On 11 September, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reshuffled his cabinet yet again. As a result, one of the most respected politicians in post-war Japan will be the head of his fourth Cabinet since his triumphant return to Japan’s political arena (at the end of 2012).

We would like to remind our readers that Shinzo Abe first became Prime Minister as far back as 2006. He took over the post from one of the veterans of Japanese politics (and to a certain extent his mentor), Junichiro Koizumi. Exactly one year later, after a series of scandals that some members of his government had become embroiled in, Shinzo Abe left his post.

For a number of reasons, there was wide-spread belief within the Japanese establishment that the career of this up-and-coming young politician was over. Hence, his return to politics as the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (the LDP, one of the oldest Japanese parties) in autumn 2012 appeared to be a very risky move.

However, we reiterate that the LDP won convincingly at the time, and Shinzo Abe once again became the Prime Minister of Japan. And he has held this position for almost 7 consecutive years now, which in and of itself is a rare feat for any politician in post-war Japan. We can confidently forecast that Shinzo Abe will remain in this post until autumn 2021, when the scheduled election to choose the new President of the LDP will be held. Exactly one year ago, unusually enough, Shinzo Abe became the leader of the party for a third time in a row.

During the 7 years of his premiership, Shinzo Abe’s closest allies have occupied the most important government
positions. For instance, Tarō Asō (Japan’s former Prime Minister from 2008 to 2009) has been the Minister of Finance during this entire period. Yoshihide Suga is also a part of Shinzo Abe’s inner circle and has served as the Chief Cabinet Secretary, who is responsible for directing the Cabinet of Japan (as well as any preparation work required before the government makes a decision), for the last seven years.

Tarō Kōno is also among Shinzo Abe’s closest allies. In August 2017 (i.e. during the penultimate reshuffle of the Cabinet), he became Japan’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, and since 11 September of this year he has been the country’s Minister for Defense.

Toshimitsu Motegi, who from December 2012 to September 2014 held the position of Minister for Economy, Trade and Industry in Shinzo Abe’s first Cabinet, became the new Minister for Foreign Affairs. He is no stranger to the foreign policy sphere if we take into account his role in rescuing the Trans-Pacific Partnership from its demise after USA’s withdrawal from it, and his participation in highly sensitive negotiations with this key ally on bilateral trade issues of the past.

Along with veterans of Japanese politics in key government positions, there are 13 newcomers (out of a total of 19 ministers) in the newly reshuffled Cabinet. Media outlets have especially focused on the new 38-year-old Environment Minister, Shinjiro Koizumi, who happens to be the son of Shinzo Abe’s political mentor mentioned earlier. Still, it is worth highlighting that after Junichiro Koizumi retired from political life, he became one of the most ardent opponents of his mentee’s plan to continue using nuclear power plants in one form or other to generate energy to meet Japan’s needs.

His son is already viewed as a potential leader of the LDP, but not in the nearest future of course. Shinjiro Koizumi is fairly popular among the Japanese youth, and his appointment to the ministerial post ensures that the approval ratings for Shinzo Abe’s Cabinet remain high. Polls have shown that the “support rate” for the current government among the population exceeded 55%.

It is also worth mentioning that the approval ratings of Shinzo Abe’s leadership team were quite decent even before the latest polls. Still, any measures meant to increase them are far from superfluous, especially at a time when the second stage of a plan to increase the consumption tax is about to begin.

A key decision that the tax had to be increased (from 5% to 10%) was made as far back as 2012 by the government headed by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), a predecessor of the LDP. This, notably, contributed to no small extent to DPJ’s devastating defeat (and its subsequent dissolution) during the previously mentioned general election in December 2012. In this particular situation, the DPJ was viewed as the bearer of bad news, i.e. someone who was not guilty of anything but yet had to face the consequences.

It was perfectly clear to everyone (including the electorate) that there was a need to raise the consumption tax. After all in Japan taxes make up only 50% of the portion of the state budget used for expenditures, and government debt at the time had already exceeded 200% of the annual GDP. Still, voters chose to punish the government that had the audacity to publicly announce the inevitable. However, we must not forget about another factor that played a role in DPJ’s demise: the disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant on 11 March 2011.

The LDP came to power afterwards and its government decided to use a different approach by implementing the necessary measures gradually. During the first stage, which occurred only one and a half years later (in the summer of 2014), the leadership increased the consumption tax from 5% to 8%. And the second stage is yet to begin.

However, it is impossible to postpone it any longer, and this last phase (when the consumption tax will increase from 8% to 10%) is scheduled for October of this year. The announcement about the upcoming hike was made before the scheduled election to the upper house of the National Diet of Japan, which took place on 21 July. And although the LDP and its allies did not emerge triumphant at the end of it, the outcome was still very satisfactory. Shinzo Abe can certainly view the results of the recent election as the electorate’s approval of unpopular and yet inevitable measures.

All in all, the need for a timely response to economic problems (internal as well as external) was one of the key reasons behind the latest (and most likely the last during Shinzo Abe’s political career) reshuffle of the Cabinet. Thus, as commentators have pointed out, there is an unprecedented number of professional economists among members of the new government.

The second equally important reason behind the reshuffle is linked to supposedly the key aim of Shinzo Abe’s entire political career, i.e. the amendment of Article 9, an anti-war part of Japan’s Constitution. In such a climate, any
events meant to simultaneously consolidate the positions of Shinzo Abe’s closest allies within the LDP leadership are scrutinized.

The New Eastern Outlook discusses the topic of constitutional amendments on a regular basis, but the author of this article still cannot understand why modern Japan should concern itself with this matter. Even more importantly, it is unclear to the majority of Japanese citizens who live well (both inside as well as outside of Japan), with the current “American” version of the Constitution in place. It is unlikely that the idea, which one of the most influential politicians in post-war Japan is fixated on, will become a reality.

Naturally, the reshuffling of the Cabinet in one of the world’s leading nations did not go unnoticed abroad. The spokeswoman of PRC’s Foreign Ministry, Hua Chunying, applauded this change (overall) and congratulated the two newly appointed Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Defense. This is a positive sign for the relations between the two leading Asian powers, and for the way the regional political game is shaping.

In South Korea, these changes in the Japanese government were viewed in the opposite light (particularly the move of Tarō Kōno to the post of Minister for Defense). In Seoul, it was thought that the reshuffle would only speed up the deterioration of the bilateral ties. But then again, these relations are getting worse without any outside help.

We could only expect to see a reversal in this dangerous trend if joint measures are taken by the two regional leading nations as well as global powers, i.e. the United States and the PRC. However, beforehand the two latter nations have to resolve the issues plaguing their bilateral relationship (another dangerous trend). And the departure from the White House of the hawkish John Bolton could help.

As for the so-called Northern Territories dispute, it will, of course, remain one of the current foreign policy issues for Japan. However, the conflict has not been among the most pressing ones for some time now.

Whenever an opportunity presents itself (i.e. however sporadically), this issue will be raised. And there have already been reports on when this will happen next, namely during a meeting between Sergey Lavrov and the new Minister for Foreign Affairs, Toshimitsu Motegi.

It will be essential to explain to the Japanese counterparts in a patient and amicable manner that Japanese businesses will derive far greater benefits from the resource-rich territories of the Russian Federation by not stoking the infamous Northern Territories conflict.

As they say in modern India: “Come and make.”

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