



**ABE'S DEATH CREATES A VOID IN
JAPAN**

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN

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

Shortly after the March 2011 tragedy struck Japan, critic Azuma Hiroki [wrote](#) that "the disaster broke us apart." He reasoned that the randomness of the death and destruction of that triple catastrophe—earthquake, tsunami, and meltdown at the Fukushima nuclear power plant—shattered a pillar of Japanese identity, the belief that all Japanese were equal. In my book *Peak Japan: The End of Great Ambitions*, a senior government official confessed that the events that day "marked the end of our illusions," as the nation had to face the grim reality that hopes for a return to normalcy after years of stagnation were unlikely.

The murder of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in Nara last week could have a similar impact on Japan. Abe was a passionate and committed conservative nationalist, who had one of the most remarkable second acts in world politics. After becoming the longest serving prime minister in Japanese history, he left office while retaining—and wielding—great influence behind the scenes. He was killed while campaigning in the Upper House election that would be held two days after his death.

That death was as random as those of March 11. Abe didn't decide to make the campaign stop until the day

before. The killer has allegedly said that he didn't shoot the former PM because of his policies. His reported motivation—the bankrupting of his mother by a religious group—occurred decades earlier.

The attack similarly struck at the belief that Japan is an especially safe and peaceful country. Japanese media have been reluctant, if not unwilling, [to call the killing an assassination](#), reasoning that the murder does not align with the prevailing image of such an act. The dissonance of a political killing is not just a political act, but a blow to national identity.

Abe was a crusader who sought to change Japan and central to his agenda was defense policy reform, which in turn demanded amendment of the nation's constitution. He was a tireless advocate in and out of office, highlighting the threat posed by a revisionist China and railing against the handcuffs imposed on Japan by a national charter which prevented it from addressing that threat and fulfilling the nation's destiny as a great power.

While his death likely boosted the performance of his Liberal Democratic Party in Sunday's ballot—it bested expectations, installing, with allies, a supermajority willing to consider constitutional revision—it may undercut his cause. There is no one with his passion, charisma, and political skill to push reform over the threshold. Most advocates are too raw and too inexperienced to win public trust for such a monumental step.

Public backing is crucial. Constitutional revision is a two-step process. Amendments must first be passed by a Diet supermajority; they must then be approved by a majority of the voting public, which is evenly split on the question. Securing that support will be difficult, more so as members of Abe's party who share his reform agenda also [promote](#) public quietism in favor of stability and governance by elites who know what's best for the country.

Incumbent Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, the chief beneficiary of his predecessor's untimely death, is a cipher. No one is quite sure what he stands for. He [said](#) after the election that he would promote Abe's legacy, but advancing a debate is not the same as pushing for

constitutional revision. He has long held a more dovish position on foreign policy; Abe, by contrast, worked assiduously behind the scenes to push the government toward a more aggressive stance. Kishida has other priorities, economic reform chief among them, and it is unclear if he is prepared to spend political capital on the causes that Abe held dear.

This does not mean that Japan will retreat. One of the most important elements of Abe's legacy is the way he shifted his country's foreign policy framework toward a more assertive, hardline, and high-profile stance. This new trajectory has endured for the two prime ministers that followed Abe and it will continue for the foreseeable future. The United States and like-minded nations will continue to have a partner in Tokyo, one that shares their vision of regional and global order.

Still, Abe's absence will be palpable. Japan has many capable and intelligent politicians but few can match his energy, experience, commitment, or sheer delight in the political fight (a characteristic that [deeply divided Japan](#) and eventually constrained as much as enabled him). Kishida's ascendance to the prime minister's office last year was a recognition of that truth, a return to form for Japanese prime ministers—a record that does not inspire great confidence.

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