

International Affairs Forum Interview

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By Jason Miks



Steven C. Clemons serves as the Executive Vice President of the **New America Foundation** and is the Director of the **Japan Policy Research Institute**. He is a founding member of the **Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy**. His blog – **The Washington Note** – is one of the most widely read such websites in Washington. Steven C. Clemons is also on the Center for International Relations' Editorial Board. Jason Miks has recently caught up with him in Tokyo for this interview.

International Affairs Forum: You had an op-ed in the Washington Post a couple of months ago warning that political debate in Japan is being stifled by far-right nationalists. What do you see going on here?

Steven C. Clemons: I think what is beginning to happen, why the issue of right wing intimidation of Japan's blue chip intellectuals, business leaders and politicians matters, is that for the first time since I can remember, you are seeing cases of self censorship by Japan's best and most thoughtful parts of civil society.

The right wingers in Japan have been lurking around politics for centuries, so that is not interesting. But in the Washington Post article I compare this to the 1930s. This is to some degree an unfair comparison because Japan now is nothing like Japan in the 1930s, and I know that. But there aren't a lot of good metaphors to show people what is happening. Also, Japan is cocooned to some degree from a lot of these big conflicts about identity. Many people just avoid it. So it is important to look at these issues when there are times of stress, or crises.

So it is not like we see storm troopers outside. But you do see a kind of thought-control going on. I wrote the piece because of an incident in which the Japan Institute for International Affairs took not just one controversial article, but a whole raft of material, off its website. It was a remarkable act of contrition by one of Japan's leading former diplomats, at a kind of official government foreign policy think tank.

What is happening is that Japan got a lobotomy in the 1950s from the United States. And that lobotomy pre-empted a lot of thinking about Japan's national interests - about what sort of

global engagement it wanted to have, what kind of military forces etc. So now Japan needs to have a discussion with its people about what sort of nationalism it wants to wear. When Junichiro Koizumi became prime minister he began to tack to the right simply to cover himself from attacks from people like Shintaro Ishihara [Tokyo's ultranationalist governor]. But that opened up an appetite in Japan for more and more flirtation with symbols such as Yasukuni shrine... and an opportunity for the current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to rise.

While I am thrilled that Abe went to China and seems to be saying a lot of the right things, his career so far has been marked by pugnacious nationalism rather than healthy nationalism. You can look at other nationalists like Ichiro Ozawa [leader of main opposition party the Democratic Party of Japan]. He's not perfect, but he's a much healthier kind of nationalist in terms of what a normal nation would look like. And he's sometimes also a hawk... so it's not a question of being a hawk or a dove, it's a question of whether you can organize your nationalism around both national interests and national security issues and do it in a way so it doesn't engage in international rejectionism, which I think is happening.

IA-Forum: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe surprised many with early visits to China and South Korea. Do you think he recognizes the need to repair relations, or was he prodded by the United States into doing it?

Steve Clemons: I don't think he was pushed by America, because I don't think America has much influence in this case. I think he was pushed by the prospect of the Upper House elections just around the corner and that when he looks at the polls in contrast to Koizumi, his numbers are already falling, because when people look at him they see a strident nationalist who is making Japan less safe.

This doesn't mean people don't want to see people confront China over bad behavior or even confront North Korea. I basically support what Japan has done with regard to North Korea. But he is saying a lot of things that, to some degree, alienate the fundamentalist right wing in Japan who are supporting him. This creates tension for them, which I think is a positive thing. But it also creates doubt among the more reasonable or moderate parts of Japanese society about whether he is saying a lot of these things to get along and to be pragmatic about his current political weakness, and whether he will turn back, when he gets through the more difficult times. It may be that we are not seeing the real Abe. In my view we should keep our powder dry and stand back and see what happens.

IA-Forum: Abe got a boost in his political fortunes in the Liberal Democratic Party leadership race by taking a tough line on North Korea, following its missile tests in July. Do you see Abe trying to exploit the North Korea situation in the future for political gain?

Steve Clemons: He became big because of the abduction [of Japanese citizens by North Korean agents] issue. North Korea has been a useful issue for him to exploit for his own success. Will he continue to milk that? Yes, he probably will. But now that he is prime

minister he can't just be highly strident. He needs to produce results now. So I suspect that what you will see is a softening, a less crude commentary from him about that, and hopefully he will move in that direction. This is what he has done in his first few weeks in office. I have my doubts about him though. I knew his father very well. In my mind Shintaro Abe was one of the great, under-appreciated, diplomats when he was Minister of Foreign Affairs. He was almost single-handedly trying to solve the Iran-Iraq war. Unfortunately Abe does not remind me much of his father. He reminds me more of his grandfather, [Prime Minister Nobusuke] Kishi, who was much more of a strident, hard-edged nationalist who defined military means as the way for Japan to assert its interests.

IA-Forum: Koizumi was the third longest serving post-war Japanese prime minister. Do you expect Abe to be this successful?

Steve Clemons: At this moment I don't. I see him disliked by significant parts of the LDP. If he stays moderate and centrist, he alienates his base. If he moves towards a healthy nationalism, he loses credibility with those who put him in power. If he swings back, he looks duplicitous. I think he has a built-in fragility. But that does not mean he won't find a way to stay around for a while. Koizumi, I would say, was not policy savvy, but he was certainly savvy politically. There's no doubt that Abe is more ideologically driven than Koizumi was and my sense is that he doesn't have the same facility with the art of politics that Koizumi clearly had.

IA-Forum: The current leader of the DPJ, Ichiro Ozawa, once wrote about his vision of Japan as a 'normal country'. What kind of 'normal' would be healthy for Japan?

Steve Clemons: When you compare Japan and Germany in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq, Germany, despite my problems with the anti-Americanism that Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder cultivated, Germany seemed to earn back its sovereignty. It showed that it would be a peer of the United States in common challenges. Japan in contrast turned out to be disappointing in this respect. I think Germany is psychologically better off for it.

A normal nation is one that figures out when it is going to converge with certain interests of other global players and when not. In my view the Iraq war and the way Koizumi sent the Self Defence Forces over was a rejection of the kind of multilateral institution building that Japan had been working hard on.

There are degrees of democracy, but Japan is still a group driven society, which can often be anti-democratic. So when I see right wing thugs engage in intimidation and violence or systematic harassment, I believe it stifles that modern debate from taking place. You can't have one wing of the political environment have a disproportionate effect by stifling debate elsewhere. A normal nation has to get over this lobotomy and Ozawa's book laid out many of these questions beautifully.

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IA-Forum: Thank you very much for your time.

Comments? Please send them to editor@ia-forum.org

