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## Abe's Legacy and Japan's Future



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# Japan's Future in the Post-Abe Era

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## About Shinzo Abe

On June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022, Japan announced the 26<sup>th</sup> House of Councillors election, kicking off the campaign for the triennial election. On July 8<sup>th</sup>, former Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, was assassinated while giving a campaign speech for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) candidates in the city of Nara. Shinzo Abe was 67, and his murder shocked both Japan and the world.

Shinzo Abe was born on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1954, in a prominent political family. The son of Shintaro Abe, who served as Japan's Foreign Minister (1982-1986), and grandson of Nobusuke Kishi, a well-known right-wing politician and also a former prime minister (1957-1960), Shinzo Abe is the longest-serving prime minister in Japan's history. A staunch right-wing conservative and leader of the largest faction within the LDP, Abe would certainly have continued to exert considerable political clout well into the future if he had not been assassinated.

Abe graduated from the Faculty of Law at Seikei University in 1977 and continued post-graduate studies at the University of Southern California in the U.S. Although indifferent to politics at first, Abe, as the heir to a political family, began working as a secretary to his father, the then-Foreign Minister in 1982. In 1993, he won his father's seat in Yamaguchi Prefecture and was elected to the House of Representatives for the first time, becoming the youngest LDP National Diet member at that time. He then successively served as the Chief Cabinet Secretary and LDP Secretary-General, catapulting him into Japan's political elite.

With the help of LDP power brokers and right-wing conservatives, Abe won the LDP's presidential election in September 2006 and became the first Japanese

Prime Minister born after World War II. However, he stepped down in disgrace after less than a year in office due to party numerous scandals and his support for some unpopular causes. Five years later, in September of 2012, Abe was re-elected as LDP President and became Prime Minister in December, ushering in the Abe era that lasted seven years and eight months.

In August 2020, due to a flare-up of chronic ulcerative colitis, Abe resigned while Japan was in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic and an economic downturn. After a short recuperation, he returned to politics and became the head of the largest faction of LDP (Seiwa Policy Research Council) in November 2021 and began to re-exert his political influence on Japanese politics.

All in all, Abe's record-long rule and an enormous influence on Japan's right-wing conservatives have left significant yet still vague legacies on this country's contemporary politics. Abe's representation of the right-wing conservative interpretation of Japan's national development and perspective on world order was exercised via the LDP's power in political mobilization and has left an indelible imprint on the future of Japanese politics.

## **The Abe Era Driven by Right-Wing Conservatives**

Abe, who led the LDP to victory in six consecutive parliamentary elections through his deft manipulation of superior political resources, not only managed the feat of being Japan's long-serving Prime Minister but also had a period named after him, i.e., "the Abe era." The biggest supporter of Abe was the Nippon Kaigi (NK, the Japan Conference), the largest right-wing organization in Japan. NK was established in May 1997 by merging two large conservative groups: Nihon wo Mamoru Kokumin Kaigi (National Conference to Protect Japan) and Nihon wo Mamoru Kai (Association to Protect Japan). Nowadays, it has more than 38,000 members and headquarters in all 47 of Japan's prefectures, with a total of 240 local branches.

Fifteen of the 19 members in the Abe Cabinet were members of NK and its affiliated organizations, such as the Parliamentary League of Japan Conference, including Abe himself, then Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Taso Aso, and then Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga, as well as several female Cabinet members such as the Defense Minister Tomomi Inada. Indeed, the Abe Cabinet was a veritable right-wing NK cabinet.

NK enjoys a powerful status both within the Japanese government and the public. However, this bizarre political phenomenon, which draws its membership from all walks of life, was criticized by Japanese scholar Jin Igarashi. He argued that “rather than saying the Japan Conference, the NK has been manipulating the cabinet behind the scenes, the two have become integrated.”

On December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Abe, urged on by the NK, visited the controversial Yasukuni Shrine as Prime Minister. Abe’s visit to the war-linked shrine, accompanied by frequent statements supporting far-right politics, was a public sign of his commitment to right-wing conservatives, and was repeated several times following his resignation. Abe had subtly instilled his right-wing political ideology into the national mindset, which was undergoing rapid and profound changes as the right-wing conservatives reinforced their policy positions to steer the nation rightward and make Japan “strong again.” In retrospect, Abe’s conservative views and policies have remarkable and deleterious impacts on Japan’s politics and society, which may continue long into the future.

Japan’s national security strategy turned sharply rightward in the Abe era. As a crucial participant in the US Indo-Pacific strategy, the country introduced its first National Security Strategy in 2013 and also established the National Security Council (NSC). In 2014, the Cabinet partially lifted the ban on collective self-defense and set out the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology. In the following year, Japan introduced a new security law. Abe and his fellow conservatives sought to break the post-war system to achieve Japan’s “defense autonomy.” They were trying their best to break the shackles of Japan’s pacifist constitution for the acceleration of Japan’s military development.

Abe advocated the concepts of “overlooking the globe” diplomacy, “Proactive Pacifism,” and “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” in an attempt to augment Japan’s “political power.” After leaving office, Abe repeatedly made erroneous Taiwan-related remarks, including the notorious “a Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency,” which had a severe and negative impact on Sino-Japanese relations.

## **Abe’s Insistence on Constitutional Amendment**

The LDP has been advocating a fundamental revision of Japan’s constitution since its founding in 1955. Right-wing conservatives consider the pacifist constitution imposed on Japan by the U.S. after WWII as a “great shame” that had robbed

the nation of sovereignty and created a major stumbling block to Japan's normalization as a sovereign state. As such, the right-wing conservatives selected Abe, who had inherited his political DNA from the right-wing politician Nobusuke Kishi, as the political princeling who could both promote and implement their long-sought amendments to strip the constitution of pacifist articles and clauses.

Thus, when Abe first became Prime Minister in 2006, he articulated his commitment to "getting rid of the post-war system," and "normalizing Japan," and prioritized constitutional amendment on his administration's policy agenda. Abe not only developed Japan's nativist constitutional amendment theory but also put it into practice. On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017, on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the pacifist constitution, Abe pledged to implement a new constitution in 2020, the year Tokyo would host the Olympic Games. However, Abe failed to honor his pledge due to the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 and other factors.

His sudden death has undoubtedly dealt a heavy blow to Japan's right-wing conservatives. But Abe's supporters may accelerate the process of constitutional amendment under the banner of his "political legacy." The ruling LDP and its coalition partner Komeito have obtained stable majorities in both houses of parliament. With support from both Komeito and the constitutional revisionists in opposition parties, the numbers voting "aye" has reached the threshold needed for starting the constitutional amendment. How the Kishida Cabinet will implement the constitutional amendment is an important political issue in the post-Abe era.

## **The Merits and Demerits of Abenomics and Its Continuation**

In the 1990s, the Japanese economy suffered a prolonged recession following the stupendous bursting of its post-1985 Plaza Accord asset bubble. To extricate Japan from its economic predicament, Abe began implementing "Abenomics" after forming his second cabinet in 2012. Abenomics was an effort to interrupt Japan's vicious cycle of deflation and spur economic growth with the "three arrows" policy, i.e., monetary easing, fiscal stimulus, and structural reforms.

At first glance, Abenomics appeared effective in promoting Japan's socio-economic recovery and prosperity. However, it failed to resolve the nation's structural predicament fundamentally. While Abenomics gifted enormous benefits to large

enterprises, few benefits were accrued by the general public. Instead of tackling the root cause of Japan's economic stagnation, it aggravated social stratification and worsened wealth inequality. Objectively, Japan's economic plight, reflected in the failure of Abenomics, is a microcosm of a common challenge for today's global economy.

Shinzo Abe's successor, Yoshihide Suga, was replaced after 12 months in office by current Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who quickly launched the high-profile "New Capitalism" policy. New Capitalism aimed to create a "virtuous cycle of growth and distribution," which would both replace and redress the flaws in Abenomics. However, New Capitalism was seen by Abe and his business supporters as an attempt to repudiate Abe's economic legacy and was harshly criticized and resisted. Kishida also proposed an economic security bill designed to mitigate perceived risks from China. Kishida's policies, however, have only added uncertainties to Japan's economic recovery in the post-Abe era. Therefore, whether Abenomics can be kept alive as an essential part of Abe's political legacy will remain under global scrutiny.

# Shinzo Abe's Political Legacy and Its Inheritance

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## Foreword

Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated on July 8, 2022. While the nation is still in shock and dismay, observers are beginning to assess Abe's political legacy and how it may shadow Japan's political future.

The Kishida government has pledged to fully maintain Abe's legacy and continue his political agenda. To this end, a state funeral is set on September 27, 2022 to maximize both public exposure and outpourings of public grief.

However, this decision has since met with public opposition. For example, on July 16, Asahi Shimbun selected several satirical poems for its senryu (a form of short poetry similar to haiku in construction) column. Roughly translated into English, one reads, "Why a state funeral? Is the country finished or what?"; another reads, "This is a country where dubious people are given state funerals." According to an opinion poll by Kyodo News Service on July 30 and 31, 53.3% of the respondents were opposed to the state funeral, compared with 45.1% in favor. Moreover, opposition parties, including the Constitutional Democratic Party and the Japanese Communist Party, strongly rejected an Abe state funeral.

The backlash over a state funeral for Abe is due to polarized opinions on his political achievements and the legacy he left for Japan. Another important reason is that Abe's assassination was not politically motivated; he was no martyr for social justice. Instead, there is growing evidence to prove that Abe was shot dead because the suspect's mother went hopelessly bankrupt from the all-out donations she made to the Unification Church, a cult that Abe and his family



had long-protected from prosecution. After trying in vain to seek justice from authorities, the resentful son shot and killed Abe in desperate hope of alerting society to the cult's activities.

Why did Abe attempt to break away from the post-war regime?

In a little over a decade, Abe's legacy, which spans the political, economic, and diplomatic realms, altered Japan beyond all recognition.

According to Professor Hyo Shindo of Tsuru University, Abe's unfinished agenda was to "break away from the post-war regime system and build a modern-day Japanese empire." For Chiyako Sato, an editorial writer at the Mainichi Shimbun, Abe's agenda was to "break away from the post-war regime and restore a strong Japan."

According to Abe, the "post-war regime" was "a basic framework, under the Constitution, which involved administration, education, economy, employment, central-local relations, foreign affairs, security, and other socio-political relationships." In Chiyako Sato's opinion, the post-war regime amounted to a political, economic, and social system "light on arms and heavy on the economy."

In Sato's view, Abe's political tenets and policies were rooted in his departure from the post-war regime. According to a study by the leading Japanese scholar Kazuhiko Togo, at the core of Abe's aspiration to break away from the post-war regime lay his belief that such a framework, established by the U.S. during the occupation period, was intended to inhibit Japan's ability to once again become a great power. Thus, Japan could only become truly independent by rebuilding the symbolic and concrete framework of the national constitution. Abe argued that breaking away from the post-war regime should be at the top of Japan's agenda.

Hyo Shindo has claimed that such a historic break would occur in two phases. The first was to change the rules, such as lifetime employment, social security, and local autonomy, established by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) during Japan's period of rapid economic growth, which had built Japan into a neo-liberal economy and society. The second and most fundamental phase was to alter the national framework born of the Potsdam Declaration and the Japanese Constitution and promote the global expansion of the Japan-U.S. military alliance based on their bilateral security treaty. The aim was to allow the Japanese military to exercise its power at home and abroad freely - as long as it stayed in good graces of the U.S. - and thus, do a better job protecting the global financial

interests of Japanese multinational companies.

## **Abe's main political legacy**

Among the many tangible and intangible pieces of Abe's political legacy of departure from the post-war regime and restoration of Japan's historic glory, the most significant was his historical revisionism, which provided an ideological basis for revising the Constitution and retooling the Legislation for Peace and Security.

What is Abe's historical revisionism and its impact on Japanese society?

Japan's disastrous wars of aggression caused appalling hardship for Asia and the world at large. In the wake of Japan's defeat, peoples of the afflicted countries, along with peace-loving, democratic forces in Japan, have called on the Japanese government to reflect on its wartime atrocities and to apologize sincerely. In 2005, then-Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama responded to this call by publicly acknowledging and apologizing for Japan's aggression for the first time.

Abe, however, remained opposed to the Murayama administration's initiative. On April 23, 2013, during a Q&A session in the Diet, Abe disputed the references to "aggression" in the Murayama Statement, arguing that the definition of what constitutes aggression had yet to be established in academia or in the international community and therefore varied from country to country. Abe's argument was nothing if not an open denial of Japan's history of aggression. Furthermore, Abe's speech marking the 70 years since the end of WWII ventured that future generations of Japanese should not continue to apologize for past mistakes. However, even in the U.S., Abe's argument was criticized, with many leading newspapers and intellectuals accusing Abe of "historical revisionism."

Significantly, the continued implementation of policies derived from Abe's historical revisionism is transforming Japan into a right-leaning society. The Japanese political scientist, Koichi Nakano, wrote that from a socioeconomic viewpoint, these policies worsen inequality; politically speaking, there are increasing restrictions on individual rights and freedoms in various aspects; and in terms of diplomatic security, Japan might now be dragged into warfare in any part of the world.

Moreover, political conditions in Japan remain ripe for constitutional revision,

largely because Abe ceaselessly promoted the idea.

Shinzo Abe always made the cause of constitutional revision a necessity in his drive to build Japan into “a beautiful country.” A crucial goal was to ensure that Japan’s Constitution recognized the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and allowed Japanese troops to fight overseas. To that end, the Abe-led LDP put forward a four-point revision proposal with the constitutional recognition of the SDF as the core element. In 2019, the LDP further built on revisionist momentum by including the proposal as one of its key election pledges for the Upper House elections.

Constitutional revision requires approval from two-thirds of Diet members, as well as public support from a majority in a national referendum. Because of Abe’s relentless push, both hurdles were cleared. In both houses of the Diet, the LDP and other pro-revision parties gained far more seats than the required two-thirds. According to an opinion poll by Asahi Shimbun in May 2022, 56% of respondents backed changes to the constitution, and 57% argued that pro-revision parties should hold more than two-thirds of the Diet seats.

Last but not least, Abe retooled the Legislation for Peace and Security.

Catalyzed by Abe, on September 19, 2015, the Diet passed two bills proposed by the cabinet and overhauled 20 existing laws, including the Self-Defense Forces Law, which significantly changed Japan’s security system.

First, Japan is turning away from its exclusively defense-oriented policy in favor of an active or all-weather defense so that the SDF could fight alongside the U.S. and other foreign militaries in any part of the world. Second, Japan has defined the situations that affect its peace and security to include “armed attack situations,” “survival-threatening situations,” and “critical impact situations,” which together give the SDF an increased variety of subjective pretexts to engage in warfare. Third, in its right to “protect overseas Japanese nationals,” the SDF would assimilate the right to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. Fourth, expanding the scope for the use of weapons by SDF personnel paves the way for the complete lifting of the constitutional restrictions on Japan’s use of force.

In short, the security legislation Abe reinvented marks a clean break from the exclusively defense-oriented policy that had been in effect for more than 60 years. It has laid a domestic legal foundation for Japan, as a henchman of the U.S., to seek hegemony in (East) Asia under the cover of exercising the right to collective self-defense.

Some Japanese scholars believe that Japan's new security legislation constitutes the most significant part of the legacy Abe left for the nation.

## **How will Abe's legacy be inherited and can its value be maintained or increased?**

Abe was shot twice and died without providing a succession plan. Although it is too early to say what the future has in store for Abe's political legacy, the author believes Japan's ruling camp will take the following stance:

Overall, Japan's ruling camp will adopt Abe's ideological system of historical revisionism and maintain his strategy of disassembling the post-war regime and restoring Japan to its former glory.

First, the ruling camp will build on Abe's legacy and turn constitutional revision into reality. As mentioned earlier, the conditions are ripe, and the revision will undoubtedly pass.

Second, the ruling camp will leave no stone unturned to obtain advantages from the new security system. Predictably, the current security legislation thus will be further revised in a more aggressive direction. Japanese politicians are clamoring to build strike capability and raise the military budget from the current level of about 1% of GDP to 2%. It is only a matter of time before both are written into national policy. However, the first dimension of altering the post-war regime will, in all likelihood, be subject to adjustment because of its huge negative impact on Japanese society. Prime Minister Kishida's "new capitalism" is the most prominent signal.

Third, the ruling camp will pursue Abe's diplomacy of values and "overlooking the globe" diplomacy with even greater fervor. By spearheading the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), the Quadrilateral Dialogue (Japan, US, India, Australia), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion to Asia, and other U.S.-led China containment strategies, Japan dreams of piggybacking its way to a modern-day empire. Currently, Japan is playing off the U.S. against China and Russia. It voluntarily acts as America's hatchet man by helping the latter maintain its international position as the dominant hegemonic power. During China's military exercises in response to the ongoing Taiwan Strait crisis, Japan went out of its way to smear and provoke China and conduct war games to explore

the possibility of intervention by the SDF. "A Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency, and therefore an emergency for the Japan-U.S. alliance." Abe's words laid bare Japan's lack of scruples when dealing with China-Japan relations, regardless of the quest for unification shared across the strait. Ultimately, Japan's saber-rattling is intended to justify Abe's new security strategy.

Japan's continued pursuit of historical revisionism is indeed to be met with both vigilance and criticism from countries worldwide, especially the victims of Japanese aggression. Domestically, the full inheritance of the new security paradigm of Abe's legacy is sure to trigger significant protest from peace-loving Japanese citizens and intellectuals.

However, it is by no means a foregone conclusion that Abe's successors will successfully obtain more tremendous advantage from Abe's new security system and build a modern-day Japanese empire by fighting America's wars around the world.

First, Japan is at a political crossroads. Abe's sudden death left a power vacuum within the LDP, with factions reshuffling and redistributing powers. A fresh round of crippling infighting and power struggles are significant obstacles for the ruling party in the future.

Second, Abe's legacy is, at best, a mixed blessing. Social problems and class conflict erupted in Japan under Abe. Without proper handling, power may change hands.

Third, the Japan-U.S. alliance is a marriage of convenience. Ever an opportunist, Japan is going the extra mile to act as a vanguard against China and Russia. Once it gains the trust of the U.S., Japan will unscrupulously break the existing taboos in defiance of the peace-loving world. Japan's ultimate goal, however, is to cut its American apron strings and become truly independent. By then, the contradiction between Japan and the U.S. will have come to the surface.

Fourth, Japan's strategic reliance on the U.S. is not a single wager. The evolution of international relations does not depend on the will of a single country, and the time when the U.S. can act unilaterally is coming to a close. If Japan blindly acts as America's hatchet man, its Asian neighbors will almost certainly resist. When push comes to shove, the U.S. may simply walk away from Asia, leaving Japan in an awkward strategic position.

## Conclusion

In sum, if Japan's ruling camp inherits Abe's political legacy without discrimination and obtains advantage, by fair means or foul, the political future of Japan remains uncertain. A proverb in Chinese is that a distant relative may not be as helpful as a near neighbor. Since China has always been, and will always be, a neighbor of Japan, the hope remains that Japan will learn from its past lessons and steer clear of the path of Datsu-A Ron, i.e. leaving Asia and entering Europe. In other words, Japan should not tempt providence by aligning with thieves and bullying its good neighbors.

# Abenomics

## Abe's Economic Legacy, a Half Full Bottle

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Japan's longest-serving Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's assassination is one of the most shocking and saddest events in contemporary Japanese history. Prime Minister Abe surprised Japanese citizens with his sudden health-related resignation in 2020. Abe's resignation opened the path for Japan's former Foreign Minister, Fumio Kishida, to win Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) support and the general election of November 2021 by a reduced majority, to become Prime Minister.

With the dust now settled on both Abe's assassination and the first 18 months of Kishida's government, one important aspect of Abe's legacy, Abenomics, can now be more clearly evaluated. Since Abe's ascension to power in 2012, Japan's economic recovery hinged on three key economic policies. The so-called three "arrows" of Abenomics were, respectively, monetary and fiscal policies and structural reform. This article analyzes and evaluates the progress made by each of the three arrows of Abenomics.

The first and best-known arrow is monetary policy. It relied on massive quantitative easing (QE) as well as the introduction, in February 2016, of negative rates and, by September 2016, of a ceiling on the yield of the 10-year Japanese Government Bond (JGB) - the so-called yield-curve control (YCC). First pioneered by the Bank of Japan (BoJ), the introduction of a YCC was later emulated by a number of other central banks. In particular, the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) introduced YCC to keep the cost of funding low after the economy crashed during the Covid pandemic.

However, unlike Japan, Australia quickly moved out of its rushed YCC, choosing to

reverse QE by both shrinking the RBA balance sheet and introducing rate hikes several times in the first half of 2022. The BoJ chose to continue with its ultra-lax YCC policy and purchased huge amounts of JGBs to the point where the BoJ now holds the majority of the publicly traded stock, but also by maintaining negative short-term interest rates. The latter has become particularly problematic as other major central banks, especially when the U.S. Federal Reserve (Fed), have tightened monetary policy by aggressively hiking rates. Moreover, the growing negative differential between Japanese and US short-term rates has pushed the yen further towards rapid depreciation. By losing some 30% of its value against the USD and a significant amount against the currencies of other trading partners, Japanese imports have become more expensive, and Japanese households have seen a sizable decline in their disposable income. The weak yen has increased the negative effects of years of stagnant consumption, partially explained by insignificant wage increases in Japanese households and signaling even further economic difficulties well into the future.

On a more positive note, mitigating inflation, which is the BoJ's main focus, and a key objective for Abenomics, is finally working. This is in line with the global inflationary wave, although at a far slower pace. As a result, the consumer price index has finally reached and even surpassed the BoJ's target of 2% (2.4% in June) compared to 0.8% in December 2021. While Japan's inflationary surge is fully explained by energy and food prices, core inflation, which excludes these two volatile items, remains below 1%, indicating the entrenchment of deflationary forces in the Japanese economy. In sum, it is hard to argue that Abenomics' first arrow has been very successful, as core inflation remains stubbornly low and the BoJ's balance sheet has ballooned, which makes an exit strategy from such aggressive use of monetary policy very costly indeed. In fact, Japanese financial institutions, habituated to two decades of meager rates, have clearly reduced their net interest margin and, thereby, their profitability. While Japanese institutions should welcome a sudden turn towards positive rates, the exit from such an ultra-lax monetary policy would be very costly for financial institutions whose liabilities need to be repriced to higher rates, and assets would be negatively affected during the adjustment period.

Beyond the repricing issue, which mainly affects financial institutions, another important concern is the rapid accumulation of public debt, which relates directly to Abenomics' second "arrow," namely, fiscal policy. This second arrow calls for fiscal policy to be actively used to support the economy, but with an overall objective of fiscal consolidation given the country's very large public debt, which is amongst the largest - if not the largest - globally. The cornerstone for the fiscal



consolidation objective, which was announced when Abenomics was launched, was a moderate increase in Japan's consumption tax. However, such an increase could only be accomplished through two separate rate hikes, the first in 2014 from 5% to 8% and the second in 2019, from 8% to 10%. Furthermore, by the time both hikes were finalized, Japan's public debt had increased by 30 percentage points of GDP, from 233% of GDP to 263%. The cause of this massive increase, the accumulation of huge fiscal deficits coinciding with the beginning of Prime Minister Abe's mandate, was due to years of negative economic performance, which considerably worsened with the 2020 onset of the Covid pandemic. In response to the pandemic, the Abe administration launched a massive fiscal package of more than 20% of GDP, which further enlarged public debt.

Against a background of rising public debt, fiscal consolidation is a moving target, increasingly hard to achieve. By the same token, debt sustainability is of increasing concern for the Japanese economy as the Bank of Japan's potential debt monetization will bring about further depreciation of the yen. In other words, few options remain for Japan's public debt to enter a sustainability pattern. The best would be reflation, i.e., higher growth and higher inflation, but both have a disappointing record before Abe and during Abenomics. Not only does Japan's core inflation currently remain below 1%, but GDP growth has also remained below 1% on average since Abenomics was launched in 2014 to today. The cause of Japan's low productivity is a failure to ensure an increase in nominal GDP, which dictates that Japan will require close-to-zero interest rates to serve its public debt. Other options, such as massive cuts to government expenditure, seem improbable given Japan's rapidly aging population. Significantly the small but painful increase in sales tax signaled the difficulty of increasing tax pressure on Japanese households without injuring the economy.

The third and final arrow, often seen as the most important, is structural reform. There are many types of structural reforms that an aging society like Japan needs. One generally positive aspect is how Japan has managed to contain health care expenditure compared with the U.S. and other advanced economies, despite its significantly larger proportion of elderly citizens. However, the critical structural reform of Japan's labor market remains unaccomplished. The importance of these reforms stems from Japan's increasingly low labor productivity, which industrial-level data reveals at barely 0.5%. The loss of industrial capacity over previous decades, as Japanese companies preferred to invest in countries with lower labor costs, is another key factor behind Japan's low productivity. Japan was unable to create enough high-paying jobs in the service sector as job creation primarily occurred in restaurants and convenience stores. A key cause for this trend lies in

Japan's dual labor market, which provides lifetime employment on one side and a precarious part-time or short-term labor market dominated by young people and women on the other. A labor market reform successfully liberalizes the rigidities in the full-time labor market and reduces the role of part-time/low-productivity jobs. It would be essential but faces intense opposition from incumbents, who are a substantial share of the Japanese population. Another vital challenge Japan faces is the increasingly large part of government expenditure dedicated to the elderly and their pensions. As such, funding is restricted to research and development, which has long been a critical feature of Japan's economic success. Finally, corporate Japan faces corporate governance challenges for which reform is sorely needed. The focus on research and development, and improving corporate governance and enhancing entrepreneurship, are generally key factors behind any country's increase in total factor productivity, which underpins economic growth.

Overall, it is difficult to predict how Japan could undertake in-depth reforms if it has taken five years to increase the consumption tax by only five percentage points, aided by two strong fiscal stimulus packages. For Japan to achieve relevant labor-market reform, the amount of fiscal anesthesia would exceed government means, given the already huge stock of accumulated public debt. Thus, at best, Abe's economic legacy can be assessed as delivering only mixed results. The first arrow, exceedingly lax monetary policy, has failed to achieve its stated inflation objective, or at least not when focusing on what matters in the medium-run, which is core inflation. Abenomics's second arrow of fiscal consolidation has not been realized, nor have large increases in fiscal expenditure catalyzed economic growth. Finally, structural reforms have been scarce with a missing mark for the most important one: the labor market.

Notwithstanding all the above, I still consider Abe's economic legacy a half-full bottle and not an empty one. In fact, for a country that pioneers the challenges that many others will soon be confronting, Japan has performed reasonably well. Given its rapid aging and the related structural challenges, Japan has managed to keep a high standard of living and a more equal income distribution than most countries around the world. In other words, Japan has managed to age gracefully while keeping harmony in its society. The fact that Japan has managed to keep such advantages while aging rapidly is an economic and societal success that should be recognized as part of Abe's legacy among others.

Youth

Voices



# The Abe Doctrine - Nationalist or Realist?



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Clouds were hanging low in the sky. A 68-year old man faced the crowds who came to greet him on this gloomy day. He waved his hand and prepared for a speech. He was nonchalant because he was used to being surrounded. For so long, he was eulogized as one of the best politicians in Japan or even worldwide. He received reverence for his progressive economic and security reforms. He had just resigned from a crucial position, but everyone knew he would be the lighthouse of this nation for many years in the future. However, all of these came to nothing with three dull gunshots. The murderer was only five steps away, and bullets came out of the pistol to penetrate the chest of the elderly man. A few hours later, the political beacon of Japan expired.

The man's name was Hirobumi Ito, the first Prime Minister of Japan. One hundred years later, another Japanese political figure who shared many similarities with Ito, met the same fate. Shinzo Abe, the former Prime Minister of Japan, a man who, like Ito, had shaped Japan for decades and dramatically transformed its preferences, was assassinated. History is rife with such circular fates.

For his critics, Shinzo Abe personified the rising tide of Japanese nationalism. He represented tired conservative ideas derived from the ruins of Japan's past imperial ambitions.<sup>1</sup> As Prime Minister, Abe visited the Yasukuni Shrine, rewrote history textbooks, catalyzed the reinterpretation of Article 9, and declined to apologize for Japan's atrocious WWII crimes.<sup>2</sup> Abe did not disguise his nationalist ideologies. In 2013, he initiated the first meeting with members of the Liberal

- 1 John Nilsson-Wright, "Shinzo Abe: Revisionist Nationalist or Pragmatic Realist?," BBC News, August 28, 2020, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53950704>.
- 2 Elias Groll, "Shinzo Abe Regrets but Declines to Apologize for Japan's WWII Actions," *Foreign Policy*, August 14, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/14/shinzo-abe-regrets-but-declines-to-apologize-for-japans-wwii-actions/>.

Democratic Party (LDP) under the slogan “Take Back Japan - Nippon wo torimodosu.” During Abe’s tenure as prime minister, his foreign policies reaffirmed his persistent nationalist attitudes. Territorial disputes with China, South Korea and Russia were met with confrontational gestures. Professor Emeritus of Washington University, Kenneth Pyle, has argued that Abe’s rhetoric mirrored many Japanese right-wing political figures such as Yasuhiro Nakasone. Abe’s connection to the Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference) has also been cited as evidence of his nationalism ideology.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Junki Nakahara at American University developed a discursive discourse analysis of the Abe administration’s official statements, speeches, and press, to demonstrate the nationalism inherent within the so-called “Abe Doctrine.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, right-wing politicians have never hidden their praise for Abe. For example, in 2003, one of the most famous Japanese extreme right-wing activists, Kanji Nishio, said, “Mr. Abe is the sole member of the administration that supports our efforts for history-textbook revisionism.”<sup>5</sup>

While the public, many scholars, and even Japanese nationalists generally believe in Abe’s nationalist political position, his foreign policies were not necessarily nationalist. A careful assessment of Abe’s foreign policies, especially during his second term as Prime Minister reveals that nationalism was not necessarily a *de facto* guiding principle of policymaking.

3 Kenneth B Pyle, *The Japanese Question: Power and Purpose in a New Era* (Washington, Dc: Aei Press Published For The American Enterprise Institute, 1996), 85.

4 Nakahara Junki, “Deconstructing Abe Shinzo’s ‘Take Back Japan’ Nationalism,” *The Asia Pacific Journal*, December 15, 2021, <https://apjif.org/2021/24/Nakahara.html>.

5 幹二西尾, “小泉純一郎と安倍晋三 -- 誰が本当の改革者か -- 「国家への忠誠心」なしに日本の大本は立て直せない,” *Voice*, no. 312 (December 1, 2003): 48–57, <https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1520291855951692800>.

6 H D P Envall, “The ‘Abe Doctrine’: Japan’s New Regional Realism,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, June 4, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcy014>, 40.

## Nationalism vs. Realism - Which One Is the Real Color of Abe?

A representative example that Abe departed from nationalism in developing Japan’s foreign policy was his effort to consolidate the Japan-U.S. alliance. While orthodox Japanese nationalist narratives called for anti-Americanism solidarity and figurative nationalists, such as Shintaro Ishihara and Susumu Nishibe, constantly advocated for the idea,<sup>6</sup> Abe did the exact opposite. He followed the tenets of the Yoshida Doctrine - a diplomatic instruction that nationalists never appreciated - to approbate the security commitment to Japan from Washington while seeking more in-depth cooperation, even at the cost of Japan’s sovereignty. Abe portrayed Japan-U.S. relations and the alliance as the most important bilateral relationship in the world. He described the

Japan-U.S. alliance as “indispensable (fufaketsu)” and the “cornerstone of Japan’s diplomacy (kaname).” Moreover, Abe said the consolidation of the Japan-U.S. alliance was the foundation of Japan’s peace and independence.<sup>7</sup>

Japan’s political and military dependency on the United States, which remains the source of its stagnation and incomplete sovereignty, negates nationalist sentiment. Abe’s acceptance of U.S.-imposed norms and principles in the Western Pacific and admission that its autocratic bilateral-based hub-and-spoke system was effective, exposes another dimension of the Abe Doctrine. Shinzo Abe demonstrated solid preferences for Japan’s national interests over nationalist appeals in foreign policy-making processes. For D. P. Envall, a leading scholar of Japanese politics, a major departure point for understanding the Abe Doctrine was how “Abe weighted deterrence over independence.”<sup>8</sup>

During his first prime ministerial term, Abe accelerated Japan’s projective capability “normalization” and proposed a “value-based diplomacy.” He then spared no effort in building the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) for so-called “Indo-Pacific stability,” established Japan’s National Security Council (NSC) in 2013, and introduced a military legislation, which legitimized the Japan Self-Defense Force’s participation in broader collective security operations, in 2015. By changing Japan’s security instruction to a more active posture, Japan was making a more “proactive contribution to peace.”<sup>9</sup> Together, Abe’s security-related initiatives can be viewed as spearheading nationalism and Japan’s militarist spirit.

The practical actions of Japan’s military reforms appear eclipsed by its high-profile and assertive multilateral diplomatic and security strategies. During Abe’s tenure, Japan’s defense spending increased by only 13%<sup>10</sup> and is smaller than the accumulated inflation rate, in constant US dollars, from 2012 to 2020. While Abe initiated and participated in many regional “China-Containment” fraternities, in actuality he “adopted a less strident approach on China,” especially when compared to his predecessor Junichiro Koizumi.<sup>11</sup>

The inconsistency between Japan’s assertive diplomatic rhetoric and conservative behavior revealed the underlying principle of the Abe Doctrine - Japan’s traditional realism, and or pragmatism, but not

7 “第166回国会における安倍内閣総理大臣施政方針演説,” Wikisource.org (ウィキメディア財団, August 15, 2009), <http://ja.wikisource.org/wiki/第166回国会における安倍内閣総理大臣施政方針演説>.

8 H D P Envall, 41.

9 John Nilsson-Wright, 2020.

10 Ibid, 2020.

11 H D P Envall, 41.

nationalism. In other words, Abe was the heir of Yoshida and not of his grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi. Thus, the Abe Doctrine watershed for Japan's foreign policy was not that nationalism replaced the old realism and pragmatism, but rather that Abe successfully modified the tradition of Japanese realism.<sup>12</sup>

Abe's modification to the traditional realism of Japan can be seen in Japan's relative power transition. As the world order restructured with unprecedented speed over the previous decade, Japan was alarmed to watch China's astonishing economic and military rise. First, China's economy surpassed Japan's, and then, in short order, doubled and tripled it in GDP terms. Moreover, China quickly surpassed Japan's naval power in both quantity and quality. Like other neighboring states, Japan quavered within the new and fragile international structure. The Yoshida Doctrine's isolationism and entrapment-avoidance concepts were perceived to no longer satisfy Japan's security needs. Abe's assessment of the geopolitical threat posed by China required Japan to seek a new security framework.

Thus, Abe decided to maintain the necessary deterrence capability of Japan, to both contain the rising giant and obtain a renewed sense of security. Abe's strategy was not to build Japan's deterrence capability purely by an expansion of arms, which nationalists had eagerly expected, but through his understanding of "cooperative deterrence." In 2014, Japan's cabinet affirmed that "no country can secure its own peace only by itself."<sup>13</sup> Based on this understanding of national security, Abe chose to establish joint security frameworks and robust Japan-U.S. relations. As such, the Abe Doctrine retained consistency with Takuya Kubo and Hisahiko Okazaki's idea of "military realism," first introduced in the 1970s.<sup>14</sup>

In the approaching new era of bipolarity, endowments for maintaining Japan's collective security camp and binding the country with the U.S. in security terms are being transformed. One consequence of the PLA's (People's Liberation Army) modernization is the rising cost of conventional deterrence costs for the U.S. in the Western Pacific. Japan's concern is not that it will be entrapped into an undesirable war by the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, but that its U.S. ally may abandon it in the future. Accordingly, Japan's accumulating fear of abandonment means that its doctrine of military realism must

<sup>12</sup> Christopher W Hughes, *Japan's Foreign and Security Policy under the "Abe Doctrine": New Dynamism or New Dead End?* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> "Cabinet Decision on Development of Seamless Security Legislation to Ensure Japan's Survival and Protect Its People," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, July 1, 2014, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page23e\\_000273.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page23e_000273.html).

<sup>14</sup> Mike Mochizuki, *Japan's Search for Strategy: The Security Policy Debate in the 1980s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Program On U.S.-Japan Relations, Center For International Affairs, Harvard University, 1982), 186.

also be adjusted to reassure the U.S. of its reliability in joint security issues. However, rather than adopting a nationalist radical rearmament policy, Abe chose relatively moderate and frugal strategies to display continuing commitment to the alliance supported by aggressive diplomatic gestures, ongoing institutional reforms, and active participation in joint security organizations. Japan's preference for a multiplicity of strategies highlights the realism and pragmatism that underpin the principles of the Abe Doctrine.

## Conclusion

The Abe Doctrine, while ostensibly nationalistic, is both realistic and pragmatic. From the Japanese perspective, Abe's foreign policies were both feasible and desirable. While this article is not a defense of Shinzo Abe or his career and policies, he has proven to be a dedicated right-wing politician motivated by a nostalgic nationalism that caused serious offense to the peoples of both China and Korea. Adding insult to injury, Abe calculatingly interfered in China's domestic affairs via statements of affinity with Taipei. Though his policies did not constitute extreme nationalism, his enduring political and social influence in Japan's future, as a figurative nationalist, is yet to be told.

The assassination of Japan's first Prime Minister, Hirobumi Ito, unleashed the nation's extreme right-wing nationalists and eventually dragged the entirety of Eastern Asia into a calamity of Japanese imperial militarism. Whether the death of Shinzo Abe will propel Japan to repeat its past mistakes is unknown. However, if Shinzo Abe's nationalist spirit remains his prime tangible legacy, then his unchaining control of Japan's beast of nationalism also remains Eastern Asia's greatest danger. One can only hope that the region's present and future leaders practice sane self-restraint. If one cannot emulate Kakuei Tanaka, then one should at least emulate the better part of Shinzo Abe. International relations are not heroic epics for ambitious leaders, but rather, the sage construal of better lives for the countless ordinary peoples inhabiting planet Earth.



# The Complex Relationship Between Shinzo Abe's Foreign Policy and Revisionist Japanese Nationalism



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Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated on July 8, 2022, by an extremist ostensibly inspired by his religious affiliation and inclination. As the longest-serving Prime Minister in Japanese history, Abe presided over the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Japan for over 9 years. He transformed Japan from a sluggish and declining economy into a regionally and internationally prominent force with substantial bargaining power over economic, geopolitical, and select security affairs in the Indo-Pacific.

There is no question that Abe was a contentious figure. To many in China and South Korea, he was an apologist for Japanese war atrocities. Abe never apologized for the massacre, rape, and systemic assault on territorial integrity and human dignity made in the name of the Japanese Empire. Indeed, Abe took to dismissing evidence for such historical injustices and repeatedly refuted “apologizing again” for the comfort women enslaved by Imperial Japanese Army during World War II – a horror that had been accepted and apologized for under the 1993 Kono Statement.

This article is by no means an attempt to vindicate or defend Abe or some of the more virulent beliefs that he held. Yet, to comprehend Abe fully, he must

be situated within the undercurrents of revisionist Japanese nationalism, which rose steadily over the past few decades, and his foreign policy antics and rhetoric through the lens of political strategy and the distinctive contexts in which he operated. The discussion focuses exclusively on both Abe's foreign policy and domestic policy, which has been noted by many observers as both distinctively nationalistic and an unambiguous romanticization of Japanese imperialist history.<sup>1</sup>

In Japan, nationalism has grown to be precipitously revisionist over the past three decades. For the first two decades after World War II, a tenuous coalition of American military lobbyists and establishmentarians had tentatively and briefly overseen Japan's political reconstruction and transition. Moderate nationalists and realists scarred by the events of the first half of the century, took to articulating a broadly liberal and globalist Japanese nationalism. In a speech delivered to the House of Representatives in 1967, Prime Minister Eisaku Sato stated that Japan "shall neither possess nor manufacture nuclear weapons, nor shall it permit their introduction into Japanese territory."<sup>2</sup> The 1960s to 1970s witnessed a series of high-profile events, including the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, when the Japanese political establishment sought to combine the Yoshida Doctrine<sup>3</sup> (a predominant focus upon internal economic development and complete geo-strategic and military alignment with the United States) with a renewed, values-driven zeal in Japan's foreign policy. Thus, Japan would seek to uphold the liberal and multilateral values that came to comprise the post-war order.

Much of this changed in the early 1990s. First, the severe economic stagnation that beset Japan demanded a more resounding and convincing explanation to be offered by the nation's political elites. More specifically, Japan's rapidly declining population and economic growth numbers meant that it was no longer plausible for the establishment politicians to purely frame internationalized trade as a force for good, without succumbing to allegations of elitism. Second, the rise of competitors within Asia, coupled with China's reform and opening-up efforts, precipitated a general uneasiness among the Japanese populace, which was discharged through both academic and popular narratives that ostracized "outsiders" including Chinese and Korean peoples. Finally, the decision by leading politicians in the late 1990s and 2000s, including Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, to "pay tribute" to wartime "heroes" by visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, established an implicit norm and expectation that pegged support for the Japanese nation with a fundamental inability to accept and reflect fairly upon the ignominious

- 1 John Nilsson-Wright, "Shinzo Abe: Revisionist Nationalist or Pragmatic Realist?," BBC News, August 28, 2020, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53950704>.
- 2 Sato Eisaku, "The Nobel Peace Prize 1974," NobelPrize.org, November 11, 1974, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1974/sato/lecture/>.
- 3 Hiroyuki Hoshiro, "Deconstructing the 'Yoshida Doctrine,'" *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, February 8, 2022, 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1468109922000019>.

horrors of war. The political zeitgeist in Japan in the early 2000s was one of angst, acrimony, and resentment, while China's accelerated economic growth was widely viewed as a harbinger of further declines in Japan's international influence.

It was against this backdrop that Shinzo Abe first rose to the premiership in September 2006. During his first term, Abe harnessed the simmering discontent among the Japanese public to give impetus and aid his political campaign to revise and broaden the interpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution<sup>4</sup> – a clause which formally and nominally renounced Japan's right of belligerency and precluded Japan from developing armed forces with war potential. Abe affirmed America's war efforts in the Middle East and adopted a high-profile stance on the Diaoyu Islands dispute. He both permitted and leveraged the rise of ultra-nationalistic, right-wing, selective accounts of Japanese history that glossed over Japan's historical errors. By comparison, the official stance of the government appeared more "moderate" and lent Abe's political theatrics greater credibility and resonance among the wider public. Ironically, Abe's first-term agenda and ambitious vision for Japan were cut short, not because of his aggressive foreign policy, but due to the series of scandals that rocked his cabinet, coupled with the suicide of his Agriculture Minister Toshikatsu Matsuoka. As a consequence, Abe was forced to resign after only twelve months as Prime Minister.

After serving two years as an ordinary member of the National Diet, Abe became leader of the opposition LDP when it lost power, for only the second time since its foundation in 1955, in the 2009 election. However, three years later Abe led the LDP to its 2012 election victory. It was during Abe's subsequent eight-year tenure as PM that his complex relationship with revisionist nationalism truly took shape. It is worth noting that despite the alignment between Abe and the right-wing ultra-nationalists on some issues, fundamental disparities and limits persisted in their "relation of convenience." As such, Abe began to resist and curtail the excesses of the increasingly popular right-wing ultra-nationalist narratives – Abe needed to rein in the beast.

More concretely, Abe's worldview, which sought close alignment with the U.S. and promotion of a "democracy and freedom" world order, actively clashed with the militarist and implicit anti-American sentiments espoused by those who felt that Japan's de-militarization under the American occupation had

4 "Article 9 - a Global Common Value for a Peaceful and Sustainable World," Global Article 9 Campaign, 2008, <http://www.article-9.org/en/index.html>.

been a national humiliation.

To advance his foreign policy agenda, Abe selected Fumio Kishida as Foreign Minister. Kishida, currently both Prime Minister and President of the LDP, was widely seen as a more status quo-preserving moderate than a revanchist rebel. Together they undertook a substantial number of foreign visits in the first two years of Abe's premiership and turned to build more robust economic and strategic partnerships with ASEAN states. To achieve his ASEAN ambitions, Abe refrained both superficially and rhetorically, but not substantively, from venerating and championing Japan's imperialist past. Among the Southeast Asian states Abe was seeking to court, Japanese imperial rule still held bitter memories. In visiting the Yasukuni Shrine and domestically emphasizing his credentials as a devout "Japanese nationalist," Abe was able to pursue a quieter militarist foreign policy. Inserting a cautious distance between himself and far-right ultranationalists was both a well-advised public perceptual move, and a necessary play for broader international support.

The Prime Minister was by no means a dove when it came to fundamental questions of militarization and rearmament. He was fully cognizant that words alone would not suffice in – and indeed were not necessary for – mollifying pro-war sentiments. In late June and early July 2014, Abe turned to lifting the long-standing moratorium on Japanese military deployment abroad, by expanding the jurisdiction of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF). This scope expansion, which permitted the SDF to defend Japan's "allies" and consolidated its status as a *de facto* army for Japan, was followed by a further authorization in 2014 of the supply of resources and weaponry to Japanese allies in conflicts abroad. Such legislative moves were – whilst nominally promulgated by the government – fundamentally exercises of public opinion, which were in turn selectively bolstered and incorporated into policies by Shinzo Abe's leadership. Noticeably, many of these changes were not narrated through Japan's reclaiming *what it was ostensibly entitled to*, but through the oft-touted vision of Japan playing a role in maintaining regional security and resolving territorial disputes. Indeed, as Jeff Kingston has argued, Abe often framed his security policy as proactive pacifism designed to empower Japan in exercising collective self-defense without pursuing total war.<sup>5</sup> Abe's clever justification shrewdly sidestepped allegations of revanchism and militarism, although, for neighbors such as China and South Korea, the writing had been on the wall. Indeed, for almost two years after his return to power, Abe did not meet with the leaders of either country.<sup>6</sup>

5 Jeff Kingston, "One-Hand Clapping: Japanese Nationalism in the Abe Era," in *Japan and Asia's Contested Order Asia Today* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 147–63. [https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0256-5\\_7](https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0256-5_7)

6 Ankit Panda, "Shinzo Abe at World Economic Forum: 'Restrain Military Expansion in Asia,'" *thediplomat.com*, January 23, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/01/shinzo-abe-at-world-economic-forum-restrain-military-expansion-in-asia/>.

Despite Abe's sly branding, there were real consequences to his channeling of jingoism to continuously expand the reach and intensity of the Japanese military-security apparatus.

At the beginning of his third term in 2015, Abe adopted a distinctively more pragmatic and flexible approach to both China and South Korea. In lieu of the amorphous flirtation – and leveraging of – extreme militarist sentiments, he sought to signal a partial, yet subtle, departure that did not fundamentally deviate, but certainly tonally shifted, from his prior stances on Japan's role in World War II. On August 14, 2015, in a speech to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the end of World War II, Abe made no apology, but articulated only his "eternal, sincere condolences," for the "immeasurable damage and suffering" caused by Japan for "innocent people"<sup>7</sup> during the war. The statement broadly adhered to the lines adopted by his more pacifist and conciliatory predecessors. The joint China-Japan-South Korea summit in 2015 featured the first official trilateral dialogue between Park Geun-Hye, Li Keqiang, and Shinzo Abe, in which the leaders agreed to negotiate trilateral free trade agreements and commit to North Korean denuclearization. Abe even pledged to – and followed through on – apologizing to South Korea for the "comfort women" issue, with Japan paying one billion yen to support the 46 surviving victims of the episode. Notwithstanding the limited criticisms he received from elements in the public, Abe's move enabled him to significantly reset the nature of South Korean-Japanese relations, at a minimal cost.

Abe's attitudes to nationalism – especially revisionist nationalism – were complex and multi-faceted. In his foreign policy, he drew upon the support of hard-lined nationalists, but never openly courted them. He distanced himself from ultranationalism in his foreign policy and stances on international affairs as needed and couched his nationalism through the lens of internationalist pacifism – and when the time was ripe, he did not hesitate in burying it altogether to secure significant political victories.

Towards the final years of his tenure, Abe took on the mantle of repairing Sino-Japanese relations. He visited China in October 2018 – with both sides pledging to take their relations in a "new historic direction." Abe committed to multi-million-dollar deals and deepening investment partnerships with China. At no point during the visit did he bring up issues of World War II. In deftly navigating the increasingly complex Indo-Pacific, China held firm to its baselines whilst accepting that economic rapprochement would be in the interest of both Japanese and Chinese peoples. A quiet, yet formidable

7 "Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (Speeches and Statements by the Prime Minister) | Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet," Kantei.go.jp, August 24, 2015, [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97\\_abe/statement/201508/0814statement.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201508/0814statement.html).

consensus had been reached – one that would see Beijing and Tokyo continually build relations across areas and spheres where they could, to the mutual benefit of present and future generations.

Yet this does not mean that the dust of history has thus settled. With Abe's passing, his two successors Suga and Kishida have adopted once again a more hardened stance towards China – not only in domestic rhetoric but also in their alignment with American interests and positions. Talk of the QUAD, as well as Japan's renewed role to play in the Indo-Pacific ambitions of America, has increasingly come to the forefront of public discourse. Abe's contributions towards Sino-Japanese relations cannot be underestimated – but they must, once again, be situated within his broader political ambitions, as a leader who sought to revitalize the Japanese economy through export-led growth and stimulus, and yet who remained fundamentally obsessive and intransigent in his historical revisionism. The future of Sino-Japanese relations remains uncertain – the hope is that as time goes by, those who seek to rewrite history shall be confronted with the naked, unmissable facts and truth, which cannot and should not be changed.

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