

## **Asia Rising - Japan**

**Professor Nick Bisley, Executive Director - La Trobe Asia , Doctor David Envall, ANU**

### **Nick Bisley**

Welcome to Asia Rising, I'm Nick Bisley, the Executive Director of La Trobe Asia here at La Trobe University and with me today is Doctor David Envall from Australia National University, a Japan specialist, and we're going to be talking about Japan's role on the global stage and particularly the reenergised place that Japan is taking both on the global stage and in the region. So I guess we'll start David with the big picture since Prime Minister Abe returned to power in December 2012, he's visited forty seven countries, most recently finishing off a nine country, whistle stop tour of the Caribbean, and I believe he's headed to South Asia for a trip to India and particularly to meet Prime Minister Modi with whom he shares a great deal it is said. So what's behind this globe-trotting, it's a real diplomatic speed dating, if you like, going on?

### **Doctor David Envall**

Well there is an effort, thank you Nick, for Japan to build up its international role and particularly around the East Asian region but also more broadly as you mentioned, South Asia and elsewhere in the world. I think there is a real effort on the Japanese government's part to engage more actively with the region on a number of fronts, economically but also in the securities sphere and in the overseas development aids sphere there's a number of policies that are changing in Japan with regard to that at the moment. A lot of what is driving this of course, is the changing dynamics of the power balance in the Asia Pacific and in particular Japan's relations with some of its neighbours notably China, so there's an effort by Prime Minister Abe and others, to build up closer relations with a number of countries around the region as a way of hedging against changing power balances in the region.

### **Professor Nick Bisley**

Do you think there's an extent to which there's also a kind of, both a diplomatic and an economic kind of competition with China that's being played out, so that we forget, because Japan's been so quiet for so long, that Japan is still the world's third largest economy, it's a big exporter, do you think Abe's sort of seeing what he's doing as part of a broader competition with China?

### **Doctor David Envall**

I think there's a competition element, I think Japan has always seen itself as the Asia representative on the wider world and it's been the dominant economy, its led economic growth of the latter part of the twentieth century and its economic model influenced a lot of other countries in the region. And of course with the rise of China over the last couple of decades, that's changed quite substantially so there's competition to maintain a leadership role in the region, both in terms of economics and also diplomacy, but I think there's a domestic dimension as well. Abe's government is responding to kind of the stagnation that you mentioned in the Japanese economy over the last couple of decades, so this is part of Japan trying to itself become more economically active, more engaged in the region, more competitive. And it ties in with some of Abe's economic reforms, you know the famous Abenomics, you know monetary reform, fiscal reform and also potentially structural reform to the Japanese economy.

### **Professor Nick Bisley**

Abe's famous Three Arrows?

### **Doctor David Envall**

The Three Arrows, yes, two of which have been fired, apologies and the third one is a little bit

stuck because it brings into light a number of interests that are not necessarily on board with liberalising the economy for example, or joining free trade groups such as the Trans Pacific Partnership and negotiating on that basis, or in bringing about other changes, so greater workforce participation, greater female workforce participation in particular. So, what the Abe government is doing regionally, kind of also ties in with this effort to say "Japan is back in the world".

### **Professor Nick Bisley**

There's that moment where Prime Minister Abe was in Washington, I think he was speaking at CSIS and gave this speech, the speech was delivered I think in Japanese, but he said in English "I'm back and Japan is back", you know it's a nice little signal, both from the really obvious signal in one basic sense, but you see the bigger picture they're trying to paint on the canvas whereby foreign policy and all of his activities are part of an overarching theme. Abe's probably best known in East Asia and particularly in China, if you read the popular press at any rate, for being assertive, possibly somewhat over the top depictions as being militaristic, but the centrepiece of this of course, is the recent constitutional reinterpretation whereby the government has essentially sought to expand what it is the self-defence force can do. So what was going on here with this reinterpretation, slightly arcane for people who might be cursory observers of Japan, what was he doing and why is an interpretation of the constitutional text so important?

### **Doctor David Envall**

Well it's important for a number of reasons and its part of a wider security reform package that fits in with the economic reform and this is something that's been close to Abe's heart for a number of years since he was first Prime Minister in 2006-7. It's basically about reworking Japan's defence institutions from the Post War Period, when Japan is this kind of, passive pacifist that had what's often seen amongst the Japanese conservatives as an abnormal international role. Depending on the United States for its security, not engaging with the wider region in terms of helping allies or partners or being involved in United Nation's peace keeping for instance. So the constitutional reform is part of this wider security reform and involves things like upgrading the Japan Defence Agency 2006-7 to the Ministry of Defence. It involves changing Japan's grand strategy from the North to focus more on the South West and maritime disputes, and it's about making the Japanese defence forces more flexible and being able to respond, and in particular, co-operate with allies and partners. So constitutional reform in particular is about changing Japan from a defence only country where Japan can only defend itself, to allowing it to defend its allies and partners. The problem of course is, the constitution is written in a way that really prohibits this and it's been interpreted by the Japanese government as very strongly prohibiting collective self-defence. Abe's preference I think, and certainly this is something he expressed when he was Prime Minister in 2006-7, has been to revise the constitution, now unfortunately constitutional revision in Japan requires a two thirds majority in both houses of the parliament, The Diet, and also a majority in a national referendum, so it's a difficult task, it's a bit like getting constitutional reform in Australia. Abe has instead taken a different approach and has sought to reinterpret rather than revise, and this is basically the government stating its interpretation of the constitution and behaving as if that is a legal change.

### **Professor Nick Bisley**

Yeah, so you had this constitution, which it's also important to emphasise, it is written by the Americans, basically said take it or leave it in 1947, signed Article 9 says in very plain terms, there will be no war material maintained, and renounced war as a tool of state craft, and yet over time through the cold war and beyond this interpretation bending if you like, the constitutional restraints came in and so Abe's reinterpretation is the latest in a number of ways in which this thing has been reinterpreted. How's this playing domestically?

**Doctor David Envall**

Problematic, on a number of areas, I mean some people agree or disagree with the aim in terms of defence policy, you know Japan should be more active, or it shouldn't be more active, but other people have real problems with moving around the constitution in this way, so not taking it to the parliament and not taking it to a referendum. Abe's own poll ratings since this was announced have dropped substantially, I think about 10 percentage points, and it's set off a number of protests and complaints. Abe has also had a number of problems negotiating this reinterpretation with his parties main coalition partner in government The New Komeito Party, and they very much historically have been opposed to these kind of reforms, they've been a pacifist party, they're backed by one of Japan's largest Buddhist organisations, so this is very unpopular amongst the rank and file of Abe's coalition partners.

Abe in fact, was forced to renegotiate the kind of reinterpretation that he wanted and The New Komeito Party was able to put a number of restrictions on how collective self-defence can be employed or interpreted, so for example, they've required that Japan's survival must be at risk, that there must be no alternative course, and that only minimum force can be used, so there's been a number of restrictions. So in practice I think this change will be less significant than perhaps some people believe, it's the fact that the government has gone from one interpretation to another that's important. But in terms of realistic policy change, it's less significant than in the first instant at least.

**Professor Nick Bisley**

Yeah, cos this is, as you alluded to earlier, this is Abe's second go around at the Prime Minister's Office, and the first time around, I think he really suffered politically from getting a bit ahead of public opinion on constitutional change in general. So it seems I think in this case, they're being a little bit more cautious, yes they're taking a hit in popularity, but it's nothing like what happened last time around when he was floating a more ambitious version of constitutional change.

**Doctor David Envall**

Reinterpretation is a problematic way to do it, because it bypasses the parliament, it bypasses the people, it's a result of the Japanese Judiciary absenting itself from any judgements relating to national security, so the supreme court has seen in the past that issues relating to Article 9 of the Constitution, are to be decided by the politicians, and this is the reason that we've had this process of reinterpretation done by the government rather than necessarily the courts. But I think because Abe has announced that he wants to do it from a long time ago, and it's such a big issue, I think that kind of moving around what would normally be the appropriate process has been problematic politically.

**Professor Nick Bisley**

That's probably a useful link to Abe's recent visit to Australia, so the constitutional change was announced from the Cabinet Office on, I think Tuesday the 1<sup>st</sup> July, and then on Tuesday the 8<sup>th</sup> July, Prime Minister Abe addressed the Joint Sitting of the Australian Parliament, the first Japanese Prime Minister to do that. There was I think, a degree of symbolism in that week in between, not only because it was a nice period to reflect on it, but because I think Australia has been a very keen supporter of this for a while, and not just the Abbott government, I think governments of both types have been supportive of a Japan that does more in the region within certain constraints. What did you make of Abe's visit to Australia, particularly in the context of this broader effort that he's undertaking of reforming the economy and making Japan a more visible, more influential player in the region, do you think he succeeded? And what do you think of the consequences for Australia of this cosyng up with more competent Japan?

**Doctor David Envall**

They're good questions. In terms of Japan I think this is part of Abe's active diplomacy around the region, you know, engagement in South East Asia with the Philippines. I think you mentioned India as another example, Abe has sought to engage more closely with a number of countries around the region and Australia is another example of that. I think it was particularly important for Abe because it came in the wake of these constitutional announcements, it was a way of perhaps, sending a message to the wider region that Japan is changing its approach to security, it's changing its relationships with countries in the region and I think for him, it sent quite an effective message of engagement and responding to the changing balance of power. Whether it was well received in the region I think is another question.

For Australia, it's both a significant opportunity particularly in terms of the trading relationship, although I think more perhaps needs to come in the future for that to be seen as a real positive. It creates some dilemmas though, in particular for Australia it creates the dilemma of; is this a sign of emerging rivalry in the Asia Pacific and is Australia being dragged into this kind of rivalry in supporting particular sides, making statements such as "our closest friend in Asia" that kind of thing? Is Australia upending its traditional approach to not having to choose between different countries in the region? So it creates some challenges in that respect because these kind of announcements are seen in a fairly poor light in Beijing.

**Professor Nick Bisley**

And it seems really that whilst both sides of politics have generally sought for Japan to be more normal in the sense you mentioned before, I think the Abbott government has been much more not just enthusiastic about Japan and enthusiastic about Abe, and there does seem to be a personal connection between Abe and Abbott, they seem to see the world in similar ways. But there also seems to be a pretty concerted effort really from the moment they took office, to signal to China in particular, that Australia and Japan see the world and the region in a particular way, so that there was "the best friend in Asia", which I tend to think was kind of diplomatically clumsy, because when you say Japan's our best friend in Asia, everyone, the Singaporeans, the Indonesians, the Thais, everyone goes what about us? It's a clumsy thing to do.

But it's been the more pointed things; when the Chinese announced their Air Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea, Australia's response in a press release issued by the foreign minister echoed the language of the Japanese, Australia has done this repeatedly, saying we oppose any effort to change the status quo, and of course in the dispute in the East China Sea over the islands the Japanese call the Senkaka, the Chinese call the Diaoyu. It's precisely the status quo which is in dispute.

Australia has in this dispute in the East China Sea really clearly signalled that it's taken a side and you saw at the tail end of Prime Minister Abe's visit, Julie Bishop the Foreign Minister reported in the Fairfax Press as saying "we've got to talk tough to China, it's the only language they understand". So is the relationship with Japan pulling Australia into a more competitive posture with China or do you think that's a bit of diplomatic rippling in the waters that can ultimately be managed through normal processes of diplomacy, or are we seeing the beginning of a larger trend in which there is a division in the region, and we're on one side of it?

**Doctor David Envall**

I don't think Australia's crossed a particular point where it can't pull back. But I think there has been a shift. Both countries certainly have been supportive of a closer relation with Japan, both in economic and security, but I think the Abbott government have been different in its emphasis compared to the previous labour government, but also compared to the previous Howard government, which was very careful to stay balanced between the different powers in the region. But I think certainly in coming years, the pressure will increase on Australia, it will become harder to strike this balance, and the status quo in the region, Australia wishes to maintain the status

quo, is perceived in some ways quite differently by different countries in the region and China for instance, sees Japan as having changed the status quo particularly over the Senkaka – Diaoyu Islands when it nationalised the islands. That from the Chinese perspective was changing the status quo, China sees Japan's constitutional revision as changing the status quo. Through the cold war Japan is a pacifist actor, it's an abnormal actor in the region's security affairs it plays a very low key role. Japan is now moving to play a much higher profile in the region and that's a change in the status quo from that perspective.

**Professor Nick Bisley**

So where do you think that it's all going? I guess there's two questions about the future, one is what are Abe's prospects? Japan has been notable, as you know well, for really with the exception of the period of Koizumi's Prime Ministership, the so called Karaoke Prime Ministers you know, everybody gets a turn, do you think Abe is likely to be a long lived PM or do you think his popularity that's declining now is going to continue?

**Doctor David Envall**

He is closing in on two years, I think he will see through to the next election at least. His popularity is still very strong, it's still above 40%. Much depends for Abe on his economics package, rather than some of these security issues and that was his problem first time around, he talked about Japan becoming a beautiful country and increasing patriotic education and becoming more nationalistic, but his economic reform packages failed and I think so Abenomics again, is the key to his political success. In Japan he needs to have structural reform bring benefits in the longer term if he's to remain in power, and the Japanese public I think, still in terms of what they consider important issues, defence is the lower down the order than prosperity and growth and employment.

**Professor Nick Bisley**

Japanese voters are like voters anywhere, it's their hip pocket first. Finally, I mean assuming the economy, he gets some movement on the economy, things continue to grow as they have in the past few quarters, are you someone who thinks Japan is likely to really begin to do more on the back of this constitutional change that we will see in five-year's time, ten-year's time a Japan that is I guess militarily, a bit more like South Korea than it currently does?

**Doctor David Envall**

I think that remains to be seen, I think there's a legitimacy problem with the way it's been done and that may prevent engaging more actively in the region. The restrictions put on collective self-defence at the present don't allow Japan to engage in the United Nations Peace Keeping, it's very much going to be about Japan's National Security; security in the areas surrounding Japan. So I think there'll be limited change, as with many things in Japan it's often a period of accumulating change, incrementalism and nothing is necessarily spectacular, so I think there'll be developments. And much depends on whether the region can find a way of negotiating through some of the territorial disputes that are currently underway both in the East China Sea, also in the South China Sea which Japan sees in its national interests as well as for economic and trade reasons.

**Professor Nick Bisley**

There you have it folks, it's not 1935 again, I tend to agree, I think change in Japan and the kind of role it plays in the region is going to be much more incremental than revolutionary. I think over time though what Japan does in ten years will not look at all like what it did in the past, but the sort of critics who kind of think, the Japanese militarist is sort of like an alcoholic and the constitutional interpretation is the liqueur chocolate and it's all, you know, two steps away from 1935 constantly, is I think really misunderstands the situation.

**Doctor David Envall**

Japan is a very different country and people are very concerned in Japan about civilian control of the armed forces and acting responsibly in the region. The Asia Pacific isn't as it was in 1935, Japan is not the dominant economy in the region like it was at that time, it's nowhere near that, so Japan has to engage more actively with, not just the west, but Asia as well. The problem of course is miscalculation, I think that's one of the chief risks in the Asia Pacific at the moment, that a crisis will emerge and the countries aren't prepared to resolve those crises easily.

**Professor Nick Bisley**

I think that's all we have time for, thank you David

**Doctor David Envall**

Thank you

**Professor Nick Bisley**

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