



Reflecting on Former Japanese PM Shinzo Abe's Legacy

SINGAPORE — The assassination of the former prime minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, in the Japanese city of Nara on July 8 came as a rude shock to Japan and the world. Arguably, while Abe's death was abrupt and tragic, this veteran politician left behind a long-lasting political legacy. Indeed, the economic, security, and political priorities that Abe pushed for during his lifetime will likely shape the geopolitical landscape of Asia Pacific and even foreign relations with the United States for years to come.



AP Images
Shinzo Abe

A Visionary Statesman

Throughout his political career, Abe presented himself as a visionary statesman determined to position Japan to be globally competitive and respected in the 21st century. He regularly alluded to the example set by his late grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, also a former prime minister of Japan, who reinforced Japan's post-war alliance with the United States. In 2006, Abe's ambitions were launched in full swing when he became the youngest prime minister in postwar Japan at age 52. His first stint in that office ended after just a year. Yet Abe's indefatigable political will saw him return to office five years later in 2012, and he served Japan until 2020 as the longest-serving prime minister in the nation-state's history.

Grant Newsham, a former U.S. Marine Corps colonel and senior research fellow at the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies, where Abe served as chief advisor, eulogized that Abe was a *sui generis* leader with a strategic perspective on foreign policy and geopolitical realities, unlike many of Japan's other prime ministers, who had brief tenures and were relatively low-key on the international stage.

Listing many of Abe's significant milestones in Japan's defense and regional relationships, Newsham indicated that Abe's active diplomatic and political efforts have contributed to a heightened sense of awareness of the threat of an increasingly assertive communist China as well as the emergence of a more engaged and militarily capable Japan.

Asserting Japanese National Interests

Abe regarded Japan's role in the Asia-Pacific and in the world as vital. He believed that Japan could not simply be a passive observer of world events, but instead play a more active regional and global role,



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even in the military sphere, to extend its influence. On the forefront of Abe's foreign-policy agenda was to cement bilateral ties with the United States. Abe realized that a more robust Japan-U.S. relationship would require Tokyo to become a more valuable ally. Hence Abe traveled the world to lift Japan's profile in the global arena.

Former U.S. President Donald Trump met Abe several times while both men were in office. Both tried to maintain the key alliance between Japan and the United States vis-à-vis rising Chinese aggression. In August 2020, Trump praised Abe as the [greatest prime minister](#) in Japanese history during a call between the two leaders, days after the Japanese premier said he was stepping down for health reasons.

Upon Abe's death, Trump told [Breitbart News](#) that Abe was a "great leader" who "loved his country." "We did incredible deals together. We made a new deal with Japan. Japan had a one-sided deal and he brought back some fairness because we had just a terrible group of trade deals with Japan. We renegotiated it. But he was a real friend of mine. He really was a distinguished, incredible person. What a disaster that is for this world. He was a true world leader and everybody respected him. We'd go to the G7 and everybody respected Shinzo. That this can happen is just horrible."

Furthermore, Abe tried to revise Article 9 of Japan's pacifist constitution to have a fully functional defense force that includes offensive military capabilities. Eventually, Abe's government did reinterpret the constitution to permit "collective self-defense," which enables the Self-Defense Forces to go into armed combat to assist allies. As a result, the Japan Self-Defense Forces expanded its military-to-military engagements, exercises, and talks throughout the Asia-Pacific region, and even as far as in Europe. Notably, Abe's crucial decision to strengthen Japan's defense capabilities in the face of the growing China threat certainly fanned the flames of ire in Communist China.

Crucially for the regional balance of power in the Asia-Pacific, Abe's ingenuity in spearheading the creation of regional cooperation frameworks such as the [Quad](#), a security alliance between the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, as well as his notion of a free and open Indo-Pacific, not only earned him the title of "Quadfather" but more importantly positioned Japan to stand confident in the face of an uncertain and unpredictable Asia-Pacific, free from the shadows of its World War II past.

After Abe's relaxation of Japanese defense hardware export rules, Japan strategically provided used aircraft and ships to the Philippines and Vietnam. Arguably, Abe's attempt to sell Japanese submarines to Australia could have altered the regional strategic order — to counter China's growing influence — but was thwarted by Australia's cancellation of what was supposedly a done deal. Instead, the Australians opted for a French bidder, but this new deal was soon discontinued after a couple of years.

An Increasingly Assertive Japan in the Face of Communist China

In an opinion piece in the *Los Angeles Times* on April 12, 2022, Abe urged the United States and Japan to terminate their policy of strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan. "The policy of ambiguity," Abe asserted, "worked extremely well as long as the U.S. was strong enough to maintain it, and as long as China was far inferior to the U.S. in military power. But those days are over." Abe claimed that the U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity "is now fostering instability in the Indo-Pacific region, by encouraging China to underestimate American resolve, while making the government in Taipei unnecessarily anxious." This piece written by the now-deceased former prime minister reflects his long standing cautious approach toward a rising Communist China.

This is not the first time that Abe has proposed a change in policy toward Taiwan. For years, critical of



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China's human-rights violations and was visibly concerned by the shifting military balance in the Taiwan Strait. In 2021, he reinforced that "a Taiwan crisis would be a crisis for Japan" and urged the United States to end its strategic ambiguity policy. While it is true that Fumio Kishida, Japan's current prime minister and Abe's successor, disagreed with Abe's advocacy for hosting U.S. nuclear weapons as a deterrent in light of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine crisis, Kishida is unlikely to stray too far from the foundations of Abe's foreign policy.

However, unfortunately for outspoken Abe, the Biden administration does not appear too keen to ditch the current American policy of strategic ambiguity, despite Communist China's aggressive rhetoric and actions toward Taiwan. Biden's ambassador to China, Nicholas Burns, labeled the policy of strategic ambiguity a "time-tested" policy and the best way to prevent a war during his confirmation hearing.

Despite the American response, William Lai, vice president of Taiwan, made a historic visit to Japan to attend Abe's funeral. His visit was the senior-most official visit to Japan since bilateral ties between Taiwan and Japan were terminated in 1972. Additionally, Taiwan's de facto ambassador to Tokyo [has](#) indicated that seven Japanese lawmakers would visit Taiwan in July. This visit would be a litmus test as to what Taiwan and Japan can or cannot do in an atmosphere of Chinese belligerence, reminiscent of Abe's own complex legacy in China. Abe's visits to the Yasukuni shrine, a memorial of Japan's war dead, including war criminals, as well as his assertion of Japan's claim to the Senkaku islands — also claimed by China, which calls them Diaoyudao — have angered many Chinese.

Abenomics

Another important feature of Abe's legacy was his attempt to deal with Japan's economic problems via what came to be commonly known as "Abenomics." Abenomics can be generally described as a three-pronged approach that includes aggressive fiscal expansion, monetary easing, and structural reform with the purpose of boosting Japan's domestic demand and gross domestic product (GDP) growth while raising inflation to two percent. The policies were proposed and implemented in stages to lift Japan's economy out of a period of minimal growth and overall deflation.

One of the key structural reforms the Abe government took was to encourage more Japanese women to join or rejoin the workforce. While success was mixed, a higher percentage of women between the ages of 15 and 64 work in Japan than in the United States as of the time of this writing. Another distinct achievement for him was securing the venue for the Tokyo Olympic Games in 2020.

In 2020, Abe famously resisted the implementation of strict Covid measures, as the rest of the world imposed strict lockdowns based on China's model. He was against border controls and the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics and, prior to leaving office, wished for Covid's official infectious disease categorization to be classified on the same level as influenza. Sadly, the global fallout from the Covid lockdowns put Japan into recession, wiping out the gains from Abenomics to a considerable extent. Hence, it is likely that Abe opted instead to remain significantly prominent in politics despite stepping down from the top job.

Although Abe's tenure saw mixed results for his economic approach, his successor, Fumio Kishida, has stuck with Abenomics, deploying big spending packages to cushion the economic blow from the Covid-19 pandemic and recently to soften the impact of soaring energy and raw material costs. Observers in Japan and beyond have noted that Abe's death could facilitate Kishida's efforts to address Japan's government debt burden, the biggest in the industrial world.

"Abe was a flag-bearer of those who support fiscal expansion. Those people lost their driving force,"



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said Dr. Mikitaka Masuyama, a professor at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies. “I would not say Kishida’s position within the party is rock solid, but he is now more likely than before to have better control over the party.”

As the world bids farewell to a truly prominent Japanese statesman, it can be asserted that Abe’s ideas and worldview will definitely leave their indelible footprint in Japan and beyond. In light of a more confident and assertive Japan, the United States can find in this island nation in the Asia-Pacific a reliable ally.



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