

Don't let Constitution controversy undermine economic efforts



Japan Business Seminar

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The Liberal Democratic Party put an end to the divided Diet through its strong showing in last month's upper house election. Now it is looking at three years with a comfortable ruling-coalition majority in both houses.

Many observers fear this will encourage Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to revive his pet project: revising the Japanese Constitution, especially Article 9, which renounces war as the nation's sovereign right. They expect that Abe will gradually drum up discussion of this topic after Aug. 15, the 68th anniversary of Japan's capitulation in World War II.

Most business leaders oppose such a constitutional revision as they fear that new friction with China and South Korea would have long-term adverse effects for their Asian operations. They are also worried that the mere discussion — and the inevitable controversy — would distract attention from reforms and reviving Japan's economy.

I belong to this group and strongly recommend against opening the Pandora's box of constitutional revision. Even the

LDP's coalition partner, New Komeito, is wary of lifting that lid. And other parties will surely jump at the chance to pull the LDP into a long public fight over the matter.

It would not take long to completely lose sight of the economy.

If Abe ignores these fears and insists on starting a public debate over the Constitution, he should at least prepare carefully and comprehensively. He must address the perceptions and realities of Japan's wartime past and the nation's way of dealing with them.

Unlike Germany, Japan has not succeeded in expressing its remorse in a way that was fully accepted by its Asian neighbors, especially the Chinese and Koreans. The numerous and far-reaching apologies by various past prime ministers — including Yasuhiro Nakasone, Tomiichi Murayama, Ryutaro Hashimoto and Junichiro Koizumi — only helped to a certain degree.

Other actions, such as textbook revisions and struggles over compensation for "comfort women," have cast doubt on

the fullness of Japan's remorse. Again and again, comments by high-ranking individuals have damaged the credibility of carefully crafted statements of apology.

I am not simply suggesting another apology, as today's Germany and Japan are in rather different positions on the world stage. Germany is no longer facing outright opponents. But China — and to a lesser degree Korea — continue to leverage anti-Japan sentiment for the sake of domestic policies. Sometimes, through education, they have deliberately nurtured anti-Japan feelings.

In the face of all this, I recommend the Japanese government issue a summary of its many past war-related statements. This should be done at an appropriate time in the form of a parliamentary declaration, signed by both houses. This would send a much more powerful message than the declarations of single governments or prime ministers issued so far.

Such a parliamentary declaration must not be the result of pressure from outside but come

from within Japan, and it should be announced to the world in a way that gives China and South Korea no chance to doubt its sincerity.

Major new initiatives, such as regular international conferences or new youth exchange programs, should then be pursued so that the one-time statement is supported with actions.

A declaration by both houses would make it much harder to question Japan's stance as a country, regardless of any individual remarks. The recent uproar over Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto's comments on "comfort women" is but one example.

Ideally, Abe will put constitutional revision on the back burner for now. But if not, let's pray he chooses a well-thought-through approach.

That could help to keep economic reforms on track; it might even make him a real leader in the eyes of the world.

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