

Foreign policy as a 'fight': Abe and the future of East Asian relations

Lee Jong-won

Foreign Policy as a "Fight": Abe and the future of East Asian relations

By Lee Jong-won

"The Man Who Turned Foreign Policy Into a Fight." That is the title of a booklet published by the Japanese newspaper Yomiuri Shimbun about Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's approach to diplomacy during his five years in office. The Japanese title uses the word "kenka." It is usually translated as "fight," but the nuance it carries is closer to a "fistfight" or "verbal scuffle" among little schoolboys.

Japanese chief cabinet secretary Abe Shinzo, the man who is all but assured to be the next prime minister, is also a man who advocates that kind of approach. He has just published a book, "Becoming a Beautiful Country," about what he hopes to accomplish in office, and it begins with the words, "a politician who fights." The book is a militant declaration, in which he says Japan has too many convictionless, fight-eschewing, overly cautious politicians. Naturally, Korea has to take an interest in what exactly the "fight" Abe is talking about means for the Japanese state and its people.



Abe (left) with Koizumi

His public statements and behavior so far place him in the farthest right- leaning category of current Japanese politicians. When we say Japan is "turning to the right" or talk about the "Japanese right," there are various factors to consider. There are four major categories that qualify as right- wing in Japan: the economic right, the realist right, the military right, and the ideological right.

The economic right wants neoliberalism on the domestic scene and, in terms of external policy, it wants greater access to natural resources and wider access to markets. As such, it is influenced by the interests of big business. The realist right wants Japan to make "international contributions" and be a "normal" country, and

is uncomfortable with a restorationist view of Japanese history. The military right calls for the abolition of material, institutional and legal limitations on Japanese military power. The ideological right's main interest is to restore Japan's past, and it emphasizes the importance of traditional values and ideas. You might call this group the Japanese version of the "religious right."

Obviously, these four categories frequently overlap, and mixtures of several of them can be found in the actions and political philosophies of individual politicians. Nevertheless, being able to differentiate and analyze each is essential when thinking about Korea's relationship with and foreign policy toward Japan.



Lee Jong-won

For example, when Koizumi worships so stubbornly at Yasukuni Shrine, to Koreans that gives him the image of a thoroughly right-wing politician. But if you look carefully at his policies and what he has done, he is primarily a member of the economic right, and not so much a part of the ideological or military right. One of Japan's main "right-wing" news outlets, the Yomiuri, criticizes him for worshipping at Yasukuni out of its realist and economic concerns that the comments and behavior of the ideological right hurt Japan's national interest.

So far, Abe's comments and behavior place him squarely in the ideological and military right. He has spent most of his time calling for constitutional amendment to restore Japan's military capabilities, rather than economic reform. He also calls for educational laws that would emphasize patriotism in schools.

Even within Japan, his views are causing concern among mainstream conservatives and the business community. Abe will, of course, show a trend toward a realistic balance once he is in power. He has been busy trying to find points of compromise on Yasukuni, and even when it comes to relations with China, he has been emphasizing the need to separate business from politics. He has been trying to ease business concerns in that regard by calling for economic cooperation in East Asia in the form of an "Economic Partnership Agreement" (EPA) that would be more expansive than a free trade agreement (FTA).

Still, what his policies towards Asia will be remains unclear. He still tends to invoke China as a threat, and he has been calling for a long-term strategy linking "democratic nations" such as Australia and India, based on the U.S.-Japanese alliance. Perhaps by intention, Korea—with the most dynamic democracy in the region—is not mentioned in that initiative. The specifics of what the initiative would entail

are unknown, but if it becomes something that by its nature targets China's growth, the bitter winds of a new Cold War will blow over East Asia. Even if the issue of Yasukuni is resolved, there will still be major factors producing instability in the Korea-Japan relationship that will have to be dealt with. Korea's policy toward Japan needs to be proactive and comprehensive enough to consider the diversity and changes in Japan.

Lee Jong-won is Professor of International Relations at Rikkyo University.

This is a slightly edited version of an article that appeared in The Hankyoreh (Seoul) on August 24, 2006. Posted at Japan Focus on September 18, 2006.