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Japan's Grand Strategy: The Abe Era and Its Aftermath

Christopher W. Hughes, Alessio Patalano and Robert Ward

On 28 August 2020, Abe Shinzo formally announced that he was stepping down as Japan's longest-serving prime minister since the Second World War.[1] Facing a relapse in the medical condition that had forced him to step down as prime minister for the first time in 2007 after just one year in office, he admitted that his health had deteriorated to the point that he was at risk of making errors. With public frustration about the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic translating into plummeting approval rates, and continued media rumblings over political-funding scandals, Abe seemed to understand that he needed to make way for new leadership.[2] An iconoclastic politician who had set out to re-energise a sluggish economy, revise Japan's constitution and change the country's role in international affairs, Abe was departing the scene having advanced his agenda, but – by his own admission – before he could fully deliver results on several issues of importance to him.[3]

How should we assess the significance and success of Abe's second stint in power? Opinions are divided.[4] Positive assessments have identified successes in three areas. Domestically, Abe fully capitalised on reforms

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that have given the Prime Minister's Office greater capacity to implement policy.[5] In security matters, although he did not achieve his signature goal of revising Article 9 – the 'peace clause' – of the Japanese constitution, Abe expanded the potential boundaries of Japan's participation in international activities and partnerships.[6] Diplomatically, Abe re-engineered Japan's international outlook and leadership role. Significantly, Abe achieved all this under the shadow of systemic challenges including an ageing population, tight domestic fiscal constraints, a more mercurial United States and an increasingly assertive China.[7]

Critics have taken a different view. On the one hand, the poor performance of Japan's economy has raised questions over the long-term significance of his premiership. In August 2020, for example, second-quarter GDP data indicated that Japan had recorded its worst quarterly economic contraction since the end of the Second World War.[8] This was largely owing to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, but was aggravated by the negative consequences of Abe's decision in October 2019 to again raise the consumption tax. By the time Abe stepped down, his vaunted 'Abenomics', with its 'three arrows' for economic reform (monetary, fiscal and structural), had failed to lift inflation, rehabilitate Japan's public finances or noticeably improve the country's economic-growth trajectory.[9] Other critics have focused on the security reforms that Abe introduced. These have altered Japan's traditional approach to internationalism and weakened significantly its post-war identity as a 'pacifist' or 'anti-militaristic' country.[10] From this perspective, Japan is back as an international actor, but not necessarily for the better, its pacifist profile having been damaged and questions raised about the longer-term sustainability and efficacy of Abe's strategy.

We take the view that the Abe era has indeed brought about significant changes in Japan, and that these changes are likely to endure. Abe's premiership was successful in attaining many of its self-declared objectives. After Abe returned to power in 2012, he charted a new grand strategy – the 'Abe Doctrine' – that broke with the past and continues to determine the frameworks, practices and tools employed by Japan as an international actor. For the first time in Japan's post-war history, military and non-military levers of power were proactively mobilised to preserve and enhance the prime

minister's vision of Japan's long-term interests. In articulating these interests and the means of attaining them, the Abe Doctrine satisfies understandings of the term 'grand strategy' as used in the field of international relations.[11]

Criticisms of Abe's reforms can sometimes serve to obscure the two most potentially significant developments of the Abe years: an increase in Japan's perceived capacity to influence international affairs and shape their outcome, and the concomitant enhancement of its 'convening' ambitions and power to influence its international environment. This is what sets Abe's Japan apart, and the country will not revert to a more reactive or passive role in the foreseeable future. Instead, Suga Yoshihide is likely to build on his predecessor's framework, though he may well shift emphasis away from certain key foreign-policy issues that proved insurmountable and costly for Abe.

The Abe Doctrine

The policy choices made between 2012 and 2020 under the Abe Doctrine represented a significant departure from the so-called 'Yoshida Doctrine' – named after Yoshida Shigeru, Japanese prime minister in 1946–47 and 1948–54 – that had set Japan's post-war strategic trajectory.[12] For Abe, personal political revival was not the only objective; his dramatic return to power in 2012 was intended to signal that 'Japan Is Back' as a significant international player and that the pledge by the revisionist factions of the governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to domestically 'take back Japan' would facilitate the restoration of Japanese foreign policy.[13]

The Abe Doctrine was constructed by Abe himself and embraced by many of the key revisionist and establishment figures around him in the LDP. These senior elites included Suga, a close adviser to Abe since his first administration and his chief cabinet secretary throughout his second mandate – making Suga the longest holder of his government role in Japanese history. Abe's doctrine was driven by a belief that as an advanced industrial democracy, Japan should recover its place as a 'tier-one country' among the great powers.[14] This doctrine posited a Japan that could help to shape international affairs, not merely react to them. Indeed, this renewed status, propelled by reinvigorated economic and military capabilities, was

seen as vital for Japan to successfully navigate the ever more severe regional and global challenges that it faced.

For Japan to restore its national power and throw off its past malaise, it needed to 'escape from the post-war regime' that was seen as having effectively imposed upon Japan the identity of a defeated power.[15] The Abe Doctrine thus sought to displace the Yoshida Doctrine, which was blamed for perpetuating a regime of defeat and producing a 'small' Japan on the international stage.[16] Abe hoped that Japan would instead move towards becoming a proud and 'beautiful country', empowered with a wide set of tools, from the country's economic might as the world's third-largest economy to its far-from-negligible military capabilities, and with a voice on how the international system was to be organised.[17]

Dismantling the Yoshida Doctrine

In this respect, the Abe Doctrine was designed to systematically dismantle three key tenets of the Yoshida Doctrine. Firstly, Abe aimed to move away from a minimalist and reactive defence posture by upgrading key capabilities of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), removing constitutional constraints on the use of military power for international security and enabling Japan to participate in what it characterises as regimes of 'collective self-defence'. Secondly, Japan was to move away from a similarly minimalist level of commitment towards the US–Japan security treaty and function as a more fully fledged and integrated alliance partner, rather than constantly hedging against alliance dilemmas of entrapment or abandonment.[18] Thirdly, Japan was to exercise more overt leadership in East Asia and beyond, refusing to accede to a rising China's dominance in the region, and shifting from default engagement with Beijing to a more pronounced counterbalancing role.

Abe's doctrine was also meant to tackle what he perceived as the domestic roots of Japan's international underperformance by addressing two long-standing legacies. The first were what he thought of as 'masochistic' interpretations of Japan as a wartime aggressor.[19] These were to be overcome through what was at times overt, revisionist denial and the relativisation of history.[20] For Abe, existing narratives hindered domestic appetite for a wider range of political possibilities and were being used by other states to

limit Japan's international presence.[21] Secondly, the Abe Doctrine envisaged removing mechanisms introduced in the immediate post-war period to demilitarise and democratise Japan. Notably, this meant reinterpreting and revising the 1947 constitution, particularly Article 9. These mechanisms, which limited Japan's ability to integrate the use of military power with other tools of statecraft in the pursuit of national security, were thought to undermine Japan's national identity and sense of patriotism, as well as its status as a truly sovereign state.[22]

The signature approach of the Abe Doctrine was defined, therefore, by an attempt to shake loose from past constraints and to demonstrate greater autonomy and agency. Japan would now present itself as a proactive power with strong economic and military capabilities, and the ability both to work with partners and to convene and organise international frameworks itself to further its own interests.[23] To that end, Abe's doctrine also sought to propound, if with some inconsistencies, a values-oriented diplomacy focusing on the rule of law, free markets, human rights and democracy.[24] Japan aspired to present itself as a rule-setter and bastion of the liberal economic order, in contradistinction to competitors such as China.[25] The essence of Abe's grand strategy was aptly summed up in Japan's first National Security Strategy (NSS) as a vision aimed at moving Japan away from passive pacifism towards making 'a proactive contribution to peace'.[26]

Re-engineering the machinery of domestic and foreign policy

For his new grand strategy to be fully implemented, Abe needed to ensure that the Prime Minister's Office (Kantei) would be in a position to set policies and see that they were implemented across government. Hence, a key element of his vision was the pursuit of greater centralisation of Japan's traditionally fragmented foreign-policy apparatus. Abe, in large part supported by Suga, looked to exploit administrative reforms already in train to consolidate the Kantei's control over the devising and implementing of foreign and security policy, and to enhance its ability to bypass other ministries where necessary.[27] The creation, under Abe, of Japan's first National Security Council (NSC) in December 2013, and the government's adoption of the NSS that same year, were designed to significantly increase the Kantei's

ability to centrally coordinate foreign policy in a way not previously seen in post-war Japan.[28]

The fragmentation of domestic policymaking weighed on Abe's mind because of the need for Japan to have greater control over its foreign-policy practice in the face of challenging international circumstances. The Abe Doctrine was calculated to equip Japan to respond to and manage the developing security and foreign-policy landscape, especially the challenges presented by the US–Japan alliance and the rise of China. For Abe, as for all previous Japanese administrations, the overriding priority was the strengthening of the US–Japan relationship so as to maintain the US-centred liberal-economic and regional-security orders from which Japan had benefited so greatly in the post-war period. Abe knew that for Japan to act as a rule-setter, the existing international system needed to be maintained.

Yet Abe's administration was also aware that US–Japan ties were becoming problematic, and that the government would need to go further in committing to the relationship than any of its predecessors. Abe and his advisers were all too aware of the United States' ongoing relative decline as a global hegemon, and its concomitantly diminishing ability – and willingness – to provide public economic goods and defend its allies without condition. The Trump presidency compounded these concerns with its disregard for upholding the United States' own liberal-international trading and democratic order, and its capricious and transactional approach to dealing with security-treaty partners. The Trump approach included demands for greater financial contributions to the costs of US regional bases and deployments, including those in Japan, and the president even openly mused about the future necessity of the US–Japan alliance.[29]

The conclusion drawn by Abe in dealing with Washington was that Japan could only mitigate the risks of US decline by deepening its investment in US hegemony and the American presence in the East Asia region, which was seen as clearly preferable to any abdication of the regional order to Chinese control. In practice, this meant simultaneous attempts to upgrade Japan's capabilities and agency in organising the region, and the tightening of US–Japan military cooperation and integration.[30] Abe's objective was to demonstrate Japan's indispensability to the US and thus its status as a more

equal alliance partner; to exert influence on US strategic choices; and where necessary to step into any gaps in US diplomatic and economic leadership in the region.[31]

The Abe Doctrine was also concerned with managing China's rise. Abe recognised the need to coexist and cooperate with China economically, but also believed that Japan should be prepared to compete with China's diplomatic influence in the region and, if necessary, to counterbalance militarily Chinese threats to Japan's territorial- and maritime-security interests.[32] The Abe Doctrine posited that the only position China would respect was one of Japanese strength. Achieving such a position would allow for selective engagement and competition, and working with a range of partners to constrain China and shepherd it to the negotiating table.[33] In this way, it was also hoped that Japan, in being able to influence both US and Chinese international behaviour, could avoid becoming caught in the midst of a looming Sino-US confrontation.

Agency through convening power

Japan under Abe sought to exercise renewed agency and buttress the country's approach to the US and China by taking the initiative in relations with a range of other regional states. Indeed, it was an inherent part of the Abe Doctrine to vigorously pursue bilateral relations with other key US allies and partners in the region – not to hedge against the US–Japan alliance, but to strengthen the traditional US hub-and-spokes security architecture. In so doing, Japan led the way in transforming this architecture into a more synergic network of alliances.[34] Abe's government, like those before him, viewed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a crucial diplomatic arena and source of partners to counter China's rising influence. Abe assiduously visited every ASEAN state in the first 18 months of his second premiership, seeking to make common cause over issues related to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and maritime security in the South China Sea. Japan also viewed closer economic links with Southeast Asian states as an alternative to China's development model and a way of helping reduce Japan's own risk of increasingly asymmetric economic interdependence with China.[35]

Although Abe's personal attitude towards South Korea was often perceived as ambivalent, he nevertheless expressed hopes for enhanced Japan–South Korea security cooperation against North Korea's missile and nuclear threats. He made some progress towards this goal. The second Abe government further vowed to pick up where it left off in courting India as an economic and security partner to check Chinese influence, and from early on it emphasised Australia as an emerging military partner.[36]

New regional frameworks and coalitions

The Abe Doctrine also set out to foster and convene new regional frameworks to complement those centred on the US. From the beginning of his second premiership, Abe sought to revive the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (known as 'the Quad') bringing together Australia, India, Japan and the US. The Abe Doctrine's emphasis on seeking like-minded liberal partners meant reaching for security partnerships with out-of-region states, including major European actors such as the United Kingdom and France, the NATO Alliance and, towards the end of Abe's mandate, the European Union.[37]

In the economic sphere, Abe rapidly perceived the possibilities of joining with the Obama administration's sponsorship of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). After the US withdrew from the deal in 2017, Japan became a leader of the TPP's successor, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), with the goal of setting the rules of the game in trade and, importantly, creating a coalition of the like-minded as a means of containing China.[38] In 2016, in what was partly an effort to promote an alternative regional vision to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Japan articulated its concept of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP). The concept was deliberately designed to be flexibly and broadly defined in order to attract a diverse range of state participants. FOIP purports to be based on maintaining a rules-based regional order, and incorporates both economic aspects in terms of providing investment for quality infrastructure projects and promoting free trade, and security aspects centred on maritime security. FOIP was initially termed a 'strategy' but later came to be more commonly referred to as a 'vision', given that Japan wanted to avoid the impression that it was a containment strategy

vis-à-vis China. The latter interpretation might have deterred many states in East and South Asia, and further afield in Africa, from taking part and being seen as having overtly taken sides with Japan. FOIP's appeal as a vision for Asia that reinforced the stability of the existing order influenced the Trump administration's thinking as it developed its own Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2019, although this was cast in more military terms.[39]

Post-war legacies

Abe's strategy called for the diplomatic legacies of the post-war period to be dealt with in what he frequently described as a 'general settlement of post-war accounts'. After his visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013 drew international criticism, Abe was determined that Japan's history would no longer be used against it for diplomatic leverage. His 2015 statement on the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War was crafted to walk a fine line in not giving ground on his revisionist view of history while offering enough standard expressions of Japanese remorse for the war to close off the need for further Japanese apologies.[40] Barack Obama's visit to Hiroshima in May 2016 and Abe's own visit to Pearl Harbor in December that same year were meant to draw a line under any historical issues in the US–Japan relationship.

Other elements of Abe's bid to release Japan from historical legacies included a possible peace treaty with President Vladimir Putin's Russia and the return of the four islands that were occupied by the Soviet Union in 1945 (which Japan calls the Northern Territories and Russia calls the Southern Kurils), as well as a resolution to the problem of North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens – a cause that had expedited his rise in national politics.[41] Abe initially supported Obama's 'strategic patience' towards and containment of North Korea, allowing Japan some diplomatic space to seek a solution with Pyongyang. Tokyo then lined up behind Donald Trump's policy of 'maximum pressure' in the hope of coercing North Korea to cooperate.

Abe's realpolitik

By the end of 2015, Abe had already managed to introduce a series of measures designed to underpin a new and more effective role for Japan within the US–

Japan alliance. He had enacted a law on designated state secrets to reinforce Japan's ability to swap key military intelligence and defence-industrial data with the US; secured a reinterpretation of Article 9 of the constitution to allow Japanese military participation in forms of collective self-defence; and passed new security legislation that would enable Japan to more 'seamlessly' work alongside the US and other partners under specific circumstances.[42]

Broader guidelines for US–Japan defence cooperation

In April 2015, the two governments also agreed to revise the guidelines for defence cooperation, the first such revision of their bilateral agreement since 1997. One of the most remarkable aspects of the revised defence guidelines concerned a critical shift in emphasis: the rigid distinction in previous guidelines between bilateral cooperation on 'Japan' and 'regional' contingencies was removed to emphasise that bilateral cooperation should now be global, and not necessarily restricted geographically to Japan itself or to the surrounding region. Moreover, cooperation could now encompass the full gamut, from peacetime operations to wartime contingencies. Another key objective was to establish mechanisms – the Alliance Coordination Mechanism (ACM) and the upgraded Bilateral Planning Mechanism (BPM) – through which the partners could work together operationally on a daily basis through seamless responses. The ACM in particular could draw on recent experience, including operations during the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011, which had exposed limits in the capacity for operational cooperation within the alliance.[43] A focus on peacetime operations helped to widen the scope of the alliance to new domains, such as cyber and space. These changes enhanced integration with the US and offered a boost to Abe's vision of a more proactive Japan beyond the boundaries of Northeast Asia. At the same time, it planted the seeds for Japan's greater strategic and operational dependency on the United States' military machinery.

When Abe returned to power in 2012, his desire to upgrade the US–Japan alliance had taken on a sense of urgency because of Tokyo's deteriorating relationship with Beijing, especially in relation to the Senkaku Islands, which China claims and calls the Diaoyu.[44] Notwithstanding the Obama administration's initial reticence when Beijing escalated tensions in 2012

by deploying law-enforcement cutters inside the islands' territorial waters, Obama himself eventually confirmed in 2014 that Article 5 of the US–Japan security treaty encompassed the defence of the islands.[45] This did not mean that the United States would automatically become involved in the military defence of the islands, but Obama's position that 'our treaty commitment to Japan's security is absolute, and Article 5 covers all territories under Japan's administration, including the Senkaku Islands' satisfied the Japanese government at a time of increasing Chinese pressure. (In December 2013, Beijing adopted an East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) that included the islands.[46]) Obama similarly continued to support plans to relocate the US military base at Futenma in Okinawa, and his visit to the Hiroshima memorial was seen in Japan as implicit agreement from the US that acts of remembrance, rather than repeated apologies by Japan, were now sufficient, and that historical matters could be removed from Japan's diplomatic agenda.[47]

Despite the Trump administration's frequent references to the uneven nature of the US–Japan alliance, rumoured requests to double or even quadruple Host Nation Support (HNS) spending for the maintenance of US bases in Japan, and pressure on Japanese automakers to increase production in the US,[48] Abe managed to have his signature FOIP framework endorsed and adopted by the White House.[49] Abe also asked Trump to reconsider the decision not to join the CPTPP agreement, but Trump declined to do so. Japanese leadership in the CPTPP now represents a significant strategic asset that new US President Joe Biden should not undervalue, particularly given the conclusion of the China-centred, 15-country Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade deal in November 2020.[50] When Japan assumes the chair of the CPTPP in 2021 it will be in a position to ensure that the bloc continues to develop, even if the US does not return in the short term.

Strength and adaptability with regard to China

The primary goal of Abe's China policy was to engage Beijing from a position of strength, keeping the door open for economic engagement where possible, while preventing bilateral issues from becoming chronically debilitating.

Most importantly, Tokyo sought to prevent changes to the status quo in the territorial and maritime-boundary disputes in the East China Sea. Chinese President Xi Jinping's aim to consolidate his power at home and expand Chinese influence overseas made early interactions with Beijing testy and required a degree of firmness from Japan.[51] By 2017, once Xi and Abe had both consolidated their domestic power bases, Abe could more easily de-emphasise areas of disagreement with Beijing, especially given that the Trump administration was increasing trade pressure on China and Japan, providing the countries with some grounds for common cause. Sino-US tensions allowed Abe, for example, to focus on the complementarity of his FOIP initiative with Beijing's BRI.[52] To mark the 40th anniversary of the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship, Abe became in October 2018 the first Japanese prime minister to visit China in seven years, signing some 52 memoranda of cooperation across a wide range of areas. (Abe also secured an agreement for Xi to visit Japan, a visit originally scheduled for spring 2020 but postponed due to the COVID-19 crisis.) In May of that same year, Tokyo and Beijing agreed to a maritime- and air-communication mechanism aimed at enhancing crisis prevention in the East China Sea.[53] No timeline was specified for its implementation, however, and it did not extend to the countries' coastguards, which account for the majority of front-line encounters.

Abe's operational response to the situation in the Senkaku Islands combined tactical pushbacks against intrusions in the islands' territorial waters with clear 'red lines', including the option of initiating maritime-security operations (MSO) as provided for in Article 82 of the JSDF Act in cases where the capabilities of the Japan Coast Guard were insufficient.[54] The Abe cabinet also allocated financial resources for acquiring relevant military and law-enforcement capabilities for dealing with 'offshore islands' scenarios.[55] At the diplomatic level, the Abe government sought to draw international attention to Chinese behaviour in several ways. Japan's official publications, most notably the 2020 edition of the country's defence White Paper, highlighted the 'relentless' nature of Chinese assertiveness;[56] and in international forums such as G7 summits, the Japanese government secured support for the principle of respecting the 'rule of law' in the management of

maritime disputes.[57] Abe's decision to regularly deploy the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) to Southeast Asia on missions in support of capacity-building for good governance at sea, such as the 'Ship Riders' initiatives, further reinforced and amplified his government's message.

Abe's approach proved that his government was willing to stand up to China by combining direct actions to counter Chinese behaviour in the East China Sea with more tailored military and diplomatic activities to draw international attention to, if not pressure on, Chinese actions. However, this strategy had its limits. In July 2020, Beijing intensified its activity around the Senkaku Islands, seeking not merely to showcase its presence around the disputed territory, but also to exercise control and, as a result, to directly challenge Japanese administration of the islands. The chasing of Japanese fishing vessels inside the islands' territorial waters would suggest an intention to challenge control by asserting law-enforcement rights.[58] Similarly, Beijing has more recently signalled an interest in regaining a degree of leadership through stronger trade links with regional countries, as showcased by the conclusion of the RCEP, and its declared intention to explore a trilateral trade agreement with Japan and South Korea.[59]

A new doctrine of defence engagement

Japan's defence policy and posture were the areas in which the Abe Doctrine departed the most from Yoshida's. On matters of policy, Abe abolished Japan's long-standing, self-imposed defence-spending cap of 1% of GDP and reversed previous trends by increasing the defence budget on a yearly basis.[60] This change was complemented by the replacement, beginning in 2014, of the bans on arms exports enacted in 1967 and 1976 with the 'Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology'. Japanese defence spending was still dwarfed by that of China, but the changes allowed Japan to announce from 2018 the conversion of two helicopter destroyers into fixed-wing-aircraft carriers, plans to acquire the largest inventory of F-35 combat aircraft after the US, the development of hypersonic missiles to be deployed in the second half of the 2020s, and the development of a new cyber force and investments in dual-use technologies for the military use of space, among other significant procurements.[61] Larger budgets were

coupled with a greater contribution by uniformed officers to the policy-making process, notably through the assignment of military personnel to senior positions within the National Security Secretariat.[62] On matters of posture, the Abe administration produced two defence-review documents, or National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), that outlined a transition towards improved capabilities for operating across multiple domains.[63]

Japan's important contribution to the disaster-relief operations in the aftermath of the 2013 typhoon in the Philippines had presented Abe with a clear example of the potential rewards of a more robust agenda of defence engagement.[64] The 2014 NDPG contained the first indications of a desire to enhance Japan's presence, building primarily on long-standing naval-diplomatic initiatives across Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. In 2018, a new NDPG confirmed and further expanded this approach. In particular, Abe's decision to focus on engagement in the troubled waters of the South China Sea, and on an enhanced leadership role in counter-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean, were key elements of Japan's commitment to Indo-Pacific security.[65]

Abe played to Japan's strengths

Aware that Japan's material capabilities were limited, the Abe government sought to play to Japan's strengths by investing in maritime capacity-building and by demonstrating commitment through naval presence. The expansion of China's military might – especially its capacity to project power at sea in the Indian and Pacific oceans – had heightened regional awareness of the centrality of sea lanes and sea cables to regional stability, connectivity and prosperity. Concern had only grown as maritime disputes worsened and challenges to the established US-led maritime order multiplied, even though the 2016 ruling on the South China Sea by the Permanent Court of Arbitration highlighted the legal flimsiness of Chinese claims.[66] Hence, the Abe government focused its efforts on naval activities that enhanced Japan's desired image as an engaging and proactive security actor committed to maintaining the international status quo. Port calls, diplomatic visits and military exercises were the means of building new, or reinforcing existing, partnerships with countries such as Australia, the Philippines and Vietnam.[67]

Japan also worked to enhance cooperation with NATO and the EU in counter-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden, and raised its leadership profile in maritime security by taking command of CTF-151, the multinational task group based at Combined Maritime Forces in Bahrain. Abe became the only Japanese prime minister to twice address NATO's decision-making body, the North Atlantic Council (NAC), doing so in 2007 and 2014. In 2019, he also concluded a milestone trade agreement with the EU, the EU–Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), which helped boost the liberal-economic order in the absence of US leadership.[68] Equally significant, Abe worked with considerable success to strengthen bilateral partnerships with major European powers, notably France and the UK. In both cases, the Japanese government and its European counterparts set up regular meetings among defence and foreign ministers, created regular opportunities for joint exercises and explored opportunities for defence-industrial cooperation.[69]

Of no less significance, the maritime focus allowed Japan to maximise the positive impact of capacity-building programmes with countries such as Sri Lanka. This enhanced Japan's influence among key emerging states. Japanese activities were pursued in coordination with close allies, notably the US, which was advantageous for both countries. For example, the JMSDF's historic first visit to Cam Ranh Base in Vietnam in 2016 facilitated a subsequent and equally significant visit by the US Navy. To ensure that defence engagement of this kind produced maximum effect, the Japanese government increased the number of its defence attachés, from 49 in 36 embassies in 2012, to 58 in 40 embassies and two government missions by 2015.[70]

Other important successes came in the development of ties with India, which has emerged as a key defence-engagement partner, particularly in terms of maritime cooperation. In December 2013, the two countries conducted their second bilateral exercise (covering basic manoeuvre and security training), with subsequent opportunities for training only growing in frequency and scope. The following year, Japan joined India's *Malabar* exercise (conducted with the US), and became a permanent member of the exercise in 2015.[71] This is India's prime military exercise covering missions from high-end warfare to maritime security and interdictions operations.[72]

By 2016, India and Japan had added regular counter-piracy bilateral exercises, allowing them to compare practices and command structures. Visits to India by Japanese uniformed chiefs became a regular occurrence. Increased defence engagement also contributed to the development of other formats, such as trilateral cooperation with the US and the Quad initiative.

Unfinished business

Abe's vigorous approach and degree of success in raising Japan's profile as an international security actor stands in contrast with the much less satisfactory results of Japan's diplomacy in its immediate neighbourhood. The Russian, South Korean and North Korean cases were particularly disappointing. In each case, the Abe Doctrine failed to resolve the legacies of the past. Abe's repeated efforts to establish a rapport with President Putin – involving no fewer than 27 bilateral summits – did not advance Japanese goals. During these encounters, Abe set forth proposals for joint economic activities to create an opening for a bilateral peace treaty and the return to Japan by Russia of two of the four islands of the Northern Territories/Southern Kurils. Russia was non-committal on Japanese proposals and added conditions for the islands' return, including the stipulation that they not host any US bases.[73]

Abe's approach failed to gain support either at home or abroad. In Japan, conservatives decried Abe's suggested willingness to give up territory to Russia. Internationally, Japan's effort to court Russia translated into restrained Japanese support for international sanctions on Moscow; especially in the aftermath of the chemical attack in Salisbury, UK, this raised questions about the credibility of Abe's avowed commitment to a rules-based order.[74]

The deterioration of Japan's ties with South Korea was even more damaging to Abe's broader ambitions. In August 2015, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, Abe had reaffirmed his country's 'deep remorse and heartfelt apology' for the wartime suffering inflicted on the people of Asia. Yet Japan's wartime behaviour remained a highly emotional issue in South Korea. In December 2015, Abe and Park Geun-hye, then South Korea's president, signed an agreement intended to

resolve the dispute over the Imperial Japanese Army's practice of forcing Korean women, referred to as 'comfort women', into sexual slavery. The Japanese government committed ¥1 billion ($8 million) to a private foundation established in South Korea to provide care for surviving women in an agreement intended to represent a 'final and irreversible solution'.[75] With the signing of the agreement, the Japanese government expected that the South Korean government would work to bring about a sense of resolution among its citizens and cease to raise the comfort-women issue in bilateral settings. After Park's fall from power in 2017, however, the limits of this approach became clear. Abe was seen by South Koreans to have conceded little in offering only a limited apology for Japanese behaviour, with most of the concessions coming from the Korean side. The deal proved domestically unworkable for new President Moon Jae-in, leading to the dissolution of the private foundation. The fact that the Obama administration had helped to broker the deal to prevent the further deterioration of ties between its two allies added to the sense that the agreement had been made under duress without adequately addressing the underlying issues, and raised doubts about Japan's ability to deal with its closest neighbour on its own.

The critical blow to Japan–South Korea relations arrived in 2018, when South Korea's Supreme Court upheld compensation awards against Japanese companies for their wartime conduct, with each complainant awarded around $100,000. The verdict caused consternation in Japan, with the government pointing out that the judgment violated the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations between the two countries that had settled all outstanding claims arising from the colonial era.[76] Tensions intensified to the point that Japan, in mid-2019, imposed export controls on the transfer of key substances and parts for use in the manufacture of South Korean semiconductors. The episode underlined how, despite decades of diplomatic efforts, a shared solution to Japan's wartime legacy remained elusive.

For the Abe government, the court ruling was symptomatic of a deeper impasse in relations for which it felt South Korea was to blame. Despite the fact that the governments had made steady progress in defence and security cooperation through the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), a bilateral intelligence-sharing pact, as well as joint

exercises and regular talks by senior military officials, spats had arisen. In 2018, a South Korean military exercise near a set of disputed islets in the Sea of Japan, which South Korea controls and calls Dokdo, and which Japan claims and calls Takeshima, heightened tensions. This was later followed by a request from South Korea that the JMSDF not hoist its 'Rising Sun' naval ensign during an international fleet review, and an alleged fire-control-radar lock-on by a South Korean naval vessel against a Japanese maritime-patrol aircraft.[77]

On North Korea too, Abe's doctrine failed to deliver the intended results. The prime minister's interest in the issue of the Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean Special Forces dated to Koizumi Junichiro's premiership in 2001–06, and Abe was personally committed to resolving it. However, Abe's efforts to establish communication with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un had to be carried out in parallel with two very different American diplomatic approaches. Neither Obama's 'strategic patience' policy, nor Trump's 'maximum pressure' approach, were well suited to the achievement of Abe's goals. Abe managed to obtain some assurance from Trump and Moon that they would raise the question of the Japanese abductees with Kim, but to little effect. Abe also failed to gain support for his stance on North Korean missile programmes and the special threat they posed to Japan (particularly North Korea's short- and medium-range missiles), which Trump did not discuss with Kim.[78] Japanese policymakers feared that Trump had abandoned Japan in favour of headline-making diplomacy with North Korea. Meanwhile, Moon, Putin and Xi all conducted separate summits with Kim.[79]

Finally, Abe was to remain frustrated in his ultimate ideological goal of constitutional revision. Even though he had recalibrated his ambitions in the face of domestic opposition towards a seemingly moderate proposal to revise paragraphs one and two of Article 9 to recognise that the 'JSDF is maintained as an armed organisation to take necessary self-defence measures', he still ran out of time to achieve any revision by his original deadline of 2020. Arguably, Abe's reinterpretation of Article 9 to allow for 'collective self-defence' was in substance a more significant change to Japan's defence posture, but Abe's inability to revise the constitution as the last vestige of the post-war order was perhaps his main personal regret.

Suga and the Abe Doctrine

Abe's resignation speech in August 2020 gave a clear assessment of what remained to be accomplished, giving the impression that he was listing his expectations for his successor. Certainly, as chief cabinet secretary throughout Abe's second premiership and a member of Abe's cabinet in 2006–07, Suga was both close to Abe politically and instrumental in implementing his policy agenda. Moves by Suga soon after taking office pointed to a government of continuity. Suga's new cabinet, announced in September 2020, inherited many key figures from the Abe administration. Eight of the 20 portfolios were reappointments, including the foreign minister, Motegi Toshimitsu, and the economy, trade and industry minister, Kajiyama Hiroshi. Kono Taro, a key figure in the second Abe administration who had served first as foreign minister and then as defence minister, remained in the cabinet, albeit with new responsibility for the administrative-reform portfolio.

Upholding key policies

An October meeting of Quad foreign ministers in Tokyo and the (virtual) Mekong–Japan Summit in November allowed Suga to affirm key elements of Abe's FOIP initiative, including maritime-domain awareness and upholding the rule of law.[80] Suga's first overseas visits, to Vietnam and Indonesia in October, were also symbolically important. The choice of countries echoed the first foreign visits by Abe in January 2013 after the start of his second administration, and served to affirm the centrality of the Abe-era 'Indo-Pacific' concept in the Suga administration's thinking. Indeed, en route to Vietnam, Suga described Japan as an 'Indo-Pacific nation'.[81] Suga's tweak of the Abe-era 'free and open', values-based Indo-Pacific formulation at the November 2020 ASEAN summit, where he called for a 'peaceful and prosperous' Indo-Pacific, caused some concern that the concept might be weakened in order to smooth relations with China, but Suga is unlikely to change the substance of Japan's original FOIP policy in the region.[82]

Suga's call at the November meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum to expand the CPTPP also suggested continuity in Abe's coalition-building diplomacy.[83] The CPTPP, of which China is not a member, has taken on greater importance as a channel for Japan's regional

influence since the signing of the RCEP, which, once it enters into force, will become the world's largest trade bloc and include China. Japan, as the largest economy in the CPTPP and the second-largest economy in the RCEP, as well as by virtue of its free-trade and economic-partnership arrangements with a number of ASEAN countries and Australia, lies at the centre of Asia's spaghetti bowl of trade deals. Tokyo is thus well placed to build and sustain coalitions within the RCEP to balance China's influence. Suga can also be expected to continue building relations with India and Australia. National and economic security will remain important areas for Suga: witness the Japan–Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement, announced during Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's visit to Tokyo in November, which provides for reciprocal visits by personnel and assets from both countries' armed forces; and the continued efforts by Japan, Australia and India to develop supply-chain alternatives to China in the region.[84]

Changes of priority and nuance

Although Suga's perceptions of Japan's international position resemble Abe's, important shifts in priorities and nuance are already under way. In part, this reflects the dramatic changes wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic on the domestic economy in 2020. Suga inherited an economy in the midst of its worst recession since the end of the Second World War. Prospects for recovery in 2021 are so uncertain that Japan's GDP may not regain its 2019 level until 2023, or even 2024. Fiscal stimulus to counteract the economic damage of the pandemic will leave Japan with a public-debt-stock-to-GDP ratio of nearly 270% by the end of 2020, with little prospect of substantial improvement into the middle of the current decade.[85] This compares with Abe who, when he took office for the second time in December 2012, could look forward to buoyant economic growth in 2013, partly on the back of the monetary-policy loosening mandated by Abenomics. The debt-to-GDP ratio at that time was a still high but broadly stable 230%.

Suga's immediate priority will therefore be economic recovery. A tight electoral calendar will increase the urgency of this goal. The next lower-house election must be held by late October 2021. Assuming the election is held before then, and that the LDP retains at least a large majority (even

if reduced from Abe's landslide of 2017), Suga will also have to face an LDP leadership election in September 2021; he is currently serving out the remainder of Abe's final three-year term. The next upper-house election will take place in mid-2022. Personal diplomacy was a hallmark of Abe's second premiership; he made some 80 visits abroad in this period. Economic priorities and elections suggest that Suga is unlikely to have the time to repeat this feat, even once the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic has passed.

Suga has also been quick to make subtle institutional changes that will alter the balance of Japan's domestic- and foreign-policy formation. Under Abe's second premiership, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) enjoyed significant influence in policymaking, and its personnel were well represented in key advisory roles to the prime minister. Suga carried out a reshuffle of these positions soon after taking office and disbanded the Council on Investments for the Future (Mirai Toshi Kaigi).[86] Abe used to chair meetings of the council as an important driver of Abenomics and a conduit for METI influence on policy. Suga's move thus marked an important change. Although Suga has set up a replacement body to deliberate policy, the Growth Strategy Council (Seicho Senryaku Kaigi), this is chaired by the chief cabinet secretary and not the prime minister. Hence, it has been downgraded in terms of institutional status compared with its predecessor. Also striking is Suga's solicitation of advice from non-political experts: in the first month of his premiership he had more than 70 meetings with private-sector figures, compared with just 24 for Abe at the start of his second premiership.[87] Suga's preference therefore seems to be for a more diverse policymaking environment than was the case under Abe, with no one policy group able to dominate.

Other ministries, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Ministry of Finance, may see their influence rise as a result of these changes. A bigger role for the foreign ministry might suggest a de-emphasising of economic issues in some areas of foreign policy. Policy towards China may take a harder edge. Imai Takaya, a key foreign-policy adviser to Abe and formerly with METI, was a driver of the moderate thawing of Abe's attitude towards China's BRI and his willingness to cooperate with the BRI where projects met Japanese standards. But with Imai's stepping down as special adviser

to the prime minister upon Abe's departure, the foreign ministry may exert greater influence on security concerns. Imai encouraged Abe's persistent courting of President Putin, ostensibly to achieve a solution to the bilateral dispute over the Northern Territories/Southern Kurils but also with a view to building economic relations with Russia. Given the lack of reciprocity from Moscow and the cost to Abe's political capital as a result, Suga may well prefer to park efforts to improve relations with Russia. Similarly, Suga, while signalling his ongoing support for some of Abe's other initiatives, may devote less energy to them given their inherent difficulty. He will surely wish to continue to press North Korea on the abductions issue, but will see it as less of a personal badge of honour, or shame; and while constitutional revision is a common goal of all LDP leaders, it may not be at the top of Suga's list.

Challenges of a new US administration

A change of president in the US will also bring challenges. The Trump challenge catalysed some of Abe's most important policy successes, including the CPTPP and the EU–Japan Economic and Strategic Partnership agreements (the EPA and SPA, launched in 2018). Trump's undermining of the rules-based international order had spurred Abe to shore it up, and the US president's focus on China had opened up policy space for Japan, allowing it to harden its China policy (albeit to a lesser degree than Trump's), while periodically incentivising China to reach out to Japan to offset US pressure. The bipartisan consensus in Washington over the strategic threat China poses to the US augurs against a complete volte-face on China by the Biden administration, but greater nuance is likely, particularly if President Biden seeks to co-opt Chinese support in areas such as climate change and global health security. Japan will thus fear grand-bargain accommodation between Washington and Beijing that leaves Tokyo's policy positions towards China exposed.[88]

Although Suga will undoubtedly prioritise US–Japan relations over everything else, pressures around the countries' security alliance will remain.[89] Biden can be expected to focus more than Trump did on managing the alliance, but Washington will continue to push Japan to do more to

support the relationship. The burden-sharing discussion may broaden from a focus on Japanese financial support for the US military presence in Japan to allowing for greater American use of bases and facilities, or even joint research and development (R&D) on military technology, such as space-based and uninhabited systems. Tokyo may also come under pressure from Washington to improve its toxic relations with South Korea. Biden played a key personal role in 2013–14 in easing tensions between Seoul and Tokyo, not least because of US concerns over the costs of these tensions for the countries' ability to counter China and North Korea.

Other goals for the US–Japan alliance could include an active role for Japan in the Taiwan Strait, but the Suga administration's level of defence activism remains to be seen. In June 2020, the Abe government decided to scrap the *Aegi*s Ashore (land-based) ballistic-missile-defence system, ostensibly for reasons of cost and concern about the system's technical flaws. The decision had the potential to widen the scope of discussion on Japan's future missile and defence capabilities, including a shift for the first time to limited strike potential against enemy missile bases, which remains problematic under Japan's defence-oriented security policy. At the time this issue went to press, however, the Suga administration looked set to approve replacement of the *Aegis* Ashore system with two new destroyers fitted with *Aegis* missile interceptors – this despite the pressure that this would place on Japan's maritime forces, which are already facing personnel shortages.

Suga also is unlikely to take early steps for shifting the country's defence posture towards the adoption of policies for an offensive use of strike capabilities. While the practice to review the NDPG every five years suggests that the document may be soon updated, Japan's defence posture is likely to continue to emphasise the procurement of 'counter-strike' capabilities. This will entail the integration of stand-off capabilities within the country's force structure, but without as yet the necessary intelligence and command-and-control structures to conduct effective strikes against imminent missile threats. Moreover, despite the increasing demand to enhance the security of Japan's defence-industrial base, Suga has not yet articulated plans to protect technologies or to boost R&D in dual-use emerging technologies to respond to Beijing's rapid advancement of its civil–military fusion strategy.

Suga's digital-reform push

While circumstances may militate against the deployment by the Suga administration of a grand strategy to the same extent as his predecessor, the prime minister's domestic focus on digital reforms points to a clear effort to build on Abe's legacy. Suga's digital push is not new – in January 2020, Nishimura Yasutoshi, Japan's minister for the economy and fiscal policy, outlined a 'digital new deal' for Japan that included the digitisation of the country's bureaucracy, as well as the development of post-5G systems and quantum and artificial-intelligence (AI) technologies.[90] Some ¥1.7 trillion ($16.3bn) was earmarked for digital-related funding in 2020/21.[91] The COVID-19 crisis has only increased the urgency of such reforms, exposing the shortcomings in Japan's administrative digital infrastructure. The delays in disbursing pandemic-related financial support in mid-2020, for example, were directly attributable to the still small percentage of administrative tasks that are transacted online: less than 12% of the total, according to the Japan Research Institute.[92]

Suga plans to create a new 'Digital Agency' to coordinate Japan's digital policy, which is now split between METI and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, with predictable consequences for the efficiency of policy formation. This focus on digital reforms dovetails with other domestic priorities for Suga, including reforming Japan's large but inefficient small- and medium-sized-enterprise (SME) sector and raising the productivity of the economy to boost growth. The digital-reform push also sits alongside Suga's broader desire to effect institutional change by breaking down barriers between Japan's siloed and turf-conscious government agencies.[93]

Suga's digital reforms are still in their early stages, and focused on digitising government paperwork and integrating the government's information-technology systems. Japan has fallen behind its rich-country peers in terms of its digital capabilities – witness its slippage in terms of global cross-border data-flow volumes from fifth in 2001 to 11th in 2019, according to the International Telecommunication Union.[94] This reflects both Japan's institutional fragmentation and the largely domestic focus of Rakuten, LINE, Yahoo! Japan and other Japanese internet companies. Japan is similarly lagging in areas such as cloud computing and 5G. NEC,

for example, which is Japan's largest telecommunications-equipment and -systems supplier, has only a 0.7% share of global 5G base stations.[95] The possession of advanced digital and technological resources affects national competitiveness and gives a country credibility and leverage in digital rule-making and cooperation. The latter is especially important for medium powers such as Japan given the trend towards great-power techno-nationalism and the resulting fragmentation of technological ecosystems.

Sustaining Abe's 'connectivity' legacy

Although the need to secure 'connectivity' animated FOIP and other areas of Abe's economic statecraft, digital policy for much of his second administration was largely focused on digital rule-making. The e-commerce chapters of the CPTPP and EPA, or the 'Osaka Track', which Abe launched at the Osaka G20 meeting in 2019 in order to secure a regime of 'data free flow with trust', are good examples of this.[96] Abe was concerned with Japan's strategic need to secure access to other countries' data for its own development of emerging technologies, and with the lack of rules in what is still a new area. Domestic digital and technological development under Suga will be critical to sustaining the connectivity within Abe's foreign-policy structures. ASEAN, a fulcrum of FOIP, is an important test bed in this regard. Notwithstanding Japan's existing digital-transformation programmes in the region, competition from China, which dominates the region's e-commerce and thus its distribution networks and payments systems, is already fierce. Parts of the region even lead Japan in terms of the volume of cross-border data flows.

Abe's legacy and Suga's plans

Suga inherits from Abe a different Japan from the country that Abe inherited in 2012. Under Abe's leadership, Japan has re-emerged as a primary actor in international affairs. It stands at the centre of many of the Asia-Pacific region's main economic, political and security mechanisms. It has assumed greater leadership in key processes such as the CPTPP, and cultivated key relationships beyond its alliance with the US, including with ASEAN, Australia, India, and partners in Europe and NATO. Suga has inherited a

Japan with a renewed sense of agency that is capable of convening larger groups of states and of potentially resorting to the use of military power in support of stability. It is perhaps symptomatic of this change that in 2013, when Abe visited Vietnam in his first overseas trip, he announced the 'strategic' nature of the bilateral relationship. In October 2020, when Suga visited Vietnam, he described how the relationship had taken on a strategic character through an agenda of cooperation that encompassed digital-economy initiatives, cyber-security cooperation and even the possibility of arms export.[97]

We have argued that Japan, having embraced the Abe Doctrine, is no longer the country that the Yoshida Doctrine had significantly influenced. It no longer merely benefits from the 'warm' embrace of its alliance with the US, but has pursued its own agency in security matters. The US alliance remains a pillar of Japan's foreign and security policy, but Tokyo has sought to evolve into a more equal partner, and certainly a more proactive one – crucially strengthening links with other bilateral partners of the US, notably Australia and India. Abe's agenda also included the development of new networks with actors in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, including Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Vietnam, who share Japan's concerns about Chinese ambitions. Within this context, the Abe Doctrine has rejected a passive approach to security and developed an unprecedented defence-engagement activism that has underwritten the country's credibility. One key question yet to be answered about Suga is how he will draw upon Abe's legacy to consolidate Japan's new-found convening power. Suga has an opportunity to do so with the CPTPP and through the connectivity agenda outlined by Abe's grand strategy and enshrined in FOIP.

A significant contributor to Abe's success in operationalising his strategy was his ability and willingness to adapt to evolving circumstances. Given the ongoing uncertainty about the future of the Japanese economy, Suga will have to be similarly flexible. In this respect, it will be interesting to observe how Suga relates to South Korea's newly announced Southern Policy, Seoul's own take on the Indo-Pacific, and how a post-Brexit tilting of the UK towards the Indo-Pacific might add to an already growing bilateral relationship between London and Tokyo. Under Abe, maritime security led

the way in Japan's security activism because of its investment in the stability of the Indo-Pacific's main economic arteries and its need to sustain a rules-based order. Under Suga, maritime-security cooperation is likely to retain its importance in Japan's defence agenda, but digital connectivity, cyber-security cooperation and the resilience of supply chains might well gain greater primacy. If so, this might lead Suga to adapt FOIP.

Ultimately, Suga's success in advancing the grand strategy laid out by Abe will depend on the new Biden administration's approach to the Indo-Pacific. While the consensus in Washington over competition with China is unlikely to change, how the next administration will tackle the Indo-Pacific and its wide array of economic and security issues is uncertain. The Biden team has thus far made clear that it intends to mend alliances and relationships that had been undermined by Trump, but it is unclear what this means for the Indo-Pacific. It may be that Biden will tend to focus on transatlantic relations, where ties seem more fractured. Domestically, Suga's priorities will be a stronger economy, an end to the COVID-19 pandemic and a renewal of Japan's technological capabilities, with foreign and security initiatives perhaps requiring more collaboration with partners. That may be easier to achieve for a Japan that changed in important ways under Abe.

Notes

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