

JAPAN IN 2016: SHIFTS IN DOMESTIC POLITICS AMID SHIFTS IN REGIONAL LANDSCAPE

by Valerie Anne Jill I. Valero

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) won the elections in July in convincing fashion, effectively ensuring policies and initiatives espoused by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will meet little to no resistance in the Diet. LDP managed to capture majority of the seats in both the House of Representatives and House of Councillors, an unprecedented achievement in Japanese electoral politics.

With the Diet firmly behind him, Abe can be expected to carry on with his domestic and foreign initiatives and policies. His Proactive Contribution to Peace policy, for instance, can be expected to continue. He can also be expected to push for, if not explore, certain developments or changes, such as constitutional revision.

Plans for constitutional revision

With the consolidation of power, constitutional revision is becoming closer to actuality. The ruling government fulfills the condition of the Peace Constitution's Article 96, which states that a two-thirds majority is required in order to undertake constitutional revision. A highly contested and sensitive subject, especially for the Japanese public, there are plans to convene a referendum to open the discussion on the merits, concerns, and parameters of revision.

It remains unclear, however, what specific parts of the Constitution Abe intends to push for revision; while there is substantial speculation that Article 9 will be the priority, there is also an assumption that Abe will set its sights on other provisions.

There is also the matter of Emperor Akihito's public address on 8 August indicating his wish to abdicate. It falls on the government to explore options (i.e., revise existing laws of succession) should the Emperor absolutely decide to relinquish his throne. The news of possible abdication coincided with speculations of the Emperor's expanded political role in the Constitution being part of Abe's revision agenda.

Initiatives towards the improvement of Russo-Japanese relations

The year 2016 saw advances toward the improvement of Russo-Japanese relations, which have been contentious since the end of World War II due to the Northern Territories dispute. Differences in policy and perspective remain with regard to the contested territories and Russia's military interventions, but have not hindered Japanese and Russian officials from conducting talks, the most notable of which to date is the Japan-Russia Summit Meeting in May at Sochi. Abe visited Russia twice in 2016 (May and September), while Pres. Vladimir Putin visited Japan in mid-December – his first visit to the country since 2005.

Both countries have reiterated their territorial claims, rapprochement efforts notwithstanding. While a resolution to the Northern Territories dispute may not materialize soon, it is expected that Japan and Russia will work to expand bilateral relations through more high-level dialogues and visits, trade, and cultural and people-to-people exchanges.

Japan's initiatives under the Abe administration to reach out to Russia have inevitably introduced certain complications, as far as security relations are concerned. Washington has expressed some reservation at recent developments in Russo-Japanese relations given that Japan is arguably its most important ally in East Asia. How the dynamics of the US-Japan alliance is going to be impacted by Japan's conscious efforts to improve Russo-Japanese relations merits observation.

Continued clashes with China on territorial claims and regional maritime security

Japan launched a diplomatic protest against Chinese incursions near the contested waters of the East China Sea, which has occurred sporadically and most notably in the first half of August 2016. Conflicting claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands have been an enduring concern in Sino-Japanese relations and prospects for resolution, if not dialogue, have been punctuated by a growing number of incidents, which range from surveillance to incursions in the contiguous zones. Japan and China also have competing claims on Okinotorishima; however, this has received far less attention in comparison to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands conflict.

Sino-Japanese relations, as far as maritime security is concerned, has become more complicated not only by China and Japan's own territorial conflicts, but also by China's militarization activities overall and Japan's more vocal and proactive stance in other regional territorial conflicts such as the South China Sea. In particular, Japan has increased its support to other parties involved in the South China Sea dispute, engaging in more exchanges, promoting maritime domain awareness, and providing assistance to reinforce maritime security capabilities. For instance, Japan supported the Philippines in its arbitration case against China, and has sought greater bilateral cooperation in maritime security through the institution of dialogues, joint military activities and technology transfers. In the latter half of 2016, Japan provided coast guard patrol boats and TC-90 surveillance aircrafts in fulfillment of the Agreement Concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology signed in February.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the regional maritime situation reflects mutual wariness, with Japan seeking to counterbalance China, and China opposing what it perceives as Japanese attempts at military resurgence.

Developments impacting Japanese trade and economy

Two crucial developments this year stand to impact Japan in terms of trade and investment for years to come – the speculated withdrawal of the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement and the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union. It is worth noting Japan's reaction to these two major developments and worth observing how the country intends to navigate such possible, if not imminent, shifts in the regional and global economic landscape.

Japan and the future of the TPP. In what observers considered to be a surprising move, the Japanese parliament ratified the TPP in November despite president-elect Donald Trump's initial pronouncement that he intends to pull the US out of the agreement, which would weaken it and render it superfluous despite the intended goal of creating a set of comprehensive rules and a highly liberalized trade and investment environment.

The TPP would be a landmark trade agreement among Asia-Pacific economies. More importantly for Japan perhaps, is that the TPP plays an integral part in Abe's economic growth strategy – TPP is expected to increase Japan's global market access and pave the way for a more open Japanese market, and provides an important counterbalance to China's ever spreading economic influence in East Asia by way of the alternative Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, as well as a means to keep Washington engaged in the region beyond the realm of defense and security.

The ratification indicates Japan's continued commitment to the TPP, but analysts likewise suggest that this commitment compels the government to step up and push further, particularly to persuade the impending Trump administration to change its mind about the agreement. If not, the ratification is seen as an opportunity to discuss further modifications to the TPP and for Japan work out its own limitations and liberalization problems.

Japan's reaction to UK's exit from the EU. The British exit from EU (Brexit) following a referendum in June, made headlines all over the world. Arguably, one of the strongest reactions to Brexit came from Japan. British media outlets took pointed notice of "Japan's Message to the United Kingdom and the European Union," referring to the 15-page memo released through the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a cautionary statement from an important non-EU country and whose lead might be followed by other third parties. The message outlines 18 requests directed at the UK, EU, and both UK and the EU concerning the impact of Brexit on existing and prospective trade and investment. It must be noted that Japan has long treated UK as its gateway to the European market, which implies a solid bilateral economic relationship, and one that stands to be complicated by the latter's decision to withdraw from the EU. 🌸

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