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From the Weakest Government to the Most Powerful

- Prime Minister Abe's Remarkable Leadership

On October 1, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reached his final decision to go ahead with a 3% consumption tax hike. He plans to use economic stimulus measures of about ¥5 trillion to minimize the negative effects of this ¥8 trillion consumption tax increase. These policies along with Abenomics are made possible by the extremely powerful leadership of Prime Minister Abe. With six prime ministers in six years (Abe for the first time in 2006, Fukuda in 2007, Aso in 2008, Hatoyama in 2009, Kan in 2010 and Noda in 2011), Japan's leadership has been a veritable revolving door. As a result, Japan had one of the world's weakest governments.

Since the formation of the second Abe administration in December 2012, though, Japan's government has become the most powerful in the world with respect to the following four points.

(1) Strong support

The Abe administration has an approval rating of more than 60%. This is about the same as the approval for German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who was recently reelected by a landslide. Furthermore, public support for Prime Minister Abe is higher than the support for U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron, French President Francois Hollande and U.S. President Barack Obama.

(2) Strong legislative majority

The Abe administration is well positioned to execute its policies because of large legislative majorities. Until not long ago, the two houses of the Japanese Diet were unable to agree on any policies. But now the "twisted Diet" problem, in which the upper and lower houses were controlled by different parties, has ended. With majorities in both houses, Abe's Liberal Democratic Party can easily implement its policies. In the United States, Congress remains "twisted." The president is having difficulty executing his policies due to resistance from the opposition Republican Party. Even in Germany, where Chancellor Merkel has been re-elected, the ruling Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union parties alone cannot form a majority and must use a coalition with the opposition Social Democratic Party.

(3) Long remaining term of office

The length of the Abe administration's term of office is one more strength. The administration can retain its current superiority without holding an election for three more years. In contrast, President Obama seems to be losing leadership inertia. Consequently, Prime Minister Abe and his administration can continue to exert powerful leadership for several more years.

(4) Solidarity behind a desire for strong leadership

A shift in the sentiment of the Japanese public is the single greatest source of strength for the government. Shinzo Abe would probably not have become prime minister again without national and economic crises due to the Great East Japan Earthquake, Senkaku Islands dispute and other events. Voters became worried about the threat to their lives and wealth as well as the possibility of an unhappy future for their children. The result was a major shift in the public's normally nonchalant attitude concerning politics and national security. This crisis mentality is what caused voters to seek a powerful leader. Moreover, this desire for solidarity was a key reason for Tokyo's successful bid to host the 2020 Summer Olympics.

Rio de Janeiro was selected as the host four years ago when Tokyo submitted a bid for the summer games. Tokyo lost despite having a superior bid because of the lack of public support. There was little public support for former Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara's bid for the Olympics in Tokyo. Furthermore, there was strong media opposition to hosting the Olympics. All political parties except the Liberal Democratic Party also adopted an extremely negative stance.

Musha Research Co., Ltd.
President
Ryoji Musha
Direct +81-3-5408-6821
musha@musha.co.jp
<http://www.musha.co.jp>

901 Renai Partire Shiodome
2-18-3 Hiagshishinbashi,
Minato-ku, 105-0021 Tokyo

The Olympics became a focus of the 2007 election to choose a governor of Tokyo. Although Governor Ishikawa, who was backed by the Liberal Democratic Party, was re-elected, all other candidates opposed the bid for the Olympics. For some time, the Japanese public has strongly embraced a mindset of criticizing authority and being somewhat rebellious about politics. However, a dramatic change in this attitude resulted in the emergence of Prime Minister Abe. The Japanese public switched from a centrifugal force to a centripetal force and Tokyo was chosen to host the Olympics. All of these events were underpinned by support for the Abe administration.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter in the U.S. presidential election. People regarded President Reagan as having a somewhat extreme anti-Communism, pro-democracy stance. The Carter administration, which was more conciliatory, had just suffered the failure of its policies involving Iran. President Reagan's hardline position against the Soviet Union led to the end of the Cold War 10 years later. For this to happen, at first a ruling circle had to appear that the public was wary of because the circle was viewed as embracing anti-Communism. This was an historical inevitability. President Reagan was precisely the type of leader that was called for at that time. The election of Prime Minister Abe as well may also be the result of the demand for the type of leader who is needed at another major turning point in history.

With respect to the economy and financial sector, and particularly stocks, political stability and a strong geopolitical base are critical. During the Cold War, Japan was protected by its security treaty with the United States. In Japan's postwar period, there was political apathy because people viewed Japan as a lightly-armed "country of merchants and artisans" (an expression coined by Naohiro Amaya). But there is no doubt that Japan is now at a significant turning point. Furthermore, Prime Minister Abe may have emerged as the powerful leader demanded by history to solve this problem and end Japan's mood of political apathy. If this is true, the prime minister now has a political base of unprecedented strength.

Now the largest geopolitical contradiction in the world is China, which will become the world's leading economic power and is ruled solely by the Communist Party.. The question is how global powers handle this issue. Accomplishing this will probably require a somewhat principled stance as exemplified by Winston Churchill and Ronald Reagan. Prime Minister Abe is a conservative, a realist and a nationalist. People should keep in mind the possibility that his election as prime minister reflects geopolitically and historically factors.

Figure 1: The political situation in major countries

	Ruling party	Head of state	Tenure	Approval rating	Source	Congress system	Ruling party seats occupancy
US	Democratic Party	Obama	Jan 2007	45%	Gallup Sep 23-29 poll	Senate: total 100 seats - Democrats 52 and Republicans 46 House of Representatives: total 435 seats with the right to vote - Democrats 200 and Republicans 232	Senate 52% House of Representatives 46%
UK	Conservative - Liberal Democratic coalition	Cameron	May 2015	31%	UKPoll Oct 2 poll	House of Commons: total 650 seats- Conservatives 303 and LDP 56 House of Lords: lifelong, no election, limited power	House of Commons 55%
Germany	CDU - CSU seeking for grand coalition with SPD	Merkel	Sep 2017	70%	Biz week Sep 20 article	Bundestag: total 630 seats - CDU-CSU 311, Bundesrat: 69 seats, limited power	Bundestat 49%
France	Socialist Party	Hollande	May 2017	23%	IFOP Sep 22 article	National Assembly: total 577 seats - Socialist Party 292 Upper House: total 348 seats - Social P 128 and UPM 131 (majority)	National Assembly 51% The Upper House 37%
Korea	Senuri Party	Park	Feb 2018	60%	Gallup Korea Sep 27 poll	(Unicameral) total 300 seats - Senuri Party 154	51%
Japan	LDP - New Komeito coalition	Abe	Dec 2016	61%	Jiji press Sep 6-9 poll	House of Councillors: total 480 seats - LDP 295 and New Komei 31 House of Representatives: total 242 - LDP 115 and New Komei 20	House of Councillors 68% House of Representative 56%

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