

National Security Group Lunch Transcript

May 8, 2013

East Asia and Japan's Security Outlook

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ROGER ROBINSON:

That said, I have been spending a fair amount of time in Japan over the past thirty-five years. I used to be stationed there with Chase Bank back in 1976 but in subsequent years we've been over two or three times a year to meet with government officials and some of the private sector as well. And it's really from that body of experience that I thought a few observations would be warranted at this juncture because of the extraordinary situation we find ourselves in, with Japan in such a precarious position, and at the same time the US, as disengaged as it is in the region despite the advertised pivot to the Asia-Pacific region.

Over the last three years or so, the Democratic Party of Japan, as you know, was a very dubious and largely unsuccessful experiment that caused our bilateral relationship to suffer at some level, certainly on the security side and that has now taken, as you know, a dramatic turn for the better with the ascendancy of Prime Minister Abe who was there previously, but this time with a vengeance, and I think is already demonstrating a take-charge attitude that, to me, is more reminiscent of Prime Minister Nakasone during the Reagan days and which are known in Japan affectionately as the golden years in our bilateral relationship. I had the good fortune to look after the US- Japan economic relationship at the NSC as part of my portfolio at that time, and a number of the young officials that we were dealing with then are various senior officials now. One of those officials was Abe's father who was Foreign Minister. Some of you might remember [UNCLEAR] Nakasone and I had a chance to work with his dad at that time.

So leave it to say that Japan is in the midst of trying to configure themselves a national security council that I think you'll see come to fruition in the near term. They know that they're in great peril. We've obviously seen the consequences of the de-emphasis of the foreign policy security portfolio in this administration. Japan had a similar experience to our previous special relationship with the UK. As you know, our traditional friendships under President Obama have been in a state of disrepair – would be a polite way to put it – sending back the Churchill bust always comes to mind in terms of a more

contemptuous attitude. Japan, for its part, has felt the chill, and of course the welcome mat went out to our adversaries with the notion of trying to see if there could be an accommodation through open-handed diplomacy, or whatever configuration they're calling it now.

But the bottom line is that Japan is in an embattled state. I think that's no small part of why Abe was given the kon [PH] after this rather feckless period of DPJ rule. The territorial disputes are well known but are more acute than perhaps we may even recognize. Obviously, the focus is the East China Sea for Japan and the Senkaku Islands. There is a kind of two-layer event going on with trawlers, maritime patrol boats on one layer closest to the island with both sides but warships of both countries that are in a second tier or perimeter, that are very worrisome. We've seen how far the Chinese emboldenment has become under this administration, with the notion that you can even have a fire control radar lock on a Japanese helicopter and ship, and basically think of this as some kind of intimidation-oriented diplomacy when most folks in the military would consider this a clear act of aggression, and have to be instantaneously responded to with shooting. This is not a diplomatic tool. It's so far over – while we're now talking about red lines, real or imagined – this is a red line in my view in terms of the military sphere, and is particularly worrisome that China would feel that it can be that reckless with an ally of the United States with no particular fear of US retribution.

Now, Russia has likewise made a move on what they call the Kurils and what of course Japan terms the Northern Territories, Medvedev made a very public visit there. They've talked about putting armaments on those islands as well. And so even – even South Korea and – has contested the disputed island claims there. So Japan is facing a kind of three-front problem, and if they start to actually get upended on one of these territorial disputes – for example, if the Chinese were to ever successfully land on the Senkakus, stand up air defenses, with Japan not having stand-off weapons like the Tomahawk Cruise Missile now, it could deter their fighter aircraft from meaningfully trying to excise them from the island, and you can imagine the kind of scenario that would unfold from there, far more dramatic, I think, than we in the United States might realize. And it would be in very short order, in my mind, that the Russians would make their move on the Northern Territories and South Korea might even be emboldened at that stage. So it's not as though Japan is looking at these in total isolation, but there is going to be a proverbial chain reaction possible here that is of great concern.

Now, on the Chinese side, that emboldenment has been exacerbated by the ascendancy of Xi Jinping. Obviously he is much closer to the PLA than was his predecessor. His wife has a rank in the PLA as you know, and he has created a circumstance where an already existing problem of divided leadership in China between the PLA and civilian leadership, it has been exacerbated. Now, we've seen over the years, incidents where the PLA prevailed over civilian leadership. We all recall the humiliation of Hu Jintao during the J20 stealth fighter test flight that he was uninformed of on the day of the meeting with Gates

in – what was it – 2011. In 2010 even a more reckless action when China embargoed rare earth minerals from Japan, which was in effect a stab at the industrial heart of Japan at that time. You'd imagine when you have a 97% or so monopoly on a strategic mineral or group of minerals of that importance, that you would save that for the proverbial rainy day, whether it be Japan nuclearizing or something quite dramatic. But to exercise that monopoly over a detained trawler captain gives you a sense of the almost childlike petulance and anger of the PLA. It's not a thoughtful, deliberate process that they go through. We remember the satellite shoot-down in 2007 that left some 450,000 pieces of space debris that we're now trying to avoid a collision with in the International Space Station and our other space assets. Hainan – it's not so long ago we remember in 2001 when our P3 was downed and our airmen and women were held hostage by China.

But I think that what we're seeing is we no longer are going to have to look for these kind of episodic moments in time when the PLA prevailed over civilian leadership, oftentimes humiliating them and not even informing them what they had in mind until after the fact. That is going to become, in my opinion, the new normal. You're going to see an intensification of that divided leadership. Japan is aware of this at the highest levels. We are not as alert to it – I can tell you right now – but it's a great source of concern for Japan because they can imagine just how easily having been, again, the target of so much of this – particularly the rare earth embargo – as to how reckless Beijing is prepared to be. Now, when you see something like the DF21D carrier killer missile being forward deployed by China, in a position to stop us from interdicting any move that might eventuate in the East China Sea – we're not talking so much Taiwan now as the – China feels that it's prevailing there quietly each day, but certainly in the East China Sea if they don't think that Japan's going to defend their territory and shrink away from their claim of sovereignty they should be thinking again. The Obama Administration's not going to be lucky on that from their point of view. Japan is going to defend that territory and if necessary shooting will occur.

Now, no one is anxious for that to happen but we're already in a period now that makes – well, that certainly is comparable to the North Korea drama that we've recently been through and remain, in effect, in, just in abeyance until the media is clear of additional traffic and so Kim Jong Un can once again dominate the airwaves, so you can expect a resurgence there. So there's a lot to talk about and not a lot of time here, and I do want to leave the requisite time for questions and answers, but I can tell you that Abe is in my view the best we're going to get in this critical timetable. We need to be far more forward-leaning – particularly this group – in really holding the Obama Administration's feet to the fire on not just begrudgingly declaring that somehow the Senkakus fall under the US-Japan treaty – security treaty – but not necessarily willing to stand up and give them sovereign control. In other words, the Administration doesn't take a position on the sovereignty of the islands. So, as usual, we're seeing this parsing, which is, you know, continuous. It almost reminds me of, you know, now we were talking about the systematic use of chemical weapons in Syria, and in North Korea it's whether we're fully testing and have a developed system. I mean, these are the kinds of sleights of hand that are getting old and are not



particularly non-transparent – or are certainly disguised, as the Administration would wish. So if we do go back to the fecklessness of the six party talks – which I think we can all predict will happen – you can count on five against one with Japan being the one. Now they are prepared for that eventuality but it's certainly not a welcome moment for them. And so I think that to the extent that we in the NGO community, the think tank community, but also those of you on Capitol Hill, to the extent that we can keep feet to the fire, as I said, and expose the effort of the United States to basically avoid or otherwise stiff-arm these obligations, this is going to be terribly important. The Chinese need to see resolve somewhere or we're going to have possibly the incident that we most feared in Northeast Asia, be right there in the East China Sea. It shouldn't be underestimated how quickly they can dominate the landscape. So, with those words I would just leave it open for questions and answers. Thank you.

MAN:

Roger, thank you. While my colleagues get situated I just want to ask you a quick question. I don't think I heard you touch on the deal that apparently has been cut between Japan and Turkey concerning nuclear fuel reprocessing of some kind. Can you expand on that a little bit and what the implications of that might be?

ROGER ROBINSON:

Well, Japan obviously is looking at its reprocessing facility – I can't quite remember the name of it, but it's a huge facility that's been under development for a good decade or more – that they are now dedicated to re-opening. One can interpret this in a number of ways. I don't want to jump to conclusions on this, but I would say that if you're Japan today, and you're seeing the bellicosity and the direct threats to their nation from North Korea, and you see China again with fire control radar locks, and this is your world and you see Russia salivating over your territory and South Korea, of all places, willing to join the fray at some level at such a delicate time and press their own territorial issues with Japan, you're in a position where you have to have leave in the US-Japan security relationship to not be thinking about nuclear reprocessing of the type that would provide you with a rather rapid capability to nuclearize should it be required. And I think that obviously there's a commercial element to this that they're not backing away from nuclear energy – and we could have that conversation about the benefits of being able to sell their nuclear technology abroad – but I think this group is more interested in the other elements of this that are less public and what they may mean. But again, if we put ourselves in their position, and you were to be betting the ranch – your country, your family – on this Administration's resolve in terms of the willingness to step up to possible use of stand-off weapons to excise a Chinese garrison that could land and set up air defenses on the Senkakus, how would you be feeling about now? So I could leave you with that rather disturbing thought.

MAN:

On that cheery note. Marshall?

MARSHALL:

Because of the damage that occurred during the tsunami to the nuclear plant there seems to be an anti-nuclear movement growing in Japan. Would you say this is traditional, or would you suggest that perhaps some outside influences are trying to discourage Japan from getting into the development of weaponry?

ROGER ROBINSON:

Well, there is certainly a lot of resistance to the notion of nuclear weapons still within Japan not to mention the neighborhood, not to mention the United States. So no one that I know is actually in the cheering section beyond those who believe that Japan is a solid, Britain-equivalent type of ally we have in Asia; that this is in our interests to see them with this robust capability including strategic capability as we can muster; that it could well be the case that SM3s fired from Japanese Aegis destroyers are the ones that defend and prevent the next Pearl Harbor – quite literally – of a North Korean missile landing on Hawaii. I mean, we are talking about a full cycle from the first event during the War. So it may be – I mean, of course that's why Abe's trying to change the Constitution so he can defend American assets and American territory with a very successful missile system that not only did we jointly develop, but that they encouraged us and gave us some money when our own SM3 program was flagging. So this is a – the sooner we can get to the more advanced versions of the SM3, obviously that's going to be a terribly important event for this group as well. So, I basically think that Japan is very reluctantly looking at its options. They know that it's a tough road to hoe domestically, and – but at the same time they have no intention in my mind of abandoning nuclear energy despite the reflexive effort to do so and they're going to stay in the nuclear business – that's part of the not-so-clear message that's emerging from the Abe administration. I think that's the right decision, and I likewise believe that they're going to have to break the traditional constraint on defense spending from the 1% of GDP. I think you can expect that to be shattered in the positive over the next twelve months and you will also see some weapons systems procured – I hope including cruise missiles, Global Hawk and the like – that will not be in the sacred mid-term defense plan and not part of that laborious procurement process that causes such delays in terms of Japanese defense burden-sharing in the Pacific. We can't afford these delays, we're on fast-forward now. They know that. I think that they're prepared to tear up the plans depending on what happens, and get serious about their defense. Now, that's a good thing for us. We should be behind it all the way.

MAN:

We have time for one or two more quick questions and quick answers. Joel.

JOEL:

As you know, Prime Minister Abe was just in Moscow meeting with Russian President Putin to try and finally sign a – or work out a peace treaty for World War II. Is this an attempt by Abe to play a Russian card against the Chinese, do you think?

ROGER ROBINSON

Well, let's put it this way. I hope so, in the sense that if you're – if you're sitting in Moscow – and Putin of course is in a love-fest with China now, and they're intelligence sharing, their front line weapons systems are being transferred to China. I mean, this is a very insidious – obviously – relationship between Beijing and Moscow, but when you look at the demographics of the Russian far-east where there are no people, in effect, and you look at the number of Chinese on the border and so forth –now Russia if they think that this is going to be a free lunch program for them vis-à-vis China, they should be thinking again. And so Japan with a clever outreach to Russia, it does have merit, and it certainly is something that could be built upon, hopefully quickly, should the need arise. But I don't see – when we talk about the threat, I don't see China as a – this thing evolving in the terms that we're traditionally thinking about. You know, five to seven years, ten years from now where are we going to be? No, no, no, let's talk about the next twelve to eighteen months. Let's talk about two or three years being a lifetime now. That's what I mean by fast-forward. So there's no more time to play games and a lot of the traditional assumptions that we've had underpinning US-Japan security relations for the last several decades – certainly the over three that I've been involved in it – all that's basically over. I think we're just a little late in discovering the fact that we're going to have to be moving increasingly in real time.

MAN:

We have time for one more question for Roger Robinson. Lynwood [PH]...I'm sorry – you had your hand up previously, right? Sorry, Lynwood.

MAN:

Just a couple of points here. As you know, in our 1946 peace treaty with Japan we gave them the administrative control of the Senkukus. That was part of the treaty. So the reluctance now to let's say forcefully back that up does not surprise me from this administration. The other point I'd like to make is I don't think we should be participating in those five-party talks until our good friends in China take some positive action with regard to North Korea, since they're the ones that have promoted the program.

They transferred those sixteen-wheel trucks that give them the capability to move their ICBM's around to hit us, and I – I mean – us ignoring what they've been doing only further compounds the problems we're having.

ROGER ROBINSON:

Well I could – please.

MAN:

The last point I want to make: in our infinite wisdom, you know, we have an annual exercise called RIMPAC, and it's for our friends and allies. And in our infinite wisdom we now have invited the Chinese Navy to participate in our 2014 exercise. So, that would have been like me inviting the Soviets to come in and partici – so we could show them all our communications, our tactics and so on. And I've done a recent op-ed on this, which should be published shortly, but if we don't cancel that exercise or withdraw the invitation, I'm suggesting our allies should withdraw and force cancellation. I can't see the Japanese participating with the Chinese in this exercise where we're showing them everything we've got.

ROGER ROBINSON:

No, I think that's a very important point and I agree with much of – well, virtually all of what you've said. I, too, can't imagine Tokyo being comfortable in this environment with that. But if we again just when you review the utter wholly owned subsidiary status of North Korea vis-à-vis China, with 90% of the fuel, 45% of the food, 36% of their total foreign aid budget – I mean, you know the numbers. And they're getting worse. I mean, trade has increased between North Korea and China over 60% in the past two years. So not only is China not using this much vaulted leverage, but they're of course going the other way, which is they're underwriting North Korea to a fare-thee-well as it does become somewhat more isolated, and they are – they are very deliberately involved in fuelling this threat. So our – hopefully the scales have fallen from our eyes and that we recognize the truth of the situation which is that the six party talks are a bad movie, you know, in a loop, that we keep seeing *ad nauseum* again and again since '94 and even previously. It's unbearable to watch and if we do go back to the six party talks, I can tell you, that's a circumstance where Japan is going to need the people in this room because they are going to be alone in a special way, trying to stand up. It's going to be very Churchillian. It's going to be a Margaret Thatcher moment for Prime Minister Abe and we need to be there with him. Thank you.