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ABE'S DIPLOMACY AT A CRUCIAL MOMENT

Akiko Iwata

- The Japan-US alliance has been made stronger than ever by an unrivaled relationship between Abe and Trump.
- This solid Japan-US alliance continues to guide both Japan-China and Japan-Russia relations.
- Following the lower house elections, the conditions were in place for “diplomacy with a bird's eye view of the globe” that would steer Japan's ties with China, Russia and the US vis-à-vis North Korea. Can Abe establish himself as a rule-maker for the international community?

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

Five years have passed since the second Abe administration was inaugurated in 2012, and in that time Prime Minister Abe has visited a total of 135 countries/regions.

What exactly is the “diplomacy with a bird's eye view of the globe” that Abe has been advocating? This article will analyze its meaning and outcomes, and offer an overview of Abe’s diplomacy this year.

The success or failure of Japanese diplomacy under earlier administrations was assessed in terms of the closeness achieved with the US as an ally but, for “diplomacy with a bird’s eye view of the globe,” this is nothing more than the first stage.

The true aim is to use Japan-US relations as a cornerstone in constructing multilayered bilateral relations with various countries and achieve the status of a rule maker for the international order.

During the Obama era, Abe was able to address the US Congress, pass a number of security laws, have President Obama visit Hiroshima, and pay a visit himself to Pearl Harbor, thereby bringing the postwar era to an end.

Abe was also quick to establish relations of trust with President Trump.

President Trump visited Japan on November 5 of last year and, following up on their previous meetings, the two leaders entered into a more in-depth discussion of the situation concerning North Korea and confirmed that Japan and the US would act with 100% mutual trust.

Japan-US relations, which had suffered a conspicuous rift during Japan’s DPJ administration, were bolstered in the Abe-Obama era, and they have taken on an entirely new level of strength under Trump.

I surmise that this Japan-US relationship is having a positive impact on Japan-China and Japan-Russia relations.

On November 11 of last year, Abe met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Da Nang, Vietnam. President Xi stressed that Abe engaged in surprisingly frank discussions on the North Korean situation, and that Japan and China should collaborate closely, in a similar manner to Japan and the US.

Xi hailed this as a fresh start to Japan-China relations, declaring that he would like to build on the current momentum to further improve these relations.

He went on to say that the two countries have a responsibility to use such opportunities as the 40th anniversary of the conclusion of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and China to return to a path of normal development through unrelenting efforts toward peace, cooperation and friendship.

At their Beijing meeting in 2014, Xi had given Abe a serious look and quoted to him from the *Analects of Confucius*: “*Yan bi xin, xing bi guo*” (“Promises must be kept and action must be resolute.”) At their meeting in Hangzhou two years later, Abe offered his encouragement for the Belt & Road Initiative and subsequently demonstrated a willingness to cooperate in this initiative.

While convinced that mentioning the initiative had struck a chord with Xi, Abe also made a show of the strong solidarity between Japan and the US. There was a sound strategy to this.

By putting forth the “Open Indo-Pacific Initiative” coordinated with the US, he employed the tactic of embracing rather than opposing the Belt & Road Initiative. Thus the nobler purpose of “cooperation with China” was established.

It should be noted that President Putin showed a similar leaning vis-à-vis Abe after the latter had re-solidified his political base. Putin met with Abe in Da Nang and congratulated him on his huge election victory, pointing out that this would enable the two to realize all of “our plans.”

Abe took this phrasing as an expression of the president’s willingness to resolve within their respective terms the issues of joint economic activities, the flow of people, the return of the four islands constituting the Northern Territories, and the conclusion of a peace treaty. This assessment was based on the Nagato summit meeting between the two in December 2016.

At the end of the Nagato summit, the Russian side was extremely hesitant to consent to any clear expression of a strong determination to bring the peace treaty issue to a conclusion “by the hands of both leaders” in the summit communique, but Abe obtained consent for this by talking one-on-one with Putin.

At that time (December 2016), Putin was no doubt of the view that the overlap in their terms of office would not be long enough to resolve the territorial

issue. However, Putin's concerns were allayed when Abe managed to reinforce his administration's political base.

Abe had suffered a drop in support for his cabinet in the wake of the Moritomo Gakuen and Kake Gakuen scandals, and diplomacy was likely one motive underlying his decision to dissolve the lower house and call for a general election.

Abe had been looking to dissolve the lower house from around August, and it seems that his meeting with Putin in Vladivostok finally prompted him to do so.

He wants personally to conclude a peace treaty. To influence Putin, he likely felt a keen need to consolidate his political base in an all-or-nothing frontal breakthrough.

Abe thus managed to put in place the conditions for moving ahead with difficult negotiations with China and Russia vis-à-vis North Korea.

Abe has continued to work with the US to ramp up the pressure on North Korea, but at the same time he has adopted a posture of cooperating with China and other parties to cautiously seek out a starting point for dialogue. In doing so, he believes the key will be for Japan, the US, China, Russia and South Korea to formulate a shared vision for the Korean peninsula.

Once Putin is past the presidential election in March, Abe will move ahead with earnest discussions on the difficult topics of developing rules for joint economic activities and territorial security issues.

With regard to Japan-China diplomacy, Abe is hoping to first hold a Japan-China-South Korea summit meeting and then to visit China himself.


He will also work with the US to advance the Open Indo-Pacific Initiative.

On the other hand, he would also like to lay the groundwork for the successful ratification of the Japan-EU EPA and the TPP11 agreement before the Japan-US FTA that the US will likely be pushing Japan to conclude.

The next issue to be addressed is whether Japan can occupy a significant place with the international community's complex power balance and become a rule maker.

This means that the achievements of diplomacy with a bird's eye view of the globe will be put to the test, but this goal is also something that can only be accomplished because Abe is a senior leader.

“Japanese diplomacy” will likely become a focal point in this year’s Liberal Democratic Party presidential election.

(Honorifics omitted) 

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