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Abe's boldness key to Japan's fortunes

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New Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has big shoes to fill.

His predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi, dominated the political scene with his risk-taking and charisma, a style that Abe does not seem to share. To fill those shoes, Abe must do more than take advantage of the domestic political capital gained by his recent visit to Beijing and Seoul. He must take concrete steps to demonstrate Japan's willingness to assume a leadership role in a future East Asian community. It is what Abe does now that really matters.

Japan has proved a responsible mem-

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ber of the international community in the post-World War II period. This, and its strong democratic values, should have positioned the country to lead the region and its neighbors forward on a range of security, economic and political issues.

Yet Japan's ability to lead is hindered by two factors: failure to define a clear political and diplomatic role for itself in the region and continued prime ministerial visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine—which signal to the world that the country is unwilling to atone for its wartime past. Abe can resolve both.

To his credit, Abe appears to understand that Japan has been going down the wrong path for the past several years. Hence his trip to Beijing and Seoul. Chinese President Hu Jintao appears to have recognized the same about Chinese policy.

Abe has reiterated former Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama's 1995 apology for Japan's wartime behavior. While comprehensive, the apology did not satisfy angry governments in China, South Korea or elsewhere. (This is due, in part, to the domestic politics of the two countries.)

Dealing with the Yasukuni controversy once and for all would be Abe's boldest

move. At the risk of angering portions of his political base, he should announce that he will not visit the shrine again.

By taking the history issue off the table, Japan would test the willingness of its neighbors to put relations back on a stable footing. It would also demonstrate his resolve to seek creative diplomatic solutions to a problem that has real costs—and few benefits—for Japan.

Next, Abe should fashion a fresh policy agenda with Japan's estranged neighbors. He can leverage the recent meetings to make real progress on noncontroversial issues that have a broad impact: energy efficiency, environmental protection, water treatment, and pollution prevention. These issues will earn him political capital at home that he will need before the July 2007 House of Councillors elections, and make a real difference to the future of the region.

The Chinese have the need, and the Japanese have the technical expertise and capital, to work together on energy and the environment. Japan would get the added benefit of cutting down on the acid rain that originates in China. For example, the two countries could face the

challenge of creating a joint energy exploration zone to exploit natural resources in the East China Sea, including natural gas. The beauty of a joint zone is that it would help avoid the question of where to draw territorial lines.

Within the context of current security concerns surrounding the North Korean nuclear test, Abe should also consider calling for a joint Japan-China-South Korea approach and coordination.

The forward-looking and candid exchange of views between Abe and his counterparts in China and South Korea is critical for the continued healthy development of the region—and for forging a future East Asia that looks ahead rather than fixating on the past. Abe's actions can pave the way for Japan, China and South Korea to focus on the future, not the past. They need to develop new ways to share political, economic and diplomatic power in Asia in the decades to come.

With political momentum on his side, strong domestic popularity and the international community lauding his efforts to mend the fences with China and South Korea, Abe must act now. He may not get a better chance.