Re-Branding Abe-Nationalism

 The NAPSNet Policy Forum provides expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia. As always, we invite your responses to this report and hope you will take the opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis.

Recommended Citation

Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Re-Branding Abe-Nationalism", NAPSNet Policy Forum, July 02, 2013, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/re-branding-abe-nationalism/

by Tessa Morris-Suzuki

July 02, 2013

I. Introduction

Tessa Morris-Suzuki writes 'in recent months sections of the media in Japan, and even internationally, have gone into overdrive to sell the message that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is not a nationalist.

'Those who care about the future of Japanese society should not allow the dazzle of verbal juggling to induce a political version of the Gruen Transfer. The prime minister’s ideology may be re-branded for the global market, but the old adage remains: buyer beware.'

Tessa Morris-Suzuki is a historian of modern Japan and Korea. She is Professor in the School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, the Australian National University.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on significant topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Policy Forum by Tess Morris-Suzuki

Re-Branding Abe-Nationalism

In 2010, the Australian Broadcasting Company (ABC) launched a highly successful TV show called The Gruen Transfer. The title refers to the disorienting psychological effects produced on consumers by the architecture of shopping malls, whose dazzle and noise are deliberately designed to mesmerize: on entering, "our eyes glaze over, our jaws slacken... we forget what we came for and become impulse buyers". [1] The ABCs Gruen Transfer explored the weird, wonderful and disorienting effects produced by the advertising industry. Its most popular element was a segment called "The Pitch", in which representatives of two advertising agencies competed to sell the unsellable to the show's audience - creating gloriously sleek videos to market bottled air, promote the virtues of banning religion, or advocate generous pay rises for politicians.

I have been reminded of The Gruen Transfer in recent months, as sections of the media in Japan, and even internationally, have gone into overdrive to sell an equally challenging message: the message that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is not a nationalist. [2] This particular pitch has been running for some time. It began with the inception of Abe's first short-lived prime ministership in 2006, when Japanese Foreign Affairs Deputy Press Secretary Tomohiko Taniguchi devoted considerable energy to persuading a US audience that Abe was "almost the polar opposite" of a nationalist. [3] The right-of-centre Sankei Newspaper took up the challenge with enthusiasm: its Washington correspondent, Yoshihisa Komori, published numerous articles, including an opinion piece in the New York Times, which aimed to refute the "nationalist" tag. Far from being a hawkish nationalist, Komori argued, Abe had "merely been shaped by democracy", and his real aim was to bring Japan back from the "post-war extreme towards the center". [4] But these pronouncements had only limited impact on international opinion, and by early 2007 one prominent Japanese marketing consultant was lamenting, in the pages of the Yomiuri newspaper, that the government needed a far more effective foreign media strategy to rescue Abe from the "hawk" and "nationalist" labels. [5]

The issue has resurfaced with renewed vigor since the advent of the second Abe regime in December 2012. In May 2013, a US Congressional Research Service paper describing Abe as a "strong nationalist" evoked a surprisingly querulous response from pro-government media in Japan, and even from Prime Minister Abe himself. Abe hit back with statement in parliament, expressing his unhappiness that "the ideas of our country" were being misunderstood by foreigners. He went on to call for measures to "actively collect and spread information so that we will be correctly understood". [6]

The prime minister's sensitivity to the "nationalist" label seems curious, since he is on record as arguing with considerable passion that there is nothing wrong with nationalism: "nationalism as I think of it is a sense of belonging to the nature, ancestors, family and the local community where one was born and brought up and with which one has become familiar. This sense of belonging is not something that we are told to have, but is completely natural and spontaneous..." [7]; in which case, the label "strong nationalist" should presumably be taken as a compliment.

Georgetown University professor Kevin Doak also claims that Abe has been internationally misunderstood. Rather than denying the Japanese prime minister's nationalism, though, Doak argues that Abe-style nationalism belongs to a brand distinct from the bad nationalisms of wartime Japan, or (apparently) of other Asian nations. Doak's argument rests on the distinction between two quite different types of nationalism, "ethnic nationalism" and "civic nationalism". He associates the first with the Japanese term minzoku - the equivalent of the German "Volk" - and the second with the

term kokumin - which simply means “people of the nation”, and can be given a wide range of nuances depending on context (though Doak questionably chooses to translate it as “civic nation”). [8]

“Ethnic nationalism,” writes Doak, “has also been positioned as ‘Asian nationalism’ at least since the 1955 Bandung Conference; in contrast, civic nationalism has from its very beginning in modern Japan and throughout East Asia been seen as the favorite of pro-Western governments, Christian minorities and intellectuals thought to be tainted by Western ways of thinking”. The mistake of outside observers, he tell us, is that they have taken Abe to be an ethnic nationalist, whereas in fact he is “one of the leaders in [the] current renaissance of civic nationalism in Japan”. Abe’s identity as a civic nationalist can be demonstrated (says Doak) by a reading of his best-selling book, Towards a Beautiful Country [Utsukushii Kuni e]: “throughout the book, Abe consistently renders the Japanese nation as kokumin (civic nation) not as minzoku (ethnic nation), a distinction made not only conceptually but also through his description of how democratic nationalism functions in practice.” [9] Doak’s depiction of the civic and democratic Abe is in dramatic contrast to his depiction (in a recent Sankei newspaper interview) of “emotional South Korea” which (apparently in toto) “links Japan bashing to ethnic pride [minzoku puraido]”.[10]

This re-labeling of Abe’s nationalism raises several problems. First, it assumes that the phenomenon of nationalism can be neatly separated into an “ethnic” and a “civic” variant, with the second being morally superior to the first. But “the Manichean view that there are two kinds of nationalism, a good, civic kind and a bad, ethnic kind” [11] has been very effectively criticized by many scholars, who point out that the notions of race, culture, tradition and citizenship bound up in nationalism are far too complex to be captured in this easy formula.[12] The identification of ethnic nationalism as “Asian” (or at least “non-Western”) and civic nationalism as “Western” or “pro-Western” has come in for particular criticism. As sociologist David McCrone puts it, the distinction “does lend itself to caricature - why can’t they be more like us?” [13]

A second problem is that, in the context of Abe’s political rhetoric, Doak’s distinction between minzoku-based and kokumin-based nationalism simply does not stand up to scrutiny. It is not correct to state (as Doak does) that Abe “directly rejects ethnic nationalism”, or to imply that Abe does not use the term minzoku. Though the word kokumin often appears in Abe’s speeches and writings, he also uses the term minzoku, and indeed uses the two terms interchangeably - as in: “when people come from foreign countries, surely they get a sense that Japanese are a minzoku, a kokumin, of high quality; they get the impression that even if we are poor, we are a country of culture…” [14] Abe’s vision of a national identity rooted in nature and tradition is evident in statements like: “the Japanese are originally an agricultural minzoku, a minzoku who produced rice by sharing water, so I think that from the beginning we have had a sense of mutual cooperation built into our DNA”;[15] or, more recently, “in the case of Japan, in particular, we are an agricultural minzoku. This is the ‘land of rice’. We firmly retained the traditions and culture of this Japan. For Japanese to be Japanese, it is necessary that agriculture must be the basis of our country”.[16]

This vision is also reflected in Abe’s central role in a range of political groups which proclaim a unique national character grounded in timeless cultural tradition. For example, as of 2012 Abe headed the liaison group of parliamentarians cooperating with the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership, a body that aims to restore traditional Japanese spiritual values weakened by postwar prosperity, promote the central place of the imperial house in Japanese life and create a new constitution built on Japanese national character.[17]

A third problem with the “civic nationalist” label is that “civic nationalism” is normally associated with liberalism, respect for individualism, and commitment to equality and human rights.[18] There is one thing that Shinzo Abe definitely is not, and that is a liberal. The two books in which he most

clearly sets out his political credo both begin with warnings of the dangers of liberalism (indeed, the first is subtitled “The Choice for Anti-Liberalism”). [19] In the US, Abe cautions, the term “liberal” has come to refer to people whose ideas are “socialist, or close to it… Revolutionaries and left-wingers are included in this category”. [20] By contrast, Abe firmly identifies himself as a conservative. Though he intermittently expresses his admiration for the British conservative party, his conservatism is really in a distinctly Japanese mold. His political hero is his grandfather Nobusuke Kishi, a key architect of Japanese economic policy in prewar Manchuria who went on to be a profoundly controversial and divisive postwar Japanese prime minister.[21]

Abe’s core goal, inherited from Kishi, clearly set out in Towards a Beautiful Country, and echoed in the manifestos of groups like the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership, is to “escape from the postwar regime”: that is, to reverse the political reforms introduced to Japan during the postwar allied occupation. In his view, these reforms undermine Japan’s traditions, which are centred on the figure of the Emperor. What Abe’s nationalist vision means in practice is best understood by examining his party’s far-reaching proposals to rewrite the postwar Japanese constitution. The proposed changes include removing the reference to “respect for the individual” and making it constitutionally impossible for foreign permanent residents to be given national or local voting rights. Freedom of speech and the right of citizens to pursue “life, liberty and happiness” would be circumscribed. Freedom of expression and freedom of association would not be protected where these “have the purpose of harming the public interest or public order”: a phrase that leaves alarmingly wide scope for interpretation. A new article would also be added to the constitution to give the state sweeping powers to declare prolonged states of emergency, during which constitutional rights could be suspended. [22]

The current popularity of the Abe government in no way reflects public enthusiasm for these grand political designs. It is, instead, a response to the government’s economic stimulus package, and to Abe’s skill in making optimistic statements, which convey a sense of leadership to a population weary of political uncertainty and economic malaise. In the end, the Abe government’s performance should and will be judged, not on any political labels, but on the impact that it has on Japanese society and on Japan’s relations with its region and the world. It is possible, and very much to be hoped, that Abe’s may yet choose to focus on the vital tasks of creating a basis for a strong Japanese economic future and improving relations with Japan’s neighbours, rather than pursuing the ideological agendas of anti-liberalism and “escape from the postwar regime”.

In the meanwhile, though, those who care about the future of Japanese society should not allow the dazzle of verbal juggling to induce a political version of the Gruen Transfer. The prime minister’s ideology may be re-branded for the global market, but the old adage remains: buyer beware.

III. REFERENCES

[1] See the Gruen Transfer website: http://www.abc.net.au/tv/gruentransfer/theshow.htm

[2] For example, J. Berkshire Miller and Takashi Yokota, “Japan Keeps its Cool: Why Tokyo’s New Government is more Pragmatic than Hawkish”, Foreign Affairs, 21 January 2013; J. Berkshire Miller and Takashi Yokota, “The Twisted Truth about Tokyo”, Japan Foreign Policy Forum, March-April 2013, http://www.japanpolicyforum.jp/en/archive/no13/000412.html.

[3] Tomohiko Taniguchi, “Japan’s Diplomacy Under the New Abe Cabinet”, address to the Brookings Institution Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies, 27 October 2006.

[4] Yoshihisa Komori, “Who’s Afraid of Shinzo Abe”, New York Times, 30 September 2006; see also Komori Yoshihisa, “Nashonarizumu no Kyojitsu”, Sankei Shinbun, 11 February 2007.

[5] Satō Kumi, “Kaigai Media Senryaku: Shushō wa Chijarazuyoku Gutairon Katare”, Yomiuri Shinbun (Tokyo morning edition), 23 February 2007.

[6] The report in question is Emma Chanlett-Avery, Mark E. Manyin, William H. Cooper and Ian E. Rinehart, “Japan-US Relations: Issues for Congress”, Congressional Research Service, 1 May 2013; Prime Minister Abe’s response was given in a debate in the Budget Committee of the Lower House of the Diet, 13 May 2013.

[7] Prime Minister Abe addressing the Lower House of the Diet, 2 October 2006.

[8] Kevin Doak, “Japan Chair Platform: Shinzo Abe’s Civic Nationalism”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 15 May 2013, http://csis.org/publication/japan-chair-platform-shinzo-abes-civic-nationalism; see also Komori Yoshihisa, “Yasukuni Sanpai wa Kokoro no Mondai”, Sankei Shinbun, 8 June 2013.

[9] Kevin Doak, “Japan Chair Platform: Shinzo Abe’s Civic Nationalism”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 15 May 2013, http://csis.org/publication/japan-chair-platform-shinzo-abes-civic-nationalis

[10] The quotation on South Korea comes from Doak’s a recent interview with the Sankei’s Yoshihisa Komori about the issue of Japanese politicians’ visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, where he depicts Japan as being at the mercy of unreasonable criticisms from “atheist China” which seeks to “justify its communist dictatorship” and from “emotional South Korea which links Japan-bashing to ethnic pride” (Nihon tataki o minzoku puraido ni tsunageru jōjoteki na Kankoku)- Komori, “Yasukuni Sanpai”

[11] Rogers Brubaker, “Myths and Misconceptions in the Study of Nationalism”, in John Hall ed., The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 272-306, quotation from p. 298.

[12] For example, Brubaker, “Myths and Misconceptions”; Stephen Shulman, “Challenging the Civic/Ethnic and East/West Dichotomies in the Study of Nationalism”, Comparative Political Studies, vol. 35, no. 5, June 2002, pp. 554-585; Bernard Yack, “The Myth of the Civic Nation”, in Ronald Beiner ed., Theorizing Nationalism, New York, State University of New York Press, 1998, pp. 103-118.

[13] David McCrone, The Sociology of Nationalism, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 9.

[14] Prime Minister Abe, addressing the Upper House Special Commission on the Basic Law on Education, 22 November 2006.

[15] Shinzo Abe addressing the Lower House Cabinet Committee, 14 April 2006.

[16] Prime Minister Abe responding to a question in the Lower House Budget Committee, 18 March 2013.

[17] See the homepage of the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership, http://www.sinseiren.org/shinseirentoha/shinseirenntoha.htm; on Abe’s position as head of the Association’s parliamentary liaison group, see http://www.sinseiren.org/shinsai_top/24.3.10ireisai.pdf

[18] See, for example, David Brown, Contemporary Nationalism, p. 49.

[19] Kurimoto Shinichirō, Abe Shinzō and Eto Seichi, “Hoshi Kakumei” Sengen: Anchi Riberaru e no Sentaku, Tokyo, Gendai Shōrin, 1996; see particularly the first chapter, written by Abe: “Watashi no ‘Hoshu Seijika Sengen’”.

[20] Abe Shinzō, Utsukishii Kuni e, Tokyo, Bungei Shinjūsha, 2006, p. 17.

[21] Abe, Utsukishii Kuni e, particularly pp. 18-23.

[22] See the full text of the Liberal Democratic Party’s current proposal for constitutional reform on the Party’s website: http://www.jimin.jp/policy/policy_topics/pdf/seisaku-109.pdf

---

IV. NAUTILUS INVITES YOUR RESPONSES

The Nautilus Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this report. Please leave a comment below or send your response to: nautilus@nautilus.org. Comments will only be posted if they include the author’s name and affiliation.

View this online at: https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/re-branding-abe-nationalism/

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org