

REMORSE AND REFORM: ABE'S STORMY SPRING

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From apologizing for Japan's wartime past to collective defense and FTA negotiations with the United States, Japan faces a number of contentious issues in the coming months that call into question Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's policies and actions. Lars Vargö sheds light on the main issues.

It has been over three months since Prime Minister Abe Shinzō was successfully re-elected in a snap election held in December last year. But while having overcome that political hurdle, Abe is facing a number of difficult issues in the coming months that will call into focus his government's policies and actions. In particular, anniversaries figure large in 2015 with this year marking the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Coming amidst a time that the Japanese government is also revising its interpretation of the constitution regarding its defense structure, Japan's neighbors will be looking closely to Abe for both apologies for Japan's past behaviour and signals of its new defense posture. Domestically meanwhile Japan is facing mounting protests regarding the U.S. air base in Okinawa as well as farmers' concerns over the TPP negotiations. Notwithstanding, with local elections taking place in April, it is likely that the Abe government will seek to postpone decisions on contentious issues until after these elections.

Anniversaries and Apologies

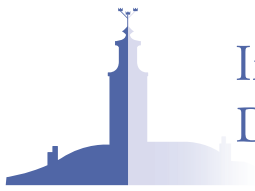
The foreign ministers of the three Northeast Asian powers, China, Japan, and South Korea, finally managed to hold their 7th trilateral meeting on March 22 in Seoul. The meeting had been on hold for over three years due to China's and South Korea's displeasure with what they have described as the Japanese government's reluctance to face up to its wartime past. The meeting is a hopeful sign that tensions in the region will be lessened and serve as impetus for a possible trilateral summit between the government leaders later this year. However, both China and South Korea have made it clear that they will first have to pay attention to the statement that Abe Shinzō is prepar-

ing for the 70th anniversary of the end of the Pacific War on August 15.

Prime Minister Abe has been criticized for trying to whitewash Japan's actions during its militaristic period during the first half of the 20th century, but recently the prime minister has reiterated that he stands by earlier statements by House Speaker Kōno Yōhei in 1993 and Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi in 1995, on the 50th anniversary of the end of the war, both recognizing responsibility for Japan's actions and apologizing for such. Yet how far Abe will go in reiterating earlier statements remains to be seen. Japan's neighbors will be observing closely to see if by "clarifying" such statements, Abe in any way waters them down by adding nuances.

Article 9, Collective Defense, and Okinawa

Another issue in the spotlight is the Japanese government's reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese constitution which, imposed by the occupying allied forces in the aftermath of WWII, bans Japan from having troops of a belligerent character. However, the reinterpretation of the article by the government last autumn paves the way for Japan to build up a considerable defense force. Furthermore, the issue of collective defense has come under intensive debate. The Japanese political leadership argues that there is currently an inconsistency in the logic of the alliance with the U.S.: that is, the U.S. is duty bound to come to the rescue of Japan if attacked by a foreign country but not vice versa. Collective defense means that Japan would be able to participate in defending not only itself along with its allies, but also assist American forces and work in concert with other nations for example in protecting sea lanes. With the concept and scope of collective de-



fense under discussion in Parliament, the opposition warns that the preconditions for Japanese troops acting outside of national borders need to be more clearly defined.

New bills necessary for making collective defense legal will be presented to Parliament in May. May might also be the month when Prime Minister Abe, scheduled to visit Washington, and President Obama will sign the new guidelines for U.S.-Japan defense cooperation. However, whether Abe will be invited to speak in the U.S. Congress during his official visit depends, according to statements by some U.S. Congressmen, on him displaying true remorse for Japanese actions during the Pacific War.

The American bases on Okinawa—strategically important for the U.S. and seen as vital for Japan's defense readiness—is another contentious issue. With the Futenma air base surrounded by an increasing number of civilian apartment buildings raising worries of an accident, it has made it necessary to relocate the base to another location. However, Henoko, the site chosen for the new base, is located in an area which many argue should be protected for environmental reasons. In fact, many Okinawans want to see a large part of the bases relocated to the main islands. The newly elected governor has also avowed that he will not let the Henoko base go ahead. While the government asserts building the new base is entirely legal, local protests continue.

TPP and Nuclear Energy

Another issue which will be on the agenda for the summit between Abe and Obama will be the negotiations on the free trade agreement, the Transpacific Partnership, or TPP. Japan has a vocal agricultural lobby, which is vehemently against opening the Japanese market for American agricultural products. Although Japan's farmers are gradually becoming fewer, and less influential, it is, again, a contentious issue. March 11, 2015, furthermore, was the fourth anniversary of the triple disaster—the earthquake, tsunami, and the Fukushima nuclear accident—which devastated the north-eastern part of Japan. The region has traditionally been an important farming area and the farmers were hit very hard by the disaster. The Japanese government has to tread carefully in order not to be accused of being insensitive to the needs of the farmers. On the other hand, the agricultural industry clearly needs extensive reforms to make it more efficient. Even though the TPP may in fact be beneficial for the industry, the government faces a challenge in placating farmers' fears and winning over public opinion in an area

which has seen slow progress in reconstruction efforts.

Even more sensitive is the nuclear energy issue. Of Japan's existing 50 nuclear reactors none are presently in use, due to safety concerns in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster. The Japanese economy accordingly needs cheap energy and although international oil prices are relatively low thus favouring importers like Japan, the Japanese currency has also hit very low levels. There are many signs that the Japanese economy is picking up again and restoring nuclear energy would certainly give a welcome boost. On the other hand, domestic opinion remains largely against because of lingering fears after Fukushima.

Concluding Remarks

The government has managed to move solutions to many contentious issues in the direction that the prime minister wants, but although the economy is picking up, and the opposition in Parliament has not managed to present effective counter arguments on security policy issues, Abe still faces a number of hurdles. Moreover, on two occasions in April, on the 12th and the 26th, local elections will be held all over Japan. As an important indicator of public opinion, Abe will consequently be reluctant to bring contentious proposals over collective defense and the TPP, among other items, to the table before those elections are over.

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