

**JAPANESE POLITICS IN 2013:  
“JAPAN IS BACK”**

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*EAI Background Brief No. 880*

Date of Publication: 23 December 2013

## **Executive Summary**

1. In February 2013, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo confidently declared: “I am back, and so shall Japan be”.
2. Given his solid electoral victories in the December 2012 Lower House and July 2013 Upper House Elections, Abe is likely to stay in power for at least the next few years and to provide strong leadership to Japan.
3. Japan is also back in at least two ways. First, the country is poised to end its economic doldrums (the so-called two “lost decades”) and a decade and a half chronic deflation thanks to Abenomics. Second, an Abe-led Japan has become more assertive in international affairs and is prepared to stand up to a rising China.
4. Besides Abenomics, the prime minister’s bold economic agenda includes the end of financial subsidies to Japan’s uncompetitive farmers by 2018, and the participation in Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations despite fierce resistance from the country’s agricultural lobby.
5. However, Abe is back with a rightwing tilt: increasing Tokyo’s defense budget in the wake of a more assertive China, appointing his man to head the Cabinet Legislation Bureau and change the pacifist constitution to permit Japan to engage in “collective security”, introducing a National Security Council for security matters, and hastily ramming a state secrecy bill through parliament.
6. For this hasty act, Abe’s popularity took a temporary dip but his resolute rejection of China’s declaration of its Air Defense Identification Zone which extends to the Japan-administered Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands may well boost his mass popularity again.
7. Ironically, Beijing’s assertiveness against Tokyo may unintentionally boost Abe’s domestic popularity and Japanese rightwing nationalism. In 2013, a

record high of 80.7% of the Japanese public “do not feel friendly” towards China.

8. The strained relations with China and South Korea over territorial and historical disputes have led Abe to seek closer relations with the US and ASEAN states. In October 2013, Tokyo and Washington agreed to update and upgrade their 1997 US-Japan Defense Guidelines.
9. That Abe and Japan are back coupled with a Xi Jinping-led China (which appears more powerful, confident and strident) may well be a harbinger of intensifying rivalry, tension and instability in East Asia in the near future.