of the two countries met Monday for the first time in nine months on the sidelines of a regional security forum in Brunei. Nonetheless, South Korean President Park Geun-hye is not considering a summit with Abe for the time being due to Tokyo's attitude on issues related to the war, the South Korean daily Chosun Ilbo reported Tuesday.

Meanwhile, China and South Korea appear to be strengthening ties, fueling concerns that Japan is being isolated in the region.

Given that Japan must work closely with South Korea and the United States in the event of an emergency involving North Korea, the continuing tension between Tokyo and Seoul is "no good," says Go Ito, professor of international relations at Meiji University.

"If North Korea attempted something now, and the Japanese prime minister and the South Korean president did not share their views, the situation would be extremely bad," he said.

To improve ties with China and South Korea, Abe's government must take great care in addressing issues relating to wartime history and act sensibly over disputes that fuel nationalistic sentiment on both sides.

The Aug. 15 anniversary of Japan's surrender in 1945 will be the first key test of the Abe team's resolve to repair ties after the Upper House election, in which it stands to take control of the Diet.

In a policy debate with leaders of major political parties on Wednesday, Abe declined to say whether he intends to visit the shrine on that day, noting that commenting on the matter itself could develop into a diplomatic problem.

Meiji University's Ito said there is a chance Abe may visit the shrine on Aug. 15, despite the predictable anger from China and South Korea, if his party wins the election by a wide margin and the public supports him.

"If he wins big and can end the divided Diet, there is nothing he should fear politically," Ito said.

Daisuke Yamamoto, Kyodo News, July 5, 2013

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<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/07/05/national/abes-diplomacy-dogged-by-history-territorial-disputes/#.Udtj6KxjbRY>