

ISSUES & INSIGHTS
VOL. 22, SR7

OCTOBER 2022

PACIFIC FORUM
INTERNATIONAL

Abe Shinzo

In Memoriam

EDITED BY
ROB YORK





Abe Shinzo In Memoriam

By
Rob York

ISSUES & INSIGHTS

SPECIAL REPORT

VOL. 22, SR7 | October 2022

Pacific Forum

Based in Honolulu, the Pacific Forum (www.pacforum.org) is a foreign policy research institute focused on the Asia-Pacific Region. Founded in 1975, the Pacific Forum collaborates with a broad network of research institutes from around the Pacific Rim, drawing on Asian perspectives and disseminating project findings and recommendations to global leaders, governments, and members of the public throughout the region. The Forum's programs encompass current and emerging political, security, economic, and maritime policy issues, and works to help stimulate cooperative policies through rigorous research, analyses and dialogues.

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INTRODUCTION

A sharp-elbowed politician, an irreplaceable international statesman

A famous, albeit fictional, statesman once said “A good act does not wash out the bad, nor a bad act the good.”

As Japan’s longest-serving prime minister, Abe Shinzo left a legacy. Fair-minded individuals would be able to find grounds for criticism in that record: Abe climbed to leadership of the Liberal Democratic Party by stoking doubts about his country’s record in World War II, provoking outrage from neighboring countries. He relished sparring with his rivals in Japan’s other political parties and in the press; his country’s press freedom ranking consequently declined under his leadership. His efforts at addressing his country’s stagnant economy and moribund birthrate saw, interpreted charitably, only modest successes.

But Abe Shinzo should be remembered for much more than that. Much as Winston Churchill should be remembered, both for his foresight regarding the rise of the Nazi threat and his record as ruthless defender of Britain’s colonial interests, proponents of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” vision that Abe championed should remember his record as a partisan, but also as an international institution builder in an age where both “freedom” and “openness” are under attack in the Indo-Pacific. In doing so, he revived Japan as an international player and helped set the stage for multilateral cooperation to preserve existing rules and norms, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the “Quad”) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Such efforts make him one of the most influential statesmen of this era.

Since Abe’s shocking assassination on July 8, the Pacific Forum has sought to ensure that the fullness of this legacy is remembered, and as such used our PacNet series to explain his impact from a variety of perspectives. In doing so, we reached out to many old friends whose names are familiar to the Pacific Forum’s long-time readers. In PacNet #37, Brad Glosserman, Pacific Forum’s senior advisor and my co-editor at *Comparative Connections*, identifies the specific attributes of Abe’s—specifically his strongly held opinions and behind-the-scenes advocacy—that made it possible for him to be this institutional builder and to restore Japan’s role on the foreign policy stage. In PacNet #36 Stephen Nagy of the International Christian University in Tokyo provides a comprehensive overview of Abe the diplomat, including his successful managing of relations with the PRC, which were actually at a low point *before* his lengthy stint as PM. In PacNet #39 Kei Koga of Nanyang Technological University demonstrates how under Abe, Japan countered the PRC’s growing influence in Southeast Asian countries through sustained engagement, winning their trust despite their unwillingness to match his hawkishness toward Beijing. Furthermore, in PacNet #43 Jagannath Panda of ISDP, Sweden explains how Abe’s dealings with India paved the way for the latter’s increased engagement with the outside world, including through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. In PacNet #40, I note that Abe’s tireless engagement with American presidents across changes in parties has made good relations with Tokyo that rarest of things in US politics: an area of bipartisan agreement that looks unlikely to change, regardless of the outcome of the 2024 election.

The Pacific Forum also reached beyond its regular contributors' list to acquire new perspectives. Shihoko Goto of the Wilson Center details Abe's prescient vision for the defense of Taiwan, something the US would gradually awaken to. Jada Frasier—an MA student in Asian Studies at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service that we believe policy professionals will be hearing from more and more in the future—explains how despite causing tensions in the Japan-South Korea relationship, Abe also deserves credit for increasing the two East Asian democracies' opportunities for security cooperation through his emphasis on minilateral groupings.

Now that Japan has laid the former prime minister to rest last week, those who remember the darker side of his leadership will find grounds to do so, and some of those criticisms will be warranted. Abe, however, left a legacy far beyond those unpleasantries, especially if, as was the case with Churchill, his country and the international community rise to the challenge they presently face.

Rob York
Oct. 6, 2022



***ABE SHINZO AND THE JAPAN-SOUTH
KOREA RELATIONSHIP: NEAR- AND
LONG-TERM LEGACIES***

BY JADA FRASER

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Under former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, Japan's relationship with South Korea had its ups and downs, mostly downs at the end. But the broad actions that Abe took to shore up Japan's regional role have laid the basis for a promising renewal of security cooperation under Prime Minister Kishida Fumio and the new South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol.

Over his eight years in office, Seoul-Tokyo relations went from bad to worse. The region also evolved during those eight years as overlapping minilateral and multilateral groupings brought Japan and South Korea closer together, even if by accident. Abe was responsible for both—that is his complicated legacy.

As Japan's longest-serving prime minister, Abe spent time alongside four South Korean presidents, but his legacy will likely be cemented by the developments in relations that took place under the tenure of conservative former President Park Geun-hye (2013-17) and progressive former President Moon Jae-in (2017-22). Numerous historical grievances frustrated progress in improving relations during Abe's time in office, as each government took antithetical views over reconciliation on issues surrounding [forced labor](#)

and the "[comfort women](#)" (wartime victims of sexual slavery).

In the weeks to come following Abe's assassination there will be countless pieces published that focus, rightly, on Abe's [ideological bent](#) which often manifested itself in revisionist personal and political actions that damaged the country's relations with South Korea. Yet, Abe's strategic re-shaping of the Indo-Pacific region will continue to elevate the role of regional powers, like South Korea, in shaping and defending the rules-based international order. As threat perceptions in [South Korea](#) and [Japan](#) converge to drive closer strategic alignment, Abe's transformation of Japan's security and defense architecture can enable the two countries to work together more seamlessly. With an eye to the future, the legacy Abe leaves behind is a strong foundation on which his successors can build.

Abe is often quoted for the famous line he delivered to former Secretary of State Richard Armitage [in 2013](#) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) that "Japan is not, and will never be a Tier-two country...I am back, and so shall Japan be." As the intellectual godfather in the conception of the [Indo-Pacific and the Quad](#), a central stakeholder in keeping the [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#) alive after US withdrawal (and renamed the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership), a main player in moving Japan towards a "[values](#)" [based foreign policy](#) centered on democracy and human rights, and a leading figure in seeing Japan become the [most trusted strategic partner](#) in much of Asia, Japan's proactive leadership role in the region under Abe unquestionably accomplished this goal.

While bilateral relations between Japan and South Korea during Abe's tenure did not see the same levels of progress, another quote from his 2013 CSIS speech underscores Abe's view of the strategic importance of the relationship, "Even with the existence of issues...the ties between Japan and Korea is something that cannot be severed." Many of Abe's successes in elevating Japan's security and economic role and re-shaping Indo-Pacific regional architecture have set the groundwork for the two countries to take the bilateral relationship to new heights. These

developments have evolved as South Korea, too, has sought a greater security and economic leadership role in the region.

Abe played a large role in re-envisioning the region's [hub-and-spokes](#)-style regional architecture to encompass minilateral groupings. These minilateral arrangements have proven adept and flexible in responding to challenges and organizing collective action. Smaller memberships facilitate stronger consensus-building. As I have argued elsewhere, pursuing regional peace and stability through [minilateral engagement](#) allows countries to cooperate where their interests align, without the fear of being trapped in a formal and binding structure. Conflicting views on issues outside the distinct remit of a minilateral grouping do not jeopardize cooperation.

Abe's leadership in elevating minilaterals to center-stage in the Indo-Pacific has direct implications for future Japan-South Korea relations, as the likely main vehicle for near-term cooperation is the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral. Progress is already happening on this front, as the three countries announced last month that they would [restart trilateral ballistic missile defense-tracking exercises](#), the first such trilateral exercise in three years.

The shared threat from North Korea is an obvious motivation for these exercises, but both countries similarly share concerns regarding China's assertiveness and provocative actions in the East and South China Seas and across the Taiwan Strait. Both countries' leaders have joined President Biden in joint statements emphasizing the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, representing a significant shift from prior US-Japan and US-ROK joint statements. While it was [Suga Yoshihide](#), Abe's successor as prime minister, who issued the first US-Japan joint statement that mentioned Taiwan for the first time since 1969, no one made greater [efforts](#) than Abe to bring the two Asian democracies closer together. The significance of both progressive former [President Moon](#) and conservative incumbent [President Yoon](#) joining Japan to include mention of Taiwan in respective joint statements with the US cannot be overstated.

Economic security is another realm in which Abe spearheaded efforts to minimize risks to Japan from supply chain vulnerability, industrial espionage, and economic coercion by [launching](#) an economic division at the National Security Secretariat in April 2020, becoming the largest of the seven divisions in the NSS. As both Japan and South Korea have felt the screws of China's economic coercion, the South Korean government has taken similar steps and [launched](#) a center dedicated to economic security that will be housed under its foreign ministry. In another promising development to link these efforts through US-Japan-South Korea trilateral cooperation, the three countries' senior officials discussed ways to [enhance cooperation](#) on economic security during a June 2022 meeting.

While Abe's often ultra-nationalist and revisionist actions in office should not be downplayed as his legacy on the Japan-South Korea bilateral relationship is recounted, his time as prime minister was instrumental in shaping the region to the benefit of both countries' national interests. The growing policy alignment in Japan and South Korea owes much to the path Abe charted in modernizing Japan's national security state and enabling greater international security engagement. Whether converging threat perceptions and growing policy alignment in Japan and South Korea can translate to substantial cooperation remains unclear, but these past few months have seen promising developments in the bilateral relationship.

All three countries have a responsibility to capitalize on the momentum in both Japan-South Korea and US-Japan-South Korea senior official engagements and invest sustained attention towards incrementally upgrading cooperative activities based on the shared national security interests of all three countries. Abe Shinzo laid much of the groundwork for this. It is now up to Prime Minister Kishida to build on it.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.



***POST-ABE INDO-PACIFIC REGIONAL
DYNAMICS: A LEGACY BEYOND THE
MAN***

BY STEPHEN NAGY

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Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, through his formulation of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (dubbed FOIP), articulated the need for a transparent, rules-based Indo-Pacific. Priorities included development assistance, infrastructure and connectivity, institution-building, maritime security cooperation, and a commitment to rules as the final arbiter for international affairs rather than a Machiavellian, might-is-right approach to foreign policy.

On his visit in 2007 to the Parliament of India he articulated the so-called “[Confluence of two seas](#)” connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans as a zone of economic intercourse, institution- and norm-building, and a concrete security agenda to ensure that critical sea lines of communication remain arbitrated by international law.

His passing will have regional consequences for different stakeholders and those who wish to shape his legacy. It will also have domestic consequences for how foreign policy is formulated. For countries with whom Abe had tense relations, those consequences may not be as expected.

Abe’s influence at home

In Japan, Abe was the factional head of the [Seiwakai](#), the largest faction within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) umbrella party. As faction head and former prime minister, Abe could shape discussions on domestic politics and security policy within the LDP and government. Wielding this influence, he committed to revising Article 9 of the Constitution and articulated the [importance of Taiwan in Japan security](#). This has not yet succeeded, but talk of [revision](#) persists, especially given his party’s dominant [election performance](#) following Abe’s death.

Abe also committed to a multi-layered and multinational cooperation not only to ameliorate Japan’s security’s dilemmas, but also to invest in the security of the broader Indo-Pacific, which has shaped incumbent Prime Minister Kishida Fumio’s policies in the region.

Taking a granular look at [Kishida’s Shangri-La dialogue speech](#), the strong influence of Abe’s FOIP vision in “Kishida’s Vision for Peace” is obvious.

Abe’s commitment to enlarging the quality and quantity of security partnerships and cooperation, and how this influenced the current government, are also evidenced in Japan’s joining of the NATO summit in Madrid and the strengthening of its security through Reciprocal Access Agreements with [Australia](#) and [the United Kingdom](#), as well as the realization of the [Quad summit in Tokyo](#) in May 2022.

Does Abe’s unexpected death give Kishida more political maneuvering room for his own foreign policy—one more autonomous from Seiwakai—or will he have to adopt more of the late prime minister’s positions?

It is too early to tell.

China and Taiwan

With Sino-Japanese relations deteriorating, Abe Shinzo’s death was celebrated by some in China, including by [netizens](#) and [club-goers](#). In the Japan-China context, however, Abe’s death should be seen with concern. While bilateral relations were fraught

with complexities and security concerns, Abe understood that Japan and China have a mutually beneficial economic relationship and that a zero-sum approach was neither feasible nor desirable.

It was Abe who resurrected Sino-Japanese relations from their 2012 low after the [nationalization](#) of the Senkaku Islands by the Democratic Party of Japan's Noda administration, using backdoor diplomacy and cooperation with astute Japanese diplomats and their Chinese counterparts.

These efforts led to Abe and Xi meeting in the fall of 2019 in Beijing and [inking](#) more than 50 third-country infrastructure and connectivity projects and numerous business deals. Both leaders also pushed for completion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Japan-China maritime and aerial communication [mechanism](#) aimed at averting unintended clashes between the Japanese and Chinese militaries went into operation in June 2018.

If it weren't for the COVID-19 pandemic, Abe may have welcomed a state visit by Xi in early 2020 to sign a fifth political document.

Today, Sino-Japanese relations are in a holding state. Japan is concerned about Beijing's position on Taiwan and whether it will seek reunification by force.

[Abe's explicit comments](#) that a Taiwan contingency would be a direct threat to Japanese security and would require a united response sought to convey clarity to Beijing and Taipei that the status quo across the Taiwan Strait is Japan's preferred option.

From Japan's perspective, cross-strait instability is of concern because it would disrupt sea lines of communication and critical technologies produced by the Taiwanese Semiconductor Manufacturing Company. In this case, Abe's commitment to multilateralism manifested in [his calls](#) for Washington to drop its ambiguity on a Taiwan contingency.

Still, the loss of Abe's pragmatism, nuance, and political acumen in managing Sino-Japan relations will make bilateral relations more complicated as Abe was not only able to negotiate Tokyo-Beijing relations

but also an effective communicator to Washington about China and the Indo-Pacific.

Regional relations

Abe's passing will have ripple effects in the region at large, with Japan's neighbors and partners looking to build on the progress he started.

South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol looks determined to reset the bilateral ROK-Japan relationship and trilateral Japan-US-ROK relations to deal with the challenges of North Korea and China. Paradoxically, Abe's death has opened the window for Yoon to engage further with Japan while at the same time removing the divisive ([especially in South Korea](#)) Abe in the South Korean context to improve relations.

In Southeast Asia and India, Abe championed bilateral relations and the key role of both in the Indo-Pacific. With his absence, Southeast Asian countries will look for continuity in the Kishida administration—and beyond—including in their diplomatic engagement within the region, commitment to connectivity and infrastructure development, and in developing strong bilateral relations with individual ASEAN states. India will look for continuity in bilateral cooperation on economic development, infrastructure, and connectivity, but also in deepening mini-lateral cooperation through enhanced cooperation within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and other emerging mini-lateral organizations such as Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

Finally, the United States views the passing of Abe with concern as he was able to marshal the political forces in Japan to take a more proactive position in securing its own security but also providing security within the US-Japan alliance and for partners. The 2016 [Legislation for Peace and Security](#) and the 2013 [Specially Designated Secrets Protection Law](#), were both meant to strengthen cooperation with the United States and like-minded countries, to enable Japan to be a more proactive partner in being a providing security within the region.

Abe's leadership was central in these legislative achievements.

Fortunately for the United States and Tokyo's other partners, Abe's FOIP vision, its commitment to a robust and ever strengthening Japan-US alliance, and to multilayered and multinational security, economic, and diplomatic cooperation to deal with the greatest regional geopolitical challenge—coexistence with China—has been internationalized and institutionalized. This should ensure that regional Indo-Pacific dynamics remain institutionally driven based on shared interests among like-minded countries.

Indo-Pacific stakeholders can contribute to the region's institutional development by crafting rules-based frameworks that embody the principles laid out in Abe's FOIP vision including development assistance, infrastructure and connectivity, institution-building, and maritime security cooperation. Finding a role for China as Abe did will be critical to achieving these goals.

Concrete initiatives that would further these objectives include expanding the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, more investment in the Partners in the Blue Pacific and similar initiatives in Southeast and South Asia and enhancing public good provision by minilaterals such as the Quad or a Quad-plus formulation to mitigate non-traditional security challenges such as climate change, piracy, illegal fishing and transnational diseases

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

BY **BRAD GLOSSERMAN**

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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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***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.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.



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

BY **ROB YORK**

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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.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.



**POST-ABE INDIA-JAPAN TIES: DOES
KISHIDA HAVE WHAT IT TAKES?**

BY DR. JAGANNATH PANDA

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Two Japan-India summit meetings between prime ministers Kishida Fumio and Narendra Modi in 2022 underscore their accelerating [Special Strategic and Global Partnership](#). This partnership is [based](#) on the shared values of freedom, humanism, democracy, tolerance, and non-violence, outlined in the Abe-Modi vision statement of 2018.

In [Modi's](#) words, “The best is yet to come.”

Indeed, 2022 is proving pivotal for India and Japan in their search for geopolitical power and for the trajectory of their bilateral relations. That this is their 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations is incidental. Both are seen as increasingly relevant partners in uncertain times—the difference is that Japan is a natural, credible partner of the West, whereas India is walking a tightrope amid [enticement](#) from both China and the West. Modi's and Kishida's personal diplomacy in the wake of the Ukraine war is largely responsible for this growing attention. But will they be able to achieve the “[Broader Asia](#)” vision that the former (late) Prime Minister Abe Shinzo promoted, to build a united (and stronger) Indo-Pacific that is already geographically and spatially in motion? Can Kishida endure the [political void](#) (and maturity) in India-Japan ties left by Abe's assassination?

The primary aim of Kishida's March visit was to convince India to take a stand against Russia, yet their bilateral ties have remained unaffected amid the dissonance. The [meeting](#) covered a range of issues including economic security, supply chains, climate action, sustainable development in India's northeast, trade and investment, loan provisions, digital partnerships, and connectivity.

Although the heads of state met after a gap of four years, Kishida continued the momentum of his predecessors—particularly Abe—amid [speculations](#) of Kishida's differences from Abe and his intent to carve out his own niche. Abe, as leader of the largest political faction (Seiwakai) in the Liberal Democratic Party, wielded tremendous clout, even after his 2020 resignation. Abe was instrumental in not only building multidirectional India-Japan ties but in persuading Modi to embrace the “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) construct, a bulwark against China. As chairman of the Japan-India Association since May, the loss of Abe's guidance will be felt in both countries.

Moving forward, the synergy Abe achieved must be accorded special focus and significance by successive Japanese (and Indian) administrations. On the economic front, Japan's [investment](#) of 5 trillion yen (\$42 billion) in India over five years will take forward the legacy of the target set during Abe's tenure. Their bilateral connect is set for a fillip through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework ([IPEF](#)) covering digital trade, supply chains, and clean energy, etc. which would ensure greater market access and secure digital infrastructure. This would help their outreach with Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

One area where progress remains slow is India-Japan cooperation in third countries, or the region at large. This includes bilateral collaboration in Indian Ocean countries, the Middle East, African countries (via barely developed initiatives like the [Asia-Africa Growth Corridor](#)), and Southeast Asia. Unexplored outreach in Northeast Asia is also compelling, especially amid this year's [increased nuclear threat](#) from North Korea. The “global” nature of the India-Japan partnership is yet to fully develop.

Tokyo has emerged a major developmental partner for India, with collaborative projects across the country. This bilateral infrastructure cooperation must now go forward, and Abe's envisioned expansion of India-Japan infrastructure projects to Bay of Bengal countries and, eventually, Southeast Asian states is key. Japan has long been a major, highly trusted infrastructure [partner](#) for ASEAN. Much scope remains for the two countries to realize their vision of a global partnership through greater trilateral [India-Japan-ASEAN](#) cooperation.

In Northeast Asia, amid the deteriorating security architecture (due to China and North Korea), one way to push forward a joint endeavor is via a Japan-India-South Korea trilateral—a realistic ambition after South Korea's increasing embrace of the FOIP concept and the promise of closer Japan-South Korea ties under President Yoon Suk Yeol.

Two critical regions in need of further impetus are the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. In the Bay of Bengal—where India's Act East Policy and Japan's FOIP through the Expanded Partnership of Quality Infrastructure show confluence amid increasing Chinese influence—they could promote information sharing, capacity building, and maritime security via [joint military exercises](#), the connectivity initiatives of the East Asia Forum, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue's maritime diplomacy. In the Indian Ocean, where Japan's FOIP and India's Security and Growth for All in the Region visions converge, Japan already [leads](#) the Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative's connectivity pillar. However, under current circumstances, a trilateral with France—an active collaborator with India—and coalescing with other Quad states would strengthen the regional security landscape.

To boost the Indo-Pacific security architecture and balance the largely US-led initiatives, a India-Japan-European Union trilateral would [create](#) a much-needed “global value-oriented, trustworthy and confidence-inducing grouping.” The recent antagonism by China, including Russian support for “[indivisible security](#),” tactics in the beleaguered regions of Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and its vetoing (with Russia) of additional

United Nations sanctions against North Korea, fuels a shared threat perception between the three. Collaboration via the European Union's Global Gateway and India and Japan's Supply Chain Resilience Initiative will further infrastructure connectivity and help in gradual decoupling from China.

Further, Kishida's sharp policy maneuvers (voicing support for Taiwan and attending the NATO Madrid summit) targeting China will likely favor India's stand and Delhi's emerging position in global geopolitics—his [declaration](#) of strengthening like-minded partnerships amid increasing defense capabilities is a more than a nod to Abe's hawkish China policy.

In view of their joint vision for the region and the vital role they play in the Indo-Pacific, both countries must join their efforts and initiate more projects for the benefit of their neighborhoods. As middle powers, combining their strengths—such as through minilateral groupings, coordinated positions in multilateral frameworks, and formation of a maritime corridor stretching from India to Japan (via ASEAN)—will be crucial for both countries to make a real impact in the region, as well as advance Abe's legacy of shaping a universal values-oriented international order.

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*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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