



## ABE WAS KEY TO THE INDO-PACIFIC'S EVOLUTION

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN

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This is a transitional moment for the Indo-Pacific. Regional governments are forging new security relationships—the [Japan-Australia partnership](#) is the leading edge, as various European governments jostle for inclusion—and new institutions are emerging—from AUKUS to the Quad in the security sphere and at the same time, economic configurations include CPTPP and RCEP.

How did we get here? There are several explanations. Realists insist that rising powers create instability, triggered either by their ambition or the hegemon's insecurity. For others, the unraveling of the architecture of coexistence, in which China provided markets and the US provided security, was the problem. To my mind, there are still more basic explanations.

First, you need a threat, a source of instability big enough to motivate states to act. With all due respect to [John Mearsheimer](#), China doesn't fit the bill—at least, not until recently. China has been rising for decades and while that created concern, there wasn't concerted action to balance against it until Xi Jinping took power. He inherited a powerhouse economy and a modernizing military and married them to ambition and vision—a Belt and Road Initiative that girdled the globe—to pursue the China dream. His ascension and his muscular foreign policy unnerved governments

worldwide. If the dream belonged to the nation, it is Xi who acted to make it real: The elimination of rivals, the [consolidation of power](#), and efforts to entrench himself in office make plain that he is a singular world-historical individual who drives decision making in Beijing.

That security threat has been magnified by perceived unreliability on the United States. It's tempting to blame Donald Trump for this. He created considerable unease with his disdain for alliances, contempt for multilateralism, and narrowly defined view of US national interests, but concern predates his administration. The US refusal to ratify the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a strategic agreement masquerading as a trade deal that Washington was instrumental in negotiating, is the most glaring example, and that was President Obama's fault. The failure to ensure that China honored the purported agreement to withdraw its forces from Scarborough Shoal was another blow to US credibility.

Trump's mercurial and transactional approach to policy crystalized fears and left allies and partners wondering what might be next. While the worst predictions did not come true, [the damage was done](#). Governments around the region know that even if Trump departed, Trumpism remains, and his foreign policy mindset could reassert itself in Washington even if he did not return to power.

More alarming, though, is a realization that a "mainstream," traditionally-minded president like Joe Biden can still [unsettle the status quo](#). The withdrawal from Afghanistan rattled even those allies who approved of the decision but were alarmed by the incompetence of its execution and the lack of consultation. The persistence of Trump's thinking about economic security, manifest most plainly in tariffs that remain in place against allies, is another source of concern. Other moves, such as the abrupt cancellation of the France-Australian submarine agreement and the substitution of a UK-US deal, reinforce a belief that Washington's field of vision is narrowing and that allies and partners play increasingly bit roles.

A third factor that shaped the region's evolution was the tenure of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. His was one of the most remarkable second acts in world politics. After a brutal failure during his first term as prime minister, he returned to the Kantei for a period of stability, energy, and creativity unrivaled in Japan's modern history.

The fact that Abe stayed in office as long as he did—he claimed the record for the longest-serving PM in the country's history—transformed perceptions of Japan. His determination to modernize the country's national security bureaucracy and subsequent commitment to using that power and purpose to support a wobbling regional order yielded institutions—the CPTPP and the Quad, to name but two—pillars of the emerging architecture.

A fourth and final key factor is a conceptual framework, the Indo-Pacific. Abe championed this concept, but it deserves recognition on its own. While the idea of an Indo-Pacific strategic space had been employed by US Pacific Command combatant commanders from the late 1980s, Abe elevated that idea to a guiding principle in his 2007 [speech](#) to the Indian Parliament in which he spoke of “the confluence of two seas.” Obama's “rebalance” incorporated the concept, but it didn't assume prominence until the Trump administration adopted the framework in 2017.

The Indo-Pacific is a curious geographical space. China is physically in the middle, but it's bracketed between two democratic powers. The inclusion of India as a geopolitical counterweight to China is one of the most obvious intentions of its proponents. More important, that Indo-Pacific frame is a predominately maritime domain and links the strategic space to the trade routes that run through its heart. In addition, the inclusion of the Indian Ocean invites European countries with an African presence to be engaged. These considerations expand the number of countries that can claim an interest in events within that region. It is thus an inherently inclusive framework, which allows more countries to participate in regional security affairs.

The key variable appears to have been Abe—which means that our current moment may well result from considerable luck. Abe was a break with history, and Japan appears to be resorting to kind. His successor was in office for just a year. His successor, Kishida Fumio, is popular, but he is a traditional Japanese politician who mediates among factions and plays down his own opinions. There is mounting [evidence](#) that the Japanese public is increasingly inward-focused, cautious, and risk-averse. It can be led, but Kishida will have to have vision, charisma, competence, and luck, especially given the challenging circumstances—COVID, China, and a distracted ally.

Still, trajectories have been set, and that will allow bureaucracies to follow through. Headwinds will grow, but there is enough momentum and energy to believe that a genuine regional security architecture will emerge.

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