

# Shinzo Abe: A Controversial Visionary

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*When politicians die, especially an untimely death in tragic circumstances, obituaries tend to go overboard. A sense of perspectives is lost when obituaries become eulogies. But you can’t falsify history. And in the final analysis, it is the forces of history that write the course of politics rather than individuals, and the fact is Japan has a gory past, a blood-soaked and brutal imperial past.*

Almost all of Japan’s neighbours paid a high price for its hegemonist ambitions and thirst for territorial conquests. Shinzo Abe’s grandfather who founded Japan’s ruling party was himself a war criminal.

Japan perpetrated unspeakable crimes on conquered peoples even by the standards of colonialism, especially the Korean and Chinese peoples. Therefore, when Abe’s legacy gets evaluated dispassionately some day, as it surely will, what may well stand out as his single most outstanding contribution is that he summarily turned around ‘pacifist’ Japan and dragged it back unwillingly to its ‘militaristic’ past. There is no question about it.

But how this will pan out in Asian politics and Japan’s political economy in a medium and long term leaves troubling question marks. The point is, Abe did not even ascertain his countrymen’s wishes to change the country’s constitution but was uneasy that the nation might not endorse his agenda.

What moved the young assassin to commit such an abominable crime we do not know, but his abject surrender owning the crime suggests that he was a man of strong convictions and the murder was far from an impulsive act. What it reminds us is that Abe was a controversial figure within Japan.

Abe’s reform programme widened the gap between the rich and the poor and fuelled social discontent while Abe’s abandonment of Japan’s ‘pacifism’ did not enjoy a national consensus. Abe’s populism obfuscated his real agenda, and his use of baser instincts such as racial and ethnic prejudices and his manipulation of the media and suppression of free press [damaged Japan’s democratic foundations](#).

Therefore, a big question mark needs to be put on his 'vision,' as his admirers tend to put it. Frankly, Abe has become a polariser in the world opinion — simply put, one-dimensional Sinophobes warm up to him like nobody's business and in the process overlook his flawed legacy in an outpouring of emotions.

The Quad's troika itself used a catching expression in its curious obituary for Abe. It praised Abe as a "transformative leader for Japan" and discreetly left it at that. The Quad's troika is right in estimating that Abe "played a formative role in the founding of the Quad partnership and worked tirelessly to advance a shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific." He was indeed an ardent votary of the containment strategy against China.

But Abe was also a master of doublespeak and once made significant contributions to improving Japan's ties with China and even publicly expressed willingness to cooperate with the Belt and Road Initiative! Quad was almost entirely built on the strength of the relationship Abe worked out with Prime Minister Modi, with whom he shared a deep distrust of China.

However, Japan's Indo-Pacific policy has since morphed into robust support for accelerating the pace of NATO's entry into Asia. That said, the fact remains that throughout its history, Japan always tenaciously sought to maintain its autonomy in the international system. How this contradiction gets resolved remains to be seen. Clearly, Japan finds it difficult to get accustomed to its status behind China in Asia's power dynamic and needs NATO support to level with China.

Abe, without doubt, was a close friend of India. His regards for India harks back to the Manmohan Singh government. Yet, how far India subscribes to this new dimension to Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy in the direction of pioneering an "Asian NATO" is unclear. Traditionally, India never had a bloc mentality. Besides, Quad or Indo-Pacific strategy is not to be equated with India's Act East policy, either.

Abe's place as the longest serving Japanese prime minister (9 years) is largely due to his charisma, the force of his personality, and his formidable political talent. But his legacy for Japan's future in terms of his ambitious domestic reform agenda — "Abenomics" or the surge in state spending and super-easy monetary policy aimed at kickstarting Japan's stagnant economy — is rather patchy. Japan's debt increased dramatically and Abe's reforms indeed weakened the yen.

The reforms' promise to reshape an economy hobbled by low productivity, a rapidly ageing population and a rigid labour market, proved elusive. On top of it, COVID-19 wiped out the short-term benefits brought by Abenomics, such as an inbound tourism boom, reflat growth and rising job availability. Looking ahead, Abe's death could stimulate the extreme Japanese right wing to promote populist, xenophobic and even extreme political goals.

Japan's two giant neighbours China and Russia are increasingly coordinating their security presence in the Far East. These two big powers will counter Japan's partnership with the NATO, no matter what it takes, and that may become the salience of the geopolitics of Asia-Pacific in the period ahead. Moscow has openly accused Japan of revanchist tendencies vis-a-vis Kuril Islands, which pose threat to regional security and stability.

If the US and NATO's prestige suffers a lethal blow in Ukraine, which seems likely, Japan's political and policy goals would lose traction. But Prime Minister Kishida is firing all cylinders

to inject swagger into Japan's ties with major European powers — especially, with Germany, with which it once had an alliance known as the Anti-Comintern Pact (1936) built on the common concerns of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan over the steady rise of Soviet power under Josef Stalin.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Kishida recently visited each other's capitals in quick succession to renew the historical bonding in the current circumstances. To be sure, Abe's departure comes at a time when Japan may find itself at the crossroads of Asian politics and world order.

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