

AJISS-Commentary

The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies

IIPS

Institute for International
Policy Studies

JIIA

The Japan Institute of
International Affairs

RIPS

Research Institute for
Peace and Security

Editorial Advisory Board:

Akio Watanabe (Chair)
Masashi Nishihara
Yoshiji Nogami
Taizo Yakushiji

Editorial Committee:

Taizo Yakushiji
Hisayoshi Ina
Tsutomu Kikuchi
Shujiro Urata and
Nobutaka Maekawa

Editor & Online Publisher:

Yoshji Nogami
President, JIIA

No. 226

4 April 2016

THE ABE ADMINISTRATION'S "PRAGMATIC POLICY LINE"

Katsuyuki Yakushiji

- Prime Minister Abe's political stance on historical issues has transformed greatly over the past year and become more pragmatic.
- This change is an extremely rational approach to dealing with the issues associated with Japan's economic slowdown, fiscal crisis, dwindling birth rate and aging population.
- Many Japanese are uneasy about the future, and producing positive results in addressing these issues will provide greater stability for the administration.

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.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, regarded as one of the leading "hawks" among politicians, has changed his stance on historical issues to a surprising degree over the past year. In addition to expressing remorse and offering apologies to the international community for Japan's invasions and colonial rule, he has taken active steps to repair diplomatic relations with neighboring countries, particularly South Korea. Once denounced by Western intellectuals and the media as a "historical revisionist," Prime Minister Abe has undergone a complete metamorphosis.


The startling agreement reached at the end of December 2015 by the Japanese and South Korean governments on the "comfort women" issue came as a shock even within Japan. Together with providing about 1 billion yen to a foundation established by the South Korean government to assist former comfort women, the Japanese government admitted the Imperial Japanese Army's involvement with regard to this issue. Prime Minister Abe also telephoned President Geun-hye Park to convey his "heartfelt apologies and feelings of remorse." On August 14, Prime Minister Abe released a statement marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in which he remarked that "my heart is rent with the utmost grief" at the course pre-war Japan had taken in defying the international community at the cost of so many peoples' lives.

Prime Minister Abe had previously criticized the Tokyo War Crimes Trials as "victors' justice," had visited Yasukuni Shrine as a serving prime minister, and had repeatedly demonstrated a negative attitude toward the Murayama Statement made on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the war's end apologizing and expressing remorse for Japan's invasions and colonial rule, as well as the Kono Statement on the comfort women issue. His stance was regarded in the international community as a rejection of the post-war international order, and was even said to "have raised concern that Tokyo could upset regional relations in ways that hurt US interests" (May 2013 report from the Congressional Research Service).

Japan is currently confronting several major issues: a prolonged economic slowdown, an increasingly serious fiscal crisis, a rapidly diminishing birthrate and aging population, and concerns about the sustainability of its social

security system. Citizens young and old are uneasy about the future, and are calling for the government to take radical steps to deal with these problems. Governments frequently adopt the tactic of whipping up nationalist sentiment against external threats to divert public dissatisfaction away from those in power but, in Japan's case, the prime minister would not garner any significant support by unleashing invective against China or South Korea and heightening tensions. Various public opinion polls have shown that a majority of citizens desire friendly relations with neighboring countries, and worsening such relations would only render the government more unstable. Prime Minister Abe is undoubtedly taking this public sentiment into account when making his decisions.

At the same time, the prime minister has been giving greater emphasis to the domestic economy. The talk coming from Prime Minister Abe now focuses less on a breakaway from the post-war regime and an arc of freedom and prosperity, and more on economic policies such as Abenomics and economic revitalization. Improving relations with neighboring countries and pursuing a course of international cooperation has enabled the administration to devote more of its energy to domestic economic measures and structural reform. The change in the prime minister's approach enjoys broad public support and has even won accolades among intellectuals, so it can be considered an extremely rational choice for a policymaker to make.

It is not the case, of course, that Prime Minister Abe has abandoned all of his previous stances. He has visited Yasukuni Shrine while prime minister, albeit only once, and he continues to insist that the constitution needs amending. Nevertheless, given the pragmatic course that he has taken, these words and deeds can only be regarded as expedients to assuage discontent among the right-wing groups that have pinned their hopes on him. 

Prof. Katsuyuki Yakushiji teaches at Toyo University. He is also an adjunct fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs.