

## Assessing President Obama's Asia tour by Kazuhiko Togo

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President Obama's recent Asia tour had important achievements, but if one asks if it genuinely strengthened mutual trust between Japan and the United States, particularly between Prime Minister Abe and President Obama, too many problems remain to give a clear affirmative answer.

Most positively, Obama's statement at the April 24 joint press conference and the language used in the Joint Statement on the Senkakus – that “These (US) commitments extend to all the territories under the administration of Japan, including the Senkaku Islands. In that context, the United States opposes any unilateral action that seeks to undermine Japan's administration of the Senkaku Islands.” – were powerful and eloquent. As the president noted, this was not new policy, but the clarity and directness of the statement are more than obvious. Together with the agreement that the US concluded with the Philippines, this statement sent a message that the most disturbing factor in East Asian security is China's seeming readiness to use force to resolve conflict, rather than rely on dialogue and negotiations. Since, in my view this is not only Japan's most important security concern but also a concern of most countries in the region, I appreciate Obama's courage and determination to make such an unequivocal statement. Obama's appreciation of Abe's decision to establish a National Security Council and his support for Abe's endeavor to exercise the right of collective defense also gave strong backing to Abe's security and defense policy.

But, I have doubts about how Japan and Abe responded on other issues. All newspaper reports prior to and during the visit indicated that it was vital for President Obama to make substantial progress on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Was he successful? The language in the Joint Statement -- “we have identified a path forward on important bilateral TPP issues. This marks a key milestone in the TPP negotiations” -- sounds powerful, but it is abstract. Prime Minister Abe faces powerful domestic constituencies and he avoided a political upheaval that would have been triggered by concessions. But if the US was disappointed by Obama's inability to get what he wanted as a result of Abe's persistence, then Japan might have played a dangerous diplomatic game: Abe got what he wanted on both the Senkakus and TPP, while Obama didn't realize his main objective. Abe now has serious reasons to work hard to find a mutually acceptable solution by making Japanese concessions on TPP.

Additionally, Abe's statement at the end of the joint press conference about his Yasukuni visit was a surprise and shock for many observers, including myself. Abe's statement was fundamentally a repetition of the statement he made Dec. 26,

2013 when he visited Yasukuni. In that sense, he reconfirmed the righteousness of his policy on Yasukuni. But it was evident that his Yasukuni visit caused a real stir in the alliance and strengthened Chinese hardliners. Did the two leaders come to some kind of understanding on that issue prior to Abe's statement? Friends and colleagues who observed the press conference unanimously pointed out the “displeasure” that appeared on Obama's face. What prompted Abe to antagonize Obama at the very moment when the president made the most forthcoming statement on the Senkakus and defense? Why did he risk planting suspicion in Obama's mind about his major policy direction of “Getting out from Post-War Regime”? Why is a matter of such vital importance so little spoken about in Japan?

Abe's unexpected statement on Yasukuni and Obama's obvious displeasure were bound to raise another issue of critical importance for Japan and the US: Russia and Ukraine. If my reading of Abe's Russian/Ukraine policy is correct, Abe is determined to tread a tight rope in his Russian policy. On the one hand, Abe cannot derogate from his position as a G7 partner, a position that is compelled by Ukrainian territorial integrity and international law as well. But if my understanding is correct, Abe is also aiming to understand in a more holistic way the complexity of historical developments in Ukraine, Russia, and Crimea. He is also cognizant of the very real danger of pushing Russia toward China in ways that would create a genuine China-Russia alliance.

The “Voice of Russia,” which is said to reflect the Kremlin's view, signals growing interest in aligning with Iran. This runs the risk of creating a Beijing-Moscow-Teheran axis, which many agree would be a strategic nightmare for the “West.” Japan's geopolitical position on the fringe of the Eurasian continent and its historical positioning between “Western” and “Japanese” values -- just as Russia is pulled between “Western” and “Slavic” values -- provides a reason to stretch the hand of dialogue toward Russia, so that Putin does not deviate too far from the fundamentals of the G7.

President Obama's statement at the joint press conference gave an impression, perhaps wrongly, that he equates China's use of power toward the Senkakus with the Russian use of power in Crimea and Ukraine. This is a very dangerous analytical parallel, which, if extended too far, could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Abe should explain these points to Obama and seek understanding that within the G7, Japan might be the country best suited for dialogue with Russia. But there is one condition Abe must observe: he should have Obama's complete confidence that Japan is not selfishly thinking of the resolution of the Northern Territories problems with Russia. This may occur but it should be the result of Japan's broader strategic calculus. In this critical juncture, implanting further suspicion in Obama's mind would be the worst strategic behavior for Abe. Why would he do it again?

Last but not least, how should Japan and the US understand the statement made by President Obama April 25 in Korea on comfort women: “I think that any of us who look back on the history of what happened to the comfort women here in South Korea, for example, have to recognize that this was a terrible, egregious violation of human rights. Those women were violated in ways that, even in the midst of war, was shocking. And they deserve to be heard; they deserve to be respected; and there should be an accurate and clear account of what happened.” One of President Obama’s most important political objectives for his Asian trip was to enhance relations between Japan and Korea. There is every reason to assume that the US put strong pressure to Japan to improve ties with South Korea. Saiki Akitaka, vice minister for foreign affairs, visited Seoul March 12-13 and upon his return to Tokyo, on March 14, Abe stated during the Parliamentary debate that “My heart is aching for the fate of those women who had to go through indescribable pain, just like all previous prime ministers, and my cabinet does not consider revising the Kono Statement.” Following this declaration, the Hague tripartite summit took place (March 25) and Japan-Korea bilateral talks at the officials’ level were held (March 30), where comfort women was at least one of the subjects taken up . A Cabinet decision was reportedly taken that concludes that Abe is not going to revise the Kono Statement during his tenure (April 1).

I have maintained that Abe and Park should begin real talks as soon as possible, and make finding a resolution to the comfort women issue a first priority while 50 or so of the comfort women are still alive, but that dialogue should be based on mutual efforts and not on a unilateral apology by Abe. The 1993 Kono Statement, which Abe has declared he will preserve, and the sincere and devoted activities of the Asian Women Fund in Korea from 1995 till 2002 need recognition, all the more so because they were not accepted by Korean society. It is truly hoped that Obama’s message would be understood and appreciated as encouraging two-way efforts by both administrations.

All in all, there is no clear evidence that trust and confidence between Japan and the US were enhanced by the president’s visit. The handling of the Senkaku issue in the talks was commendable. But the fact that a TPP agreement was not reached; that Abe’s statement about his Yasukuni visit could result in more suspicion on the part of Obama; that Abe, by his own statement, might have weakened his position on Ukraine; and that Obama’s statement in Seoul about comfort women, if interpreted as solely pressing Japan, could implant suspicion on the Japanese side, all indicate that the two countries have much to do to make the Japan-US alliance really solid and trustworthy.

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