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MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Amy Tarr (atarr@mit.edu, 617.253.1965).

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Waiting for Goldilocks: Getting Japan's Foreign Policy Just Right

Richard J. Samuels

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Generations of American parents have read their children a story called “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” It is the story of a young girl who wanders into the bears’ home in the woods. Goldilocks sits on chairs that are too big and too small, before finding one that is “just right.” She rejects bowls of their porridge as being too hot and as too cold, until she finds one that is “just right.” Like most children’s stories, Goldilocks is metaphorical. Americans use it to describe the process of finding just the right balance between alternatives that are too extreme.

This metaphor captures the challenges awaiting Abe Shinzo, Japan’s new prime minister very nicely—particularly in the areas of foreign and security policy. His predecessor, Koizumi Junichiro, had already been like Goldilocks in his extended effort to find just the right policy toward North Korea. In his 2002 visit to Pyongyang he explored engagement, only to adopt toward a harder, more confrontational line. If the first was too hot and the second too cold, Abe is left with the responsibility to find a policy toward the DPRK that is “just right.” North Korea’s nuclear weapons test in October 2006 and its July 2006 missile tests certainly do not make this any easier.

Growing Ties to China

China policy provides the same challenge. Prime Minister Koizumi often acknowledged that Sino-Japanese economic relations are mutually benefi-

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cial and that the two economies are complimentary. Indeed, bilateral trade has never been more robust. Japan provides China with technology and capital, while China provides Japan with cheap production and an export platform. Ten million Chinese work in Japanese firms, and that number continues to grow as Japan redirects its direct foreign investment toward China and away from the United States. Japan's export dependence on China has soared—nearly to U.S. levels—and the share of Japanese imports from China has nearly doubled. Both countries are energy importers, so each benefit considerably from global resource development, from stability in the sea lanes, and from the efficient use of resources. And both have an abiding interest in a vibrant regional economy.

According to a December 2003 Yomiuri Shimbun poll, fifty-three percent of Japanese respondents considered the United States to be the most important country from a political perspective, compared with thirty percent for China. But, when asked who is Japan's most important trade partner, more than half answered China—twice as many as named the United States.

Confrontational Diplomacy

Still, Japan's China diplomacy has been confrontational. Koizumi poked a long sharp stick in Beijing's eye by repeatedly visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, most recently in August 2006. Abe secretly visited the shrine in April. Notwithstanding the fact that Beijing uses anti-Japanese nationalism to consolidate its own power, Tokyo has not gone nearly far enough to earn the trust of its neighbors. Japan still has a very bad reputation in East Asia due to its unwillingness to confront history squarely—undoubtedly the largest constraint on its diplomacy. Japanese voters await a Goldilocks who will get the history issue—and China policy—“just right.”

What would this take? And is Abe the man for the job? Sino-Japanese trade and investment are at record levels, so clearly more needs to be done.

Certainly, a moratorium on Yasukuni visits by the prime minister—a suggestion made by former diplomat Togo Kazuhiko—would be a start. Replacing the current modus vivendi in which China and Japan compete for regional dominance would be helpful as well. If redirected through multilateral institutions, Sino-Japanese competition could be positive for both sides. Japanese strategists could continue to proceed functionally, building cooperation in specific policy areas such as energy, crime, the environment, and the economy. They could continue taking small and very tentative steps toward a “comprehensive” arrangement, an “open, transparent, and inclusive” regional trade bloc. Tokyo has sent intermittent signals that it could accept an East Asian Community that excludes the United States, and in the run-up to the first meeting of the

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nascent EAC in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005, Japan's ambivalence about U.S. participation was more transparent than the economic institutions it was proposing.

Calibrating the US-Japan Relationship

Finally, therefore, Abe has to find the right balance in the Japan-U.S. alliance. The United States is still Japan's most important source of security. It will continue to be embraced—but at what cost? Koizumi tilted hard in the American direction, a move that fortunately has not yet cost the lives of Japanese soldiers, but that could in the future, if a correction is not made. Abe has been similarly willing to court entanglement to avoid abandonment. But it is not at all clear how Japanese citizens will respond if one of the Japanese military transports left behind in Kuwait to ferry U.S. soldiers and materiel is brought down by hostile fire.

If he is to be Japan's "Goldilocks," Abe will reposition Japan—neither too close nor too far from the United States. Building an East Asian Community that resembles the stable, prosperous, economically integrated Western Europe—and one that is built upon a Japanese commitment to the values of democracy and freedom—would be "just right." So long as the security relationship with the United States is properly attended to, Japan could balance against U.S. and European economic power while insuring itself against Chinese military power without destabilizing the relationship.

Washington seems confident that Abe appreciates our many shared national interests. It will continue to monitor the construction of Asia's new economic architecture, and will want to be sure that it is open and built upon a liberal vision. It will have to be patient as "Goldilocks" repairs Japan's relationships with Korea and China. It will also have to appreciate—or at least not be too surprised—that "Goldilocks" will be engaged in distancing Japan from the United States in areas where interests diverge, as in the case of Iran.

Although Mr. Abe has been identified by many analysts as an unreconstructed and doctrinaire hawk—the very personification of the consolidation of revisionist power within the LDP—he already has begun to play the Goldilocks role. Adopting a sort of "Nixon goes to China" posture, the conservative Abe endorsed

the war apologies uttered by previous Japanese leaders, including the most controversial one penned by Socialist Murayama Tomiichi in 1993. Then, departing from a long tradition of making Washington the Prime Minister's first stop, Abe's initial overseas visit took him to Beijing, where he held lengthy consultations with both President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. There he once again acknowledged Japan's war responsibility and distanced himself from his predecessor's promise to visit the Yasukuni Shrine annually.

In another fence-mending initiative, Prime Minister Abe flew from Beijing to Seoul to confer with President Roh Moo-hyun. Soon thereafter, in a statement that surprised most pundits, Abe even acknowledged his grandfather's "mistake" in initiating the Pacific War. (Abe's grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, was a leading official in Japan's industrial development and colonial administration in Manchuria during the Pacific War. After the war, he served three years in jail as an unindicted Class A war criminal. Kishi then helped found the Liberal Democratic Party and served as Japan's Prime Minister from 1957 to 1960.)

When North Korea tested its nuclear device in October 2006, Abe responded coolly by reiterating Tokyo's three non-nuclear principles. Japan would not overreact by going nuclear.

In Iran, meanwhile, negotiations between the Iranian government and Impex, the Japanese government-owned oil exploration firm, resulted in a sharp reduction—from 75 percent to 10 percent—of the Japanese stake in the development of the Azadegan field. Abe has wasted no time in rearranging Japan's strategic chess board, while keeping it in the game on all fronts.

An effective Prime Minister Abe will be possessed of an independent, full-throated voice on security issues as well as a keen eye for economic advantage. He will neither lead Japan too far toward great power status, nor allow it to remain so dependent upon the United States as to risk further entanglement. He will abandon Japan's cheap riding and will consolidate its military gains, without allowing them to drag Japan down. In short, he will appreciate that the costs of remaining a U.S. ally are escalating, but will avoid allowing them become too great to bear.

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