



***ABE SHINZO'S LEGACY IN
SOUTHEAST ASIA***

BY ***KEI KOGA***

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The murder of Abe Shinzo on July 8 was a profound political shock to Japan and to the world. He was not the incumbent prime minister, and his death did not directly affect the current decision-making process of the Japanese government. Yet, he was the living legend who significantly shaped Japan's domestic and foreign policy during the 2010s.

Domestically, he led the largest faction in the Liberal Democratic Party, and his word influenced Japan's diplomatic and security discourse, notably his remarks on "[nuclear-sharing](#)" and "[doubling the defense budget](#)." Internationally, his diplomatic visibility was also strong, as he was the norm entrepreneur who facilitated the "Indo-Pacific" narrative through Japan's "[Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#)" (FOIP) concept from 2016.

Located at the center of the Indo-Pacific, Southeast Asia was a region Abe consistently engaged, considering it vital for Japan's peace and prosperity.

Japan has engaged with ASEAN and each individual Southeast Asian state continuously since its adoption of the [Fukuda Doctrine](#) in 1977. Abe made his mark, however, by increasing Japan's diplomatic visibility and commitment. Once Abe assumed his second prime ministership at the end of 2012, he

enthusiastically conducted comprehensive engagement with Southeast Asia. In 2013, the 40th anniversary of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation, Abe made visits to all ASEAN member states, hosted summit meetings, and successfully concluded [the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit Meeting](#) in Tokyo. In 2014, Abe made a speech at the 13th IISS Shangri-La Dialogue on "[Peace and prosperity in Asia, forevermore](#)," pushing for stronger international maritime stability, particularly in the East and South China Seas, where China's assertiveness was growing. In 2014 and 2015 he focused on summit diplomacy to reassure Southeast Asian states that Japan's constitutional reinterpretation of Article 9 (allowing Japan to exercise a right to collective self-defense) would not be a threat or a destabilizing factor to East Asia.

The Abe administration also intensified its economic, strategic, and defense engagement with Southeast Asia. In 2015, Abe launched the "[Partnership for Quality Infrastructure](#)" to provide financial assistance, mainly to Southeast Asia, for infrastructure development that would fully comply with international standards, while competing with China's Belt and Road Initiative—which had alternative standards. After Abe announced the FOIP strategy in 2016, Japan has continuously emphasized the importance of ASEAN centrality and unity, [culminating](#) in "the ASEAN-Japan Summit on Cooperation on ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" in 2020. In 2016, Japan launched [the Vientiane Vision](#) to enhance defense cooperation with ASEAN, which was later upgraded as [Vientiane Vision 2.0](#) in 2019. Also, the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force consistently exhibited its defense presence in Southeast Asia, conducting military exercises with regional states through [the Indo-Pacific Deployment](#) every year since 2019.

These initiatives were not spawned as ad-hoc or one-shot diplomatic efforts that the then-prime minister created as ceremonial actions. Abe had a clear strategic vision that the future of the balance of power in East Asia, including Southeast Asia, would shift with the rise of an assertive China. Considering China's growing presence in the East and South China Seas and increasing Chinese economic influence

through the Belt and Road Initiative, Abe persistently highlighted the importance of stable maritime security, ensuring the sea lines of communication, the freedom of navigation and overflight, international law, as well as rules-based infrastructure development in line with the highest international standards. Although Japan was in relative decline vis-à-vis China—whose military expenditures surpassed Japan’s in the mid-2000s and whose GDP passed Japan’s in 2010—Abe was not intimidated and facilitated independent strategic thinking to defend his country’s national interests and regional stability. The FOIP was the embodiment of such thinking.

Abe’s diplomatic stance also contributed to promoting Southeast Asian states’ hedging strategy. As strategic rivalry was growing between the United States and China, Southeast Asian states aimed to “[hedge](#)”—avoiding taking sides and gaining economic and security benefits from both sides—including even those who tend to lean toward either China (such as [Cambodia](#)) or the United States (like [Singapore](#)). Japan’s relatively independent stance helped Southeast Asia pursue a hedging behavior by enhancing cooperation with Japan rather than the United States or China. The [ISEAS Yusof-Ishak Institute Survey](#) from 2019 to 2022 suggests as much, indicating that ASEAN considered Japan the best strategic option in 2020 and the second best in 2021 and 2022 after the European Union.

To be sure, Southeast Asian states did not always appreciate Abe’s strategic posture. On the contrary, they frequently expressed concerns about Abe’s strong anti-China attitude, which might destabilize East Asian peace and security. For example, [Singapore](#) expressed its regret about Abe’s visit to Yasukuni shrine in 2013, fearing that this would increase tension and ruin trust with regional states. In 2016 and 2017, when Japan launched FOIP and began to hold Quad meetings regularly, several ASEAN member states raised questions about Japan’s stance toward [ASEAN](#) and were [hesitant](#) to support its strategic initiative. However, Abe did not merely dismiss those criticisms. He incorporated them into his existing strategic thinking and attempted to strike a balance between Japan’s interests and Southeast Asia’s concerns. This is evidence of Abe’s

willingness to hear ASEAN’s voice, which made Japan the most trusted major power for Southeast Asia, according to [ISEAS Yusof-Ishak surveys](#) from 2019 to 2022.

Unlike a traditional Japanese leader, Abe was not a consensus-builder but a strong believer in his own strategic and political vision, which [polarized](#) opinion, particularly in the domestic realm. However, his strategic posture produced positive outcome for Japan—making Japan diplomatically more visible in Southeast Asia and gaining more trust from regional states. He will be remembered as a proactive strategic leader who matched words with deeds, raising Japan’s diplomatic status in Southeast Asia.

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