



## ASSESSING ABE SHINZO'S REMARKABLE SECOND ACT

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On Nov. 20, Abe Shinzo became the longest serving prime minister in Japanese history, surpassing the previous record of 2,886 days held by Katsura Taro of the Taisho period. His has been one of the most remarkable second acts in political history. Abe took office determined to pursue aggressive and forward-leaning domestic political and foreign policy agendas. Implementation has been mixed: while he has had notable successes, there have been unmistakable failures as well.

He has been most successful in foreign policy, faithfully pursuing a realist vision that sought to strengthen Japan's alliance with the United States and upgrade the role of Japan's Self-Defense Forces within the alliance framework. Japan is conducting an increasingly frequent number of joint military drills with the US and the degree of bilateral integration is deepening too. He has vigorously expanded Japan's security cooperation with other countries, signing strategic partnership agreements and acquisition and cross-servicing agreements (ACSA) with other US allies and partners (such as Australia, United Kingdom, France, and Canada), broadening Japan's

network of defense cooperation. Essential to this step was a new interpretation of the constitution in 2014 that opened the way to the exercise of collective defense. Japan's active security roles in the South China Sea through naval drills and port calls, as well as coast guard capacity-building assistance, to Vietnam and the Philippines are part of this expanding security network. Security initiatives are pillars of a broader diplomatic agenda that began as soon as Abe returned to the Prime Minister's Office, one in which Southeast Asia has been prominent: he visited all 10 ASEAN member states in his first year back in office.

A vital part of this effort has been Abe's ability to manage his relationship with US President Donald Trump. Abe has established the "gold standard" for dealing with Trump, making the prime minister a critical interlocutor when the president deals with regional issues.

A notable exception to this positive record is South Korea. Extension of the hard-won General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) between the two countries has been entangled with the issue of compensation for conscripted laborers more than 70 years ago, triggering fear that coordinated responses to North Korean threats will be jeopardized. Abe has not been able to improve the bilateral relationship with both the conservative (Park Geun-hye) and progressive (Moon Jae-in) leaderships in South Korea.

Pyongyang confounds all its diplomatic partners, so blaming Abe for failure to make progress in that relationship would be harsh. His effort to explore new approaches and timing to resolve the abduction issue with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has been complicated by Trump's summitry gambits with Kim.

Abe has set a floor in Japan-China relations, an impressive accomplishment given his national security agenda, one that would normally prompt a hard response from Beijing. Instead, realism has prevailed in both capitals and Abe, working with Xi Jinping, has been able to reconcile his vision of a more visible and assertive Japanese foreign and security policy with China's own regional ambitions.

Realism – and a desire to check the rise of China -- has led Abe to keep some distance from the hardline

Russia policy of the European Union and the United States. Hoping to entice Moscow toward resolution of the longstanding territorial dispute with Russia, Japan offered an economic assistance package to reestablish its presence in energy development in the Russian Far East. While there has been no progress on the territory issue, Japan's assistance has kept Russia from becoming overly dependent on China for development of the Far East.

Abe has several successes in international trade policy. Undaunted by the US decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and working closely with Australia, he salvaged the deal, now known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). His administration also concluded the Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Union. CPTPP was then leveraged against both China and the United States. As the US started a trade war against China, Japan agreed with China (which seeks alternative export destinations) to accelerate negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand, and 10 ASEAN members. Cooperation on the economic front facilitated Japan's ability to arrest the downward spiral in relations with Beijing over China's claim to and assertions around the Senkaku Islands. Neither CPTPP nor RCEP negotiations gave Japan sufficient leverage to reject US demands to negotiate a bilateral free trade agreement. Japan agreed to lower tariffs on US meat exports, but Abe, despite his relationship with Trump, did not receive an explicit US commitment to not raise auto tariffs. That failure is the most visible blemish on a remarkable effort to fill the void in international leadership on trade issues that has emerged in recent years.

In domestic politics, Abe's performance is mixed. First, the sheer length of his term as PM is impressive. Stability in political leadership, which Japan lacked for much of the last two decades, has allowed the country to pursue a dynamic foreign policy agenda. His long tenure is also attributable to the relative absence of major scandals involving him and his Cabinet members, and a weak opposition.

Abe's long tenure also reflects the absence of a credible challenger to his leadership within the ruling

Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Abe has remained ambiguous about his choice of successor, an effort to keep ambitious faction leaders in line. Policy continuity over the transition period greatly depends on Abe's ability to control the succession, but indications of policy challenges have surfaced in discussions of the consumption tax increase and constitutional amendment issues.

In a tactical decision, Abe delayed the increase of the consumption tax to fall 2019, when he eventually raised it to 10%. The need to raise the tax is a manifestation of Japan's worsening fiscal condition. The debt-service ratio within the annual government budget has increased to the highest level among developed countries, while reform of the biggest expenditure – social security – remains insufficient in the face of an aging population. One of Abe's biggest failures on the domestic front has been his inability to commence a national debate (within the country and within the Diet) on amending the constitution. Ironically, Abe's inability to make progress on this issue, perhaps his highest personal priority and even though the limited scope of the proposed amendment simply endorses after the fact security policy initiatives that have occurred since the early 1990s, may have kept him in power thus far.

Abe's greatest failure may be economic. The unprecedented easing of financial liquidity that followed his arm-twisting of the Bank of Japan leadership has not been sufficient to reach the declared target of 2% annual inflation, not brought about anticipated wage increases, and not sufficiently boosted economic growth. Most importantly, structural transformation of the economy through upskilling and innovations has not happened. In 2019, Japan dropped to sixth place again in rankings of national competitiveness. Success in promoting women in the workforce and reversing the declining birth rate demand real battle against both government regulations and conservative (paternalistic) social values, and Abe's rhetorical support for these reform agendas has not been accompanied by real deeds.

Abe's success in his second administration reflects a pragmatic approach to governing, a mindset that was not evident during his first term in office. He has recognized that he must temper his ambitions and

remain attuned to the public's understanding of what is possible and desirable. But while he has tempered his instincts, he continues to try to move that center of gravity. With the current term of the Lower House of Parliament expiring in less than two years, Abe has to consider both his leftover agendas and the timing of a possible snap election. Global economic conditions amid intensifying trade disputes will likely be key determinants of how much time Abe will have.

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