

# Abe's legacy: An appreciation

In life and in death, Shinzo Abe attracted controversy, today's state funeral being no exception. To focus on that is to ignore the legacy of the most consequential post-war Japanese prime minister, one whose vision and actions set a new direction for his country's foreign policy.



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For *The Straits Times*

Shinzo Abe's second term as prime minister (2012-2020) marked the final break with the Yoshida Doctrine that had for far too long limited Japanese foreign, security and defence policies.

Named after Mr Shigeru Yoshida, the prime minister from 1948 to 1954, the doctrine was premised on relying almost entirely on the United States for security, while focusing on economic growth and relying on a very narrow interpretation of collective self-defence under the pacifist Constitution to fend off calls for Japan to take on wider responsibilities for regional or international security.

This approach made sense in the immediate post-World War II period when Japan was still recovering from wartime devastation. But the passive and reactive foreign policy that was its consequence sat uneasily with a Japan whose economic strength had grown to be only second to that of the United States. By the time of the first Gulf War in 1990, it was clearly anachronistic. Japan was derided for practising selfish "cheque-book diplomacy" instead of shouldering its responsibilities as a major power.

Previous prime ministers, notably Mr Abe's grandfather Nobusuke Kishi (1957-1960), Mr Takeo Fukuda (1976-1978), Mr Yasuhiro Nakasone (1982-1987), Mr Kiichi Miyazawa (1991-1993) and Mr Junichiro Koizumi (2001-2006), took incremental steps away from the Yoshida Doctrine. But it was Mr Abe who made the bold and decisive break. In this respect, he was the most consequential post-war Japanese prime minister whose legacy is a new direction for Japanese foreign policy.

Mr Abe is perhaps best known outside Japan as a right-wing politician who wanted to change Article 9 of Japan's Constitution which renounces war as an instrument of state policy, but failed. However, the changes that he wanted were minor and would only have recognised what had long been an established fact: Japan's Self-Defence Forces are among the most technologically advanced and powerful in the Indo-Pacific. His failure to amend the Constitution is a red herring.

After his return to power in 2012, Mr Abe took a series of political and administrative steps that did not require constitutional changes but nevertheless radically revised the interpretation of Article 9 to allow much deeper and broader defence cooperation with the US.

Collective self-defence was not to be exercised only in the direct defence of Japan or the US, but potentially also to defend other allies and third countries with close relationships with Japan. The security Rubicon was crossed in 2015 when the new interpretation was formally enshrined in law after the Diet passed "Legislation for Peace and Security", a comprehensive package of 10 Bills.

Pacifist opinion in Japan is ebbing but still significant. Debate in the Diet was robust. But in retrospect, what was notable was how little



A mourner offering flowers on July 15 next to a photograph of former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe, who was shot while campaigning for a parliamentary election, in Tokyo. Previous prime ministers took incremental steps away from the Yoshida Doctrine, but it was Mr Abe who made the bold and decisive break. In this respect, he was the most consequential post-war Japanese prime minister whose legacy is a new direction for Japanese foreign policy. PHOTO: REUTERS

negative reaction, either domestically or abroad, there was when legislation that marked such a major watershed in post-war Japan's defence and security policies was passed. Whatever misgivings some may have had, they accepted that the changed strategic environment impelled a new approach to security and defence. Today, except for marginal players such as the communists and the extreme right who think that Mr Abe had not gone far enough, there is a de facto consensus across the Japanese political spectrum on the new direction.

2015 was also the 70th anniversary of Japan's surrender and the end of World War II. In September, China held a grand military parade to celebrate the anniversary. In the run-up, Beijing tried to use Japan's militarist past to whip up anti-Japanese sentiment, perhaps to isolate Japan and complicate passage of the legislation. If this was the intention, China failed.

Leaders of the US and its Western allies did not attend. From the Indo-Pacific, only eight leaders participated. North Korea, China's only formal ally, sent the head of the Korean Workers' Party, a powerless post. Asean leaders who attended were either close Chinese partners like Myanmar and Cambodia, or fellow Leninist states like Vietnam and Laos who attended out of party solidarity.

In neither case was concern about Japan a consideration. Thailand was represented by a deputy prime minister, while Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore did not send serving political office holders. Asean, like most of Asia, prefers to look forward not backward in relations with Japan.

#### NUANCED APPROACH TO CHINA

China's increasingly assertive, and on occasion downright aggressive, behaviour in the East and South China seas shifted Japanese public opinion on defence and security issues in a more realistic direction. This helped Mr Abe regain leadership of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) after he resigned in 2007, and facilitated his efforts to take Japan in a new direction. Concerns about China undoubtedly drove his efforts to reinterpret the Constitution to strengthen Japan's ability to contribute to collective defence, but he was no simplistic China hawk.

Japan's relations with China, always complicated, plummeted in the early 2000s after Mr Koizumi refused to be deterred by China

from visiting the controversial Yasukuni Shrine. They reached a nadir in 2012 after prime minister Yoshihiko Noda, taking the less bad option, nationalised the Senkaku Islands which China claimed, to forestall them being bought by the ultra-nationalist former governor of Tokyo Shintaro Ishihara.

After his return to power in December 2012, Mr Abe adopted a nuanced approach towards China. He made clear that Japan would not be intimidated by or dictated to by China, while simultaneously taking steps to stabilise a relationship that he understood Japan could not ignore and indeed needed for its own economic well-being.

Thus in December 2013, a year after becoming prime minister again, Mr Abe defied China and visited Yasukuni Shrine, the first visit by a serving Japanese prime minister since 2006, but then refrained from doing so again until he stepped down in 2020.

He started the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Quality Infrastructure initiative with the US and Australia to compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative, but allowed the Japan Bank for International Cooperation to jointly fund BRI and FOIP projects with the China Development Bank.

He encouraged and funded Japanese companies to move critical facilities out of China to enhance supply-chain resilience and protect crucial technologies from mercantilist and predatory Chinese policies, but side-stepped US president Donald Trump's trade war against China.

In November 2014, China, probably recognising that Mr Abe could not be coerced, dropped its precondition that Japan should acknowledge that the Senkaku Islands were disputed and that he should promise never to visit Yasukuni, and agreed to a meeting with its President Xi Jinping. The meeting was clearly fraught – in former US deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage's memorable phrase, the official photograph of the summit looked like the two leaders "were smelling each other's socks" – but still they met. In his condolence message after Mr Abe's murder, Mr Xi acknowledged that Mr Abe had contributed positively to improving relations between China and Japan.

#### MANAGING US RELATIONS

Central to Mr Abe's plans for dealing with China was strengthening the US-Japan alliance. Obvious as it may seem,

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this was not to be taken for granted. Some on the Japanese right who support stronger defence do so to distance Japan from the US. But in this respect as with relations with China, Mr Abe was no simple right-winger. In November 2016, he flew to New York to meet Mr Trump even before the latter had been inaugurated as the 45th president. This was something more than just the natural anxiety to meet the new leader of Japan's principal ally who had expressed scepticism about America's alliance system during his election campaign.

Earlier than any other leader anywhere, Mr Abe recognised that Mr Trump was only an extreme symptom of a more fundamental phenomenon. After the Cold War, the US still had formidable competitors like China, but no longer faced any existential threat. There was thus no reason for Americans to bear any burden or pay any price to uphold the international order. In different ways, the main priorities of all post-Cold War American presidents since Mr Bill Clinton were domestic, with Mr George W. Bush an exception forced by the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

This was not the retreat from the world that some portrayed. But as America began to disentangle itself from over-extensions in the Middle East and elsewhere, its international interventions became more selective, and it demanded more from its allies, partners and friends. Mr Trump did not invent transactionalism. He was merely less polite about it than his predecessors and successor.

Mr Abe went out of his way to cultivate friendly personal relations with Mr Trump throughout the four chaotic years of his presidency, even as he hedged by cultivating relations with India, Australia and Asean. Japan was not spared from American pressures on burden sharing. Mr Abe had to swallow rebuffs like Mr Trump's abrupt scrapping of the Trans-Pacific Partnership that he had paid a political price to join, while working hard to establish the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership as a second-best replacement. This was high political realism and statesmanship. Mr Abe clearly understood there is no Indo-Pacific balance without the US and whatever its imperfections, we have only one US and have to work with it.

Some Singaporean intellectuals could take lessons from Mr Abe in

this respect. The US and China are what they are. American democracy which distrusts power on principle is dysfunctional by design, today more than ever before; an entitled assertiveness, indeed aggressiveness, is inherent in the ethno-nationalist narrative of humiliation and rejuvenation by which the Chinese Communist Party justifies its right to rule and its China Dream is one of restoration of hierarchy. But we have no choice but to deal with both. US-China competition does not make strong relations with the US and China alternatives. Rather, competition makes the former the necessary condition for the latter.

#### JAPAN'S NEW DIRECTION

Japan has always played three main roles in the Indo-Pacific security architecture. First, the US-Japan alliance is the primary anchor of the US presence in the region. Second, Japan plays a key role in supplementing the US presence in the region, particularly in South-east Asia. Third, Japan is an important actor in its own right, initially in economics but with a growing security dimension.

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Will Mr Abe's new direction be sustained? Sustainability is key because while he set a new direction, Japan is still only at the beginning of its new trajectory. Sustainability depends on two main factors: political continuity and economics.

As previously noted, there is a broad consensus on the necessity of Mr Abe's new direction across mainstream political parties and certainly within the LDP which faces no significant opposition. Barring some serious mishap, the LDP is set to hold power for the foreseeable future.

It is unlikely that any future prime minister will match Mr Abe's tenure in office. But while different individuals may pursue his agenda with different degrees of enthusiasm, debates will primarily be about pace and means, not ends. Mr Abe's new direction was a response to structural changes in Japan's strategic environment and future leaders do not have much choice.

The second factor is more consequential. Mr Abe recognised that the new capabilities Japan needs to sustain his more ambitious interpretation of collective defence, ultimately depended on the health of Japan's economy. No one will claim that Abenomics was a resounding success, but neither was it a failure. The first two "arrows" of Abenomics – a flexible fiscal policy and monetary expansion – seemed to work reasonably well. Whether because of Abenomics or some other reason, Japan shook off the lost decade of the 1990s and grew steadily.

But if Japan is to avoid the stagnation of a rapidly ageing society, the third "arrow" of structural reform is crucial. The only real answer to the falling birthrate of an ageing advanced economy is immigration and a sensible foreign labour policy. Large-scale immigration is probably a stretch too far for Japan as it will require a redefinition of what it means to be Japanese, but the latter is possible.

Mr Abe took some small steps towards a more liberal foreign labour policy. What has been done so far is clearly too little and too hesitant. A bolder approach is needed. It will be politically very difficult. But since the Meiji Restoration, Japan has fundamentally changed several times to respond to existential challenges in its environment. Mr Abe's new defence and security policies show what is possible. A poll conducted by the left-leaning Asahi Shimbun earlier in September 2022 showed high support for Mr Abe's state funeral among younger Japanese who regard themselves as having benefited from his economic policies – 58 per cent among those 18 to 29 compared to 26 per cent among those 70 or older – is a hopeful sign for the future. His third arrow may yet surprise us all.

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