Shinzo Abe’s Leadership and the Legacy of Japan’s Defeat

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In August 2015, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe released a statement on the seventieth anniversary of Japan’s defeat in the Second World War. In the seventy years since 1945, Japan has not registered any war-related deaths, which might be viewed as analogous to Sweden and its experience following the Great Northern War of 1700 to 1721. Barring its participation in the Napoleonic War from 1805 to 1809, Sweden has since this time renounced war. As defeated countries that have pursued no-war state policies, Sweden and Japan may be two of the major exceptions for the last four centuries. Experiencing no war-related deaths from 1945 to 2015 is not an easy accomplishment for Japan or perhaps for any country. Thus, it is no wonder that Prime Minister Abe sounded very proud of Japan’s seventy-year record post-1945.

Abe’s six years “in the wilderness” after his sudden departure from the Prime Minister’s Office in 2007 gave him much time to reflect on how he might lead, if and when he was given another chance. His dream is to restore Japan’s beauty, by which he means that war and colonialism should not entirely color modern Japanese history. Instead, post-war Japan should be judged by the history of Japan’s proud accomplishment of peace and prosperity—bereft of the Tokyo Tribunal verdict. Restoring Japan’s beauty has remained a central theme throughout the development of Abe’s leadership, which I will summarize in the following paragraphs.

1 Abe noted that Japan has repeatedly expressed “deep remorse” and “heartfelt apology” for the nation’s actions during the war, adding, “such position articulated by the previous cabinets will remain unshakeable into the future.” He also said Japan would never again resort to “aggression” and would abandon “colonial rule” forever, key phrases from past statements. “Japan’s Apologies for World War II,” The New York Times, August 12, 2015.
3 Peace has prevailed in Sweden for a total of 209 years since 1721, and Sweden has since registered no war-related deaths since 1809, except for those in support of United Nations Peacekeeping.
First, Abe changed course with regards to Yasukuni Shrine visits. Liberated from the self-imposed restraint of the first Abe government from 2006 to 2007, Abe paid a visit to the Yasukuni Shrine on December 29, 2013. This triggered a somewhat unexpected reaction from Xi Jinping, the new Chinese president who was steadily consolidating power during this period. December 26 marks the 120th birthday of Chairman Mao Zedong, and as such Xi paid a visit on this day to the Mao Zedong Mausoleum in Tiananmen Square. Xi initially suppressed Chinese citizens’ anger about Abe’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. However, a month later in January 2014, Xi mobilized pens and weapons massively to denounce Abe and to threaten the Japanese Self Defense Force, Navy, Air Force, and Maritime Safety Agency vessels in the East China Sea. Chinese assertiveness has continued until today but never overshadowed Abe’s well-performed diplomatic achievement since then, especially with the United States; President Xi’s three recent meetings with President Obama to persuade him to approve China’s great power status as on par with the United States have not been well received by the United States.

Second, Abe turned his efforts to the economy in order to stop the two-decade-long recession that he believed most afflicted Japan. To this end, Abe announced a carefully prepared monetary easing-based policy, “Abenomics,” to be executed from March 2013 onward. One component of Abenomics is to increase the printing of money so that the annual inflation rate reaches 2 percent in the ensuing two years after its 2013 implementation, with the ultimate goal of positively impacting public opinion toward the Abe government. The Ministry of Finance, however, was preoccupied with the astronomical government deficit and repeatedly pushed Abe regarding a consumption tax hike. In this regard, Abe’s predecessor, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, had legislated a consumption tax hike, with its implementation to occur during Abe’s tenure. This tax hike from 5 percent to 8 percent was enacted in April 2014. The negative effect of this tax on citizens’ psychology was perhaps much larger than Abe had expected. The Economist magazine captured the mood surrounding this first condition of economic recovery with its October 2015 article titled, “Less of the Same,” which suggests that Abe’s economic arrows “missed their mark.”

Third, Abe energetically carried out economic and diplomatic gambles. Responding to Abe’s policies, economic figures like stock prices initially rose steadily and the exchange rate vis-à-vis the U.S. dollar decreased, thus triggering an increase in Japanese exports of manufactured products and dramatic inflows of foreign money and tourists. Among all Japanese prime ministers since 1945, Abe has had the most meetings with top foreign leaders in the first, second, and third years of his term. The contrast is especially

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8 “Less of the Same,” The Economist, 3 October 2015, 79.
sharp when compared to his great uncle, Prime Minister Eisaku Sato, who stayed at home in his first year due to concerns that uncertain domestic politics might dangerously evolve in his absence. Abe, however, actively pursued diplomatic efforts to show that Japan is a country to be reckoned with or, in Abe’s own words, that “Japan is back.”

Simultaneously, these efforts are meant to demonstrate that Abe is a vigorous and effective leader returning Japan to both a vibrant economy and a reliable ally and friend of the world. As a sub-climax of this policy package, Abe gave a speech to a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress in April 2015. His speech focused on enhancing Japan’s alliance with the United States. For that purpose, he targeted the American narratives of World War II and—despite the fierce battles fought during the war—appealed to themes of mutual trust, eternal reconciliation, and peace between the United States and Japan. Most touching was the encounter of two men: Lieutenant General Lawrence Snowden, an American war veteran who fought at Iwo Jima, and Yoshitaka Shindo, a former cabinet minister under Abe and the grandson of General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, whose forces inflicted massive casualties on the U.S. forces at Iwo Jima.

Fourth, when two conditions were met, namely the departure from recession and the resumption of Japan’s role as a respectable ally, Abe embarked on Japan’s security legislation. As is normal to Japanese political conventions, a council of pundits and experts, including both academics and practitioners, was assembled in the spring of 2015. They discussed what the Abe Statement of August 15, 2015 should contain and how it should be expressed. Abe was presented with their policy proposal in July 2015. Academic consensus on modern Japanese history formed the organizational basis of the policy proposal, with academic leader Shinichi Kitaoka widely regarded as the best historian on the subject. Before and after this proposal came out, citizens were somewhat atavistically reminded of August 15, 1945 and the events preceding this date.

The Abe Statement in August of this year was both applauded and criticized among Japanese citizens. What is striking, however, is that the conservative nationalist and liberal pro-alliance schools both came away with a positive impression of the statement’s basic tone. Right-wing nationalists like Shoichi Watanabe and moderate liberals like Fumiaki Kubo praised it. Watanabe gives full marks to the statement, which he interprets as rejecting the line of the Tokyo Tribunal, whereas Kubo notes that the statement is intended to deny the ill-founded rumor that Abe is a revisionist. Needless to say, many other commentators are sharply critical of the statement.

Opposition grew as the security legislative process unfolded in August and September of 2015. Poll data helps to explain this phenomenon. First, 60 to 70 percent of Japanese citizens, “Japan is Back,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 22, 2013.

August 15, 1945 marks the day on which Japan surrendered.

"Omoiyari yosan gengaku teian [omoiyari budget reduction proposed],” Mainichi Shimbun, October 11, 2015.
citizens believe that neither the pre-1945 experience of aggression nor colonialism should be repeated, and that Japan should continue to register no war-related deaths in the future. When asked about the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty and its related laws, 55 to 65 percent of citizens support the alliance. Yet, divergence of opinion is clear if one asks the question, “When the power disparity between the United States and China narrows, which of the following options do you think is the best?” Japanese citizens’ responses are fairly evenly split among (a) “neutrality with nuclear arms buildup”; (b) “Japan-U.S. security alliance retained as the fundamental pillar, plus friendship with China managed”; (c) “neutrality with the current level of arms buildup”; and (d) “neutrality after nonnuclear arms buildup.” It is important here to note that although the Japan-U.S. alliance should function to deter potential threats, economic transactions between Japan and China are enormous and, therefore, important to Japan. Simultaneously, President Obama’s perceived procrastination vis-à-vis interventions and managing global issues, such as terrorism and protracted civil wars, draws some concern from Japanese citizens.

As is typical in Japanese parliamentary meetings, questions from parliamentarians and answers from the prime minister and other relevant cabinet ministers are exchanged first in the lower house and then in the upper house. All the legislative bills are reviewed in the Cabinet Legislative Bureau to ensure that bills are correctly presented and do not violate the Constitution. Article 9 of the Constitution has been a contentious issue since the new Constitution was set up during the Allied Powers’ occupation period in 1946. Aware of these concerns, Prime Minister Abe appointed a diplomat well-versed in international and constitutional law, who argued that Article 9 was de facto frozen once the United States recognized security threats derived from the Cold War, especially when the Korean War broke out and the Police Reserve Force, (the predecessor of Japan’s Self Defense Force), was established to cope with rising internal security concerns in Japan. In this regard, Abe has ended the old convention in which the director-general of the bureau was automatically chosen from inside the bureau according to bureaucratic rules. Since Abe became prime minister, the Cabinet Bureau has not touched upon the constitutionality of the security bills processed in these reviews. Therefore, opposition parliamentarians focused their questions on the unconstitutionality from narrowly partisan interests. Additionally, constitutional experts were summoned to present their views as part of Japanese parliamentary convention. One after another, the experts argued against the security bills on the basis of unconstitutionality, which resulted in unexpected confusion in the lower house; it appeared as though the small parliamentary minorities might usurp the National Diet to

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kill the security bills. Notwithstanding this confusion and despite the odds, Abe was determined to pass these bills.

Abe was, however, forced to compromise on two issues. The first compromise is related to constitutional interpretation, while the second has to do with the capability and training of the Self Defense Force (SDF). The Cabinet Legislative Bureau chief informed Abe prior to the parliamentary sessions that constitutional interpretation cannot be overstretched under certain circumstances, and Defense Minister Gen Nakatani conceded that the SDF did not have the capacity to meet various assignments that—per the security bills—the SDF would be expected to carry out. Thus, Abe had to take a step back. Next, the upper house session proceeded. Instead of constitutional pundits, national security experts were summoned to present their views on the security bills. From September 19, 2015, thousands of protestors surrounded the National Diet, and yet the upper house passed the proposed bills. To Abe, some of the legislative entanglements were a surprise since he had been confident in the coalition’s parliamentary majority in the lower house, particularly following his successful speech to the U.S. Congress in April 2015.

To understand Abe’s confusion, I need to review the immediate postwar arrangements covering the emperor’s status, Article 9 of the Constitution, and Japan’s alliance with the United States. I will briefly show that the three arrangements have continuously functioned as key parameters of Japanese politics. The postwar arrangements after the defeat, including the Constitution, (especially the Constitution’s treatment of the emperor’s status and sovereign matters of war and peace), and the alliance are intricately entangled and had to be settled—if hastily and provisionally—in the initial period of occupation. Emperor Showa was astute in persuading both General Douglas MacArthur and the Japanese citizens of the indispensability of the emperor despite war responsibility issues. The emperor’s role became strictly symbolic, rather than substantive. Sovereign matters of war and peace were settled in Article 9—that is, non-possession of armed forces and non-resort to war to settle international disputes. Given the Japanese decision-making record of hiding and plotting behind the name of the emperor—who was the sovereign monarch as well as commander in chief—and given the combat resilience and tenacity of Japanese fighters even during desperate situations, the symbolic emperor and the no-war Constitution were American proposals for the new Constitution before other Allies joined the process of decision-making. The entire Japanese archipelago was occupied between 1945 and 1952. The Amami islands (northern Ryukyus) were occupied until 1953. The Okinawa islands were

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16 Following World War II, the American occupation sought to ensure that the emperor was exonerated of any responsibility for Japan’s wartime policies. Narahiko Toyoshita, “Showa tennō no sengo Nihon [Japan after the War under Emperor Showa]” (Tokyo: Iwatai Shoten, 2015).

17 Ibid.
occupied until 1972. During the Korean War, all the U.S. bases were utilized for war execution. When the war was nearly over, Japan was granted independence. During the Vietnam War, Okinawa military bases were heavily used for war execution. When the war was almost over, Okinawa was to be returned to Japan on the condition that U.S. military bases and facilities would be used continuously by the United States and would retain special privileges akin to extraterritoriality and tariff autonomy. Since February 1979, East Asia has registered virtually no war-related deaths except in that between North and South Korea—which is more or less a domestic civil war—and between China and Vietnam. Thus, what Timo Kivimaki calls the “Long East Asian peace” since 1979 continues through today.\(^\text{18}\)

When Abe became prime minister in 2006, rumor spread that he might lead Japan in a more nationalistic direction with heavy militarization. The rumor turned out to be false, at least in the short term. Abe was prompt in moving the country toward reconciliation with China, in sharp contrast to his predecessor, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who repeatedly visited the Yasukuni Shrine. When Abe returned to power in late 2012, the rumor again immediately spread that he would lead the country in such a direction, bolstered by his decision to visit the Yasukuni Shrine on December 29, 2013—one year after becoming prime minister.\(^\text{19}\) As mentioned previously, Abe had not paid a visit to the Yasukuni Shrine during Abe I from 2006 to 2007—a fact that he sought to make up for once the opportunity presented itself. When Abe II started on December 26, 2012, the mood was extremely unfavorable to Abe since his predecessor Yoshihiko Noda and Xi’s predecessor Hu Jintao blew up disputes surrounding the Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands in autumn 2012.\(^\text{20}\)

Xi Jinping’s predecessor, Hu Jintao, was perhaps overwhelmed by Chinese citizens’ outburst of anger and outrage against Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda’s nationalization of the disputed islands, which were under Japanese control in October 2012.\(^\text{21}\) After witnessing large-scale demonstrations and violent activities against Japanese shops and factories in China, Xi learned a lesson and took a different route. Xi’s assertive diplomacy, combined with his consolidation of internal security, might well have originated as he watched these events unfold in autumn 2012. No incidents took place on December 29, 2012, or thereafter, in China directed against Japan, except for the Chinese government’s harshest denunciation of

\(^{19}\) Takashi Inoguchi, “Uncertain Times Cast a Cloud Over Happiness in Asia.”
\(^{20}\) In 2012, the Japanese government nationalized some of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. This was done in an attempt to preempt efforts on the part of nationalist Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara to purchase some of the islands with private money. While the goal of the Noda government’s decision to purchase the islands was to bolster Japan-China relations, the result was actually a significant rise in tensions.
\(^{21}\) Takashi Inoguchi, “Uncertain Times Cast a Cloud Over Happiness in Asia.”
Japan. Then from January 2013 onward, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) Navy and Maritime Policing Agency’s armed vessels took aggressive action against their Japanese counterparts. Chinese Naval vessels set fire control radar targeting against Japanese vessels. Then, on February 1, 2013, the PLA Liberation Daily carried an article penned by the PLA Air Force, which reported that a simulation of the Chinese Air Force versus the U.S.-Japan combined Air Force ended in the former’s devastating defeat. Following this report, the PLA Air Force proceeded to visibly and repeatedly risk the “unusual approach” to the Japanese air force aircraft. When the Chinese government announced its Air Identification Defense Zone (AIDZ) in the East China Sea, the United States responded by flying a bomber aircraft over the AIDZ. Although China shifted its focus to the South China Sea, Chinese actions in the East China Sea continued, including constructing oil rigs and militarily threatening Japanese vessels and aircraft.

By August 2015 when the statement was released, both Japan and China intermittently resumed moves toward reconciliation. They steadily expanded trade, investment, and related economic transactions, registering one of the largest and most dynamic bilateral economic partnerships in the world. Yet, Japan has simultaneously focused defense spending on improving the quality of weapons and training for forces, which is revealing of the mood in Japan. Yet, it is also important to note that Japan has actually reduced its defense spending from $45 billion in 2005 to $42 billion in 2016. Alternatively, China’s defense budget is set to rise from $30 billion in 2005 to $140 billion in 2016.

It is clear that the Abe II administration resembles the Abe I administration in terms of Abe’s policy towards China, specifically reconciliation, an incremental increase in weapons and improved quality of armed forces training, as well as stagnation in the quantity of defense spending. This similarity is the result of the trio of post-war arrangements and their limitation of Abe’s goals—a result that has been reinforced by a less-than-strong economic comeback, despite high-levels of quantitative easing since March 2013. The subsequent paragraphs will further explore why the Abe I and Abe II administrations have exhibited similar outcomes.

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22 Shortly after Abe’s visit, China summoned Japan’s Beijing envoy to lodge a “strong protest.” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang said Beijing seriously condemned the visit. “This poses a major political obstacle in the improvement of bilateral relations. Japan must take responsibility for all the consequences that this creates,” he said. See “China Condemns Japan PM Shinzo Abe’s Yasukuni Shrine Visit,” BBC News, December 26, 2013.
23 Jiefang Junbao, “Nankong yanyu zhang chuxian jiang yinyu di sanfan moni yuji jibo jiluo, [During Air Force military exercise in the Nanjing Air Force Area, a third party speaking in English appeared and an Airborne Early Warning craft was shot down],” February 1, 2013.
24 Takashi Inoguchi and Ankit Panda (forthcoming), “Japanese Perspectives about the South China Sea.”
25 “Less of the Same,” The Economist, 79.
26 Abe I refers to the first Abe administration from 2006 to 2007, while Abe II refers to the current Abe administration.
To explain the similarity between the Abe I and Abe II administrations, it is instructive to delve deeper into the three key issues of 2015: the emperor’s status, Article 9 of the Constitution, and the U.S.-Japan alliance. Judging from Abe’s oft-used phrases like “I am the top leader” or “I am in charge” or “the problem is under control,” Abe might have overestimated the power of prime minister in Japanese politics before security-related legislation was carried out in the National Diet, especially after his very successful speech at the U.S. Congress.\(^27\) The trio of postwar arrangements has remained up to today. First, Emperor Akihito—along with Empress Michiko—has emerged as a key defender of the postwar trilateral arrangement. For years, the emperor and empress have been most arduous expressing their deep remorse and compassion for those killed in the battlefields of the Pacific, as well as for those who have suffered from disasters like the March 11, 2011 East Japan earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear power destruction. Remolding Article 9 in a fundamental way and nullifying no-resort to war could place the arrangement of the 1946 Supreme Commander for the Allied Power’s (SCAP) “democratization and demilitarization” in limbo. Article 9 and SCAP are linked tightly but subtly; if “no resort to war” is fundamentally changed, then “the symbolic emperor” may, too, experience a fundamental change.\(^28\) The “substantive emperor” could then re-emerge as a possibility, which may lead some to think that an incremental and concerted metamorphosis of the emperor’s status, Article 9, and the U.S.-Japan alliance might be an option in the future.

Second, many laws are connected to Article 9. Although it is not well-known, it is significant to point out that neither the honor of those killed in war-related duties nor the compensation given to those families left behind have been enshrined in law. Japanese citizens are not oblivious to how the Japanese government has differentiated in its treatment of soldiers and officers after the war. For example, when a Japanese police officer was killed during the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations to Cambodia, the Japanese government gave what is considered a high honor to the individual killed, as well as significant compensation for his family members.\(^29\) Yet, if he had been a SDF officer, the state would not have bestowed such a high honor or granted significant compensation for family dependents. The general interpretation is that the Constitution prohibits such actions. Therefore, some of the assignments relating to the SDF’s expeditionary nature that the government initially intended to legislate have been limited or removed due to the harsh criticism of security legislation inside and outside of the National Diet.

Third, of all laws and agreements connected to the alliance, perhaps the most significant are agreements such as the Special Agreement and the Status of Forces Agreement with the United States about the provision of weapons and materials to Japan.

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\(^{28}\) Takashi Inoguchi and Ankit Panda, “Japanese Perspectives about the South China Sea.”

Although the alliance was revised in 1960 to enable the United States to help Japan deter and resist potential aggressors, the United States government is happy to receive what is called an omoiyari (sympathy) budget from the Japanese government, covering such items as military base rents, Japanese employees’ services, electricity, and training camp relocation fees. The United States government wants the Japanese government budget on this item to increase to some $300,000 dollars from the current $200,000 dollars for the 2015 fiscal year. The U.S. “rebalancing” policy, despite the overall U.S. federal government budget squeezing, leads the United States government to demand a larger omoiyari budget from the Japanese government.

It seems, at least in the short term, that Emperor Akihito’s uncompromising pacifism by example, the public’s instinctive and somewhat atavistic anti-militarism, and the United States’ quiet determination to preserve U.S. primacy in the region have kept the trilateral arrangement rock solid. The short-term outcome of security legislation is thus described in terms of “evolutionary change” or “Abe the evolutionary.” Broadly speaking, the trio of immediate postwar arrangements limited the security legislation, and is also responsible for Abe’s confusion regarding the difficulty of passing such legislation. Ultimately, this limitation is the reason that Abe II parallels Abe I, provided that the economic policy was insufficient and only helped Abe to pass the security legislation with some setbacks to the original thrust of the legislation.

Since 1938, mankind has trended towards fewer war-related deaths on an annual basis—dropping from five million deaths per year over the years 1938 to 1945, to 10,000 war-related deaths per year since 1989. The Abe Statement is broadly in harmony with this trend. Needless to say, the future trend of human collective violence remains to be carefully watched in the dynamic and diverse East Asia region, which currently represents the heights and depths of global economic prosperity coupled with a deep sense of mutual distrust and hyper insecurity among states.

In summary, several core elements have and continue to influence Abe’s leadership progression. First, Abe was keenly aware that his loyal supporters should be considered immediately following his inauguration. While his trip to the Yasukuni Shrine was politically applauded, it carried with it numerous consequences. The visit has drawn enduring criticism from Chinese, Korean, and, most importantly, Japanese citizens who suspect Abe of revisionist tendencies, which has ultimately prevented him from fully exercising his leadership. Secondly, Abe learned from his grandfather that citizens’ economic purses must be taken care of before a leader can pursue any political agenda,

30 “Omoiyari yosan gengaku teian [omoiyari budget reduction proposed],” Mainichi Shimbun.
32 The world saw five million war-related deaths per year from 1938 to 1945; 100,000 war-related deaths per year from 1945 to 1989; and 10,000 war-related deaths per year since 1989. See “War Occurrence: Hyper-Insecurity and Multilateral Institutions,” Japanese Journal of Political Science 16, No. 3 (2015): 388-398; Takashi Inoguchi, “Uncertain Times Cast a Cloud Over Happiness in Asia.”
including the security legislation. While this brilliant political strategy facilitates policy preparation, Abe is well advised to note that the market has its own illogic in an era of uncertainty, unpredictability, and unexpected risks. Thirdly, Abe’s security legislation was successful because of his pragmatic willingness to take two steps forward and one step backward. The trio of the immediate postwar arrangements—the emperor’s status, Article 9, and the alliance with the United States—turned out to be solid, while Emperor Akihito’s pacifism, citizens’ apprehension of war, and the United States’ determination to maintain primacy are all structurally deep.

What can we expect of Abe in the future? Two key factors loom large. First, Japanese citizens’ continued high-level support for Abe cannot be assured as the “new normal” economies of the world—including the G-7 and emerging economies, but excluding China—fail to register significant annual growth rates. Public approval of Abe’s leadership rests on successful economic reforms, which have not yet been realized.

The second critical factor is the international security environment, specifically that of East and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, which does not bode well for future stability. Going forward, Japan must augment its ability to defend and deter against threats, as well as articulate the nation’s position and vision in a manner that encourages global citizens to join Japan’s endeavor for peace and stability over the next seventy years.

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33 Nassim Nicholas Taleb, The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable (London: Random House, 2007); Takashi Inoguchi, “Japan’s Foreign Policy Line after the Cold War.”

34 “Less of the Same,” The Economist, 79.