



***ABE SHINZO: HOW TO HANDLE AN
UNPREDICTABLE AMERICA***

BY **ROB YORK**

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For more from this author, visit his recent chapter of [Comparative Connections](#).

Much has been written since former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's death about his status as a "[polarizing](#)" figure. This was true in domestic Japanese politics, in [China](#), and in [South Korea](#), where Abe's views and actions have prompted highly mixed assessments since his passing.

But Abe's legacy is far from polarizing in other contexts, notably in the US national political scene.

Presidential praise

It came as little surprise that former President Donald Trump was one of the first major figures to [respond](#) to the news of Abe's death. Abe was the first foreign leader to meet Trump following his election in 2016, [dropping by](#) Trump Tower on short notice that November. In the months and years to come Abe cultivated a reputation as a "[Trump whisperer](#)" for US partners and allies unsure of how the former president would react to his new responsibilities, meeting him at least 10 times, speaking with him at least 30, and twice visiting him at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida. Regional observers will recall Trump's sharp turn toward confrontation with North Korea in 2017, including discussion of military options. What may have been forgotten is that, following their first Mar-a-Lago [meeting](#) in early 2017—long before "fire and fury" and the "little

Rocket Man" speech—Abe called for a strong stance against North Korea over a recent missile test.

Trump responded, at the time, that the United States "stands behind Japan, its great ally, 100%."

When news of Abe's death broke, Trump reacted by declaring it, in his typically dramatic fashion, "Really BAD NEWS FOR THE WORLD!" and that Abe was "a unifier like no other, but above all, he was a man who loved and cherished his magnificent country, Japan."

By the time Joe Biden became president, Abe's long stint as PM had ended, as Abe had announced his departure for health reasons two months before the November 2020 election. Nonetheless, Biden had a history with Abe in the Obama administration and, as president, was quick to build upon the legacy of closer relations Abe promoted across the Obama and Trump administrations. Abe's successor and long-time partner Suga Yoshihide was the first foreign leader Biden [hosted](#) at the White House in April 2021, where they promised to "[work] together to take on the challenges from China and on issues like the East China Sea, the South China Sea, as well as North Korea, to ensure a future of a free and open Indo-Pacific." Their statement also called for "peace and stability across Taiwan Strait," an issue Abe had become increasingly [strident](#) on in the years leading up to his assassination.

It is thus unsurprising that Biden [reacted](#) to the news of Abe's death by saying he was "stunned, outraged, and deeply saddened by the news that my friend Abe Shinzo...was shot and killed while campaigning. This is a tragedy for Japan and for all who knew him."

The contender

Abe's long shadow extends beyond current and former presidents as well. Even though [polling](#) and [scholarly literature](#) shows that American voters rarely [prioritize](#) foreign policy—and, as such, presidential contenders rarely speak out on foreign affairs that did not involve the consequences of American foreign policy decision-making (e.g. the botched Afghanistan withdrawal)—Florida's Republican Governor Ron

DeSantis [reacted](#) to news of Abe's death by calling him a "heck of an ally." DeSantis added: "[Abe] understood freedom. He understood the threat posed by China."

DeSantis made that statement in the context of upcoming meetings between the state of Florida and the Japan Association designed to boost business/investment ties.

However, there may be another context in which DeSantis' remarks may be read: Based on recent [polls](#), he is the one American political figure likely to disrupt a Biden-Trump rematch in 2024. Best known in the US political scene as a [culture warrior](#) who refused to [lock down](#) his state in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, DeSantis has also quietly [built up](#) a fundraising war chest far in excess of what he needs to win re-election as governor this fall, as well as close ties to major donors outside of Florida.

DeSantis had near-term reasons for his comments on Abe, but with his polling and fundraising on the rise, it certainly did not hurt for him to show that he has his eye on foreign affairs. Signaling affinity for a faithful US ally like Abe is one way to do so.

Japan and beyond

Some [analysis](#) of the Biden administration's foreign policy has noted the incumbent president's low approval ratings. What confidence, they ask, should US partners in Asia have in embracing Biden's agendas for the Indo-Pacific, when he may be ousted in 2024 by another "America first" candidate?

This, however, overstates how radical the change during the first Trump administration actually was, at least on foreign policy. That administration's departures from the status quo on China, [Taiwan](#), and the use of the "Indo-Pacific terminology" reflected a process quietly at work a few years earlier. No wonder these policy choices have since become bipartisan initiatives that the Biden administration decided to carry [forward](#).

One lesson of Abe's strong working relationship with Washington across presidential administrations, and the persistence of attitudes toward China, Taiwan, and

the Quad since the Trump administration demonstrate that initiatives beginning under one administration may carry over to another, with the differences being mostly stylistic.

Another is that there is little substitute for cultivating personal relationships with the president, however idiosyncratic their leadership style. Abe had his differences with Trump—on [bilateral trade](#), on withdrawal from the TPP, and on easing pressure on North Korea in favor of summitry—but the ongoing alignment between the United States and Japan on formerly controversial issues ranging from China to Taiwan to the Quad indicates the success of his efforts. Remarks from all three leading contenders suggest that his legacy will live on in the form of close US-Japan ties.

Not bad for a "polarizing" leader.

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