



***THE PRESCIENCE OF ABE'S VISION
FOR TAIWAN***

BY SHIHOKO GOTO

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Pursuit of a rules-based order for the Indo-Pacific had been one of Abe Shinzo's foreign policy hallmarks. In hindsight, it now appears prescient in addressing the shift in the region's power dynamics.

During the two years since he stepped down as prime minister, Abe had focused increasingly on Taiwan as a geopolitical flashpoint warranting greater Japan-US coordination. The attention Abe paid to Taiwan undoubtedly looks farsighted now, and has established his legacy as a premier that identified many of the systemic challenges facing not just Japan, but the region at large.

When Abe outlined his vision for the Indo-Pacific during his first term (2006-07) in office, few would have expected that his [2007 speech](#) before the Indian parliament about the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans would become the foundation for multilateral cooperation in Asia. Over the past 15 years, however, the concept of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" has not only been adopted by Abe's successors, but also been embraced by the United States and other nations. Not only was the concept of FOIP adopted by the Trump administration, but the concept has become the foundation for new mechanisms for regional cooperation including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad") and AUKUS.

Taiwan had been an integral part of the Abe government's Indo-Pacific strategy, as the prime minister noted the strategic importance of the island publicly on numerous occasions. Under Abe in 2019 Japan signed onto the US-Taiwan Global Cooperation and Training Framework, which had been established in 2015 to promote Taiwan's strengths in international cooperation and governance. It was, however, after leaving office in 2020 that Abe stepped up his support for Taiwan, connecting the need to defend Taiwan's democracy and economy as part of a broader strategy to counterbalance increased threats from China.

China's increasing militarization and willingness to leverage economic dominance to take punitive actions against governments it opposed had been in effect well before Abe's resignation. Yet Beijing's weaponization of its economic presence and aggression on perceived core interests, including Taiwan, only intensified from the outbreak of the global pandemic.

In an exclusive [interview with the Wilson Center](#) in March 2022, Abe cautioned that the possibility of China invading Taiwan could not be dismissed.

"China has taken a position that Taiwan is a part of China...at the same time, we are in a situation where Taiwan is not recognized as a nation by most of the countries in the international community. Of course, it is not even a member state of the United Nations," Abe said, adding that while Beijing has not yet made clear whether it would act to assert its claim over Taiwan, "the fact that they have not done so does not mean that they have decided that they won't."

Certainly, Abe's wariness about Beijing's moves to intimidate Taiwan was shared by his successors Suga Yoshihide and Kishida Fumio. It was Suga who in April 2021 signed onto the [joint statement](#) with the United States which declared the "importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait," the first time since 1969 that Taiwan was mentioned in a bilateral statement. Since then, the G7, NATO, and other groups have followed in highlighting the vulnerability of Taiwan and the need for the international community to come to its defense as part of a broader strategy to push back against Chinese aggressions.

Japan's reassessment of its policy toward Taiwan since Abe left office has been striking. Having skirted issues related to Taiwan in light of Japan's own defense strategy—which concentrates on self-defense mechanisms—Tokyo has emerged as a leading champion of greater support for the Taiwanese government amid Beijing's growing pressure. The support is not merely altruistic, but reflects growing alarm about the spillover effect for Japan. It has led to a review of Japanese policy toward Taiwan in its June 2021 [defense white paper](#), recognizing not only the strategic importance of Taiwan, but also the growing concerted efforts by China to destabilize Taipei.

No longer shying away from expressing support for Taiwan, Tokyo has ramped up efforts to support it more comprehensively, including economically and politically. As the prime minister who signed Japan on to the preceding TPP trade agreement, Abe's commitment to ensure that Taipei be part of the CPTPP multilateral trade framework has been particularly noteworthy. In a virtual meeting with Tsai Ing-wen in March 2022, Abe [told the Taiwanese president](#) that it was in the interest of the international community for Taiwan to join the CPTPP as soon as possible. In addition, Tokyo was at the forefront of providing Taiwan with vaccines in summer 2021, and Japanese consumers quickly mobilized and expressed support for Taiwan by snapping up Taiwanese pineapples boycotted by China.

Abe played no small part in directing the convergence of political and public support for Taiwan, repeatedly arguing that Beijing not only threatened Taiwan and the international order, but directly threatened Japan's own security and stability as well. In the weeks since his assassination, however, global attention on Taiwan has only increased with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's early August visit. As China stepped up military exercises in the Taiwan Strait in direct response to the House speaker's tour of Taipei, the immediate concern is whether or not such military actions will continue in the longer term, and the possibility of such conduct leading to direct conflict.

In the longer term, though, Pelosi's visit is expected to lead to a reassessment of US policy towards Taiwan. While both Washington and Tokyo remain in

agreement about the need to continue supporting Taipei and stave off acts of aggression by China, those objectives can be reached more effectively through greater coordination of action by Japan and the United States. Defending Taiwan militarily, economically, and politically will be one of the biggest challenges for the US-Japan alliance, and no doubt would have been the focal point of Abe's foreign policy agenda ex-officio.

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