

New Directions in Japanese Politics and Foreign Policy

Tenth Annual Lecture on Japanese Politics

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In his Tenth Annual Lecture on Japanese Politics, cosponsored by the Center on Japanese Economy and Business (CJEB) at Columbia Business School and the Weatherhead East Asian Institute (WEAI) of Columbia University, Professor Gerald Curtis addressed the fundamental geopolitical factors that are driving change in Japanese security policy. The talk was moderated by Professor Hugh Patrick, director of CJEB.

Professor Curtis first discussed how Japan's foreign and security policy is gradually shifting. Despite a desire to avoid foreign entanglement, Japan is being impelled to increase its international involvement, especially in light of recent events in the Middle East, in which two Japanese citizens were executed by the Islamic State. The current U.S. – Japan security alliance is the lynchpin for Japan's security policy, but it alone cannot guarantee Japan's security.

Japan's foreign policy was forged in the crucible of the Cold War. Its security alliance with the United States was part of a global U.S. strategy to contain the Soviet Union. In the bipolar system that characterized the Cold War, Japan was able to feel confident about its security without having to engage in a major rearmament. But the world is a very different place now. A quarter of a century after the end of the Cold War, East Asia is evolving a multipolar system that is less stable and less predictable. China has emerged as a great power, North Korea has developed nuclear weapons, and every country in Asia, including Japan, is trying to find new ways to enhance its security. The United States and China are the two dominant players in this international system, but this does not represent a new form of bipolarity; these two are inter-dependent in a way that the United States and USSR never were. China has adopted an aggressive stance with regard to both South China Sea and East China Sea disputes. The United States remains the most powerful country in East Asia, and will retain that position for years to come, but it no longer enjoys unchallengeable supremacy. How does this affect Japan?



Hugh Patrick

Professor Curtis noted that the Japanese are realists about international power and know that China's influence and power will inevitably expand with its economy. The fundamental challenge facing the United States and Japan is not to contain China, but how to ensure a balance of power and maintain peace. Professor Curtis emphasized that containment and balance of power are not the same. Containment is not possible, and Japan alone cannot maintain a balance of power in East Asia. Its strategy to maintain a balance is based on three elements: developing its own capacity, sustaining the security alliance with the United States, and developing security relations with regional neighbors.

Despite recent tensions, Professor Curtis is cautiously optimistic about short-term Sino-Japanese relations. The November meeting between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Premier Xi Jinping at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit was important and has led to a resumption of dialogue at various levels between China and Japan. Japan's long-term challenge is to manage its strategic rivalry with China while further integrating their economies and developing strong grassroots ties. For both Japan and the United States, an effort must be made to make the U.S.-China-Japan trilateral relationship a positive sum relationship. It is important for the United States to make clear to China that policies which worsen relations with Japan will have an adverse effect on China's relations with the United States.

Professor Curtis's primary point was that shifts in the international system – far more than Prime Minister Abe's personality – are what are pushing policy change in Japan. Even if Abe were not the Prime Minister, Japan would face the same challenges and be impelled to pursue

a similar policy trajectory. Many of Abe's policies are neither unique to him or to his party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Rather, they build incrementally on policies that were advocated by the previous Democratic Party of Japan government.

Given this underlying reality, Professor Curtis outlined what difference it makes that Abe, and not someone else, is prime minister. He emphasized three reasons in particular. First, Abe is politically stronger than his predecessors, given the disorganization of opposition and due to his relative power within the LDP, and he has used that position to strengthen the control of the Kantei – the prime minister's office – over the cabinet and over the party. Second, he has tirelessly advocated a higher-profile Japanese foreign policy, visiting over 50 countries and meeting with over 100 state leaders. Finally, and unfortunately, his comments about Japan's wartime history and the comments of his close friends and associates have created suspicions about his longer term foreign policy goals. This has the effect of undermining support for policies that in and of themselves make a great deal of sense. In this regard, the remarks he makes in August 2015, in commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, will be closely followed, and will significantly impact Japan's future relations with its neighbors and with the United States.

In summary, Professor Curtis said that Abe has seized the opportunity to push for change in Japan's foreign and security policy. Whether he will succeed in convincing the public to support constitutional revision is uncertain, but there is no question that he will put constitutional revision near the top of his agenda beginning next year.



Question and Answer Session



Gerald Curtis, Hugh Patrick

An audience member asked about the implications of the United States allying with a strong revisionist leader. Professor Curtis responded that Abe's policies are in line with U.S. interests. Though the overhang of history is clouding the waters, the United States is pleased with Abe's efforts to reinterpret Article Nine of the Constitution to permit collective defense.

The next questioner asked whether Japan's system of strong Prime Ministerial leadership is weakened by Abe's need for a two-third majority to revise the Constitution. Professor Curtis responded that prime ministerial leadership refers to the power of the prime minister over the cabinet and the party in the government decision-making process, not to the balance of forces in the Diet.

The next questioner asked how Japan plans to balance greater international involvement with a desire to avoid entanglement in foreign conflicts, given recent events in the Middle East. Professor Curtis answered that Japan cannot avoid entanglement in the Middle East. However, it will assume a greater humanitarian role, not a military one.

The following question related to the extent to which Prime Minister Abe's personal views are driving foreign policy change. Professor Curtis emphasized that fundamental forces are driving changes in Japan's policy and Abe has taken advantage of this opportunity to push Japan in a new direction. However, the changes have been incremental.



Hugh Patrick, Gerald Curtis, David E. Weinstein (CJEB's Director of Research)