

A Strategic Vision Required for Suga Diplomacy

By NABESHIMA Keizo

Mr. SUGA Yoshihide, Chief Cabinet Secretary, was elected as the new President of the Liberal Democratic Party by winning over 70% of the support at the party election held on September 14. He is going to be nominated as the 99th Prime Minister at the extraordinary session of the National Diet on the 16th. It was fortunate that the incoming cabinet would be established, without a political vacuum, after only 19 days since the announcement of PM ABE Shinzo's resignation due to recurrence of his health condition. In the party presidency campaign, Mr. SUGA pledged "the succession and moving forward" based on PM ABE's policy as his commitment if elected. While PM ABE, the longest serving leader of the country, left big achievements in the last 7 year and 8 months, there are some major political issues like revision of the constitution still remained. Such issues require the wide national support, as well as firm will and capacity to make a bold action to move them forward. Having been the longest serving Chief Cabinet Secretary himself, Mr. Suga seems confident of his diplomatic policy as he says that he took part and played a key role in all the major policy decisions during the Abe cabinet. His diplomatic capacity as Prime Minister, however, is yet to be known.

Soon after turning to the 21st century, after 9/11 attacks in 2001, the world surrounding Japan has entered the age of uncertainty. China's economic and military rise has led its relations with the United States at the level of the "cold war," instability in Asia, Iran's nuclear development and trembling Middle East, the dividing West ---the world is at the historic turning point. The liberal international order established in the post-World War II period is concerned to be collapsing due to relative decline of the US and the increase of emerging countries' voices, including of China. Unpredictable outbreaks such as the novel coronavirus will occur, and the chances of the collapse of the power balance in the current world is not zero. It is inevitable for Japan to have a strong plan to resiliently counteract, and to safely protect its nationals and territories in order to survive any emergency cases occur in the world.

How the "post-Abe" administration of Japan would like the world to be, and what would be Japan's role to help realize that? The first and major assignment of the Suga administration is to lay out its strategic vision of the policy that covers diplomacy, defense, security and economy. The biggest unavoidable agenda in Japan's external relation is that of the US & China, and its stance towards both sides. The US-China frictions are intensifying in the security field ---missile defense, maritime and homeland security--- as well as in the international economy such as at the reform talk of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The intensity keeps getting harder as the US presidential election in November is in near sight, between Xi Jinping's China leveraging its Belt and Road Initiative in an attempt to establish new international order of their liking, versus Trump's US administration concluding that the previous administrations' China engagement policy was a failure. How Japan prefer

the international order to be, and how and what way could it be achieved? Japan's diplomatic efforts will be further needed to enhance its international influence to gain the worldwide support on its vision, and a specific roadmap to achieve it.

Mr. Suga said in the debate program on NHK that, based on his recognition the improvement of the US-China relations will bring the stability in the world, a strategic diplomacy is needed, rather than straight choice of "with US or with China." The rest of the world is struggling to take balance in their relations with the US and China. For Japan, the US is a security ally, while China remains to be a close economic partner on one hand, does not relax its repeated, strong anti-Japan campaign ---violating territorial waters of Senkaku Islands, or export embargo on rare earth materials, for example--- depending on the timings on the other. Historically proven whoever they are against, China shows no mercy to weaker opponent, and will not offend the stronger. Armor peeks out from their 'smile diplomacy.' That characteristics have been clear throughout the history of China's policy on the negotiations of the normalization of the diplomatic relations with Japan, and with the US, since Deng Xiaoping. Even under Abe administration, pro-China lawmakers in the ruling LDP and Komei Party apparently had influence over the government's policy towards China and restricted its security policy. Needless to say, Japan-China relations will be sought based on the stronger deterrence by the Japan-US alliance. Mr. Suga shall be reminded that the immediate issue for Japan is nothing but to strengthen its own defense capacity against the violation of its sovereignty, including the 'gray zone crisis' that Senkaku Islands are exposed.

(This is the English translation of an article written by NABESHIMA Keizo, Critic, which originally appeared on the e-forum "Hyakka-Seiho (Hundred Flowers in Full Bloom)" of JFIR on September 15, 2020.)