

Abe Cabinet Reshuffled

Many right-wing faces, but cautious start

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4 September 2014

On 3 September 2014, Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzo reshuffled his Cabinet for the first time since taking office in December 2012. Media reports repeatedly used certain keywords to describe this new formation, including “advancement of women” and “party unity” or “intraparty appeasement.” The former relates to the reshuffled Cabinet having five female ministers; and the latter to the appointment of the former President of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Tanigaki Sadakazu as the party's Secretary General. What does this new formation tell us about defense and security policy, particularly in relation to the right to collective self-defense?

Eto Akinori, appointed as Defense Minister and Minister in Charge of Security Legislation, is a Lower House Member from Aomori Prefecture (elected five times since 1996). He served as the Senior Vice-Minister of Defense during Abe's first cabinet in 2007, during the Fukuda cabinet from 2007 to 2008, and then also during Abe's second cabinet from 2012 to just before this reshuffling. He has a reputation as an expert in security policy.

The very fact that the Defense Minister and the Minister in Charge of Security Legislation are concurrently served by the same person leads us to question the purpose of the latter post, a position established specifically to set laws regarding the implementation of the right to collective self-defense. According to news reports, Prime Minister Abe first planned to appoint former LDP Secretary General Ishiba Shigeru to this post, but this offer was firmly refused due to differences in their approaches to security policy.

Although Mr Eto was not a member of the ruling parties' consultation that created the foundation of the 1 July 2014 Cabinet decision on the right to collective self-defense, his experience as Senior Vice-Minister of Defense in the two Abe cabinets as well as his deep understanding of Prime Minister Abe's security policy became the decisive factor for this appointment, according to media reports.

On Mr Eto's website, his policy on international affairs is stated under the section “International Contribution — Reinvigorating Japanese Diplomacy”. According to this page, he believes that “in order for Japan to assume international responsibility, firmly maintaining the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, and enhancing its credibility is a necessity”. This, he says, is in addition to the prevention and eradication of international terrorism, international cooperation needed to achieve this goal, as well as the importance of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) refueling US vessels on anti-terrorism missions in the Indian Ocean.

Furthermore, as a native and therefore representative of Aomori Prefecture, his website also states that; “Aomori hosts the Bases of Ground, Maritime and Air SDF, as well as the U.S. Air Base Misawa. Utilizing these characteristics, I shall make my best efforts to promote the region”.

During his time as Senior Vice-Minister, Mr Eto served as Chair of the Defense Ministry Reform Committee. At this time he promoted increasing “efficiency” in the defense sector, meaning better communication, coordination, and integration between uniformed personnel in the Maritime, Air, and Ground SDF and civil officers at the Defense Ministry. This in part is about removing bureaucratic barriers between the organizations, but could also imply a challenge to “civilian control”, through having more voices from uniformed personnel who are supposed to be under the instruction of civilians. The Asahi Shimbun daily newspaper reported that "he has gained the trust of both uniformed personnel and civil officers".

Mr Eto belongs to several right-wing nationalist Diet members' groups, including the “Visiting the Yasukuni Shrine Together”, “Diet Members to Discuss Japanese Future and History Education”, and “Diet Members affiliated with Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference)” groups.

All in all, however, he has started off his new post cautiously. At the first press conference immediately after the Cabinet reshuffling, Mr Eto presented a prudent attitude on Sino-Japanese relations, in that he places importance on building confidence between the two countries and avoiding armed conflicts. He said, “It is necessary to pursue opportunities for dialogue at various levels”, and spoke about the importance of arranging a “marine communication

mechanism”, to prevent plane crashes and other incidents. He also stated that “on matters related to security legislation, I will endeavour to provide detailed explanations to the citizens of Japan through Diet proceedings”. Regarding the relocation of the Futenma Air Station to Henoko, Okinawa, he said, “I understand that there are opinions held that are opposed to the proposal. The government shall try to supplicate the understanding of the people in Okinawa”.

On the other hand, in the reshuffling more right-wing nationalists were appointed as Cabinet or LDP leadership members than before. For instance, Inada Tomomi was appointed as the new Chair of the LDP Policy Research Council with the strong backing of Mr Abe. In November 2012, Ms Inada listed herself as an assenter in an advertisement run in a U.S. newspaper denying Japan's responsibility regarding "comfort women" during World War II. Takaichi Sanae, also listed in the same advertisement, was appointed as Minister for Internal Affairs and Communications. This position carries particular importance in security legislation because local authorities' cooperation would be required to enable the U.S. Forces and the SDF to work effectively in contingencies.

It should also be noted that there are some moderate or liberal members, such as LDP Secretary General Tanigaki Sadakazu who places importance on improving relations with China, Minister for Foreign Affairs Kishida Fumio (remaining) from Hiroshima, and Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Obuchi Yuko who is known to be cautious about nuclear power. It is worth closely watching how the distinctive characters of these members can be brought forward, together with that of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism Minister Ota Akihiro - the only remaining minister from New Komeito, the junior party of the ruling coalition which positions itself as a “peace party”. Some believe that a complete right-wing dominated government has been avoided. Others, however, observe that Prime Minister Abe tactfully incorporated possible opposing forces into the Cabinet so he can eventually control them under his dominant leadership.

Citizens must monitor the performance of this newly formulated government.