

Measuring Shinzo Abe's Impact on the Indo-Pacific

By Dr. John Hemmings

Last month's news that Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was stepping down came like a thunderbolt from the blue. Once again, a health condition that had compelled him to step down in 2007, resurfaced. Whatever else one might say about Abe 'the politician' or Abe 'the nationalist', one cannot refute the fact that Abe the 'grand strategist' has had the most impact on Japan's security posture since the Second World War. Of course, the question will be how Yoshihide Suga - his successor - adjusts Japan's grand strategy in coming months before he calls an election. One thing is already obvious, Suga – and, indeed, the next generation of future prime ministers – will have to live with Abe's legacy in one form or another.

Dr. John Hemmings, Associate Professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, explains that: "Suga – and, indeed, the next generation of future prime ministers – will continue Abe's legacy in one form or another."

This is all a long way from 2007, when Abe's one-year premiership was already in the rear-view mirror. Even as he recovered his health, there were whispers in the corridors of Kasumigaseki that he intended to make a comeback and become prime minister again. At the time, many Japan-watchers were skeptical about his chances. His first year had not been particularly successful or popular. Indeed, the loss of the Upper House to the opposition Democratic Party of Japan had paved the way for their electoral in in 2009. Despite this inauspicious beginning, not only did Abe challenge his doubters by successfully running for LDP leadership in September 2012 but he campaigned on a slogan of "take back Japan" in November and won the premiership back in 2012.

In terms of domestic policies, Abe's ambitions were grand, though the results were mixed. However, one felt spirits lift when he announced "Japan is back!" in a series of speeches deigned to launch "Abenomics". Using three arrows of monetary easing, fiscal stimulus, and structural reform, the new basket of policies intended to get Japan out of the two-decade slump that had followed the 1992 bursting of the asset price bubble that characterized Japanese growth in the 1980s. For a conservative politician, he was deeply pragmatic and was willing to challenge traditional Japanese social and business structures in order to empower Japan.

Despite a mixed record in domestic policy, it is in the arena of foreign and security policy that Abe has had the most impact and the area where Suga – and other Prime Ministers – will benefit the most. During this period, he oversaw a strengthening of the office of the Prime Minister, giving it a national security council (modelled closely on the UK NSC) and supportive secretariat to effect good security policy. Abe also encouraged intelligence community reforms, creating the equivalent of Britain's Official Secrets Act, readying the ground for other necessary intelligence reforms across Japan's bureaucracies. In 2013, Japan passed a state secrets act, which was a badly-needed effort to criminalize espionage. Given the continued need for democratic societies to share intelligence on Chinese and Russian interference operations, foreign policy, and maritime expansionism, this legislation was badly needed. It still remains for Japan to create a classification system and clearance system that allows it to work more closely with the United States and its Five Eyes partners. This was followed in 2015, by the passage of controversial legislation allowing for Japan's armed forces to take part in conflicts overseas.

For example, he took a concept floating around after the 2005 Indian Ocean Tsunami of turning the four countries that aided the region into a quasi-security partnership. This "Quadrilateral" included the US,

Japan, Australia and India and has developed into a functional strategic alignment. As we enter an era of increased strategic competition, an era where a revitalized and expanded Chinese navy has begun to dominate and control vital shipping lanes in the South China Sea, this group serves as a check on Chinese ambitions. While it lacks formal institutionalization or even the simple ability of collective defense inherent in traditional alliances, its ad hoc nature remains a strength, allowing for New Zealand, Vietnam, and South Korea to join the original Quad members in a “plus” format. Though it’s unclear as to whether this ambiguity of the group will remain a strength – after all, defense guarantees are necessary for the deterrent of collective defense – it’s unclear as to whether member states are ready for formalization. Abe’s role in promoting the Quad was pivotal and its hybrid nature is a little reflective of Japan’s restrictions under the pacifist constitution.

Perhaps of even more significance is Abe’s role in promoting the “Indo-Pacific” over the historic “Asia-Pacific” framework. Recognizing India’s importance as a democratic balancer to future Chinese hegemony in the future of the region’s integration efforts, he promoted the concept of the Indo-Pacific in his 2007 “Confluence of the Two Seas” speech in the Indian parliament and began systematically wooing Indian leaders to the framing. Including a democratic India in the future of Asia was not only good geopolitics, it was good geo-economics, as India’s population and democratic system balanced out China’s equally large population and authoritarian system. Not only did the idea go down well in New Delhi, it was eagerly taken up by other like-minded states in-region over subsequent years, with Australia, ASEAN, France, the UK and the US adopting either the framing or creating their own versions. In 2016, Tokyo put more flesh on the concept, unveiling the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision”, which acted as a foil for Beijing’s increasingly China-centric vision of Asia’s future, while promoting openness and values to attract regional hedgers.

“One of Abe’s greatest strengths was his team that brought together big thinkers... with backroom operators “

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been an incredibly influential figure on the world stage and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga will have his work cut out for him. Not only must he uphold and continue the shift in Japan’s grand strategy, he must manage Japan’s famously difficult bureaucracy to do so. One of Abe’s greatest strengths was his team that brought together big thinkers – such as Nobukatsu Kanehara – with backroom operators – such as Shotaro Yachi, and Suga himself. Suga, the son of a farmer was well-known and well-feared by senior bureaucrats as someone who was dangerous to cross and who was deeply loyal to the Prime Minister. Mandarins who opposed the Prime Minister often found their promotions held up or relegated to less senior positions. According to rumor, when Abe heard that Suga was going to run for office in December last year, he said to Suga, “Yes, I can see you as prime minister, but who will be your ‘Suga’”? This puts much pressure upon Suga’s new chief cabinet secretary Katsunobu Kato to manage the bureaucracy as efficiently as he once did. Whether or not Suga can succeed in the public nature of his new position – and not be tempted back into facilitation – will ultimately be a critical issue for him.

Looking back at the premiership of Shinzo Abe, it is clear that a complicated leader has left the stage. While his views on Japan’s militaristic past were less-than-ideal, his Indo-Pacific conceptualization and support for the Quad were instrumental in shaping a balancing coalition toward the PRC. It was also a highly liberal vision of regional order, replete with norms of openness, rules, and human rights – something no Japanese post-war leader had previously emphasized. While he has struggled with Japan’s historic issue – notably with South Korea – he has reached “across the aisle” multiple times. The breakdown in the relationship with South Korea must be seen in the context of his speeches in front of both houses of Australia’s Parliament and the US Congress on Japan’s wartime history. The speeches were full of regret and sorrow and were accordingly well-received. As Yoshihide Suga assumes the levers of Japanese power, he comes to a situation in which Tokyo’s grand strategy is well-stated and its influence at an all-high. He will have to manage the relationship with the United States, Japan’s close ally, a hegemonic China, and a cautious region in a world rocked by the pandemic and economic slowdown. One hopes he will do well.

Dr. John Hemmings is an Associate Professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies. He can be contacted at hemmingsj@apcss.org.

APB Series Founding Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye | APB Series Coordinator: Peter Valente

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center or any organization with which the author is affiliated.

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.