

Note to Washington: enjoy Abe while you have him by Grant Newsham

Grant Newsham (gnewsham78@gmail.com) is a Senior Research Fellow at the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies. He is a retired US Marine Colonel and lived in Japan for 20 years, also serving as a diplomat assigned to the US Embassy, Tokyo and working in the private sector. This article first appeared in the *Lowy Interpreter* blog [here](#).

Shinzo Abe will not be Japan's prime minister forever, and once he leaves office he might just be missed.

Abe is the first Japanese prime minister in decades [with a strategic vision](#) of Japan's role in the world. He recognized that Japan could no longer sit quietly, writing the occasional check, while events unfolded around it. Foremost, he saw that close ties with the US are indispensable for Japan – and that forging a strong Japan-US relationship required Tokyo to become a more 'useful' ally. And by playing an active regional and global role – including militarily – Japan could raise its stature.

To this end, Prime Minister Abe has gotten out and about, visiting all parts of the world. Being seen and heard makes a difference, and contrasts starkly with the low international profile of most previous Japanese prime ministers.

Abe also directed the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) to expand military-to-military engagements, exercises and talks throughout the Asia-Pacific region, and even in Europe. Moreover, following Abe's success in relaxing defense export rules, Japan [is providing used aircraft](#) and ships to the Philippines and Vietnam, and is aggressively trying to sell submarines to Australia.

Although China [predictably complains](#), Japan's military outreach is generally well received in the region, with Australia, Vietnam, India, Philippines and others welcoming Japanese security cooperation. Abe even bit his tongue and patiently tried building a relationship with South Korea. His outreach to Seoul is just now [showing signs of progress](#).

It should be remembered that Abe was not the first prime minister to start this move to a more active defense and assertive foreign policy, but he has moved things faster and farther than anyone else since Prime Minister Nakasone more than 30 years ago.

The US long wanted Japan to be a more active ally and to play a more substantial defense role. Unfortunately, the US government wasted a year after Abe's election, keeping him at arm's length for his views of history, comfort women, and his reputation as a 'rightist.' However, the Americans finally got over this and got what they wanted – as evidenced by last year's revision (and improvement) of [US-Japan Defense Guidelines](#), and Abe's successful passage of measures

broadening what Japan can do under the doctrine of 'collective self-defense.'

It's worth noting that Abe does not snap his fingers and get what he wants. He has always faced [considerable domestic opposition](#). Abe can't ignore public opinion, and consequently he has endeavored to explain his policies, even if imperfectly, better than earlier prime ministers.

Besides challenges from opposition parties, Abe has plenty of enemies within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). There is even a sizeable LDP bloc opposing Abe's active defense policies, not to mention many politicians of all parties favoring a more accommodating stance toward China. And of course Japan's bureaucracy drags its feet on occasion. Indeed, for all his success, Abe has been unable to meaningfully increase defense spending – given the Ministry of Finance's outsized influence – but he has at least prevented further cuts.

One should not assume this trajectory toward a more assertive Japan will continue. Abe is practically Otto von Bismarck himself compared to many of his predecessors – who seemed to view a Japanese prime minister's primary purpose as recycling money from the central government to favored supporters and back again. For them, foreign affairs and military matters were better left to risk-averse bureaucrats.

The US government should fear a return to the 'status quo ante Abe' when Japanese officials proclaimed most things related to national security as 'too hard,' or only changeable at a glacial pace. With Abe's departure, the US will have lost its best chance in decades for Japan to develop into a more useful ally – while injecting a needed degree of 'equality' into the bilateral relationship. And Japan will have squandered its opportunity to be taken seriously on the world stage for something other than its money.

Moreover, forget about Japan increasing defense spending – to which many of the JSDF's shortcomings can be traced. As for resolving the Okinawa basing issues: Abe has made an effort to look at Japan's defense from a national perspective, rather than the viewpoint of Okinawan activist and outsider-incited opposition. He nobly tried to finally push through the replacement for the Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station after repeated promises by Tokyo to do so went unfulfilled. When Abe eventually goes, expect a return to constant friction and hapless and unsuccessful central government efforts to placate a noisy local opposition with huge payoffs and concessions that guarantee degradation of US forces combat capabilities and overall deterrence.

A word about the economy: Abe is regularly savaged by critics – especially foreign ones – [for the perceived failure](#) of 'Abenomics.' Abe deserves a pass on this, not least since none of his predecessors over the last 25 years had any greater

success reviving the economy. Indeed, one might fairly argue that Abe's biggest mistake was failing to listen closely to the Ministry of Finance and Bank of Japan – and then do precisely the opposite of what the bureaucrats recommend.

The world needs an assertive, active Japan. Representing as it does a higher manifestation of individual liberty, consensual government and rule of law, the world needs the proactive, engaged, militarily capable nation that Prime Minister Abe, for all his shortcomings, has tried to create.

If Japan returns to form – with a rapid succession of 'money shuffling' prime ministers – and retreats back into its shell while timid bureaucrats run the show, the world and the region will be worse off.

More than anyone, the US government will miss him.

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