

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## U.S. Should Prioritize Alliance Support with Visiting Japanese PM

*Bruce Klingner*

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will meet with President Obama on February 22 to affirm the bilateral alliance and align policies responding to recent North Korean and Chinese aggression. Since Abe has been in office for only two months, no tangible summit achievements (“deliverables,” in diplomatic parlance) are expected. But President Obama should use the opportunity to avow U.S. defense of its ally against Chinese assertiveness, press Tokyo for tangible progress on alliance defense issues, and counsel Abe against raising wartime history issues that are certain to empower Japan’s detractors and complicate more important U.S.–Japan strategic priorities.

### **North Korean Provocation.**

Security issues will dominate the summit meeting. North Korea twice

defied U.N. Security Council resolutions by successfully launching a long-range rocket in December and conducting a nuclear weapons test in February. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has shown himself to be no less belligerent or dangerous than his predecessors. Washington and Tokyo, along with Seoul, should coordinate a common strategy to overcome Chinese resistance to a stronger U.N. response to Pyongyang’s defiance.

Since Beijing is likely to remain obstructionist at the U.N. Security Council, the allies should lead a separate international effort to impose comprehensive sanctions on North Korean and other nations’ banks, businesses, and government agencies in violation of U.N. resolutions and international law.

**The Senkakus Situation.** Abe’s primary trip objective will be to gain a stronger U.S. commitment against Chinese encroachment of the Senkaku Islands (called Diaoyu by China), whose sovereignty is disputed but under the administrative control of Japan. Beijing has pursued an increasingly assertive foreign policy and pressed expansionist territorial claims against the Senkakus. Confrontations between Japan and China over the islands in 2010 and 2012 inflamed nationalist feelings in

both countries and increased the risk of a military clash.

The Obama Administration has voiced support for Japan in its territorial dispute with China by declaring that the bilateral defense treaty applies to the Senkakus. But Washington’s message has been undercut by an overemphasis on America’s non-role in determining sovereignty as well as U.S. calls for the countries to step back from potential confrontation, as if both were equally to blame. Since Beijing has been the aggressor, as it has been in the South China Sea, Washington’s message should be more pointed at countering Beijing’s actions.

**Japanese Defense.** President Obama should commend Abe’s encouraging first steps on defense reform. Washington has long pressed Japan to assume a greater role in its own defense while adopting overseas security responsibilities commensurate with its military and economic strength. In January, though in office less than a month, Abe increased Japan’s defense spending, countering a 12-year trend of underfunding Japan’s security requirements.

Japan’s Ministry of Defense announced that the additional \$3.2 billion to the \$53 billion defense budget was to acquire additional PAC-3

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**The Heritage Foundation**  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
(202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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surface-to-air anti-ballistic missile systems, four F-15 fighter jets, and maritime surveillance equipment. It is encouraging that, despite Japan's fiscal problems, the new leadership understands the need to redress shortfalls in the nation's defense requirements.

The Japanese leader has identified an extensive agenda of necessary changes to his country's security forces. The prime minister instructed Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera to revise the National Defense Program Guidelines adopted in 2010 by the left-leaning Democratic Party of Japan. Abe and his Liberal Democratic Party advocate enhancing Japanese security capabilities and cooperation with the U.S. military in response to increasing Asian security threats.

Abe also advocates implementation of collective self-defense to enable Japan to defend the U.S. as it protects itself. Abe reconvened the blue-ribbon task force, headed by former Japanese Ambassador to the U.S. Shunji Yanai, to address the issue. The Yanai Commission, begun during Abe's earlier tenure as prime minister, concluded that Japanese defense forces should be allowed to defend U.S. cities, bases, and personnel when they are attacked. The commission's recommendations were not acted upon by Abe's successor, Yasuo Fukuda.

The Obama Administration should press Japan to begin implementing its decades-old commitment to building a replacement airfield for U.S. Marine Corps air units on Okinawa. Although the U.S. has repeatedly compromised alliance military capabilities in attempts to ameliorate Okinawan protests, Tokyo has continued to drag its feet on initiating construction. Washington should make clear that Chinese actions in the region underscore the need for a comprehensive U.S. military presence on the island.

**Other Issues.** On the economic front, President Obama should emphasize the need for Japan to accede to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) multilateral trade negotiations. However, Abe vowed this week that he will not sacrifice Japan's agriculture to join the TPP free trade talks. Japan's powerful agricultural lobby has been a fierce opponent of the TPP, since it would challenge the heavily protected farming sector.

Finally, Abe's revisionist historical statements on Japan's actions during World War II are troubling and, if he acts on them, would needlessly exacerbate regional tensions. For example, Abe has in the past suggested retracting or revising the Kono Statement, Japan's statement of contrition for forcing women into sexual slavery during the war.

### **An Excellent Opportunity.**

Washington should privately counsel Abe, as the Bush Administration did, not to pursue his contentious political goals around matters of history. Instead, Abe should focus on augmenting Japan's strong alliance with the U.S. and improving relations with South Korea in order to better address the growing security threats of China and North Korea. If Japan is to become a more effective leader in the Asia-Pacific, some political crockery does need to be broken, but Abe should refrain from acting like a bull in the geopolitical china shop.

Abe's conservative foreign policy views and the Japanese public's growing concern over the country's security vulnerability provide an excellent opportunity for Washington to achieve several policy objectives critical to the health of the U.S.–Japan alliance. Abe's opening moves since his assuming office in December are very encouraging in this regard. That said, Washington should encourage its ally to move forward on promised defense initiatives while not being distracted by counterproductive historical issues.

—*Bruce Klingner is Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*