



Remembering a man who transformed his country

Shinzo Abe's policies will have far-reaching consequences for Japan's economy and international relations



The state funeral of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Tokyo last September | POOL / VIA REUTERS

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It has been a year since a disgruntled man killed former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during a political rally in the city of Nara.

In that time, Abe's foreign and domestic policy legacy has been debated as he was a towering figure in Japanese politics, having served as prime minister for nearly nine years across two separate terms.

During his tenure, he oversaw several significant foreign and domestic policy accomplishments but also faced significant challenges and criticisms.

On the foreign policy front, Abe was a staunch advocate for a more assertive and proactive Japanese role in regional and global affairs. He pursued a policy of "proactive pacifism," which sought to expand Japan's security and defense capabilities while remaining committed to the principles of peace and nonaggression.

These principles can be seen in Japan's 2022 December new National Security Strategy, in Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's 2022 Shangri-la Dialogue keynote speech and in the recent Group of Seven Hiroshima Summit. Japan at the Shangri-la Dialogue stressed that it would bolster its defense and security cooperation with like-minded states like Australia, Germany, France, the U.K., Canada and the U.S. while remaining wedded to Japan's defense-oriented security posture and its non-nuclear principles of not producing nuclear weapons, not hosting nuclear weapons and not allowing the transit of such weapons through Japanese territories and waters.

Abe was instrumental in stabilizing and strengthening Japan's security alliance with the United States during the unorthodox presidency of Donald Trump. His achievements included the revision of the guidelines for U.S.-Japan defense cooperation in 2015. He also sought to deepen the nation's ties with other countries in Asia, including China and South Korea — despite historical tensions.

In the case of South Korea, he signed the 2015 "comfort women" agreement. With China, Abe sought to stabilize relations with Beijing in the 2019 bilateral summit in which both parties agreed to third country infrastructure cooperation. If it wasn't for the COVID-19 pandemic, we might have seen a visit of President Xi Jinping to Tokyo in March 2020 to sign the fifth political document that charts out the framework for bilateral relations for the next 10 years.

Abe's visit to Pearl Harbor in 2016, where he offered condolences to the victims of the attack alongside then-President Barack Obama, was seen as a significant gesture of reconciliation between the two former enemies.

The former prime minister controversially highlighted that Taiwan's security mattered for Japan and the world, a concern that has been echoed in capitals and organizations around the world.

Abe's foreign policy legacy should also be understood through his efforts to tame and inform the Trump administration, embedding Japan in a series of multilateral relationships such as the the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Japan-EU Economic Partnership and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the advocacy of the "free and open Indo-Pacific" vision.

In the case of the latter, it can be argued that Abe's vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific has been broadly adopted by many like-minded countries and regions to shape China's behavior through a balanced formula of economic engagement, resilience and deterrence.

At the domestic level, Abe also pursued several policy initiatives aimed at revitalizing the nation's economy and society, which had been stagnating for years. His signature policy, known as Abenomics, was a set of economic policies aimed at ending deflation, increasing growth and creating jobs. Abenomics consisted of three main "arrows": monetary easing, fiscal stimulus and structural reforms. While some critics argued that Abenomics did not go far enough or did not produce the desired results, there is little doubt that it had a significant impact on the Japanese economy. Unemployment fell to historic lows, corporate governance improved and the stock market soared.

Abe also pursued several social and cultural reforms aimed at addressing Japan's demographic challenges such as an aging population and declining birthrate. He sought to promote greater gender equality and empower women in the workforce and he introduced policies aimed at attracting more foreign workers to Japan.

Despite his signature womenomics initiative, gender equality and empowerment continue to struggle in Japan when compared to the nation's Western counterparts and migration rates remain at levels that do not meet the country's labor needs.

Notwithstanding these accomplishments, Abe's legacy is not without its shortcomings and criticisms. One of the most significant criticisms of Abe's tenure was associated with several corruption scandals and his treatment of the press.

Another major criticism of Abe's tenure was his handling of historical issues, particularly Japan's wartime past. While Abe made efforts to improve relations with neighboring countries, he was also criticized for his perceived revisionism and downplaying of the nation's wartime atrocities, particularly as it relates to so-called comfort women women

and girls who suffered under Japan's military brothel system before and during World War II. Abe's controversial visit to the Yasukuni Shrine was seen as particularly provocative and damaging to Japan's relationships with its neighbors.

These criticisms ignore the August 2015 Cabinet statement in which Abe stressed that "Japan has repeatedly expressed the feelings of deep remorse and heartfelt apology for its actions during the war." They also ignore that Abe supported the Report of the Advisory Panel on the History of the 20th Century and on Japan's Role and the World Order in the 21st Century, which also highlighted the nation's destructive imperial period.

While Abe's legacy is complex and multifaceted, there is no denying his significant impact on Japan's foreign and domestic policies during his tenure as prime minister. His policies and initiatives have had far-reaching consequences for Japan's economy, society and international relations — and his legacy will be debated and analyzed for years to come.

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