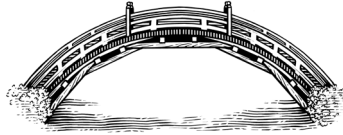


SPECIAL ESSAY

Japan's Return to Great Power Politics: Abe's Restoration

—
Kenneth B. Pyle



KENNETH B. PYLE is the Henry M. Jackson Professor of History and International Studies Emeritus at the University of Washington and Founding President of the National Bureau of Asian Research. He can be reached at <kbp@uw.edu>.

NOTE ≈ *This essay draws on the author's forthcoming book, Japan in the American Century (Cambridge: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2018).*

KEYWORDS: JAPAN; SHINZO ABE; FOREIGN POLICY; U.S.-JAPAN ALLIANCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay explains how Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is engineering a seismic shift in Japan's foreign policy from a postwar position of dependence and subordination in the U.S.-led order to a proactive and independent role, which in the uncertain regional environment is likely to gain increasing popular support.

MAIN ARGUMENT

After more than 70 years of subordination in the U.S.-led world order, Japan is pulling free from its self-binding constraints and restoring an activist foreign policy not seen since 1945. Coming to power with a surge of conservative nationalist support in the Liberal Democratic Party, Abe has engineered Japan's return to great-power politics. He has achieved a historic reinterpretation of the constitution to permit collective self-defense, ended the ban on arms exports and other self-binding policies, and pressed for new offensive military capacity, all of which have made possible a much more cohesive and integrated U.S.-Japan alliance. Although Abe and the policy elite have had to override public opposition in returning Japan to this activist role, in such circumstances of transition in the international order, Japan has historically experienced rapid swings in geopolitical position. With the growing uncertainty of regional conditions, we should not be surprised if the pacifist identity that postwar generations have long embraced gives way and we see changes in the prolonged resistance of the Japanese public to revision of the constitution and to an activist and assertive foreign policy.


POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Japan will closely weigh the reliability of U.S. assurances and the future direction of U.S. policy in Asia, especially as they relate to the management of the nuclear threat from North Korea and to Japanese interests vis-à-vis China.
- Japan's immediate priority will be to strengthen its alignment with the U.S., but in the longer term it will increasingly move toward a more independent foreign policy that offers greater autonomy and room to adjust to its perception of the shifting regional balance of power.
- Although Abe appears likely to remain in office until 2021, even should his term be shortened, his policies now have a momentum that will be very difficult to reverse. These policies are supported by all likely LDP candidates to succeed him, and the political opposition is weaker than at any time in the postwar period.

In 2018, Japan is celebrating the 150th anniversary of its modern revolution, the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The nature of a country's modern revolution illuminates a great deal about the national character, the strategic principles, and the logic of a people. Just as 1776 tells Americans so much about ourselves—the ideals and purposes that we hold central—so the Meiji Restoration reveals much about the nature and purpose of modern Japan. The restoration was not a class upheaval proclaiming new values. Rather, it was a conservative nationalist revolution, carried out “from above” by a party within the old samurai elite and driven by the dangers posed by the Western imperial powers. Its purpose was to strengthen Japan, adapt to the changes in the external environment, restore the independence that was infringed by the West, and bring Japan into the company of the great powers. Over the next two decades, borrowing broadly from the Western powers, the Meiji Restoration achieved one of the most remarkable institutional innovations in world history: Japan became Asia's first rising power. This formative experience of Japan's entry into the modern world established a strategic style of realism and pragmatism in response to shifts in the international system.

In the prime ministership of Shinzo Abe, we are witnessing a similar accommodation to changes in the international system. Like the Meiji Restoration—albeit on a more limited historical scale—Abe is engineering a foreign policy revolution carried out from above by a conservative elite. When his cabinet in 2014 approved a radical reinterpretation of the constitution to allow collective self-defense, Abe reportedly told leaders of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) that the achievement was “as significant as the Meiji Restoration.”¹ Despite the obvious hyperbole, it is nevertheless apparent that he is bringing about a major transformation in postwar Japan that follows in the tradition of the founding of the modern Japanese state. Since World War II, the nation has been subordinated in the U.S.-led world order as a military satellite, some would say a “client state,” deeply dependent on the United States for most aspects of its national security. Abe's conservative nationalist agenda is restoring an activist foreign policy not seen since 1945, and with it the long period of U.S. domination of Japan is passing.

No other nation was more profoundly affected than Japan by the United States' rise to world power in the twentieth century. Henry Luce wrote his

¹ “Japanese PM Shinzo Abe Likens Military Revision to Meiji Restoration,” *South China Morning Post*, July 3, 2014  <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1545083/japanese-pm-shinzo-abe-likens-military-revision-meiji-restoration>.

famous essay “The American Century” in 1941, shortly before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, urging Americans to lay aside the “moral and practical bankruptcy” of isolationism and take the opportunity provided by U.S. power to rehabilitate the world. The “American century,” he said, “must be a sharing with all people of our Bill of Rights, our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, our magnificent industrial products, our technical skills.” The values and institutions that came out of the American experience were for all peoples, and the United States must be active and forceful in leading the world to realize them. Americans must “accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and in consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit.”²

Since World War II, the United States has defined, as Luce had hoped, an extraordinary period in world history. But early in the 21st century the international order is reaching an inflection point, and a new, less U.S.-centric order is emerging. The erosion of the U.S.-led world order and the resulting uncertainty have given Abe unexpected momentum to achieve a more independent role for Japan. Just as no other nation was affected more by the establishment of the American world order than Japan, so no other nation is likely to be influenced more by the erosion of that order.

By placing the foreign policy of the Abe administration in a broad historical perspective, this essay underscores the revolutionary transformation it represents. I first discuss how the United States’ unconditional surrender policy in World War II led to a radical, liberal reconstruction of Japan and to its subordination in the U.S. Cold War system through an unpopular military alliance. The essay shows how Japan chose to insulate itself from Cold War involvement, allowing the country to concentrate on economic growth, but leaving it wholly dependent on the United States for security. I then describe how Abe is overcoming this legacy of dependence, pulling free from past constraints and returning to an activist, independent role in Asian geopolitics not seen since 1945.

JAPAN’S POSTWAR SUBORDINATION

The uniqueness of the U.S.-led order’s impact on Japan can be traced to the unprecedented goal for which the United States chose to fight

² Henry R. Luce, *The American Century* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1941), 23–24, 32–33, 39.

World War II in the Pacific. The goal was not to drive the enemy back to its own borders and negotiate a peace. Nor was it simply to establish a favorable balance of power in the region. Diplomacy and compromises were both ruled out. This was the only foreign war in U.S. history fought to unconditional surrender. The goal was to achieve a revolution in international affairs and a new world order of the kind that Thomas Paine had dreamed and Woodrow Wilson had attempted. Americans overwhelmingly embraced the view that it was our destiny to shape the future of the world. Confidence in the moral imperative of this crusading international role legitimated the use of maximum military might. When this unconditional surrender policy provoked the unconditional resistance of Japan's military leaders, it resulted in the firebombing and devastation of more than 60 Japanese cities, the use of two atomic bombs, and the death of more than 750,000 civilians in the last months of the war.

We tend to forget how extreme the United States' unconditional surrender terms were. During the war, President Franklin Roosevelt enumerated them: surrender of sovereignty and occupation of the entire country; dissolution of the empire; war crimes trials; permanent disarmament; democratization of the political, social, and economic systems; and re-education of the people. Supremely confident in the universality of American values and institutions and undeterred by deep cultural differences with Japan, an insular nation that had experienced no major immigration for nearly two millennia, the United States set out to remake in its own image an ancient, deeply conservative, and complex civilization. The result was the most intrusive reconstruction of another nation in modern history. To conform with the new U.S.-led international order, reforms were made to transform Japan into a permanently disarmed liberal democratic state. Emblematic of the remaking of Japan was the imposition of a U.S.-authored constitution that General Douglas MacArthur called "the most liberal constitution in history."³ And probably it was. It guaranteed many more human rights (including gender equality) than the U.S. constitution. The preamble proclaimed that Japan's security would be preserved by "trusting in the justice and faith of the peace-loving peoples of the world."⁴ Equally emblematic was the redesign of the education system to teach liberal values of democracy, individualism, internationalism, and peace.

³ Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 301.

⁴ "The Constitution of Japan," Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, November 3, 1946. http://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html.

A Twisted Cold War Alliance

The onset of the Cold War forced Americans to admit the mistake of the constitution's utopian Article 9, which prohibited a military and the right to belligerence. The United States sought to remilitarize Japan to serve as its principal ally in Asia. In a deft but controversial initiative, the shrewd prime minister Shigeru Yoshida contrived to accept a long-term military alliance and U.S. bases in Japan in return for an end to the occupation. The great majority of the Japanese people, still deeply traumatized by their war experience, were dead set against these new priorities for their country, but with their sovereignty still in the hands of the Americans and with over 200,000 U.S. troops still occupying the country, it was the U.S. national interest that determined Japan's future. The peace treaty signed in 1951 formally ended the occupation, but a military alliance signed at the same time was privately described by John Foster Dulles, its drafter, as amounting to "a voluntary continuation of the Occupation."⁵ The semi-colonial status imposed on Japan by the imperial powers in the nineteenth century (the immediate cause of the Meiji Restoration) did not intrude nearly so much on Japanese sovereignty as this hegemonic alliance. It became a means to control Japanese foreign policy, ensuring that Japan did not choose neutrality in the Cold War or undertake an independent rearmament, effectively subordinating Japan in the U.S.-led struggle against the Soviet bloc.

Japan, however, adapted to the Cold War order and found ways to exploit it. Yoshida and his successors formulated a unique strategy of pursuing Japanese economic interests while passively deferring to U.S. political and military domination. Insisting on adherence to Article 9, Yoshida stoutly resisted U.S. efforts to remilitarize Japan for participation in the Cold War struggle.

"The day [for rearmament] will come naturally when our livelihood recovers," he told an aide. "It may sound devious (*zurui*), but let the Americans handle [our security] until then. It is indeed our Heaven-bestowed good fortune that the Constitution bans arms. If the Americans complain, the Constitution gives us a perfect justification. The politicians who want to amend it are fools."⁶

To satisfy the Americans, Yoshida and his successors in the LDP agreed to establish the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) but in succeeding years adopted a series of self-binding measures to preclude active involvement in

⁵ Roger Buckley, *U.S.-Japan Alliance Diplomacy 1945-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 78.

⁶ Miyazawa Kiichi, *Tokyo-Washington no mitsudan* [Secret Discussions between Tokyo and Washington] (Tokyo: Jitsugyo no Nihonsha, 1956), 160.

the power politics of the Cold War. I call these measures “the nine no’s”: no overseas deployment of the JSDF, no participation in collective self-defense, no power-projection capability, no possession of nuclear arms, no arms exports, no sharing of defense-related technology, no spending more than 1% of GNP for defense, no military use of space, and no foreign aid for military purposes. Japan defined itself as a trading state and paid the United States billions of dollars to provide its security. The Mutual Security Treaty became a peculiar, contradictory, and twisted alliance, lacking common purpose and mutuality. Between the U.S. forces and the JSDF there was no interoperability, no joint command, little consultation, and almost no coordination. Such dependence on another nation for security was demeaning and costly of Japan’s self-respect. Nevertheless, this grand strategy of avoiding great-power politics worked brilliantly both to propitiate the pacifist instincts of the Japanese people and to facilitate the “economic miracle.”

The Post-Cold War Interval

Throughout its modern history the recurrent pattern of Japanese geopolitics has been one of adapting Japan’s political system to meet the conditions of the international environment. Beginning with the Meiji Restoration, Japanese leaders repeatedly accommodated policies and institutions to changes in the prevailing external realities. The historically formed character of the conservative elite has always been noted for its realism and pragmatism, its readiness to adapt to meet the needs of national power. As the post-Cold War reality sank in, Japan behaved in classic fashion. Once again the country’s conservative elite would change its foreign policy and revise the domestic infrastructure in response to the changing external order.

The Yoshida strategy was designed to succeed in the Cold War system, but it was immediately outmoded when the conflict ended. With the end of superpower rivalry, the United States was no longer willing to provide automatic guarantees of Japanese security and demanded that its junior partner shoulder greater responsibility for its own security and for the international order. Step by step, fitfully, Japan began undoing its strategy and groping for a new one to fit the still-emerging post-Cold War order. A new direction and sense of national purpose, however, did not come readily. Disoriented by the new international circumstances, the configuration of domestic politics shifted in a topsy-turvy fashion. In the postwar period, there had long been three centers of political power in the Diet: first, the LDP’s conservative mainstream that adhered to the Yoshida strategy of concentrating on economic growth;

second, the opposition Japan Socialist Party, which advocated neutrality during the Cold War; and third, the political nationalists composing the right wing of the LDP who wanted to revise the constitution, rearm, and assert a more independent role in the world. The end of the Cold War undermined the first two. The mainstream Yoshida school of the LDP lost its footing, while the Socialist Party collapsed. Left standing was the nationalist right wing of the LDP, which soon became the party's new mainstream.

Still, the Yoshida strategy, which was deeply embedded in Japan's postwar institutions and sanctioned by its extraordinary successes in building Japan's international economic power, had great staying power and was not easily overturned. For 40 years, Japan had anchored both its foreign policy and domestic system in the unique conditions of the bilateral order. Sections of the bureaucracy, the opposition parties, remnants of the Yoshida school, the Komeito Party (the LDP's junior coalition partner), and much of the voting public resisted any change that might entangle Japan in military matters. The economic bureaucrats had long dominated the JSDF budget, and elite bureaucrats in the Cabinet Legislation Bureau maintained firm control of the narrow interpretation of the constitution's Article 9. It was difficult to replace a strategic policy so deeply entrenched in the bureaucratic politics amid persistent public resistance to change.

No country was less prepared for the post-Cold War era than Japan. Japan had neglected, and in fact deliberately averted its attention from, developing an infrastructure to take responsibility for its security. Incredibly, the Japanese had no plan or legislation that would allow the government to deal with national emergencies. Dependence on the United States had become the foundation of the nation's foreign policy. Exclusive concentration on economic growth left Japan without political-strategic institutions, crisis-management practices, intelligence-gathering capabilities, or resources for strategic planning. Adopting a more orthodox role in a conflict-prone world would require an institutional revolution and the formation of a security infrastructure lacking in the years of the Yoshida strategy. If Japan were to become an actor in international politics after more than a half century of shunning this role, it would need organizations responsible for strategic and military planning. Developing a foreign policy with greater symmetry between the economic and political dimensions of its international role would challenge the institutional and informal practices sanctified by decades of success in purely economic matters. The Ministry of Finance's domination of the budget-making process would need to be modified in ways that give military and strategic criteria greater influence. The prime minister's capacity

to provide bold leadership in foreign policy—to formulate a strategic vision and implement security policy—must be greatly enhanced to deal with rapidly changing international circumstances. The constitution must be amended or reinterpreted to define the role of the military, to make collective self-defense legal, and to clarify the national purpose. In short, Japan would need to undergo a major transformation of its foreign policy and supporting institutions.

The United States, exercising the leverage that Japan's subordination in the hegemonic alliance provided, kept relentless pressure on Japan. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the organizing of Operation Enduring Freedom to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan, the U.S. deputy secretary of state summoned the Japanese ambassador in Washington to deliver the message that the United States expected Japan to “show the flag.” Similarly, when the invasion of Iraq began in 2003, Washington asked Tokyo for “boots on the ground.” In both cases, the debates in Japan were protracted, and the fundamental issue was always whether the constitution allowed collective self-defense. The government drafted special legislation to allow noncombat, logistical support of U.S. and other coalition forces in the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns. With successive international crises involving the United States and its allies, Japan's more active engagement continued to evolve. The pace of Japanese adaptation to the post-Cold War conditions might have continued at a slow, incremental pace had not the emergence of a newly assertive China and a belligerent North Korea created a more threatening regional environment. Yet the external environment was not the only cause; fundamental shifts in domestic politics also fueled a more rapid tempo of change.

ABE'S FOREIGN POLICY REVOLUTION

A Surge of Conservative Nationalism

The opportune time for the political nationalists arrived in 2012 with the LDP's landslide victory in the general election and Abe's return as prime minister. After a brief first term (2006–7) marked by mishaps and bad judgment, Abe was followed in the next five years by a succession of five weak prime ministers. From 2009 to 2012, the LDP briefly lost its hold on government to the Democratic Party of Japan, which proved hapless and incapable of retaining public confidence. When Abe regained power in 2012 after such political disarray—he was the first prime minister since Yoshida to

be given a second chance—his return did not reflect his popularity among the majority of voters, who either stayed at home or voted for the LDP simply out of disgust for the opposition's record. Rather, it was the surge of conservative nationalist support in his party that gave Abe the opportunity.

Abe is a political blue blood whose ancestors hailed from one of the two feudal domains that led the Meiji Restoration. Steeped in the elitist traditions of Japanese politics, his father had been foreign minister and his grandfather and great uncle had been prime ministers. Abe's nationalist perspective was shaped by the memory of his maternal grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, who was a member of the war cabinet and imprisoned by the occupation as a suspected war criminal, before returning to politics and serving a tumultuous three-year term as prime minister (1957–60) in which he failed in an attempt to remilitarize Japan. Returning to power, Abe vowed to “take back Japan” (*Nippon o torimodosu*) and end the long subordination of Japan in the U.S.-led order. In his book *Toward a New Country*, he declared his intention to end the legacy of the occupation and to recover Japanese autonomy. For too long the Japanese people had enjoyed prosperity without “the clear awareness that the lives and treasure of the Japanese people and the territory of Japan must be protected by the Japanese government's own hands.”⁷ His goal, as often said, was “an end to the postwar structure” (*rejimu*) and the “recovery of independence” (*dokuritsu no kaifuku*).

The post-Cold War period was the seed time of conservative nationalism. Given the extent of the occupation's reforms, it should come as no surprise that there would be a conservative reaction. What was surprising was that it was so long in coming. The politics of the Cold War held it in abeyance. Abe was the darling of dozens of new conservative groups, who denounced the imposed constitution, its liberal social values, the hegemonic alliance, and above all the victors' version of history, which concentrated blame for the Asia-Pacific War on Japan. They were resentful of the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, which they regarded as victors' justice, one-sided and biased in its verdicts. The Greater East Asian War, as they called it, should not be attributed to Japanese militarism alone. It was the West's original intrusion into Asia that led Japan to arm and expand to defend itself. Though many conservatives acknowledged that the Japanese military committed aggression against Japan's Asian neighbors, they bristled at these neighbors' interference in how the Japanese taught their own history. They contended that the Chinese

⁷ Shinzo Abe, *Atarashii kuni e* [Toward a New Country], rev. ed. (Tokyo: Bungei shunju, 2013), 254. This was a revision of a book entitled *Utsukushii kuni e* [Toward a Beautiful Country] published at the time of Abe's first administration.

had not come to an honest assessment of the crimes committed because of Maoist policies and that the Koreans had not been willing to acknowledge the positive contributions of Japanese colonial rule. They rejected descriptions of the Nanjing massacre and of coerced sexual slavery as inaccurate and exaggerated. As for the war with the United States, they argued that the attack on Pearl Harbor was a desperate act by a Japan driven into a corner by U.S. ultimatums. The war's ending, in their view, was a cruel bombing of a country that was already seeking a mediated settlement.

The group that drew the most attention in the media for its size and influence among the policy elite was Nippon Kaigi (the Japan Council or Conference), founded in 1997. As of 2016, it claimed 38,000 members, headquarters in all 47 prefectures, 240 local branches, 1,700 local assembly members, and 281 Diet members, with Abe and his deputy prime minister Taro Aso as special advisers. Its goals were revising the constitution, implementing patriotic education, building a strong national defense to assume an active international security role, and establishing a positive view of Japanese history to replace the verdicts of the war crimes trials.⁸ The large number of Diet members belonging to these groups was indicative of a new generation of LDP politicians who were no longer inclined to adopt a low posture in the face of persistent demands from China and South Korea for apologies and remorse for Japan's wartime atrocities.

Abe's Agenda

Having had five years to reflect on his failed first opportunity to lead Japan, Abe hit the ground running. He first addressed economic issues and captured the public imagination by announcing "three arrows" to be unleashed to revive the economic dynamism of an earlier time: loose monetary policy, fiscal stimulus, and structural reform. The results of this bold initiative were slow in coming, but Abe was credited with strong leadership. Together with his economic policies (known as Abenomics), he moved swiftly to make a series of major institutional reforms necessary to realize his goal of replacing a dependent foreign policy with an activist international role. Above all, he wanted to strengthen the U.S. alliance by making it possible for Japan to provide military support to the United States

⁸ For discussion of Nippon Kaigi and its influence, see Sugano Tamotsu, *Nippon Kaigi no kenkyu* [Research on the Japan Council] (Tokyo: Fusosha, 2016). See also David McNeill, "Nippon Kaigi and the Radical Conservative Project to Take Back Japan," *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 13, no. 50 (2015).

and third countries even when Japan itself was not directly under attack. National security required readiness to engage in collective self-defense—a right that Japan had always rejected as unconstitutional.

In 2013, his first year of his new term in office, Abe established Japan's first-ever National Security Council, staffed with its own secretariat to overcome the notoriously balkanized policymaking process. Intent on strengthening his role in making foreign policy, he wrested power from the bureaucrats and consolidated it in the prime minister's office, where he had the counsel and intelligence needed to determine strategy and manage crises. At Abe's direction, the National Security Council soon promulgated Japan's first National Security Strategy. For 70 years, depending on the United States, Japan had never developed a comprehensive plan for pursuing its security interests. The National Security Strategy argued the need for collective self-defense by emphasizing the changing balance of power in Asia, globalization, new technological developments, and a range of emergent threats from cyber to maritime security. It concluded that Japan could not ensure its security by itself but rather required international collective responses, tighter alliance relations, and closer security partnerships. Next, in the face of public opposition voicing fears that civil and political liberties would be infringed on, Abe pushed through controversial legislation to provide greater protection of state secrets in order to encourage intelligence sharing with the United States.

Most significant—the centerpiece of his foreign policy revolution—was Abe's breaking the postwar deadlock on collective self-defense in a series of calculated steps. He set out to overturn the long-standing interpretation of Article 9, which permitted only individual self-defense and the minimum level of defense capability to act if Japan were attacked directly. Once again wresting power from the bureaucrats, he asserted political control over the Cabinet Legislation Bureau, which had maintained minimalist interpretations of the constitution, and appointed a commission to review and advise him on the legal interpretation of Article 9. The handpicked commission predictably recommended a new and broader interpretation that would allow for collective self-defense in a variety of scenarios. On July 1, 2014, the cabinet approved this interpretation. Subsequently, legislation passed the Diet to implement the new interpretation of the constitution allowing the exercise of the use of force in support of countries with which Japan is in close relationship. Certain broad constraints on the exercise of collective self-defense were

included in the legislation.⁹ However, as Christopher Hughes argues in his recent exhaustive study, these constraints are so vague and subject to flexible executive interpretation as to be potentially hollow and hostage to future security contingencies.¹⁰

A firewall in place for over 60 years was breached. Article 9 had been subject to manipulation and reinterpretation in the past as a result of a 1959 Supreme Court decision in which the court declined to interpret Article 9, ruling it to be a “political matter” that must be left to the political branches of government. Abe’s bold demarche is the most substantial and controversial reinterpretation since the establishment of the JSDF in 1954. The precedent he set of overtly asserting political control over the interpretation of Article 9 opened the way for further loosening of the constraints on him and his successors advancing an activist security policy in the future. With this new constitutional interpretation, Hughes concludes, “Japan has embarked on a genuinely radical trajectory in security policy...It does indeed mark a sharp break with the antimilitaristic principles of the past....and necessitates consideration of Japan as a far more serious military player in international security.”¹¹

This revolutionary change in policy was carried out from above by the policymaking elite in the face of public opinion polls showing strong opposition to a new foreign policy that might entangle Japan in international conflicts. Legal scholars in Japanese universities overwhelmingly opposed the decision to ignore prescribed procedures for amending the constitution, which required passage by a two-thirds majority in both houses of the Diet and a simple majority in a national referendum. The cabinet’s decision to reinterpret Article 9 sparked massive public demonstrations of opposition, and an older generation of postwar progressives watched wistfully as the essence of Article 9, so important to their national identity, further eroded. Nevertheless, given the unprecedented weakness of opposition parties in government, Abe was free to move ahead.

Foreign policy has traditionally been the area in which the prime minister has the most freedom of action, not having to satisfy any factional constituency. Moreover, a skilled prime minister can act independently of public opinion on foreign policy without suffering political consequences,

⁹ Collective self-defense can be exercised only under conditions in which an attack on a closely aligned country poses a threat to Japan’s survival and the peoples’ well-being, when there is no other appropriate means to repel an attack, and where the use of force is limited to the minimum necessary. Prior Diet approval is required except in “emergency” situations.

¹⁰ Christopher W. Hughes, “Japan’s Strategic Trajectory and Collective Self-Defense: Essential Continuity or Radical Shift?” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 43, no. 1 (2017): 93–126.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

given that other issues usually weigh more heavily on voters. Abe is a notable example of a prime minister whose foreign policy initiatives have often been unpopular without preventing his electoral success. By emphasizing popular economic and welfare issues, and downplaying his controversial security policies at election time, he has circumvented public opinion and achieved his foreign policy revolution “from above.”

In addition to overturning the ban on collective self-defense, Abe has finally and decisively ended all but one of the other self-binding policies (the nine no's) adopted to keep Japan from involvement in great-power politics. The exception is the ban on possession of nuclear arms, which is nevertheless under constant review. Some of these rollbacks preceded Abe, but they were tentative and constrained. For example, since 2003, Japan's cooperation with the United States on ballistic missile defense had quietly transgressed the prohibitions on militarization of space and collective self-defense. Among his reforms, Abe ended the long-standing ban on arms exports (in place since 1976) and gave new stimulus to the domestic arms industry. He revised the foreign aid charter to permit support abroad for defense-related projects. He brushed aside the formal policy of limiting defense expenditure to 1% of GNP.¹² In a Diet speech in March 2017, he said there was no thought in his administration to maintaining that limitation. Picking up on this assertion, the LDP's Research Committee on Security recommended that Japan use as a point of reference NATO's 2% of GDP benchmark for defense expenditure. For a half century, Ministry of Finance bureaucrats had pressured politicians to maintain the 1% limit, but Abe installed Taro Aso, his vice prime minister, to serve concurrently as minister of finance to oversee the ministry's usually veiled processes. During the Abe administration there have been annual increases in defense spending, despite Japan's debt-to-GDP ratio of 250% and the competing demands of the welfare budget for an aging society. The 2018 defense budget is the highest ever and accounts for over 5% of the entire government budget, which is also at a postwar high.¹³ Increases allow Abe to eye plans for new capacity to project military power, including developing cruise missiles capable of hitting foreign bases and converting the Izumo-class helicopter carrier into an aircraft carrier that could accommodate new F-35B jets.

¹² The 1976 Defense Program Outline read: “The total amount of defense expenditure in each fiscal year shall not exceed, for the time being, an amount equivalent to 1/100th of the gross national product of the said fiscal year.” See Kenneth B. Pyle, *The Japan Question: Power and Purpose in a New Era* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2nd ed. 1996), 33–34.

¹³ “Rising Asia Tensions Push Japan's Defense Budget to Record High,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, December 21, 2017.

Reinterpretation of the constitution to allow collective self-defense has set in motion the most profound change in the U.S.-Japan alliance since the end of the occupation. The alliance is taking on the character of a classic alliance in which states aggregate their power against a commonly perceived threat. Revised U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines, agreed on in 2015, offer a blueprint for greater integration, interoperability, coordination of strategy, and geographic scope of cooperation. With consciousness of shared interests, the alliance could become more cohesive; with agreement on expectations and defined obligations to act in specified contingencies, it could become more operational. The JSDF still has more restrictions than a normal military, but in this more coordinated relationship, the allies have a common purpose of building intra-Asian strategic cooperation to maintain a balance of power as Chinese military power expands.

Abe and an Indo-Pacific Security Framework

In his ambition to return Japan to great-power politics, Abe has been its most activist postwar leader, reporting to the Diet that in his first five years in office he has “visited 76 countries and regions and held 600 summit meetings.”¹⁴ The initiative to which Abe is most committed is building a matrix of cooperative security and economic relations among Asian countries. He has promoted strategic relationships with the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia, and India as a counterbalance to China’s ambitions for regional hegemony. As an island nation, devoid of natural resources and deeply dependent on trade, Japan regards maritime issues such as free trade and freedom of navigation as paramount concerns. Its relations with India and key ASEAN members are also vitally important given that these countries are likely to emerge as the drivers of regional economic growth in the decades to come. India is forecast to pull ahead of Japan by 2030 to become the world’s third-largest economy.¹⁵ However that may be, the two countries seem destined to be Asia’s second- and third-largest economies for the foreseeable future.

The relationship between India and Japan is free of the history problems that confound Japan’s relations with its neighbors. Abe has long felt an affinity with India growing out of its wartime sympathy for Japan’s struggle against

¹⁴ Shinzo Abe (policy speech to the 196th Session of the Diet, Tokyo, January 22, 2018) ~ https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201801/_00002.html.

¹⁵ Masashi Uehara and Kengo Tahara, “India’s Economy to Be World’s No. 3 by 2028: Forecast,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, December 7, 2017.

Western colonialism. The Indian jurist Radhabinod Pal was the only one of the eleven justices on the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal to reach a not-guilty verdict for Japan's wartime leaders.¹⁶ India, like Japan, has border disputes with China and is alarmed at the prospect of Chinese regional hegemony. Both countries are also resentful of China's opposition to their becoming permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Abe's signature foreign policy initiative is his vision of an Indo-Pacific security framework for the 21st century. He originated the concept during his first administration in an address to the Indian parliament in 2007, which he titled the "Confluence of the Two Seas," envisaging a "broader" or "expanded Asia" constituting both the Pacific and Indian Oceans.¹⁷ Maintaining free and open sea lanes is a common interest binding together the region's maritime democracies. Abe returned to this theme at the outset of his second term in 2012, in an essay making explicit his concern over China's naval and territorial encroachments on the maritime commons:

The South China Sea seems set to become a "Lake Beijing"...a sea deep enough for the People's Liberation Army's navy to base their nuclear-powered attack submarines, capable of launching missiles with nuclear warheads. Soon, the PLA Navy's newly built aircraft carrier will be a common sight—more than sufficient to scare China's neighbors. That is why Japan must not yield to the Chinese government's daily exercises in coercion around the Senkaku Islands....Japan's top foreign policy priority must be to expand the country's strategic horizons. Japan is a mature maritime democracy and its choice of close partners should reflect that fact. I envisage a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan and the U.S. state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific.¹⁸

Abe developed a personal chemistry with Narendra Modi, who took office as India's prime minister in 2014. Based on their countries' economic and geopolitical needs, they agreed on a "special strategic and global partnership," which soon resulted in a string of deals underscoring India's position as Japan's largest aid recipient. One high-profile aid project is Japan's provision of a highly concessional \$17 billion loan and the technology to

¹⁶ Pal roundly criticized the former Western imperial powers for their hypocrisy in condemning Japanese imperialism and stated that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki constituted war crimes. For his support, a monument honoring Pal was erected at the Yasukuni Shrine in 2005. On his first visit to India as prime minister, Abe made a point of meeting with Pal's son.

¹⁷ Shinzo Abe, "Confluence of the Two Seas" (speech, New Delhi, August 22, 2007) ~ <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>.

¹⁸ Shinzo Abe, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," Project Syndicate, December 27, 2012 ~ <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe>.

build India's first bullet train to connect Mumbai and Ahmedabad, in Modi's home state of Gujarat.¹⁹ The far more significant development was a civil nuclear deal signed in November 2016 that allows Japanese companies to export atomic technology to India. To reach this agreement, Abe overcame considerable opposition at home because India is not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. He succeeded in convincing President Donald Trump to endorse this concept during the president's November 2017 visit to Japan, during which they announced agreement on pursuing an "Indo-Pacific security strategy." To counter China's Belt and Road Initiative, Modi and Abe have proposed the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) to promote development cooperation, infrastructure building, and economic partnerships. The corridor would establish a network of maritime facilities stretching from East Asia to the Middle East and Africa that helps meet Africa's development needs. Like the much more visible Belt and Road Initiative, the AAGC is in its early stages but offers a potential opportunity for the United States and others to join in funding.

The military dimensions of the Japan-India relationship are still limited. Japan has joined the bilateral U.S.-India naval exercises known as the Malabar series, designed to develop coordination and interoperability among the navies. China has expressed displeasure over this development, which it correctly sees as aimed at its military vessels entering the Indian Ocean. In January 2018, high-ranking naval officers from Japan, the United States, Australia, and India met in New Delhi to affirm their commitment to maintaining "free and open waters in the region."²⁰

The Indo-Pacific framework highlights Abe's activism, his focus on leadership in Asia, and his desire to ease Japan's dependence on the U.S. bilateral relationship. The Japan-India relationship is still at an early stage—both countries trade far more with China than with each other—but their complementary interests carry potential for future development.

Abe's Pragmatism

Having come to power with a strong ideological bent and the backing of large numbers of reactionary groups, Abe was regarded both in Japan and abroad as an ideologue. The *Economist* described him as an "arch nationalist" and his choices for cabinet posts as "scarily right-wing."²¹

¹⁹ Purnendra Jain, "Abe and Modi Deepen Japan-India Ties," East Asia Forum, December 17, 2015.

²⁰ "Japan, U.S., India, Australia Naval Officers Meet," *NHK News*, January 18, 2017.

²¹ "Japan's New Cabinet: Back to the Future," *Economist*, January 5, 2013.

In a gesture to his conservative base on the anniversary of his first year in office, he made a high-profile visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, which commemorates those who died in war. Time, however, has shown Abe to be notably pragmatic in his policies, sometimes to the dismay of the conservative groups that helped bring him to power. He has chosen a forward-looking stance responsive to current trends. Such an approach puts him squarely in the long tradition of modern Japanese conservatism, which is pragmatic, nonideological, and realist.²²

Abe's pragmatism was on display in his widely scrutinized message on the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in August 2015. Putting aside his past ideological positions, he was conciliatory, acknowledging that Japan had committed aggression while leaving open a wider interpretation that the Western imperial encroachment on Asia had played a role in the emergence of Japanese militarism. Later in 2015, to strengthen security collaboration with South Korea and the United States, Abe reached an agreement with South Korean president Park Geun-hye in which he expressed "sorrow and remorse" for the suffering of the "comfort women" during the war.

Abe has handled the unpredictable Trump presidency with remarkable equanimity. With surprisingly fast footwork, he was the first foreign leader to meet with the president-elect and, despite the uncertainties associated with the Trump administration's approach to Asia, has succeeded in establishing a personal bond. He had expended considerable political capital to propitiate domestic economic interests, especially in the highly protected agricultural sector, in order to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) forged by the Obama administration between the United States, Japan, and ten other Pacific nations. The agreement attempted to counter China's growing regional influence while fixing standards for market access, environmental protection, finance-sector reform, energy policy, and health and education cooperation. When the new Trump administration abruptly withdrew from the TPP, Abe worked to maintain the multilateral agreement among the remaining eleven countries, hoping that eventually the United States would rejoin. He also concluded a wide-ranging agreement with the European Union to create a free trade area.

The times have indeed carried Abe in a wholly unexpected direction, seemingly far from his ideological origins. The Trump administration's abdication of global leadership—its abandonment of open trade,

²² For a discussion of Japanese conservatism, see Kenneth B. Pyle, *Japan Rising: The Resurgence of Japanese Power and Purpose* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007), 41–55.

multilateralism, and promotion of democracy—handed Abe the opportunity to seize leadership of the rules-based order. Given his reputation as a right-wing nationalist, it is a matter of breathtaking irony that Abe, together with Angela Merkel, should be regarded, in the words of G. John Ikenberry, as “the new leaders of the free world [who] will have to sustain international liberalism.”²³ Having become a proponent of the liberal order, Abe has repeatedly referred to Japan’s support of “universal values,” which to some observers does not ring true, given his longtime advocacy of replacing liberal American values with Japanese values in education. In an upper house session of the Diet in May 2015, he explained why Japan was joining the TPP negotiations: “Creating new rules with our ally and with other countries that share universal values such as freedom, democracy, basic human rights, and the rule of law and deepening mutually dependent economic relationships with these countries has strategic significance for our country’s security as well as for the stability of the region.”²⁴ Had the “arch nationalist” become a liberal? It would be more accurate to understand Abe’s “liberalism” as indicative of his realism. He was defending Japan’s interest in a free and open trading system. Appropriating liberal rhetoric was a way of crafting a national identity for Japan as a regional democratic leader over against authoritarian China.

A notable example of Abe’s pragmatism is his scaling back of plans for constitutional revision. Rather than pursuing the extensive revision that an LDP draft proposed in 2012, he has instead decided on the more achievable goal of keeping the existing two clauses in Article 9 and simply adding a paragraph that will recognize the legality of the JSDF. Since opinion polls show the JSDF to be one of the most respected institutions in Japan, this proposal stands a reasonable chance of success. In any case, in the back of Abe’s mind must be the reassuring thought that, while not accomplishing a more extensive formal revision, he has achieved success already through simple reinterpretation by cabinet decision. A more limited revision approved by a popular referendum would be a satisfying symbolic achievement.

²³ G. John Ikenberry, “The Plot against American Foreign Policy: Can the Liberal Order Survive?” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2017.

²⁴ Aurelia George Mulgan, “Securitizing the TPP in Japan: Policymaking Structure and Discourse,” *Asia Policy*, no. 22 (2016): 212.

JAPAN IN THE TWILIGHT OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY

The American century as Luce envisioned it in 1941, with the United States possessing the power and the will to reorder the world, is coming to an end and along with it the extraordinary period of U.S. domination of Japan. The Trump administration's retreat from global leadership is not the cause of this shift but does mark it with an exclamation point. The diffusion of power in the world is the root cause. At the end of World War II, possessing half of the world's GDP, the United States was in a historically unique position to create and manage a new order. In 2018, the U.S. share of GDP is estimated to be little more than 15%.²⁵ The rise of China and other Asian countries is part of a growing diffusion of power that reduces the influence of the United States and its ability to shape the regional future. Asia is now a multipolar region with several powerful actors and a larger group of lesser-but-strong secondary players. The region not only is the center of gravity in world economic dynamism but also is becoming the new center of gravity in global politics. All the world's principal military powers and several of the key middle powers are in Asia. These countries in rough descending order of military power are the United States, China, Russia, India, Japan, South Korea, Pakistan, and North Korea. Six of these eight powers possess nuclear weapons and the other two are near nuclear. While the United States will remain militarily dominant for the foreseeable future, U.S. primacy will be less pronounced.

For the time being, Japan's immediate priority will be to strengthen its alignment with the United States, but in the longer term Japan will increasingly move toward a more independent foreign policy, one that offers greater autonomy and room to adjust to its perception of the shifting balance of power in the region. Japan will also closely weigh the reliability of U.S. assurances and the future direction of U.S. policy in Asia. The Trump administration's "America first" rhetoric, abrupt withdrawal from the TPP, and other unsettling references to alliances and multilateralism inevitably deepen latent Japanese concerns over the United States' commitment to continuing to carry the burden of security in the western Pacific. With memories of Richard Nixon's opening to China, Tokyo is bound to be uneasy over the future course of the Sino-U.S. relationship and its implications for Japanese interests.

North Korea's expanding nuclear and missile technology, which may soon include the capability to threaten the U.S. homeland, is causing Japan to

²⁵ "GDP Share of World Total (PPP) Data for All Countries," Economy Watch ~ http://www.economywatch.com/economic-statistics/economic-indicators/GDP_Share_of_World_Total_PPP.

question whether the United States would place an American city at jeopardy to come to Japan's aid. In an essay in the *Yomiuri* newspaper in October 2017, Shinichi Kitaoka, a key foreign policy adviser to Abe, wrote the following:

Japan should build up not only a missile defense system, but also counterstrike capabilities in response to North Korea's military threat....What will the United States really do when North Korea finally develops the ability to target Los Angeles with either precision-guided intercontinental ballistic missiles or submarine-launched ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads? I doubt that Washington would order an offensive against the North while knowing that a large number of citizens in the second-largest U.S. city would be inevitably killed. Put simply, Japan has virtually no say about the extent and range of any offensive the United States may launch in this region. Is it appropriate for a country to leave its fate up to a foreign country to such an extent?²⁶

Should North Korea succeed in achieving a full-scale nuclear capability, the credibility of the United States' nuclear umbrella for its allies in South Korea and Japan could be seriously diminished. From the country's earliest history, Japan's security has been linked to the peninsula, and it is doubtful that Japan could long tolerate a nuclear North Korea. In such circumstances, the incentives for Tokyo to acquire its own nuclear weapons would greatly increase. Japan's evaluation of the U.S. alliance will hinge on how U.S. leaders manage the nuclear threat from North Korea and how well Japan's interests are served in the United States' relations with China.

Abe has engineered Japan's return to great-power politics from above, showing resolve in overriding public opposition. Yet absent the stability of the U.S.-led order, the future will appear dangerously uncertain to the Japanese public. In such times of transition in the international order, Japan has historically experienced rapid swings in its geopolitical positions. The pacifist and antimilitarist identity that postwar generations have long embraced could give way quickly to a very different orientation. The postwar political scientist Masao Maruyama once observed that a pragmatic tendency to conform to the environment is a key aspect of Japanese political psychology. Foreigners, he observed, are often baffled by two contradictory tendencies in Japanese politics: the difficulty of enacting change and the rapidity with which change takes place. Maruyama's explanation is that a characteristic conservative reluctance to break with the past is set off by the readiness to accommodate the realities of the time. This, he argued, is the hallmark of the pragmatic

²⁶ Shinichi Kitaoka, "Japan Should Acquire Counterstrike Ability," *Japan News*, October 3, 2017 ~ <http://qoshe.com/the-japan-news/shinichi-kitaoka/insights-into-the-world-japan-should-acquire-cou/1621876>.

and non-doctrinaire nature of Japanese conservatism, in contrast with the stubborn and principled conservatism in Europe. Therefore, in Japanese politics it is difficult to break with the past, but once change is underway, it spreads rapidly.²⁷

With the growing uncertainty of regional conditions, we should not be surprised if the Japanese public's prolonged resistance to revision of the constitution and to an activist and assertive foreign policy changes. During the past half century, as the country's industrial and financial power grew, the return of Japan to great-power politics has been predicted—wrongly. But in the present circumstances, seen in broad perspective, there should be no doubt that Japan is undergoing a seismic shift of the nation's course. In five years as prime minister, Abe has begun restoring Japan's responsibility for its own security, making the U.S. alliance more reciprocal and launching an activist foreign policy not seen since 1945. So long as Abe avoids major political scandal and keeps his health, he appears likely to remain in office until 2021 and become the longest-serving prime minister in Japanese history. But even should his term be shortened, his policies now have a momentum that will be very difficult to reverse. These policies are supported by all likely candidates to succeed him, and the political opposition is weaker than at any time in the postwar period. As was the case in Japan's modern revolution of 1868, the new policies and reforms that Abe has begun will develop over many years, but he has changed the course of the ship of the Japanese state. ◆

²⁷ Masao Maruyama, *Senchu to sengo no aida* [Between Wartime and Postwar] (Tokyo: Misuzu shobo, 1976), 347–48.