

Abe seeks to capitalize from crisis

Buoyed by approval of his response to DPRK's actions, Japanese PM mulls risky move to call snap polls

The provocations by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) may be a double-edged sword for Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who reportedly intends to dissolve the lower house of parliament and call a snap general election for late October.

The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) will likely highlight the necessity of a strong government to handle the DPRK's nuclear and missile threats. Two DPRK missiles that were fired over Hokkaido Island, and a nuclear test on Sept 3, have triggered anxiety and fear in Japan.

The DPRK has threatened to "sink" Japanese islands with nuclear weapons. A total of six DPRK missiles have so far passed over Japanese territory, which, as *The Yomiuri Shimbun* said, may become routine events.

Japan's J-Alert was issued in 12 prefectures including Hokkaido, encouraging people to evacuate to a sturdy building or basement, when the DPRK fired missiles over Japan on Aug 29 and Sept 15.

The warnings issued were the most widespread since the system was put into operation in 2007. But many people said they found no shelters.

So, a growing number of people

in Japan are promoting self-reliance, with air-tight underground nuclear bunkers built under their houses. Residents in many parts of the nation have held evacuation drills for a simulated DPRK missile attack.

As the DPRK presses on with missile and nuclear tests, Abe may find it easier to sell his idea of building a strong military. In a signed article published in *The New York Times* on Sept 17, Abe said Japan faces the threat of missiles — short and medium range — together with the possibility of chemical weapons attacks. He dismissed dialogue with the DPRK.

"Now is the time to exert the utmost pressure on the North. There should be no more delays," Abe wrote. "I firmly support the United States position that all options are on the table."

Addressing the United Nations General Assembly on Sept 19, US President Donald Trump vowed to "totally destroy" the DPRK if the US is forced to defend itself or its allies against the renegade nation's nuclear weapons program.

Revision of Japan's constitution is likely to be one of the main issues in the LDP's campaign platform.

Polls by Japanese media have noted a rebound in Abe's approval ratings, with the latest *Yomiuri Shimbun* survey showing a jump to 50 percent approval, while 39 percent of respondents did not support him.

Abe's response to the DPRK nuclear test, including phone calls and consultations with Trump and

South Korean President Moon Jae-in, received favorable attention in Japan.

Abe's approval rating also rose 8 percentage points in September 2016 when the DPRK carried out its fifth nuclear test.

The New York Times said there are signs that the Japanese public's devotion to pacifism and its attitude toward the Japanese military, known as the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), have begun to change, in part at Abe's prompting.

Two years ago, Abe pushed through security laws that expand the SDF's role and permit Japanese troops to participate in overseas combat missions.

The LDP's task force for pushing through revision of the constitution has again begun to discuss how to write a new charter, with an eye on Article 9. Abe has argued for the addition of a new clause to Article 9 that specifies the existence of the SDF while upholding the article's renunciation of war and ban on Japan maintaining the potential for war. Abe aims to amend the constitution by 2020.

A public opinion poll in April by Kyodo News showed that 49 percent of those surveyed believed that Article 9 needs to be updated, versus 47 percent who were opposed to any change. In December 2012, when Abe assumed office, 51 percent of the public opposed changes to Article 9, with 45 percent in favor of revisions.

"As a national security crisis is unfolding before our eyes, we need to win people's understanding

about related issues including how the national security legislation actually works," said Koichi Hagiuda, an Abe confidant who currently serves as the LDP's executive acting secretary-general.

The upcoming election will be a chance for the LDP to rally support for revision of the constitution.

But Japan's opposition parties have warned Abe against creating a political vacuum by dissolving the lower house. Tensions with the DPRK, in their words, remain high due to its ballistic missile launches and nuclear test.

Democratic Party leader Seiji Maehara called dissolution of the lower house "selfish" and without due regard for Japanese people's lives and properties.

With the DPRK showing no signs of stopping its missile firings and nuclear tests, it is hard to see a strong "rationale" for the dissolution, which would leave the Diet's lower house without members for days, *The Asahi Shimbun's* editorial said.

Still, the issue of 17 Japanese nationals abducted by DPRK agents in the 1970s and 80s is a topic Abe has to face with sensitivity.

Family members of the Japanese abductees, as well as their supporters, urged the Japanese government on Sept 17 to make redoubled efforts to bring the victims home.

They are concerned that the abduction issue might be ignored, with the international community preoccupied with exerting more pressure on the DPRK to mend its ways.

The DPRK admitted 13 abductions, returned five Japanese and said the others had died.

Abe has repeatedly vowed to resolve the abduction issue, despite the lack of an action plan, while he is in office.

Dissolving the lower house is deemed the prime minister's prerogative. Abe wants to take advantage of disarray in Japan's main opposition Democratic Party, with many members leaving the party.

A snap general election would give politicians close to Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike little time to establish a new party or for opposition parties to come up with a convincing campaign manifesto.

The LDP's campaign agenda would also include economic and social security issues. The Abe administration aims to raise the consumption tax from the current 8 percent to 10 percent in October 2019 as planned.

Abe's idea is to use part of the revenue from a 10 percent consumption tax hike — which was originally allocated for social security purposes — for child-rearing assistance.

Given the current political landscape, in which the LDP is not necessarily the public's most favored choice and opposition parties offer no clear vision of governance — people in Japan could well feel disengaged and unmotivated to vote in a snap election.

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Chinese navy sails in peace

Annual exercises with Russia pose no threat to anyone and are a boon to mutual trust and regional order

By SUN XINGJIE

The navies of China and Russia started the second stage of their weeklong Joint Sea-2017 military drills in the Sea of Japan on Sept 18. The first stage was held two months ago in the Baltic Sea.

The drills, held annually since 2012, will for the first time reach the Sea of Okhotsk, north of Japan's Hokkaido Island, and involve joint submarine rescue missions and antisubmarine operations.

These "firsts" and the kickoff date, which is often linked to the September 18 Incident, have drawn speculation from some media out-

lets. On Sept 18, 1931, Japanese soldiers triggered a blast on a railway line in Northeast China, blamed the Chinese military for it and used it as a pretext for the invasion of China.

However, the truth is that China's naval ambitions go beyond emotional links with a painful memory. The historical issues between Beijing and Tokyo are not likely to be settled by a naval drill in the neighborhood, nor do they have anything to do with "Chinese muscle-flexing".

The Chinese navy has good reason to go further offshore and work closely with its Russian counterpart.

The Sea of Japan is not "Japan's Sea" but part of the wide ocean. From the Baltic Sea to the Sea of

Okhotsk, the Chinese-Russian naval exercises are intrinsically about strengthening the strategic partnership between the two permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

The two neighbors' joint drills are more of a boon to mutual trust and regional order, and do not necessarily target a third party.

Those who doubt this contention prefer to forget the fact that the United States holds a slew of annual military drills with its Asian allies in the region. It may be fair to say that military drills have become a part of the standard practice in the Asia-Pacific, because of the escalating security tensions in the region.

Traditionally known as a land power that did not pay enough attention to its navy, China is catching up with leading naval powers rather rapidly, and to the discomfort of many countries.

A stronger navy has played a major role in protecting China's maritime interests and providing more public goods to the international community.

Since 2008, it has dispatched 26 escort task force groups, including more than 70 ships to the Gulf of Aden and the coast of Somalia. And it has provided protection to more than 6,300 Chinese and foreign vessels during these missions.

The Chinese-Russian naval

cooperation, too, has gone beyond bilateral drills, as the two navies jointly escorted the Syrian chemical weapons in 2014. China, now the world's largest trading country, has every reason to develop its naval power to safeguard its trade routes and overseas businesses.

It may take some time for some countries to accept the peaceful rise of the Chinese navy, as well as the fact that China has no intention of "seeking revenge" on countries it used to be at war with or those that committed atrocities on its people.

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