Abe Shinzo: Diplomat-in-Chief

Yuki Tatsumi

Abe Shinzo is the longest-serving prime minister in post-World War II Japan. Having occupied the office since December 2012, Abe has attempted to leverage his stable tenure to increase Japan's international presence. In particular, Abe has tried to reshape the way Japan conducts its foreign policy, from being responsive to proactive. "A proactive contribution to peace with international principle" or *chikyushugi o fukansuru gaiko* (diplomacy that takes a panoramic view of the world map) symbolizes his government's approach, part of an earnest attempt to remain relevant on the international scene even as the country grapples with irreversible trends including population decline and aging.

Abe's February 2013 speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies during his first visit to Washington DC after returning to power demonstrates his determination to expand (or sustain at a minimum) Japan's international presence. He spoke at length about his government's insistence on keeping Japan a "first-rate country" and his desire to ensure that it will play a role as "the guardian of the commons," contributing to international efforts to uphold rules and norms.

Indeed, over 7 years since then, Abe has led his government to attempt to reshape his country's foreign policy. At the end of his first year in office, Japan's first-ever National Security Strategy was issued. Abe tried to anchor Japan's foreign policy in two key factors – a robust alliance with the United States, and expansion of its partnerships with other U.S. allies and partners. In addition, as he sought to demonstrate his government's firm commitment to the U.S.-Japan alliance, he also has attempted to carve out a broader room for autonomous diplomacy with the leaders of the countries that the U.S. do not necessarily consider as partners. In fact, particularly in Northeast Asia, Abe's moves have often been out of sync with U.S. ones – with Kim Jong-un in 2018, Moon Jae-in in 2019, Putin from well back, and increasingly with Xi in the Trump era.

Abe encountered a range of challenges in recalibrating foreign policy within Northeast Asia. With history issues unresolved with some neighbors over apologies and compensation for Japan's wartime behavior, disagreements over sovereignty issues lingering from that period, and contention over security issues, Abe has found it difficult to apply his overarching foreign policy principles in bilateral relations with China, the two Koreas, and Russia. Abe has taken different approaches to move relations forward with these countries, but diplomacy since December 2012 has had one common thread: Abe's role as the "diplomat-in-chief" has been pronounced.

By mid-2019, Abe's successes were widely heralded: the closest relationship with Donald Trump of any world leader; improvement in Japan-China relations with a state visit by Xi Jinping – this would have been the first in seven years for a Chinese leader – targeted for the spring of 2020; sustained diplomacy with Vladimir Putin to keep the hope for a long-sought breakthrough in Japan-Russia relations; deepening ties with leaders in Australia (particularly under former prime minister Tony Abbott), India (Narendra Modi met with Abe and Trump together at the G20 Abe hosted), and Southeast Asia; and the more decisive response to the challenges from South Korea, first under Park Geun-hye and now under Moon Jae-in.

However, in the first quarter of 2020 Abe's star might have begun to fade. Abe's plan to host Xi for a state visit in April was derailed due to the outbreak of the COVID-19. He was also criticized for prioritizing Xi's state visit over taking decisive action and imposing more stringent travel restrictions from China early on when the pandemic first broke out.[1] Similarly, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, originally set to start on July 24, 2020, has been postponed to July 23, 2021 due to the COVID-19.[2]

In this chapter, I first provide an overview of the evolution of Japan's foreign policy under the Abe administration, pointing to some key documents. Next, I look at Japan's bilateral relationship with each of the Northeast Asian states. After discussing the role of Abe as top diplomat and how it affected Japan's foreign policymaking, I conclude with prospects for foreign policy in the post-Abe era.

Japan's Foreign Policy under the Abe Government

Abe's vision for his country's foreign policy predates his return to power. As prime minister succeeding Koizumi Junichiro in June 2006, he laid out a vision that served as the baseline of the foreign policy principles when he returned to the office. In front of the Indian parliament in August 2007, Abe delivered a speech entitled "Confluence of the Two Seas," in which he talked about his belief that the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean are an interconnected geostrategic space, where the future of Japan's prosperity lies. He talked about the importance of maintaining the vast maritime space as open and free, where all the countries that benefit from them behave according to the international rules and norms that have been established.[3]

Aso Taro, Abe's foreign minister at that time, developed the framework further into a concept called "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity." "Value diplomacy" was stressed, emphasizing the importance of Japan developing partnerships with the countries that share the key universal values for the international order, including freedom, democracy, free trade, and respect for human rights. Mindful of criticism that a concept with focus on the values associated with democracies is designed to isolate China, Aso argued that Japan is open to work with any countries that agree with the principles of this "arc."[4]

Abe's foreign policy vision was published via *Project Syndicate* and circulated across Western media, becoming an important building-block for his foreign policy agenda. Entitled "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," Abe reconfirmed his belief that the peace and stability of the Pacific Ocean is "inseparable" from that of the Indian Ocean, including freedom of navigation. He raised his concern that the South China Sea was turning into "Lake Beijing" due to China's assertive, unilateral actions to change the status quo, arguing that India and Australia, along with the United States and Japan, are the countries that he would like to see working together to maintain the vast maritime space from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean as free and open commons.[5]

His major foreign policy was to be unveiled during a visit to Indonesia in January 2013. However, his trip was cut short due to a hostage crisis in Nigeria. Although he did not get to deliver it, the speech, "The Bounty of Open Seas: Five New Principles of Japanese Diplomacy," was released on the Japanese government website. The principles Abe articulated – freedom of thought, expression, and speech; respect for the rule of law; support for a free and open economy; more dynamic people-to-people exchanges between Japan and the countries in the Indo-Pacific region; and promotion of youth exchanges – were consistent with what he has said since 2006.[6]

During his first visit after his return to power, Abe's speech in Washington, DC, building on the vision of "free and open maritime commons" that he had laid out in his Security Diamond talk, unequivocally declared that Japan would strive to play a proactive role as the "guardian of the commons." He also emphasized his determination to keep Japan a "first-rate country." In a clear response to the 3rd Armitage-Nye report[7] that challenged Japan to decide whether it would want to stay among the "group of first-rate nations that continue to shape and uphold the existing liberal international order," Abe declared that his government was determined to make institutional, legal, and political adjustments necessary to ensure that Japan would remain an active, responsible stakeholder to help maintain international peace and prosperity.

Two big changes in Japan's strategic environment occurred between when Abe was prime minister for the first time and when he returned to the office: the ascendance of China, and the relative (perceived) decline of the United States. In 2006, China's rise was under way, but Japan was still in a position of relative strength, being the second largest economy in the world, and Chinese assertiveness around the Senkaku Islands was not yet on the horizon. By 2012, however, China had already replaced Japan as the world's second largest economy, accompanied by increasing military assertiveness in the East and South China seas supporting its territorial claims.

Similarly, the United States in 2006, despite its intensified engagement in the Middle East, was still considered to be the predominant leader in maintaining the international order that it helped build after WWII. It was considered to be the anchor of alliance systems predicated on U.S. commitment to the security of allies both in Europe and in Asia, as well as its willingness to lead the international effort to intervene militarily at a time of crisis. In 2012, in contrast, the United States had begun to show signs of being more selective in its engagement, especially employing its military. Barack Obama won the presidential election in 2008 vowing to end U.S. military engagement in the Middle East and articulating a higher threshold – U.S. or allied security and national interests at risk – as the requirement for the U.S. to commit its military forces. Declaring the era of the U.S. acting as the world's policeman over, Obama seriously altered Japan's calculus.

The National Security Strategy (NSS) of December 2013 was developed not only in accord with Abe's vision of a Japan that has a higher profile and is more active internationally but also as a reflection of the two important changes in Japan's strategic environment mentioned above. Similar to any country's national security strategy, Japan's NSS identified the security of Japan and the protection of its people's lives and assets as its ultimate goal. It argued that Japan should achieve this by taking a three-pronged approach: maintenance of robust alliance cooperation with the United States, pursuit of greater security partnerships with

other U.S. allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, and proactive provision of support for international efforts to sustain the existing liberal international order. Dubbed a "proactive contribution to peace," these approaches were designed to have a synergistic effect in facilitating peace and stability in the international security environment, which is critical for Japan's own national interests.[8]

Based on the NSS, the Abe government launched a few initiatives, which continue to this day. In Southeast Asia, it sought to complement its existing economic-focused engagement by launching the Vientiane Vision, which focused on defense cooperation in areas where the countries in the region fall short, including developing the capacities of their coast guards. Japan also sought to deepen ties with India, particularly in infrastructure programs in Southeast and South Asia. In Africa, which has seen massive cash inflows and development assistance projects by China, it reorganized its engagement under the concept of "quality assistance." In Europe, Abe reinforced his message about the importance of like-minded nations working together on global issues. His outreach became particularly important when Europe's relationship with the Trump administration began to fray.

Abe's recent diplomatic initiative, the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept, stands on these past efforts, reflecting his belief since 2006 that peace and stability in both oceans are critical for Japan's future. It also reflects his belief that the maritime domain must be kept free and open as a means to transport public goods to all the countries in the region that benefit from it, and in keeping with a heightened sense of urgency to counter China's ascendancy, as demonstrated by the recently announced initiative between Japan and India on joint infrastructure investment in Southeast and South Asia.

Abe's effort in revitalizing Japan's foreign policy has come in tandem with his government's enhancement of its national security policy toolkit, including institutional and legal changes. Institutionally, he has sought to enhance the role that the new National Security Secretariat plays in the foreign and security policymaking process not only by appointing foreign and defense officials who have been highly respected in their own bureaucracy to senior Cabinet Secretariat and National Security Secretariat positions, but also by retaining them in their appointed positions beyond two years, the average personnel turnover time in the Japanese bureaucracy.[9]

He also tackled policy changes that were long considered taboo. For example, he successfully revised the Three Principles for Arms Exports to Three Principles for the Transfer of Arms and Technology, opening the door for Japanese industry to export defense equipment, and participating in the research and development effort with foreign partners for national security purposes. Taking advantage of legislation passed in 2008, Abe also sought better integration by nesting the Space Development Strategy headquarters in the Cabinet Secretariat. By doing so, Abe sent a strong signal that Japan, although it would not "militarize" space, would use space for national security purposes.

Most importantly, he sought to modernize the legal framework that defines the permissible parameters for Japan's national security policy. In December 2013, the National Secrecy Law passed, which obligates government officials and contractors who are exposed to sensitive information to protect it, taking an important first step to enhance Japan's information security system. In the fall of 2015, the Peace and Security Legislation passed

– a package that includes considerable revision of existing laws as well as new laws – which provides the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) the legal authorization to engage in a wider scope of operations.

Constitutional revision was one area where Abe has not been able to make the progress he had wanted. While he pursued the complete revision of Article 9 so that Japan could be freed from the previous constraint of not being able to exercise the right of collective self-defense, he was only able to achieve its partial reinterpretation – that it is constitutional for Japan to exercise its right of collective self-defense in: 1) a situation that would gravely endanger Japan's own security if left unaddressed, or 2) a situation that would put Japan's allies and partners at grave risk if Japan did not respond. While his government was able to give legs to this constitutional reinterpretation by passing the Peace and Security Legislation in 2015, it was far from what Abe had originally sought.

In Abe's efforts to recalibrate Japan's foreign policy, a few characteristics have been particularly noteworthy. First is Abe's consistent emphasis on the importance of maintaining the existing international order, and his just as consistent belief that Japan should play an active role toward that end. From his August 2007 speech in India through his August 2016 speech at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), he has reiterated his belief that Japan has the responsibility to facilitate connectivity between the Pacific and Indian oceans while ensuring continued respect for values such as freedom of navigation, rule of law, a market economy, and freedom from coercion.[10] Abe consistently articulated his belief that Japan should play a robust role in ensuring the peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific region, including foreign summits. Even during his short first tenure between 2006-2007, Abe visited 18 countries, significantly more than his successors before 2012. Since returning to power, as of February 2020, Abe had taken 81 foreign trips, visiting over 170 countries and regions. [11]

Abe's Bilateral Diplomacy in Northeast Asia

Abe has taken a tailored, bilateral approach with the countries in the region. While he has not contradicted the foreign policy principles he established for Japan, the peculiarity of bilateral relations in Northeast Asia – Japan's legacy of World War II and Abe's desire to move Japan beyond it, in particular – has put Abe into a position of having to adjust his rules of engagement. In addition, the deepening polarization of U.S. relations in the region and the uneasy state of diplomacy over two Koreas further widened fissures in the region, which posed challenges for Abe's aspirations.

Japan-China

In 2006, Abe chose China along with South Korea as the first destinations of his foreign trips as prime minister. Because most Japanese prime ministers have chosen the United States as the first country to visit, Abe's moves were perceived as unusual, but also as a gesture that demonstrated his willingness to build a positive relationship with these two countries with which ties had sunk sharply. Given Abe's image as a right-wing conservative politician, these moves drew surprise. His moves were also appreciated because, by this time, relations had entered a period of what many dubbed a "politically chilly, economically warm" relationship.

Abe's predecessor Koizumi Junichiro irritated China by repeatedly visiting the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, which enshrines some Class A war criminals, aggravating the diplomatic tensions between Tokyo and Beijing.

At the end of Abe's visit on October 8-9, 2006, the two governments issued a joint statement in which they expressed their intention to pursue "a mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests," identifying peaceful co-existence, friendship across generations, mutually-beneficial cooperation, and joint development, as the goals they would strive to achieve in their relationship. The two also agreed that steady progress in developing a heathy and stable relationship would be in the fundamental interests of both countries.[12]

When Abe returned to office at the end of 2012, however, he found relations far worse than when he had left. Relations took a sharp fall, particularly when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) was in power, which is ironic because it was thought to be better positioned to improve relations with China and South Korea because of its progressive orientation. The tensions first rose over the arrest of a Chinese fishing trawler captain in the waters near the Senkaku Islands in 2010 when China curtailed exports of rare earth minerals to Japan and arrested several Japanese businessmen working in China for alleged espionage activities, sending a clear signal that China does not hesitate to leverage its economic relations to push on sovereignty issues. The bilateral relations took another turn for the worse when the Japanese government, under Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko of the DPJ, decided to purchase three islands of the Senkakus.

Unlike when Abe succeeded Koizumi in 2006, however, he did not rush to improve Japan's relationship with China by either pushing to make an official visit to Beijing or pursuing a summit with his Chinese counterpart. In fact, he went the entire year of 2013 without meeting the Chinese leadership. Even though he had occasion to attend multilateral meetings such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and East Asia summits with his Chinese counterpart, it was not until he visited Beijing to participate in the APEC Summit in November 2014 that Abe met with Chinese president Xi Jinping for a bilateral summit. At that time, Abe made the case that Japan and China needed to restart a "mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests" and identified the following four areas in which he would like to see bilateral cooperation: 1) mutual understanding between the two peoples, 2) economic relations, 3) the East China Sea, and 4) improvement of the East Asian security environment.[13] Even though he received only a non-committal and lukewarm response from Xi, this meeting ended the diplomatic stalemate at the summit level and paved the way for a more active dialogue between the two governments at all levels.

Following his first meeting with Xi, Abe's meetings with his Chinese counterparts increased. In 2015, he met Xi on the sidelines of the 60th anniversary Asia-Africa Summit in April, and met Premier Li Keqiang in November in Seoul for the Japan-China-South Korea summit, where Abe and Li agreed to resume foreign minister level meetings on a regular basis and confirmed the two countries' determination to continue to improve bilateral relations.[14] Following this meeting, the pace of bilateral consultations at various levels picked up. By the time Li visited Japan to attend the Japan-China-South Korea summit in May 2018, despite the disagreement over the Senkaku Islands, leaders affirmed that Japan-China relations had been restored.[15]

Throughout the last seven years, Abe's message to China has remained consistent. First, he took every occasion he could to reinforce his message that Japan would not compromise its position on the sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands and that it would counter Chinese attempts to change the status quo by coercive measures. In this context, he also has demonstrated his government's steadfast support for the countries in Southeast Asia that are the claimants in the sovereignty dispute over the South China Sea. Second, while he was consistent in his message that Japan would not tolerate Chinese aggressive behavior to assert its sovereignty claims, Abe also made it clear that Japan was willing to engage with China in the areas that are mutually beneficial. He was also selective in the timing to engage in summit diplomacy, waiting for almost two years before he pursued his meeting with Xi Jinping. In so doing, he seems to have successfully leveraged the 40th anniversary of the Japan-China Friendship Treaty in 2018 to generate incentives for China to improve relations with Japan.

Despite the positive atmosphere that surrounds Japan-China relations, it is premature to conclude that Abe's overtures to Xi should be seen as a success. Even though Abe and Xi met in Beijing in advance of the December 2019 China-Japan-Korea summit and discussed preparations for a fifth statement to boost bilateral relations, Sino-Japanese relations are at an uncertain juncture in 2020 after the outbreak of the novel coronavirus which began in China. Even before the spread of the novel coronavirus, the U.S. under the Trump Administration has been intensifying criticism of China not only over security, but also over economic policy and human rights. What Xi seeks to see in the fifth joint document, which the two governments have been discussing in preparation for Xi's visit to Japan, may test how far Abe is willing to go to carve out maneuvering room in his diplomacy when U.S. allies are facing increasing pressure from Washington to distance themselves from Beijing.

Japan-South Korea

Similar to Japan-China relations, Japan-South Korea relations were a bilateral relationship which Abe sought to repair when he succeeded Koizumi. His interest in an improved relationship became clear when he called President Roh Moo-hyun only two days after becoming prime minister on September 28, 2006, articulating two principles for his approach to South Korea: 1) he considers this one of the most important bilateral relationships for Japan, and 2) while acknowledging the difficulties in overcoming history issues, Abe wants a future-oriented Japan-South Korea relationship.[16] Less than two weeks after this phone conversation, Abe visited Seoul as part of his first foreign trip as prime minister, securing agreement on the critical importance of a positive relationship for East Asia, and on continuing efforts to build a future-oriented bilateral relationship.[17] Following Abe's visit, diplomatic engagement was reenergized, particularly at the foreign minister level, with in-person or phone contacts on a regular basis. For instance, in his short tenure as Abe's foreign minister, Aso Taro met with his counterpart six times, and held phone meetings five times.[18] While the situation surrounding North Korea was in flux, there was active region-wide diplomacy effort toward resumption of the Six-Party Talks.

However, when Abe returned to power, Japan-South Korea relations were in a downward spiral. Four months earlier, President Lee Myung-bak visited Takeshima (Dokdo) to assert South Korea's sovereignty – the first time that a South Korean president did so. Furthermore, Lee mentioned on August 14, the day before commemoration of Japan's surrender, that the

Japanese emperor is not welcome in South Korea until he personally apologizes to former "comfort women," which was met by very strong criticism from Japan. Japanese officials had believed that Lee was serious about putting the history issue behind them and was genuinely interested in forging a future-oriented and forward-looking relationship. The motives behind Lee's moves – whether they were aimed at playing the "Japan card" to boost his popularity at home – mattered little to the Japanese.

Japanese leaders were even more disappointed with Park Geun-hye, who succeeded Lee in 2013, beginning her term with a very tough stance vis-à-vis Japan. In fact, it took Barack Obama to set up a U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral summit for Park to meet with Abe. Japan-South Korea relations stagnated during most of Park's tenure, except toward the end when Park made a couple of major decisions in her policy toward Japan – signing the Japan-South Korea bilateral General Security of Military Information Agreement, (GSOMIA) in November 2015, and then, in December 2015, signing a bilateral agreement for a "final and irreversible" resolution of the "comfort women" issue in exchange for Japan agreeing to help the South Korean government fund a new foundation in South Korea, which would provide assistance to the former "comfort women." With one of the thorniest issues between the two countries seemingly resolved, there was hope that these agreements would provide much-needed positive momentum to improve the relationship.

Assuming he had done all he could, Abe watched Park get impeached and Moon Jae-in take office, promising that his government would nullify the December 2015 agreement and appointed a presidential commission to examine its validity. In July 2018, the South Korean Supreme Court agreed with the lower court ruling that Nippon Steel, which used conscripted Korean laborers during WWII, must pay compensation amounting to $85,000 to each of these workers. The court decision also allowed the seizure of Japanese companies' assets by South Korean authorities, and the Moon administration did nothing to intervene.

In July 2019, the Japanese government decided to take South Korea off "the white list" within its export control regime, which, despite the Japanese government's rejection, was widely considered to be Tokyo's retaliation against Moon's inaction against the court decision. South Korea responded by first appealing to the World Trade Organization, and next by announcing that it would withdraw from GSOMIA. Later, Seoul suspended both its appeal and its intention to withdraw from GSOMIA. Abe maintains that it should continue to honor the 1965 Japan-South Korea Basic Agreement which ruled out wartime reparations claims, insisting that it is up to South Korea to take the first step toward putting the bilateral relationship back on track.

It would be fair to assess Abe's diplomacy with Seoul as a failure. But Japanese overwhelmingly agree that it is not Abe's fault. Wariness of South Korea's persistent push on various historical issues is prevalent not only among government officials in Tokyo, but also among the public. The most recent public opinion poll on Japan's foreign policy, conducted by the Cabinet Affairs Office in December 2019, demonstrates that among the Japanese, while more than half of those surveyed thought Japan-South Korea relations are beneficial not only for both countries but also for the broader region, the overwhelming majority (over 70%) do not have a favorable impression of South Korea.[19] In any case, he has only the December 2015 agreement as a tangible achievement in his diplomacy vis-à-vis South Korea, with little else to show.

Japan-North Korea

For Japan, there are three major challenges in its bilateral relationship with North Korea. First is the security threat that North Korea has presented to Japan since it announced its intention to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1992. Pyongyang has steadily developed not only its nuclear weapons but also its ballistic missile capabilities. For Japan, improvement of its short- and medium-range ballistic missile capabilities has been an urgent matter too. Second is the diplomatic issue that is unique to Japan-North Korea relations: the abductions issue. The Japanese government continues to demand North Korea to provide an accounting for presumed abductees who it believes still remain in North Korea. Finally, North Korea is the last country with which Japan has not settled wartime issues due to the absence of diplomatic relations. When Koizumi visited Pyongyang in September 2002, he signed the Japan-North Korea Pyongyang Declaration, which agreed that the two countries would make their utmost effort to normalize bilateral relations, which could be achieved only after all the bilateral issues – Japan's wartime reparations, abductions, North Korea's missile and nuclear programs – are resolved in a comprehensive manner, to mutual satisfaction.[20]

Abe is considered one of the staunchest supporters of the abduction issue. His meteoric political rise was linked to his vocal support for the families of abductees. Throughout his dual tenure as prime minister, resolution of this issue has been the priority in his North Korea policy. Since Kim Jong-il admitted to Koizumi that his national security apparatus was responsible for the abductions, Japan has taken the position that the comprehensive settlement of abductions, nuclear weapons, and missiles is the prerequisite for negotiations for diplomatic normalization.

Starting in 2006, Abe had Japan's foreign ministry begin to issue an annual report on the abduction issue. When he returned in 2012, he also established the *rachi mondai taisaku honbu* (abduction issue headquarters) within the Cabinet office, which the prime minister chairs, and which includes all of his cabinet ministers, seeking to promote an all-of-government effort to resolve the issue.

Abe's government defined "the resolution" of the abduction issue as the return of *all* the victims to Japan.[21] In this context, Abe chose to take an approach to North Korea that was similar to the one he took for China – not rushing to establish connections at the summit level, but being cautious about when and how to engage. Abe was forced to revise his approach after Trump, defying all expectations, decided to hold a summit meeting with Kim Jong-un in 2018. China, South Korea, and Russia all began robust diplomatic engagement with North Korea, Abe became the only leader in the region yet to meet Kim Jong-un, and he modified his position from "dialogue and pressure" to "dialogue without preconditions." However, there is no prospect that Abe will meet Kim again in the foreseeable future.

Japan-Russia

Russia remains the only country with which Japan has not signed a peace treaty after WWII, and Abe has been determined to obtain this breakthrough. Returning to the premiership with the overall goal of "moving Japan beyond the postwar regime (*sengo regime kara no dakkyaku),*" Abe invested time and effort in developing a personal relationship with Vladimir Putin, meeting with him 27 times. Abe was even willing to be at odds with the U.S.

when he invited Putin to his hometown in Yamaguchi Prefecture for a summit meeting in December 2016, despite Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, which had drawn intense criticism from the international community, including the Obama administration.

Despite Abe's effort, however, even though the two agreed to "accelerate" peace treaty negotiations in Singapore in 2018, there has been no visible progress. Rather, Russia has steadily continued to fortify its control over the four islands that have been disputed, including building military facilities, deploying troops, and conducting military drills. Putin's hardline position on the fruits of Soviet victory in 1945, and on territorial integrity, makes Abe's pursuit seem hopeless.

What sustains Abe's effort to pursue the settlement of the Northern Territories issue? Even though he has not publicly changed Japan's official position on the issue that it will demand the return of all the four islands at the same time, Abe, at times, seems ready to take a two-step approach, secure an agreement first on the return of two islands while continuing to negotiate the return of the other two islands. At other times, his desire to continue his engagement with Putin seems to be driven by his desire to prevent Russia from continuing to deepen its security relationship with China and siding with Beijing on its sovereignty claims, including on the Senkaku Islands. Some have even speculated that a third objective is to carve out a sphere of autonomous diplomacy rather than to depend solely on the U.S. alliance in great power relations. Abe ploughs forward in pursuit of Putin despite the disappointments.

Abe as Diplomat-in-Chief and Its implications

Both in Japan's global/regional diplomacy as well as in its bilateral relations in Northeast Asia, Abe's role as Japan's top diplomat has been pronounced. Being the longest-serving prime minister since the Meiji Restoration has allowed him to be a constant presence in multilateral forums such as the G7, the UN General Assembly, APEC, and the East Asia Summit. This affords him senior statesman-like status, contributing to raising Japan's international profile.

Furthermore, Abe has been skillful in articulating his vison for Japan's foreign policy in these settings, such as launching the concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." He also introduced new efforts in girls' education in Africa and Southeast Asia when he spoke at the UN General Assembly in September 2019.[22] Abe is widely praised for the vision of his numerous initiatives, the breadth of his diplomatic undertakings, and the personal rapport achieved with numerous world leaders.

Abe should also be given credit for his efforts in streamlining Japan's foreign policy making process, giving greater maneuverability to the prime minister and his close advisors to shape Japan's foreign policy agenda. He did so by accelerating the effort to concentrate policy- and decision-making authority in the *Kantei* (Office of the Prime Minister). Although the effort to strengthen the *Kantei* long precedes Abe, he has accelerated the process through measures such as establishing the *Naikaku Jinji-kyoku* in 2015 and thereby gaining control of appointing senior officials throughout the government, and by enhancing the National Security Secretariat. In the area of foreign policy, these measures allowed Abe to gain much greater control than his predecessors in order to prioritize foreign policy issues of his choosing.

His effort in modernizing the legal and regulatory framework for security policy has also been noteworthy. Even though the constitutional revision has stalled far short of where Abe wanted to go, he was still successful in relaxing the constraints under which Japan's security policy had been placed, such as establishing the new Three Principles for Transferring Defense Equipment. In addition, enacting the Peace and Security Legislation enabled Abe to foster an environment in which the SDF, if necessary and when appropriate, can back up Japan's foreign policy goals by its overseas activities.

However, when it comes to his diplomacy in Northeast Asia, Abe has hardly achieved any successes. For instance, despite the time and effort he spent to build a personal relationship with Putin, meeting at every opportunity, he not only has been unable to move the needle on the Northern Territories issue, but also seems to have fallen into a trap, as had his predecessors, by allowing economic cooperation with Russia to take place before any concrete progress in negotiations over the sovereignty. Quite to the contrary, Russia seems to be doubling down on its effort to tighten the grip on these islands. Similarly, with North Korea, all the effort Abe made to hold off from pursuing summit-level engagement did not yield any progress. Especially as he became the "odd man out," after Trump's decision to meet Kim, Abe was forced to adjust his position to be willing to meet with Kim "without attaching any condition."[23] Furthermore, Japan's relations with South Korea have sunk to the lowest point since the two countries signed the Basic Agreement and normalized their relations. With Abe and Moon so far apart in their stance toward Japan's wartime history, as well as in their approaches to North Korea and China, Abe is hard-pressed to find any common ground. The outbreak of the novel coronavirus since January 2020 may provide a face-saving way for the two leaders to resume engagement. Still, the prospect for concrete cooperation between the two countries seems far from certain.

Even with China, the country with which he has had the best prospect to gain concrete results, Abe now finds himself having to tread carefully. Although he managed to get relations back on track by the spring of May 2018 when he hosted the 7th Japan-China-South Korea trilateral summit in Tokyo, his possible over-eagerness to host Xi Jinping for a state visit in the spring of 2020 has come under severe scrutiny due to questionable judgement on not enforcing more rigorous screening for visitors from China at an early stage of the outbreak of COVID-19.

In short, while Abe has been visionary in his speeches, his ability to deliver tangible results for Japan as the diplomat-in-chief has been questionable at best so far. This is in spite of the fact that he has successfully buttressed the authority of *Kantei,* making it a lot easier for him to focus on shaping his own agenda, compared to any of his successors. In addition, Abe has also benefited from the lack of a credible contender to replace him, either within his own Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) or in the opposition parties.

What does Abe's limited success in bringing concrete results for diplomatic issues in Northeast Asia mean? First and foremost, with the possible exception of Japan-China relations that tend to get impacted more by the ongoing dynamics in today's geopolitics, the diplomatic challenges Japan has with its neighbors have historical roots that go back several decades with structural issues built into them, and thus do not have an immediate solution, as the other countries also have their own domestic dynamics that often run against Japan's policy preference. For example, many of Japan's diplomatic challenges with

South Korea have their roots in the conditions inside South Korea[24] under which the two countries negotiated and signed the agreement to normalize their relations. As a result, now that South Korea enjoys vibrant democracy, regardless of what Japan chooses or does not choose to do, Tokyo's policy choices get politicized in South Korean domestic political content, and any agreement between the two governments runs the risk of being undermined, as we have been witnessing the fallout of a series of moves made by the Moon administration.

Furthermore, with the diplomatic issues in Northeast Asia, Japan has developed a rock-solid position on many of them over the years. Abe's predecessors have shown considerable reluctance to demonstrate flexibility, and Abe himself has not shown much interest in working to create flexibility, which has sometimes cost Japan diplomatic opportunities. In the case of North Korea, for example, Japan's persistent position of "no substantive engagement before the resolution of the abduction issue" has not only tied Tokyo's hands with Pyongyang in its bilateral negotiation, but also placed Japan as an outlier in regional diplomacy toward North Korea's denuclearization. Similarly, Japan's solid position on the Northern Territories – the return of four disputed islands all at once – has not allowed Japan to make any progress on its negotiation with Russia toward a bilateral peace treaty which Japan needs in order to reach a full closure on World War II.

Abe is slated to leave office by September 2021. If Abe, with his very stable tenure since 2012, has not been able to achieve much progress in any of Japan's major foreign policy issues in Northeast Asia, what does that mean for Japan's foreign policy after he leaves the office?

Currently, there are several politicians who seem to be positioning themselves as contenders in post-Abe leadership. Contenders include former foreign minister Kishida Fumio, former defense and agricultural minister Ishiba Shigeru, incumbent foreign minister Motegi Toshimitsu, and incumbent chief cabinet secretary Suga Yoshihide. Each of them is more of a consensus builder, and none of them are known to be visionaries, or known for their ambitious foreign policy agenda. If anything, with the exception of Ishiba, all of them have risen to be regarded as the contender for post-Abe leadership by showing their loyalty to Abe, rarely expressing any dissent with Abe over his policy agenda.

These factors suggest the following for post-Abe Japanese foreign policy. First, because of their tendencies to emphasize forming consensus before moving forward with their decisions, all of them are likely to show a strong probability to be locked into Japan's historical positions on Japan's diplomatic issues in Northeast Asia. There may be a difference in nuances in their approaches –for example, Kishida may take a more sympathetic tone in his approach toward Japan-South Korea relations – but none of them will be likely to make a fundamental shift in Japan's negotiating position in any of the diplomatic challenges it currently has with its neighbors.

Furthermore, their consensus-based approach will likely result in slower decision-making. The concentration of decision-making authority in *Kantei* works effectively with decisive leaders, such as those who have honored greater centralization of the decision-making process in the past, including Nakasone Yasuhiro, Koizumi Junichiro and Abe himself. On the contrary, if the prime minister is more cautious about making decisions, the decision-making

process will return to the incremental, bottom-up inter-agency consultation process that Japan used to have, with greater importance attached to the consultations that take place among the officials assigned from the stakeholder agencies (such as Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry) to the National Security Secretariat. As a result, it is highly probably that in the post-Abe era, Japanese foreign policy will become less dynamic and less visionary, with only minor adjustment to the overall direction that Abe has already set for Japan.

The biggest unknown today is the impact that the novel coronavirus will have. This new virus has already impacted Abe's potential foreign policy legacies, including the state visit by Chinese president Xi Jinping to Japan and the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics until July 2021. Furthermore, Abe has been heavily criticized by the Japanese public for his government's potentially "too little, too late" response as the spread of the novel coronavirus accelerates across Japan. This includes his government's emergency declaration for major metropolitan areas in Japan, including Tokyo, which was issued on April 7 after much speculation. Even following the declaration, his government continues to be criticized for the lack of clarity in its guidance as well as its unwillingness to employ more decisive measures (such as imposition of fines on the violators) to enforce the guidance. The Abe government's missteps in its response to the novel coronavirus could not only cost him his support within Japan, but also could cost him the confidence of the international community in Japan's capacity as a country to handle emergencies that evolve quickly, such as international pandemics.

Should that happen, Abe's leadership style itself will be placed under great scrutiny. Did he and his closest advisors monopolize the decision-making process, unwilling to listening to dissenting views before making decisions? Should he have sought more to forge consensus among major political leaders to reach better balanced decisions, even if it might have taken a bit longer? The answers to these questions will present powerful "lessons learned" for his successor, influencing his or her approach toward decision-making over policy issues. However as the debate about the post-Abe leadership unfolds, one thing is certain. With all of the frontrunners to succeed Abe likely to place greater emphasis on shaping consensus, it is highly unlikely to witness a leader be a high-profile "diplomat-in-chief" as Abe has ably done.

Endnotes

[1] The Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs has so far only banned the entry of non-Japanese citizens who have traveled to Hubei and Zhejiang provinces. Chinese and other non-citizens who have traveled to other parts of China within 14 days prior to their arrival in Japan are "requested" to self-quarantine for 14 days and refrain from public transportation. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Border enforcement measures to prevent the spread of novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)," March 27, 2020, https://www.mofa.go.jp/ca/fna/page4e_001053.html.

[2] International Olympic Committee, "IOC, IPC, Tokyo 2020 Organising Committee and Tokyo Metropolitan Government Announce New Dates for the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020," March 30, 2020, https://www.olympic.org/news/ioc-ipc-tokyo-2020-organising-committee-and-tokyo-metropolitan-government-announce-new-dates-for-the-olympic-and-paralympic-games-tokyo-2020.

[3] Abe Shinzo, "Confluence of the Two Seas," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August

22, 2007, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html

[4] Aso Taro, "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity: Japan's Expanding Diplomatic Horizons," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 30, 2006, https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/fm/aso/speech0611.html.

[5] Abe Shinzo, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," *Project Syndicate*, December 27, 2012, https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe?barrier=accesspaylog.

[6] Abe Shinzo, "The Bounty of Open Seas: Five New Principles of Japanese Diplomacy," Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, January 18, 2013, http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201301/18speech_e.html.

[7] Richard L Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Anchoring Stability in Asia," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 15, 2012, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/120810_Armitage_USJapanAlliance_Web.pdf.

[8] Government of Japan, *National Security Strategy,* December 17, 2013, http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/documents/2013/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2013/12/17/NSS.pdf.

[9] For instance, Yachi Shotaro, a highly respected retired diplomat, was first appointed as the senior advisor to the Cabinet Office in December 2012 and served as Abe's first national security advisor during 2014-2019. Similarly, Kanehara Nobukatsu, assistant chief cabinet secretary, served in the position for seven years before he retired in December 2019, the last five years of which as Abe's deputy national security advisor.

[10] Abe Shinzo, "Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD IX)," Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, August 27, 2016, http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201608/1218850_11013.html.

[11] Fukuda Yasuo, who immediately succeeded Abe in 2007, visited only nine countries in his tenure. Aso, Hatoyama, Kan, and Noda visited 12, eight, seven, and 10 respectively. Given that the tenure of each roughly lasted one year, Abe visiting 18 countries in that short period of time was considerably more. Data are taken from Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Soridaijin no Gaikoku Homon Ichiran: 2006 nen 10 gatsu kara 2020 nen 2 gatsu made," https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/kaidan/page24_000037.html.

[12] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Abe Soridaijin: Nitchu Kyodo Happyo," October 8, 2006, https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/kaidan/s_abe/cn_kr_06/china_kpress.html.

[13] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-China Summit Meeting," November 10, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page4e_000151.html.

[14] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-China Summit Meeting," November 1, 2015, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page3e_000404.html.

[15] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Japan," May 11, 2018, https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/a_o/c_m1/cn/page4_003997.html.

[16] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Abe Sori to Roh Moo-hyun Kankoku Daitoryo no Denwa Kaidan (Gaiyo)," September 28, 2006, https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/kaidan/s_abe/korea_p_06/gaiyo.html.

[17] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Abe Naikaku Soridaijin no Kankoku Homon (Gaiyo)," October 9, 2006, https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/kaidan/s_abe/cn_kr_06/korea_gaiyo.html.

[18] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Daikan Minkoku: Kako no Yojin Orai/Kaidan," https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/korea/visit/index.html.

[19] Cabinet Affairs Office, *Gaiko ni kansuru Yoron Chosa*, December 2019, https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/r01/r01-gaiko/gairyaku.pdf.

[20] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration," September 17, 2002, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/pmv0209/pyongyang.html.

[21] For instance, Abe, in his first policy speech in front of the Diet in January 2013, stated that his work would not end until "the families of all the abductees are able to hold their relatives in their arms." Abe Shinzo, "Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 183rd Session of the Diet," Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, January 28, 2013, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201301/28syosin_e.html.

[22] Abe Shinzo, "Address by Prime Minister Abe at the Seventy-Fourth Session of the United Nations General Assembly," Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet, September 25, 2019, http://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201909/_00002.html.

[23] Abe Shinzo, "Policy Speech by the Prime Minister to the 201st Session of the Diet," Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet January 20, 2020, http://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/202001/_00004.html.

[24] When the two countries signed the Basic Agreement in 1967 and normalized bilateral relations, South Korea was under military dictatorship, so the public never had a chance to weigh in on the contents of the agreement, nor were they explained to the public.