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Japan's Approach to Northeast Asian Security: Between Nationalism and (Reluctant) Multilateralism

by Axel Berkofsky

ABSTRACT

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe wants Japan to become a more "normal" country in terms of its security and defence policies. In order to achieve a new level of security-policy "normality," Abe has invested enormous political capital and resources in reinterpreting the country's war-renouncing constitution. This has enabled Tokyo's armed forces to execute the right to collective self-defence as formulated in Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Furthermore, in 2015 the Abe-led government pushed a package of controversial national security laws through parliament, which enable the country's armed forces to better defend Japanese territory by military means, alone or with the US in the framework of the bilateral US-Japan security alliance. Such fundamental changes to Tokyo's security agenda are the basis for Japan to expand old and establish new partnerships with countries such as Australia, India, the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam, in order to counter the potential threat posed by Chinese territorial expansionism in the South China Sea. Tokyo's bilateral security alliance with Washington might, under US President Donald Trump, be subject to changes in the months ahead. At the same time, the Japanese nationalism and historical revisionism propagated by Abe and his supporters will continue to hinder Japan's achieving sustainable reconciliation with South Korea and China. All of the above will likely mean that Tokyo's interest in the South Korean-sponsored Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) will remain very limited at best.

Japan | Foreign policy | Military policy | Nationalism | Northeast Asia | South Korea | North Korea | United States

keywords

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Introduction

Since his re-election in December 2012, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the Japanese Government that he leads have invested significant resources in strengthening the country's defence capabilities. They also intend to provide Japan's military with the legal and constitutional frameworks needed to more actively and substantially contribute towards security cooperation with the United States – as formulated in the US-Japan Security Treaty of 1960. Constitutional reinterpretation, the adoption in 2015 of new national-security laws and new US-Japan Guidelines for Defence Cooperation, and the ongoing expansion of Tokyo's regional security and defence ties (bilateral and multilateral) all testify to this approach. By contrast, far fewer Japanese resources and energy will be dedicated to the South Korean-sponsored Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI). Tokyo's interest in NAPCI will continue to remain marginal at best, for a number of reasons. These include its current poor relations with Seoul, disagreements over the interpretation of Japanese World War II militarism, and the nationalism and historical revisionism endorsed and practised by Abe's government. Frankly, Tokyo is not missing a great deal by showing so little interest in assigning more resources to NAPCI as a regional-security instrument. All NAPCI contributors are aware that the Initiative has not – as was envisioned by Seoul – been able to resume result-oriented, multilateral (i.e. with North Korea's participation) negotiations on Pyongyang's nuclear programme, leading to the North's denuclearization. Indeed, North Korea's most recent nuclear test has unequivocally demonstrated that its nuclear programme is not up for negotiation. This is not least because Pyongyang's nuclear-threat potential remains its only tool for exerting pressure on countries in and beyond the region.

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1. Constitutional reinterpretation and national-security laws

In summer 2014, the Japanese Government led by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared as its top priority a reinterpretation of the war-renouncing Article 9 of Japan's constitution.¹ This constitutional reinterpretation proved controversial in Japan, and the government was forced to push it through parliament in late 2014. It allows Japan's military – its Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), established in 1954² – to execute the right to collective self-defence as formulated in Chapter VII, Article 51 of the UN Charter. In 2015, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), led by Abe, adopted a legal framework allowing the country's armed forces to execute this right, by implementing a set of new national-security laws. To be sure, even after this process, Japan's military is not authorized to execute the collective self-defence right in the way that most other countries' armed forces are allowed to. It is permitted to use force together with, for example, the US for the exclusive purpose of defending Japanese territory. That means that we will not – for the foreseeable future – see Japan's armed forces fighting alongside soldiers of other countries overseas (e.g. in the framework of UN-sanctioned multinational military missions). It also means that Japan's armed forces will remain unable to execute the right to collective self-defence as part of multinational military operations such as the UN-mandated war in Afghanistan.

At home, Japan's new national-security laws (taking effect from March 2016) are controversial, and have alarmed those who argue that they violate Article 9 of the constitution. Regardless of this issue, they do not – as is typically feared and argued in Beijing – stand for a re-emergence of Japanese militarism. Rather, they offer confirmation that Tokyo's defence and security policies will remain strictly non-offensive and defence-oriented. Furthermore, and equally importantly, this constitutional reinterpretation and its attendant national-security laws will not allow the acquisition and deployment of offensive military capabilities that would enable Japan to attack another country.³ One of the laws adopted in September 2015⁴ amends ten existing security-related laws. It lifts restrictions on the country's armed forces, including the ban on executing the right to collective self-defence. A second piece of new legislation comprises a permanent law allowing Japan to deploy its

¹ Constitutional re-interpretation to enable Japan to become what is referred to as "normal country" (*futsu no kuni* in Japanese) in terms of security and defence policies has in essence been promoted by the Liberal-Democratic Party of Japan (LDP) since it started to govern in Japan in 1955. Since then, the LDP has *de facto* uninterruptedly governed in Japan. Only from 1993-1994 when the country was ruled by an eight-party coalition excluding the LDP for 11 months and from 2009-2013 when the country was ruled by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), was the LDP out of power.

² "Self-Defence Forces" as opposed to "real" armed or military forces Japan's war-renouncing constitution does the country not allow to maintain.

³ The issue of equipping the country with offensive military capabilities including nuclear weapons makes it into Japan's policy agenda every once in a while.

⁴ The laws first passed the Lower House of the Japanese Parliament in the summer of 2015 and then the Upper House in September of the same year.

JSDF overseas to provide logistical support for UN-authorized multilateral military operations.⁵ While proponents of Japan's security laws point out that they were debated for more than 200 hours in parliament in summer 2015, their opponents counter that the Prime Minister brushed aside informed opposition to the security legislation as irrelevant.⁶ Indeed, Abe chose in June 2015 to dismiss as immaterial the concerns of three prominent constitutional-law scholars who had concluded that the national-security laws were unconstitutional and in violation of Article 9. Ironically, it had been the Abe Cabinet that first appointed these constitutional scholars in the first place.

2. The problem with Japanese nationalism and revisionism

Prime Minister Abe is a convinced nationalist and revisionist. He belongs to or leads a number of groups advocating a fundamental reinterpretation of the nature and extent of Japan's World War II militarism.⁷ A Abe is the grandson of Nobusuke Kishi, a controversial Japanese Prime Minister of the late 1950s,⁸ who in the postwar years became known as the most committed promoter of the US-imposed constitutional revision of 1947.⁹ Shinzo Abe has apparently made it his task to complete his grandfather's self-imposed mission to revise Japan's postwar constitution. In the 1990s, for example, he joined the LDP's History and Deliberation Committee. This revisionist body denies that Japan's Imperial Army massacred up to 200,000 Chinese civilians during its six-week-long occupation of the then Chinese capital, Nanjing, in 1937. Later, Abe headed the Group of Young Diet Members for the Re-Thinking of Japan's Future and History Education. The group claims that Tokyo's World War II militarism did not constitute a "war of aggression" but rather a "war of liberation," freeing Asian countries from Western colonialism.

⁵ See Reiji Yoshida and Mizuho Aoki, "Diet Enacts Security Laws, Marking Japan's Departure from Pacifism", in *The Japan Times*, 19 September 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/09/19/national/politics-diplomacy/diet-enacts-security-laws-marking-japans-departure-from-pacifism-2>.

⁶ See e.g. "Abe's 'Stain'", in *The Economist*, 26 September 2015, <http://econ.st/1iNW1EV>. For further details on Shinzo Abe's revisionist thinking and policies see also Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan's Foreign and Security Policy under the 'Abe Doctrine'. New Dynamism or New Dead End?*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

⁷ See Richard Katz, "Abe not Placating the Right; He is the Right", in *East Asia Forum*, 13 January 2014, <http://wp.me/poZN0-ako>.

⁸ (Very) controversial as Kishi was as Japan's Munitions Minister since 1941 (in the cabinet of militarist Prime Minister Hideki Tojo) responsible for forcing thousands of Korean and Chinese to work as slaves in Japanese factories and mines during World War II. After the war, Kishi spent time in Sugamo Prison in Tokyo as "Class A war crimes" suspect. He was released from prison in 1948 without having been tried and indicted as criminal of war.

⁹ On the history of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, see also Axel Berkofsky, *A Pacifist Constitution for An Armed Empire. Past and Present of Japanese Security and Defence Policies*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2012.

When Abe became Prime Minister for the second time in 2012,¹⁰ he appointed several revisionist colleagues to his Cabinet. Many of them were members of the so-called "League for Visits to Yasukuni Shrine," a group of politicians and scholars promoting visits to the controversial shrine in central Tokyo.¹¹ Abe himself has, in the past, been a frequent visitor to this Shinto site, the resting place of 14 convicted Japanese war criminals. His last visit, in December 2013, triggered diplomatic crises with both South Korea and China. Finally, many of Abe's current ministers belong to the revisionist institute Nippon Kaigi ("Japan Conference"). Amongst other things, this organization campaigns for an end to Japan's so-called "apology diplomacy" and demands the reinstatement of the Japanese Emperor as head of state.¹² Today, Abe and his like-minded followers continue to insist that constitutional revision is necessary in order to enable Japan to regain its "self-respect," "dignity" and "independence" – as the country's postwar constitution was drafted by "foreigners," i.e. the occupying US in 1947.

3. (A degree of) Japanese-Korean reconciliation

Unsurprisingly, the Abe Government's historical revisionism has recently had a negative impact on prospects for regional-security cooperation – in both bilateral (Japanese-South Korean) and trilateral (Japanese-US-South Korean) forums. However, over the course of 2015, it seemed as if the demands of *realpolitik* had caught up with Japan's Prime Minister. He decided to undertake a serious effort to sustainably improve Japan's relations with South Korea. Additionally, he had, in 2012, planned to revisit Japan's official apology for its wartime aggression, made by then Prime Minister Tomoiichi Murayama in 1995. However, in March 2015, Abe changed his mind and confirmed that Japan would adhere to Murayama's official apology, which unambiguously referred to Japan as a World War II "aggressor." At the same time (in March 2015) Abe also acknowledged that South Korean women had been forced to prostitute themselves for Japan's Imperial Army during the latter's occupation of the Korean Peninsula. ("Forced" as opposed to having voluntarily chosen to "work" in brothels set up by the Japanese occupiers, as Abe and other historical revisionists had at times suggested.) Based on this fundamental change of mind, Tokyo and Seoul reached an agreement in December 2015 to settle the

¹⁰ Abe was – with a great majority – re-elected in December 2014, taking advantage of the country's currently very weak political opposition in disarray. The LDP now controls a third majority in both chambers of the Japanese Parliament (the Lower House and the Upper House), which enables the party to overrule any opposition against LDP-drafted bills submitted to the Parliament.

¹¹ While Japanese politicians visiting the shrine typically maintain their visits' purpose is to honour Japan's war dead, to the outside world the shrine is a symbol for Japanese World War II militarism.

¹² Who was degraded from "head of state" and commander-in-chief of Japan's Imperial Army to "symbol" of state with no political powers when Japan was in 1946 under pressure from the occupying US *de facto* obliged to adopt a constitution that was drafted by the staff of General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP) in Japan.

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"comfort women"¹³ issue after Abe officially apologized on behalf of Japan. He also agreed to set up a 1 billion yen (8.5 million dollars) fund for the surviving 46 South Korean forced prostitutes.¹⁴

Nonetheless, by January 2016, one member of Abe's Cabinet was apparently no longer able to suppress his revisionist instincts. Japan's Foreign Minister, Fumio Kishida, reverted to a stance that, seemingly deliberately, damaged prospects for Japanese-South Korean agreement. He publicly maintained that the term "sex slaves" was not appropriate when describing what Japan's Imperial Army had forced South Korean women to do during World War II.¹⁵ Furthermore, Kishida is not the only member of Abe's Cabinet who believes that this term is not applicable to what many, mainly South Korean, women were obliged to undergo in Japanese so-called "comfort stations" in occupied Korea. The above-mentioned South Korean-Japanese agreement of December 2015 did not end the controversy over the "comfort women"/"sex slaves" issue. On 28 December 2016, South Korean activists installed a bronze "comfort women" statue outside the Japanese Consulate in the South Korean city of Busan. Tokyo argued that this action violated the December 2015 agreement. In response, it temporarily recalled its Consul General in Busan and its Ambassador in Seoul at the beginning of January 2017. The Japanese Government also suspended a currency-swap agreement and postponed a high-level bilateral economic dialogue.¹⁶ The fragile Japanese-South Korean reconciliation process suffered another blow when Japan's controversial, revisionist Defence Minister, Tomomi Inada, together with a group of Japanese lawmakers, visited the Yasukuni Shrine in late December 2016. Ironically – indeed, sadly – the visit took place one day after Abe, together with outgoing US President Barack Obama, visited Pearl Harbor with a promise that "Japan would never again wage war."¹⁷

¹³ Up 200,000 women from South Korea (but also from the Philippines, Indonesia, Taiwan and the Netherlands) were forced to prostitute themselves in what Japan's Imperial Army at the time referred to so-called "comfort stations," i.e. Japanese-run brothels for the "comfort" of Japanese soldiers. Some Japanese nationalists and revisionists claim until today that not only Japan but also countries during past wars ran such brothels. Something, as it is at times cynically argued among Japan's nationalists and revisionists, was "normal" practice during wars.

¹⁴ See e.g. "Japan and South Korea Agree WWII 'Comfort Women' Deal", in *BBC News*, 28 December 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35188135>.

¹⁵ See Reiji Yoshida, "Japan's Foreign Minister Challenges Term of 'Sex Slaves' for 'Comfort Women'", in *The Japan Times*, 18 January 2016, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/01/18/national/politics-diplomacy/japans-foreign-minister-challenges-use-of-sex-slaves-term-for-comfort-women>.

¹⁶ See "Japan Recalls Korean Envoy over 'Comfort Women' Statue", in *BBC News*, 6 January 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38526914>. The statue in Busan is by far not the only one of such statues in South Korea (there more than 30 in the country) and the Japanese government decided to withdraw its envoys when Seoul did not take action on Japanese complaints about the statues.

¹⁷ See Reiji Yoshida, "Defense Chief Inada Disrupts Abe's Historic Moment by Visiting Yasukuni", in *The Japan Times*, 29 December 2016, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/12/29/national/politics-diplomacy/defense-chief-inada-takes-yasukuni-heels-pearl-harbor-visit>.

4. Japanese security policies: defensive-oriented, bilateral and multilateral

These developments in Japan's security and defence-policy agenda do not point to any plans for the country to transform itself from an officially "pacifist" nation to a "militarist" one, threatening regional peace and stability. Nonetheless, Chinese policymakers and scholars continue to (groundlessly)¹⁸ fear such an outcome. Tokyo is however, currently expanding bilateral and multilateral regional-security and defence ties with India, Australia, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines. It is doing so in order to, amongst other goals, counterbalance aggressive Chinese expansionism in disputed territorial waters in the East and South China Seas. The expansion of defence ties with India, in particular, has been high on Abe's security-policy agenda over recent years. This mutual interest has led, amongst other things, to the adoption of a joint security declaration.¹⁹ This agreement covers cooperation on cyber security, the 2009 establishment of a Japanese-Indian "2 plus 2" dialogue (between respective ministers of defence and foreign affairs), and joint maritime-defence and coastguard exercises.

Trilateral US-Japan-India defence ties have also been institutionalized through the establishment of the US-Japan-India Trilateral Dialogue of 2013.²⁰ Additionally, the 2015 revision of the US-Japan Guidelines for Defence Cooperation²¹ further proves that Tokyo remains committed to coordinating and conducting its security and defence policies (both regional and global) within the framework of its bilateral security alliance with the US. These revised defence guidelines²² foresee the expansion of Japan's role and competencies vis-à-vis US-Japanese military cooperation in the case of a military conflict in or beyond the region. Admittedly, there is currently a high degree of uncertainty amongst Japanese foreign-policymakers as to whether, and to what extent, US President Donald Trump might wish to change the nature and extent of Washington's security alliance with Tokyo. On the election campaign trail, Trump announced that, with him as US President, Japan would have to shoulder more of the burden of securing peace and stability in Asia through their bilateral security alliance. The alliance, Trump seemed to indicate, would have to become less asymmetrical – not only would the US be

¹⁸ Numerous conversations with Chinese policymakers and scholars in 2015 and 2016 confirm deep-seated Chinese concerns about a return of Japan becoming an aggressive regional military power. However, many Chinese policymakers and scholars are fully aware that constitutional re-interpretation and the adoption of national security laws do in reality and in no way stand for a return to Japanese World War II-style Japanese militarism.

¹⁹ In 2008, the so-called Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between Japan and India.

²⁰ Kei Koga and Yogesh Joshi, "Japan-India Security Cooperation", in *The Diplomat*, 17 July 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/?p=12352>.

²¹ See Ankit Panda, "US, Japan Agree to New Defense Guidelines", in *The Diplomat*, 28 April 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/?p=53891>.

²² Before 2015, the guidelines were last revised in 1997. The 1997 already mentioned US-Japan military cooperation in what was referred to as "areas surrounding Japan" and at time Beijing feared that one of such "areas" were the Taiwan Straits in the event of a US-Sino military conflict over Taiwan.

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obliged to defend Japan in the case of attack but also vice versa: Japan would – in the case of an attack on the US, through the US-Japan Security Treaty – be obliged to defend the US unconditionally. The level of contribution that Trump envisages would most probably go far beyond that which Japan currently authorizes itself to provide, even after its aforementioned constitutional reinterpretation.

Constitutional reinterpretation and the adoption of new national-security laws have also prompted debate on whether Japan's navy could, or should, join US so-called "Freedom of Navigation Operations" (FONOPs) in the South China Sea. This is all the more important when seen against the backdrop of Chinese territorial expansionism in both the East and South China Seas. While the US currently conducts South China Sea FONOPs alone, in June 2015 Japanese Admiral Katsutoshi Kawano, Chief of the Joint Staff of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), declared that Japan's navy – its Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) – could consider conducting joint patrols with the US Navy "depending on the situation."²³ In April of the same year, Washington and Tokyo had, in fact, already reportedly discussed the possibility of conducting joint patrols in both seas.²⁴ Jointly patrolling the East and South China Seas could prove easier said than done, however, as Tokyo would have to adopt further specific laws in order to authorize its navy to conduct such operations. Furthermore, this adoption would not be the only obstacle that Tokyo would have to overcome. Japan's naval capacities are also an issue, in view of the fact that many of the country's naval and coastguard vessels are currently engaged in patrolling Japanese territorial waters close, and not so close, to home (e.g. in the East China Sea, around the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands). Beijing is clearly very worried about Tokyo authorizing its military to execute the aforementioned right to collective self-defence in the East China Sea. After all, Japan's SDF, together with the country's well-equipped and state-of-the-art coastguard forces, are now authorized to come to the aid of US military units when jointly defending Japanese-controlled islands in the East China Sea. Such measures are intended to counter Chinese attempts to "re-conquer" or occupy the Japanese-controlled but contested Senkaku Islands. Beijing calls these islands "Diaoyutai," and itself claims sovereignty over them.²⁵ Tokyo's new-found ability to make an active contribution to defending Japanese-controlled territories away from its mainland has undoubtedly had an impact on Beijing's strategy to establish "dual control" over the contested East China Sea islands. China has, over recent years, sought to establish this sort of dual control through frequent intrusion into Japanese-controlled territorial waters around the islands.²⁶

²³ See Franz-Stefan Gady, "Japan's Top Military Officer: Joint US-Japanese Patrols in South China Sea a Possibility", in *The Diplomat*, 26 June 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/?p=59041>.

²⁴ Prashanth Parameswaran, "US-Japan Joint Patrols in the South China Sea?", in *The Diplomat*, 1 May 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/?p=54332>.

²⁵ Article 5 of the US-Japan Security Treaty *de facto* obliges Washington to defend Japanese-controlled territory and territorial waters.

²⁶ Japanese law prohibits Japanese citizens from setting foot on the islands, which are since 1895 and Japan's victory over China in the Japanese-Sino War of 1894/1895 under Japanese control. From 1945-to the very early 1970, the Senkaku Islands were administered by the US and then

5. Japan and NAPCI

As a South Korea-sponsored multilateral institution supported by the US, Japan, China, Russia and Mongolia, the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) was initially intended by Seoul to help defuse tensions on the Korean Peninsula. This, however, has turned out to be a case of wishful thinking, as recent North Korean missile and nuclear tests have decisively demonstrated. Unless Pyongyang fundamentally changes its policies, NAPCI's impact on attempts to resume negotiations on North Korea's denuclearization is non-existent. (And any such change currently seems highly unlikely unless and until Beijing decides to interrupt, or indeed terminate, its economic, financial and energy aid to the North.) Admittedly, NAPCI is not exclusively aimed at achieving sustainable peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. However, given that it is a South Korean initiative, such localized security issues obviously form its central priority. Japan participates in NAPCI meetings, but the relevance of the initiative for Japanese regional security-policy planning must be described as very limited. In Japan (and, without doubt, also elsewhere in and beyond Asia), NAPCI is not perceived as having produced results relevant to national and regional security. From a Japanese perspective, it is not only North Korea that stands in the way of the Initiative having a tangible impact on attempts to manage and defuse the threat posed by the North's missile and nuclear programmes. Tokyo complains that China's trade and investment ties and energy and financial aid provided for Pyongyang allow North Korea to continue to ignore UN sanctions and continue the development of its missile and nuclear programmes. From a Japanese perspective, China – due to a number of geopolitical and regional strategic considerations – does not exert enough (or indeed any) political or economic pressure on Pyongyang to terminate its missile and nuclear programmes.

Conclusions

Japan – like South Korea – will continue to invest heavily in regional missile-defence systems in view of recent North Korean missile and nuclear tests. Tokyo's very recent announcement (2017) to invest an additional 118 billion yen (1 billion dollars) in the deployment of joint US-Japan missile-defence systems and installations²⁷ is evidence of this. As detailed above, Japan under Prime Minister Abe will, above all, continue to invest resources in defending Japan militarily from North Korea (and China). It will not necessarily devote further resources to seeking to get Pyongyang back to the negotiation table – in the framework of NAPCI, or any other multilateral structure for that matter. Furthermore, its bilateral security alliance with the US will remain at the very centre of Japan's security and defence-policy strategies. This will, by default, assign a lower priority to multilateral talks

(together with Okinawa) returned to Japan.

²⁷ Franz-Stefan Gady, "Japan Approves Modest Defense Budget Hike", in *The Diplomat*, 23 December 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/?p=101375>.

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or negotiations on regional security with a Japanese contribution. To be sure, a forum like NAPCI has the “advantage” of being an informal arena that is not aimed at obliging interested parties and contributors to make binding security-policy commitments. That *de facto* means that NAPCI – like any other formal or informal security forum – can exist in a security environment in which the US is engaged in expanding ties with its current and (potential) future military allies: Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and Vietnam. Japan, however, at least for now, does not seem eager to take advantage of NAPCI’s informal character in order to become more deeply involved in the forum. Finally, Japan under Prime Minister Abe is probably also not overly enthusiastic about supporting NAPCI because it is a South Korean, rather than a Japanese, initiative. In other words: for a country run by a nationalist and revisionist leader like Shinzo Abe, it must be – obviously for the aforementioned “wrong” reasons (nationalism/revisionism) – very difficult to accept a South Korean leadership role in a regional security initiative such as NAPCI.

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