

# The New Japanese Nationalism

The nationalist pride and neoliberal economics peddled by Shinzo Abe promise only cheap escape from Japan's problems.

by Kristin Surak



Kiyoshi Ota / Reuters

Shortly after Prime Minister Shinzo Abe returned to power in 2013, he declared triumphantly in a public speech, “Japan is back!” Since then, to the cheers of global capital, he has done much to prove it.

At the helm of the world's third largest economy is, finally, a man able to drive privatization and deregulation past factional differences to re-start growth again — a task so heroic that the *Economist* emblazoned its cover with the hound-faced PM as Superman.

It's quite a return for a premier who stepped down in 2007 after less than a year in office under the shadow of scandal, giving the rather less rock-ribbed excuse of crippling diarrhea. Even seasoned Japan watchers did not expect that Abe would take the LDP's nomination in autumn of 2012. Nobutaka Machimura secured the most votes within the Diet, and Shigeru Ishiba won the local vote. But after party elections went into a nearly unprecedented second round, internal horse-trading placed Abe on top — and left him with a number of favors to pay.

“Abenomics” is part of the package, combining several long-standing demands of the ruling class into a potent cocktail. Export giants received a welcomed plunge in the yen from Y77 to Y100 to the dollar, finance bureaucrats finally got a rise in the sales tax from five percent to eight percent, big business and the banks lapped up newly printed money and applauded further labor market deregulation.

The adrenaline shot into the comatose economy seemed to work for the first year: GDP moved out of negative growth to 1.3% in early 2013; among firms, the old standards posted profits. The *Economist* and *Financial Times* trotted alongside the upticking lines like cheerleaders as inflation hit 1.5%. It seemed like Japan's massive economy was again ready to be milked for profits.

Printing money and public spending can create such bubbles but not sustain them, and the payoffs of Abenomics are already proving to be short-lived and concentrated in the hands of entrenched interests. Banks are booming — the financial holding company Nomura, for example, has tripled its earnings — and manufacturing, especially the auto industry, has done well. Yet profits have not been reinvested in wage rises, and wages are falling even as prices increase.

By the second quarter this year, the GDP declined a whopping 6.8%, wiping out all the economic gains of the first quarter when consumers stocked up on goods in anticipation of the new sales tax. Apologists claim that the lower base line will only make it easier to post growth in the autumn.

If Abenomics has secured a legacy for a once-failed prime minister, does it mark a real change in Abe's goals? Beyond dubious supply-side economics, little distinguishes his first term from the second. Talk of an “arc of freedom and prosperity” to protect free enterprise in the US, Japan, Australia, and India (no Chinese, please) has become secret negotiations over the Trans-Pacific Partnership meant to accomplish the same.

His 2006 national best seller *Towards a Beautiful Country* is again flying off the shelves, repackaged with little imagination as *Towards a New Country*. It's no surprise that he still rejects the 1995 apology for imperial aggression, offered by socialist Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama on the fiftieth anniversary of the war's end, and typically understood as the government's official position. In his first stint in office, Abe attempted to revise all of the country's founding charters — the Constitution, the Fundamental Law of Education, and the Ampo security treaty with the US — with partial success.

Now is his chance to pick up where he left off. And one need only look at his proposed revisions to the Constitution to see where this is going.

Gone are the lofty democratic ideals in the preamble — hymns to “the preservation of peace, and the banishment of tyranny and slavery, oppression and intolerance for all time of the earth” — for a beefier start: “Japan is a country with a long history and unique culture, and an emperor as the symbol unifying the nation.” What follows are adjustments to nearly all of the document's 103 articles that would greatly expand the scope for a state of emergency; transform the nominal Self Defense Force into a full-fledged army; and subordinate freedoms of speech, press, and association to the maintenance of public order.

But high hurdles stand in the way of amending the country's founding document. Abe needs a super-majority in both houses of the Diet and the support of a reluctant public to win a referendum. Thus quiet, incremental change has been the preferred approach. His Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso outlined the strategy in a public relations nightmare in which he praised the Nazis for replacing the Weimar Constitution without anyone noticing and suggested that Japan might learn from the example.

The promise of resuscitating the comatose economy has the press and populace entranced, and with the audience looking the other way, Abe is making inroads on his less popular proposals.

Last month, his office proclaimed that the Constitution does not rule out collective self-defense — despite an article that unblinkingly declares, “[T]he Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of setting international disputes.”

The US has pushed Japan for years to relax its interpretation of Article 9 and stand “shoulder to shoulder” with its troops — a call Abe and the nationalists are only too grateful to follow. The new reading, rather incredulously, is said to enable Japan to come to the aid of the US military if under attack.

Former top official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ukeru Magosaki has described it as effectively transforming the Japanese Self Defense Force into “mercenaries in service of the US.” If not the first revised reading — an SDF has been created and even sent overseas on UN support missions — it is the first to come not from the judiciary but the executive.

Foundational to constitutionalism is the principle that no agency lies above its rule. In principle, change comes through gradual reinterpretation by courts or formal amendment procedures, not from the recommendations of advisory panels appointed by the prime minister. But for Abe, such quibbling only gets in the way of firm leadership.

The top-down approach is a trademark, which Abe brandished with relish last December in the quick passage of a sweeping new State Secrets Act. Passed off as protecting the national interest from media leaks, the act goes much further than the customary concerns of espionage and terrorism. Indeed, it is more of an anti-whistle blower law than anything else, serving a reporter with five years in prison and her source with ten for exposing corruption, threats to public health, and even environmental issues if designated a “secret.”

But such fears may be abating as critical voices in the mainstream media step down under pressure from above. The casualties of late include some of the most reasoned journalist critics of nuclear power and the mishandling of the Fukushima disaster: Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) commentator Toru Nakakita, NHK newscaster Jun Hori, and Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) Radio announcer Takashi Uesugi.

Certainly the new head of the NHK, Katsuo Momii, is not mourning the loss. The businessman selected by Abe to run Japan’s most popular television news source accepted his appointment by declaring, without blush, “If the government goes right, we can’t go left.” It comes as little surprise that NHK’s coverage of the revised interpretation of Article 9 did not include news of the man who set himself on fire in protest against the law in one of the busiest sections of Tokyo.

The nationalist pride Abe and others peddle promises only cheap escape from the problems wrenching the country. Japan is now one of the most unequal members of the OECD, with poverty rates — one in six no longer making it above the line — behind only the US and Mexico. A third of all workers are on short-term or part-time contracts, but lifetime employment for the baby boom generation means the rates for youth are much higher.

With much of the social welfare net attached to regular work, what is left for them? Hopefully more than the nationalist posturing Abe offers.

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