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## On security and diplomacy, Abe's legacy to be felt far into the future



Prime Minister Fumio Kishida addresses a memorial service for late leader Shinzo Abe on Saturday, the first anniversary of his assassination, in Tokyo's Minato Ward. | KYODO

In the year since former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated as he campaigned on a Nara street corner, Japan has undergone a number of monumental shifts in its approach to security and foreign policy, cementing the late leader's legacy.

From the December adoption of three new security documents, including a new National Security Strategy that outlines audacious plans for a “counterstrike capability,” to the passage of a budget in March

(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/03/28/national/politics-diplomacy/record-budget-defense-inflation/>) seeking to double defense spending by 2027, nominally pacifist Japan has undergone a dramatic transformation.

Much of the credit for this — for better or worse — goes to Abe, who played a significant role in laying the foundation for his successors to see his vision come to fruition. But Abe's mark on the country, including key diplomatic shortcomings, is far more indelible, with its impact likely to be felt long into the future, observers say.

## Abe's vision

“Abe's vision and policies most certainly were crucial in paving the way for the further reforms of Japan's security and defense posture that we saw emerge at the end of 2022 under (Prime Minister Fumio) Kishida,” said Christopher Hughes, a Japan expert and professor at Warwick University in Britain.

Although Abe had also built on the groundwork laid by his predecessors — from both his Liberal Democratic Party and now-defunct Democratic Party of Japan — his second stint in office from 2012 to 2020 “accelerated and consolidated a radical trajectory in Japan's security policy,” Hughes said.

Abe's Cabinet approved a reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Constitution in 2014 to allow Japan to exercise the right to collective self-defense. In 2015, he oversaw a major revision to the bilateral U.S.-Japan defense guidelines, which allowed Japan to take on a more ambitious global role amid rising tensions with nuclear-armed North Korea and an increasingly assertive China.



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People hold placards and shout slogans as they protest against then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's security legislation outside parliament in Tokyo in August 2015. | REUTERS

But the biggest win for Abe would come months later, when his ruling bloc rammed through security bills — known by its sponsors as the “Peace and Security Preservation Legislation” — that codified the right to collective self-defense, enabling Japan to mobilize troops overseas to defend itself and its allies should they come under attack.

Hughes, who has written extensively on Abe's approach to foreign and security policy, has argued for several years that the trajectory set by the late leader should be regarded as an “Abe Doctrine” that “has set the fundamental parameters” for future prime ministers.

The Abe Doctrine, Hughes said, effectively displaced Japan's previously dominant “Yoshida Doctrine,” the policy adopted after World War II by Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida that delegated the defense of the country to the U.S. and allowed Tokyo to focus on economic growth.

Abe's policies would now advocate moving from a minimalist to assertive national defense posture, establishing a more effective and integrated U.S.-Japan alliance as well as a more proactive regional diplomatic and security role, while also seeking to shift away from a default policy of engagement with China.

In the year since Abe's death, these shifts have become more evident, reflected in a variety of moves by Kishida.

Indeed, the late leader's fingerprints can be found on everything from the regional propagation and cementing of his "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept to "the Quad" increasingly bolstered framework of cooperation between Japan, the U.S., Australia and India, to last year's decision to acquire a counterstrike capabilities amid fears that the bloody war in Ukraine could foreshadow an invasion of Taiwan by China.

## **New LDP consensus**

Sebastian Maslow, a Japan security expert and lecturer at Sendai Shirayuri Women's College, said that while Abe was "a key player reshaping the international order with a focus on the Indo-Pacific" and "deserves credit in promoting this geostrategic shift," it was his successors' decisions to follow through on his policy line that "helped to further entrench it as a new consensus."

"While under Abe, many of the implemented changes remained contested, few within the LDP today would dispute Kishida's security agenda," Maslow said.

Indeed, many observers have claimed that reaching consensus under the conservative Abe — who was a divisive figure for many, even within his own party — would have been far more difficult than under his successors, especially Kishida, who hails from the more dovish wing of the LDP.



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Then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe address senior members of the Self-Defense Forces at the Defense Ministry in Tokyo in December 2015. | REUTERS

As the grandson of former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, who he greatly admired, Abe was a political scion. The late leader even spoke of how he felt it was his mission to carry on Kishi's goal and "break with the postwar regime" — making Japan a force to be reckoned with on the international stage.

Kishida, on the other hand, leads the traditionally dovish Kochikai faction of the LDP, a sharp contrast with Seiwakai, the hawkish faction once led by Abe. The current prime minister also has a history of sealing diplomatic deals, including a 2015 "comfort women" agreement with South Korea that was said to "finally and irreversibly" resolve the issue of women who suffered under Japan's military brothel system before and during World War II. The deal was effectively abandoned by a later South Korean administration.

"While Kishida was long considered a liberal within the LDP, the fact he does not promote an alternative agenda but implements policies that very much follow Abe's initial agenda, including counterstrike capabilities and closer ties to the U.S., illustrate just how consequential Abe was for Japan's security evolution," Maslow said.

"That this shift has become mostly undisputed within the LDP," Maslow said, "is clearly (Abe's) legacy."

In a statement Saturday marking the anniversary of Abe's assassination, Kishida, himself, was clear on his view of his predecessor's legacy.

"The reason why I am able to manage this administration as prime minister is because of the foundation that Prime Minister Abe laid in both domestic and foreign affairs."

## Tarnished legacy?

But while Abe's legacy as a torchbearer on security issues is not in dispute, diplomacy is another matter.

From his failure to reach a postwar peace treaty with Russian leader Vladimir Putin to his apparent willingness to let ties with neighboring South Korea deteriorate in the face of festering historical issues, Abe's shortcomings in the diplomatic field are often glossed over.

The late leader's inability to deliver on his tough stance toward nuclear-armed North Korea, which is known to have abducted 17 Japanese nationals decades ago — and perhaps hundreds more — and his policy flip-flop amid then-U.S. President Donald Trump's dalliance with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, ranks among Abe's most consequential foreign policy failures, said Maslow.

"Abe's stock value in politics increased as a result of his advocacy of the abduction issue and his hawkish stance toward Pyongyang," he said. "Yet, he failed to deliver any progress on this issue, despite early attempts to reopen dialogue with the North."



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Prime Minister Fumio Kishida reviews Self-Defense Force troops at Camp Asaka in Tokyo in November 2021. | POOL / VIA REUTERS

This failure is evident today as Pyongyang continues to build and launch increasingly advanced missiles into waters near Japan — and sometimes even over the country.

But critics say Abe's legacy of paving the way for Japan's security and diplomatic transformation, for all its plaudits, may actually be his biggest and most lasting failure. Koichi Nakano, an international politics professor at Sophia University in Tokyo, points to "two potentially fatal flaws."

"First, Japan's security strategy is no longer grounded in any way in its constitutional principles, and yet Kishida (like Abe) continues to claim that Japan's pacifism remains unchanged," Nakano said.

The issue, he said, is that "no one knows" what exactly is happening.

"What exactly can Japan do, and what (can it) not do? No one knows. Neither the U.S. nor (the) Japanese government knows, certainly the Japanese people don't, and of course, the Chinese (don't) either," he said.

Second, Nakano pointed to a lack of checks and balances and failure to elucidate the public that began under Abe on issues such as the 2015 security law, which was rammed through parliament, and leached into the policies of succeeding administrations,

including Kishida's.

For Kishida, the clearest example has been the debate over paying for Japan's military buildup. While the prime minister pledged to spend ¥43 trillion over five years on defense in a budget enacted in March, his administration has not reached a consensus on how to secure funding.

Amid fears of a backlash at the ballot box, Kishida has put a decision off pending further debate, including one on a potentially deeply unpopular tax hike that the LDP has said will not come into effect until "an appropriate time after 2024."

Abe's legacy "is not as secure and stable as it may look now," said Nakano, "because both Abe and Kishida have just been pushing for these policy changes through the backdoor, undermining the country's system of liberal democratic checks and balances and keeping the public in the dark."

Others, such as Hughes, say that the groundwork laid by the late prime minister remains firm, regardless of any potential issues.

"Abe's legacy will continue to have a considerable impact over the longer-term and certainly won't fade post-Kishida," said Hughes. "Japan has been on a trajectory towards becoming a more assertive security and defense actor for two decades or more, but Abe accelerated and effectively articulated this strategy."

