

Glaring gaps in the Kake Gakuen probe

Editorial

Education ministry documents point to senior officials close to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe citing the “prime minister’s intent” in pushing for a deregulatory measure to approve the opening of a new veterinary medicine department at a university run by a school operator headed by Abe’s longtime friend. Abe rules out any favoritism on his part, and the officials deny (or do not remember) putting such pressure on the ministry. Top officials of the ministry now cast doubts on the credibility of the latest document to emerge — supposedly compiled by its ranks — that implicates Abe’s close aide in the case. The charges that fly over the Kake Gakuen scandal keep going in circles.

The public remains mystified as to what really happened. Nearly three-quarters of respondents in a Kyodo News poll last weekend said they were not convinced by the government’s explanation that its policy over the issue was never distorted by favoritism, while almost 85 percent replied they do not think the relevant facts have been made clear by the government’s probe. The Abe administration should accept the opposition camp’s demand for further Diet inquiry into the case.

In the government’s deregulatory project subsidized by local authorities, the Okayama-based Kake Gakuen, headed by Abe’s close friend Kotaro Kake, plans to open a new veterinary medicine department — the first to be launched in more than 50 years — in a university it runs in Imabari, Ehime Prefecture, next spring. It has been a long time since the education ministry has approved such an opening on the grounds that the nation has a sufficient supply of veterinarians to meet demand.

A set of documents that supposedly are records of exchanges between the Cabinet Office and the ministry — initially dismissed by the Abe administration as of dubious origin but eventually confirmed by the ministry as authentic — showed that a senior bureaucrat in the Cabinet Office urged the ministry last fall to expedite the process for approving the launch of a new veterinary medicine department by citing “the prime minister’s intent” or “the highest-level (person) at the Prime Minister’s Office.” Former administrative vice education minister Kihei Maekawa, who was the ministry’s top bureaucrat when the alleged exchanges took place, said he also faced similar pressure from the Cabinet Office.

Discrepancies between what the education ministry documents state and officials’ explanations suggest a further probe is merited.

But the Cabinet Office said its own probe — released just as the 150-day regular Diet session was about to close — showed that none of its officials made any such remarks to the education ministry.

The latest document, disclosed by the ministry Tuesday, was described as a summary of the remarks made by Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Koichi Hagiuda — one of Abe’s closest aides — in his meeting last Oct. 21 with the head of the ministry’s higher education bureau. It quotes Hagiuda as telling the bureau chief that “the prime minister has set a deadline” of opening the new veterinary medicine department on April 2018, and that he would later get the director of the Kake Gakuen secretariat to visit the chief of the education ministry section in charge of the matter. If he had really made that remark, it means the Abe administration had effectively chosen Kake Gakuen as the operator of the new department three months before it was officially chosen for the special deregulation project.

Just like other officials named in the series of documents, Hagiuda flatly denied making the quoted remarks and said that he had “never been given any instructions by Prime Minister Abe concerning Kake Gakuen.” He went on to say that the education ministry apologized to him because the document in question was “extremely inaccurate.” The ministry confirmed that Hagiuda and the bureau chief met on that day but said the document included quotes “that had not been made by Hagiuda,” without specifying which parts of the document were incorrect. It seems odd that the ministry, which did not deny what was written in the earlier-disclosed document, is so confident that the latest file on Hagiuda’s remarks is inaccurate. Is it really possible that the ministry official who compiled the document simply made up the quoted statement?

The discrepancies between what the education ministry documents imply and officials’ explanations suggest that a further probe is merited. Seemingly contrite after his Cabinet’s approval ratings took a nosedive in media polls just after the Diet session ended, Abe said he was “determined to build up efforts to carefully explain” to dispel public distrust of his administration incurred over the Kake Gakuen case. He should stay true to his word.

Trump’s South China Sea policy taking shape

U.S. administration starts speaking softer while still showing a big stick

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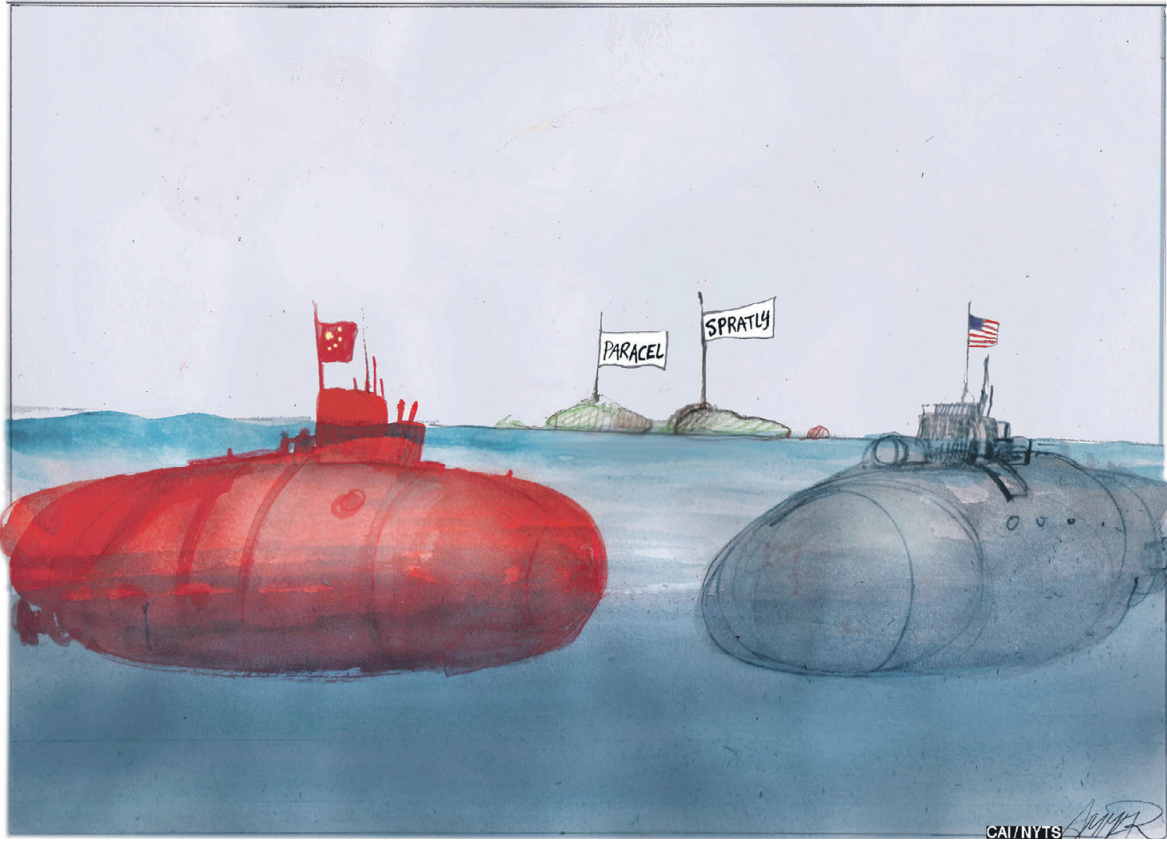
The outlines of the Trump administration’s policy toward China and the South China Sea are emerging from a fog of confusing and contradictory statements and actions. The administration started off with a relatively belligerent posture toward China in general and its actions in the South China Sea in particular. But the administration seems to have moderated its stance. Indeed, the emerging policy is beginning to look somewhat familiar. It is essentially a continuation of the Obama administration’s policy — although it appears to have a heavier emphasis on a military component.

Rightly or wrongly, U.S. freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) vis-a-vis China’s claims have become an indicator of U.S. resolve — at least in the view of some opinion leaders in the region. There were six legally confused and confusing FONOPs in the South China Sea against China’s claims during the Obama administration. But some eight months have passed since the last one on Oct. 16.

The Trump administration supposedly did not approve three U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) requests to carry out new FONOPs against China’s claims in the South China Sea. The U.S. Pacific Fleet commander, Adm. Scott Swift, explained that “we just present the opportunities. ... They are either taken advantage of or they’re not.”

It then began to appear that Trump, in his “let’s make a deal” approach to foreign policy, had backed off criticism and actions against China in general and in the South China Sea in particular in return for China’s assistance in stopping North Korea’s nuclear weapon and missile development programs.

This was the background to more recent U.S. statements and actions. In his address to the Shangri-La Dialogue in early June, U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis tried to balance between praising China for its help with North Korea and criticizing its “indisputable militarization of artificial islands” and “excessive maritime claims unsupported by international law.” But he upped the ante by adding that the U.S. “cannot and will not accept unilateral coercive changes to the sta-



tus quo.” He also outlined his policy as a mix of supporting and as necessary, demonstrating, “the rules based international order”; encouraging a more interconnected region regarding security matters; enhancing U.S. military capabilities there; and reinforcing U.S. defense relations with allies and willing partners, including training and weapons sales. This is basically similar to former U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter’s stated approach to the region.

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has recently come out even stronger, telling Congress on June 14 that he has warned Chinese counterparts that their current foreign policy will “bring us into conflict.” He said that U.S.-China relations had reached “an inflection point” and could lead to war if not properly managed.

On June 21, after meeting in Washington with Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi and PLA Chief of Joint Staff Fang Fenghui as part of the new U.S.-China Diplomatic Security Dialogue, he said that he and Mattis “made clear” to their Chinese counterparts that the U.S. position remains the same. “We oppose changes to the status quo of the past through the militarization of outposts in the South China Sea and excessive maritime claims unsupported by international law, and we uphold freedom of navigation and over-

flight.” In seeming possible contradiction, Mattis added, “I’m committed to improving the U.S.-China defense relationship so that it remains a stabilizing element in our overall relationship.”

So this is — for what it is worth — the Trump administration’s policy toward the South China Sea. However, Mattis, Tillerson and Trump himself seem to be somewhat preoccupied with other international and domestic matters. PACOM commander Adm. Harry Harris has emerged as the “tip of the spear” for Washington’s strategic approach to China.

Indeed, according to security analyst Carl Thayer, Harris is “the very glue holding the traditional U.S. line together across Asia.” He is — at the very least — in charge of implementing policy. Some observers say the portion of Mattis’ Shangri-La speech criticizing China’s actions in the South China Sea reflected Harris’ view that the U.S. needs to have a more robust posture toward China there.

In Harris’ own words, “We will continue to cooperate where we can but have to be ready to confront if we must. So I simply continue to focus on building critical relationships while ensuring that we have credible combat power to back up our security commitments and to help American diplomacy

If China is unwilling or unable to help sufficiently with North Korea, the military component of U.S. foreign policy may become the main or even sole approach.

Iran and the Saudi deflection campaign

It’s time for the West to understand that Saudi Arabia is the — far less favorable — mirror image of Iran

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The net effect of U.S. President Donald Trump’s sycophantic support of Riyadh is that it absolves the Saudis of any of their own responsibility for terror.

The Saudi attempt to pin all the blame on Iran, and point to Qatar as its supposed chief subcontractor, flies in the face of what’s really going on in the world.

Iran is anything but blameless, far from it. And Qatar is to blame as well. But if we look at Saudi money paths and Wahhabi indoctrination, it is clear that Saudi-sponsored terrorism is more virulent than ever before.

Simply put, the threat of Iranian-sponsored terrorism is so ... 1980s. In contrast, what is very 21st century is Salafist terrorism.

And although Qatar sponsors or assists its share of that in Libya, the Sahara and Syria, the principal source of support, financial and ideological, that Salafist terrorists use has Saudi Arabia written all over it. It is Saudi-inspired and -educated machinations of deviousness that keep hitting Western targets.

Where does it end?

Thus, in the most charitable interpretation, what Trump’s “laissez faire” translates into is that, instead of acknowledging Saudi terror sponsorship — a key step if Trump really wanted to fight global terror — he has given them not just a pass, but his blessing. That is not just completely idiotic, but dangerous.

Whatever Iran’s faults, and they are plenty, unlike in Saudi Arabia, the Iranian regime’s religious superstructure and hard-line military are not representative of its people.

As we know from opinion polling and elections — yes, Iran has those — two-thirds of society, broadly speaking, embraces the universal notions of Western freedoms. If the number were to surpass 10 to 15 percent among Saudis, it would be astonishing.

Time to open our eyes

It is high time for the entire West to understand that Saudi Arabia is the — far less favorable — mirror image of Iran. Below the very thin veneer of an extremely cynical, U.S.-friendly royal regime, the Saudi population is deeply hostile and explosively reactionary.

That is so because those same Saudi rulers see to it that, in its mosques, as in as many mosques of the world as possible, the United States (and the rest of the West) is seen as the fountain of all evil.

For that reason, the U.S., under Trump, has not just aligned itself one-sidedly, but — if a choice were to be made — also on the wrong side of the equation.

But at least the rest of the Western world should not close its eyes before all that limitless acid the Saudis are ready to spew.

In Trump’s defense?

Perhaps the most stunning fact in all this is that Trump probably hasn’t realized any of this. His mind works on a much plainer level.

One part of the explanation is that Trump, forever craving affirmation, thoroughly enjoys playing America’s meddler in chief. That is why he loved playing “big man” during his recent visit to Saudi Arabia, where his hosts played him like a fiddle. They even pumped up his needy ego with huge banners of his face.



SWORDS INSTEAD OF PLOUGHSHARES

The other part is the U.S. president probably just wanted to do the Saudis, a longtime U.S. ally and excellent customer for U.S. military goods, a favor.

In Trump’s world, that is an entirely rational act: The customer is always right (provided he also pleases Trump).

No wonder then that, after his return and in view of the looming Saudi blockade of Qatar, Trump dutifully took to the tweet waves to sanctify the Saudi action.

Meddler in chief

What is indisputable is that, with Trump in the Oval Office, a dangerous amateur gets to play games the real meaning of which he does not comprehend.

The sad news is that Trump, the veteran pitchman for whoever will put his name and face on their product or service for a ludicrously high fee, has now effectively made himself the chief Saudi lobbyist not just in the U.S., but the world at large.

Amazingly, for that to happen, the U.S. president did not even have to be hijacked

operate from a position of strength.”

This more aggressive tactical approach may have been evidenced by recent U.S. actions in the region. In May, two aircraft carrier strike groups were deployed to the western Pacific, one of which undertook the first-ever drills in the South China Sea with Japan’s largest warship, the Izumo helicopter carrier. The first FONOP under the Trump administration occurred in late May when the USS Dewey made a provocative non-innocent passage within 12 nautical miles (22 km) of Mischief Reef, indirectly challenging China’s claim to sovereignty over the low tide feature. Mattis — who reportedly had asked PACOM for a strategy for the South China Sea — said the Dewey FONOP was part of U.S. strategy.

This FONOP was promptly followed by an in-your-face training exercise over the South China Sea with two B-1B Lancer heavy strategic bombers liaising with the Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer USS Sterett.

However, on the “carrot” end of the equation the Sterett made a scheduled port visit to Zhanjiang, a major node for China’s South Sea surface naval fleet. Leading the visit was the man who may replace Harris as PACOM next year — the commander of the Pacific Fleet, Adm. Swift. In keeping with Harris’ new preference for “speaking softly but carrying (showing) a big stick,” Swift downplayed FONOPs themselves in favor of America’s demonstration of strength by its “consistence presence” in the region.

This low-key statement was in keeping with a recent decision not to announce or highlight FONOPs in the South China Sea. Swift confirmed that the quieter approach equated to a softer U.S. posture in the region. Also announced in May was that China had been invited to participate in the 2018 Rim of the Pacific Exercise, known as RIMPAC — the world’s largest international naval exercise and hosted by the U.S. Navy in Hawaii.

The conclusion is that the Trump administration’s policy regarding the South China Sea is a continuation of the Obama administration’s policy but with more emphasis on the military dimension. However, if China is unwilling or unable to help sufficiently with North Korea, or with other “trade-offs” proposed by Trump, the military component of U.S. foreign policy may become the main or even sole approach.

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