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Japan Transformed? The Foreign Policy Legacy of the Abe Government

Abstract: Throughout his exceptionally long tenure (2012–20), former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō made no secret of his ambition to transform Japan’s foreign policy. He was also widely credited with extraordinary individual agency. We critically assess foreign policy shifts under Abe and evaluate the relative significance of individual, domestic, and international factors. Abe had a major impact, but his individual influence should not be exaggerated: his highest personal priorities saw limited success. However, Abe facilitated and accelerated reforms consistent with domestic political and international structural changes. Our assessment of Abe’s legacy carries important implications for future Japanese foreign policymaking.

On August 24, 2020, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō entered the history books as the longest continuously serving premier since Japan’s first cabinet in 1885. Abe’s tenure surpassed that of iconic, transformative post-war leaders Yoshida Shigeru and Satō Eisaku, as well as Meiji-era prime ministers Katsura Tarō and Itō Hirobumi. Between the December 2012 landslide victory that returned him to the Prime Minister’s Office and his resignation in 2020, Abe and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) prevailed in all six national elections, and the LDP-Kōmeitō coalition enjoyed majorities in both houses of the Diet. Observers often described national politics during 2012–20 as single-handed dominance by Abe (*Abe ikkyō*).

Taking advantage of exceptional political stability and longevity, Abe sought to transform Japanese foreign policy. He made no secret of his desire

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to “unshackle” Japan from the “postwar regime” (*sengo rejiimu kara no dakkyaku*), an idea originating in the LDP’s 1955 Founding Charter.¹ Abe promoted his foreign policy as unabashedly bold and transformational. Within a year after returning to power, he declared that “Japan is back”; vowed that his country would exercise influence as a first-tier world power²; asserted that Japan’s national security “is not someone else’s problem, it is a crisis that exists right there and now”³; and oversaw the cabinet’s promulgation of Japan’s first-ever national security strategy, which called for a more “proactive” (*sekkyokuteki*) role overseas.⁴

Discourse among scholars and policy experts often characterizes the Abe era, and Abe himself, as transformative for Japan’s role in the world. Leading security experts judged Abe’s defense policy a radical transformation, declared Japan’s postwar pacifism “dead,” and characterized his institutional reforms as “the most ambitious reorganization of Japan’s foreign and security policy apparatus since the end of World War II.”⁵ In economic relations, two “mega” trade deals, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, led to the assessment that Tokyo had become a “champion” of multilateralism and free trade—one “never before . . . so consequential to the fate of the liberal trading order.”⁶ Typically, considerable agency was ascribed to Abe himself. As early as 2015, scholars

1. Tōgō Kazuhiko, “Abe Shinzō no ‘sengo rejiimu kara no dakkyaku,’” *Kyōto sangyō daigaku sekai mondai kenkyūjo kiyō*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2015), pp. 3–12; Jiyū Minshutō, “Rittō sengen kōryō,” November 15, 1955, <https://www.jimin.jp/aboutus/declaration/> (accessed November 17, 2020).

2. Shinzo Abe, “Japan Is Back,” February 22, 2013, https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/us_20130222en.html (accessed July 5, 2021); Shinzo Abe, “Toward an Alliance of Hope,” April 29, 2015, http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201504/uscongress.html (accessed July 15, 2020).

3. Shushō kantei, “Abe naikaku sōri daijin shūnin kisha kaiken,” December 26, 2012, https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/96_abe/statement/2012/1226kaiken.html (accessed August 15, 2020).

4. Naikaku Kanbō, “Kokka anzen hoshō senryaku,” December 17, 2013, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryō/131217anzenhoshō.html> (accessed July 7, 2020).

5. Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan’s Foreign and Security Policy under the “Abe Doctrine”: New Dynamism or New Dead End?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Karl Gustafsson, Linus Hagström, and Ulv Hanssen, “Japan’s Pacifism Is Dead,” *Survival*, Vol. 60, No. 6 (2018), pp. 137–58; Eric Heginbotham and Richard Samuels, “Will Tokyo’s Arms Exports Help or Hurt U.S. Interests in Asia?” *Cipher Brief*, July 14, 2017, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/will-tokyos-arms-exports-help-or-hurt-u-s-interests-in-asia> (accessed August 15, 2020).

6. Mireya Solís, “Follower No More?: Japan’s Leadership Role as a Champion of the Liberal Trading Order,” in Yoichi Funabashi and G. John Ikenberry, eds., *The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism: Japan and the World Order* (Brookings Institution Press, 2020), pp. 79, 81.

described Abe as Japan's most transformative leader since Yoshida Shigeru (1946–47; 1948–54).⁷

This article offers a comprehensive postmortem on the significance of Abe's tenure (2012–20) for contemporary and future Japanese foreign policy. It considers the following questions: First, what were the key changes to Japan's foreign policy under Abe, what motivated these shifts, and how transformative were they relative to a pre-Abe baseline? What aspects of Japan's foreign policy did *not* change? Second, as a source of policy shifts, what was the relative importance of Abe's personal leadership compared to domestic political and international factors? We assess these questions systematically by adapting Kenneth Waltz's influential "levels of analysis" of international relations.⁸ Based on our findings, we also consider broader implications for future change under Abe's successors.

Major Developments in Japanese Foreign Policy under Abe, 2012–20

We begin with a brief survey of policy developments during Abe's tenure in the domains of national security, diplomacy, economic relations, multilateral cooperation, and history issues. Both change and continuity carry significant implications for Japan's foreign policy trajectory, and narrowly focusing only on the former can lead to an exaggerated assessment of transformation. We thus also highlight areas of stability. A subsequent analytical section examines the factors that propelled and constrained policy shifts under Abe.

In his first press conference following the LDP-Kōmeitō's December 2012 landslide election victory, Abe underscored that he would make national security a top priority. Over the next eight years, his government carried out numerous reforms to Japan's national security institutions and policies. It placed particular emphasis on three areas: bolstering deterrence against perceived regional threats by expanding the roles, missions, and capabilities of Japan's Self-Defense Forces; strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance; and diversifying and expanding security cooperation with partners beyond Washington.⁹

7. Editorial Staff, "Abe Shinzo: Japan's Most Consequential Prime Minister since Yoshida Shigeru," *Asan Forum*, February 5, 2015, <http://www.theasanforum.org/abe-shinzo-japans-most-consequential-prime-minister-since-yoshida-shigeru/> (accessed July 15, 2020).

8. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (Columbia University Press, 2001).

9. Adam P. Liff, "Japan's Defense Reforms under Abe: Assessing Institutional and Policy Change," in Takeo Hoshi and Phillip Y. Lipsky, eds., *The Political Economy of the Abe Government and Abenomics Reforms* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 479–510.

With regard to institutional reforms, the 2013 establishment of Japan's first-ever National Security Council has had the greatest impact. It deepened the centralization of foreign policy decision making in the cabinet and enhanced long-term strategic planning, interagency coordination, and crisis management. Its most significant output was Japan's first comprehensive national security strategy, which encompassed not only defense but also economic policy and other aspects of Japan's international engagement.¹⁰ As an indication of the Abe government's shift toward a comprehensive national security strategy transcending traditional military/defense affairs, in spring 2020 it added a new "economic security" unit to review economic issues with national security implications (e.g., foreign investments, telecommunications, cybersecurity).¹¹

Beyond institutional reforms, the Abe government also pursued important changes to Japan's defense policy. Most notably, landmark "peace and security legislation" in 2015 authorized new roles and missions for Japan's Self-Defense Forces, including expanded activities beyond strict territorial defense. Most famously, it provided a legal foundation for the Abe cabinet's controversial 2014 reinterpretation of the constitution's Article 9 to expand the circumstances under which Japan can come to the aid of a third country that has suffered an armed attack—so-called limited exercise of collective self-defense.¹² Additionally, the legislation opened up new opportunities to train, exercise, and plan with military forces of the United States and other countries. And it also created new scope for Japan to engage in "international peace support" activities—most of which do not entail combat, such as search-and-rescue operations and logistical support. Finally, the legislation made it possible to use weapons to protect foreign military forces under limited circumstances, e.g., if those forces are involved in peacetime

10. Key Japanese-language studies include Sunohara Tsuyoshi, *Nihon-ban NSC to wa nanika?* (Shinchosha, 2014); Kotani Ken, "Nihon-ban kokka anzen hoshō kaigi (NSC) no kinōteki tokuchō," *Kokusai anzen hoshō*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (March 2015), pp. 61–75; Oriki Ryōichi and Kaneko Masafumi, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi: hyōka to teigen* (PHP Kenkyūjo, November 2015), http://research.php.co.jp/research/foreign_policy/pdf/seisaku_teigen20151126.pdf (accessed November 25, 2020); Matsuda Yasuhiro, ed., *NSC kokka anzen hoshō kaigi: kiki kanri anpo seisaku tōgō mekanizumu no hikaku kenkyū* (Sairyūsha, 2009).

11. "Japan Sets Up NSC Team to Meet Coronavirus, Tech Challenges," *Kyodo*, April 1, 2020, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/04/89596a0delee-japan-sets-up-nsc-team-to-meet-coronavirus-tech-challenges.html> (accessed April 10, 2020).

12. For critical discussions of the meaning and significance of the 2014 reinterpretation to allow "limited" (*genteitekina*) exercise of collective self-defense for Japan's security policy trajectory, see Christopher W. Hughes, "Japan's Strategic Trajectory and Collective Self-Defense: Essential Continuity or Radical Shift?" *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2017), pp. 93–126; Adam P. Liff, "Policy by Other Means: 'Collective Self-Defense' and the Politics of Japan's Postwar Constitutional (Re-)Interpretations," *Asia Policy*, No. 24 (2017), pp. 139–72.

activities contributing to Japan's defense or in United Nations peacekeeping operations.¹³ The 2015 legislation combined with the 2013 national security strategy, annual defense white papers, two national defense program guidelines (2013, 2018), and the 2015 revision to the U.S.-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation to define defense policy shifts under Abe.¹⁴

Concerns over a possible conflict with China over the Senkaku (Diaoyu in Chinese) Islands—which Japan administers but over which Beijing also claims sovereignty—became particularly acute after 2012. They prompted investments in enhancing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and modifying the Self-Defense Forces' posture and composition to more effectively confront perceived threats near Japan's remote southwestern islands. This included new and longer-range radar and missiles on several islands, a new fleet of fighter aircraft in Okinawa, and enhanced expeditionary capabilities, including Japan's first amphibious forces since 1945. In response to China's assertion of its sovereignty claim using primarily nonmilitary government vessels, Japan's Coast Guard received major budget increases, new vessels, and an expanded mandate focused on territorial defense. Meanwhile, the Abe government established new units focused on space, cyberspace, and electromagnetic operations.¹⁵ In short, the Abe era witnessed an expansion of the roles, missions, and capabilities of Japan's own Self-Defense Forces, albeit in most cases with significant restrictions on using weapons or force.¹⁶

Throughout the postwar period, Japan's alliance with the United States has been a central pillar of its defense policy. Since the end of the cold war, successive Japanese governments have sought to strengthen it in response to regional strategic vicissitudes. Abe's government continued this effort. It also accelerated a more recent trend: diversifying Japan's security ties beyond the United States, but in a manner generally congruent with U.S. strategy. Major examples of cooperation with third parties included the U.S.-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue and the reinvigoration of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue involving Japan, the United States, Australia, and India. More independent initiatives included agreements with Canberra covering transfer of defense equipment and technology and an

13. Summary of legislation adapted from Mori Satoru, "Anpo hōsei no seiritsu," Tōkyō zaidan, October 1, 2015, <https://www.tkfd.or.jp/research/detail.php?id=285> (accessed November 17, 2020).

14. Naikaku Kanbō, "Kokka anzen hoshō senryaku." Provisional translations of all other documents referenced here are available at www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/index.html and www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/d_policy/national.html (accessed July 19, 2021).

15. Ministry of Defense (MOD), "Medium Term Defense Program (FY 2019–FY 2023)," December 18, 2018, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/chuki_seibi31-35_e.pdf (accessed December 18, 2020).

16. Liff, "Japan's Defense Reforms under Abe."

acquisition and cross-servicing agreement for military logistics and Japanese proposals for a Southeast Asian regional defense framework.¹⁷ Finally, the Abe government further loosened a ban on arms exports and signed new defense equipment and technology transfer agreements with various U.S. allies and partners.¹⁸

For a balanced assessment of the Abe government's national security legacy, it is also critically important to note what did not change. Most prominently, Abe left office without achieving his life-long ambition of formally revising Article 9. Despite widely hyped defense spending increases throughout his tenure, Abe-era defense budgets remained at roughly one per cent of gross domestic product (GDP)—falling far short of the LDP's own 2018 call to double expenditures to two per cent of GDP!¹⁹ Furthermore, key pillars of Japan's postwar defense policy persisted: the use of force or weapons in combat or outside an armed attack on Japan were still heavily circumscribed. Even successful reforms, such as constitutional reinterpretation to enable limited collective self-defense, ended up watered down from Abe's original objectives.²⁰ He pushed the envelope but left office without resolving whether or how Japan would acquire strike capabilities. Finally, Abe-era policy shifts generally continued along a reform trajectory already underway before his return to power.²¹ And despite numerous, practically significant reforms, the defining characteristic of Japan's postwar defense posture—its “exclusively defense-oriented policy” (*senshu bōei*)—basically remained in place.²²

Beyond defense, an important guiding framework for Japanese diplomacy during Abe's tenure was the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,”²³ which was publicly linked directly to the prime minister.²⁴ The framework was often vague and evolved over time, but it consistently emphasized liberal

17. MOD, “Updating the ‘Vientiane Vision: Japan’s Defense Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN,’” November 2019, https://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/exc/admm/06/vv2_en.pdf (accessed December 18, 2020).

18. MOD, “Defense of Japan 2019,” p. 515, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2019/pdf/index.html (accessed August 6, 2020).

19. “Bōeihi (GDP ~2%) meyasu; Jimintō ga teigenan NATO sankō ni,” *Nikkei shinbun*, May 24, 2018.

20. The significance of the 2014 constitutional reinterpretation is contested among scholars. For an alternate view, see Hughes, “Japan’s Strategic Trajectory and Collective Self-Defense.”

21. Liff, “Japan’s Defense Reforms under Abe.”

22. MOD, “Defense of Japan 2019,” p. 25.

23. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), “Jiyū de hirakareta indo taiheiyo,” August 7, 2020, https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/page25_001766.html (accessed December 18, 2020).

24. Shinzo Abe, “Confluence of the Two Seas,” August 22, 2007, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html> (accessed November 26, 2020); Shinzo Abe, “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond,” *Project Syndicate*, December 27, 2012, <https://www>

principles such as the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and economic openness. Furthermore, the change in emphasis from “Asia Pacific” to “Indo-Pacific” represented a meaningful shift in Japanese diplomacy as the country sought to expand its leadership over a larger geographic area and strengthen relations with partners beyond East Asia, particularly India.

Japan had articulated similar diplomatic slogans in the past that left little impact, such as the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” under Prime Minister Asō Tarō (2008–9). This time, however, the United States and other foreign governments openly embraced Japan’s concept. The United States developed its own Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy and renamed its military’s Pacific Command to Indo-Pacific Command. In bilateral dialogues, officials in the Donald Trump administration routinely thanked Japan for articulating the concept and noted that it had become a guiding framework for U.S. regional engagement.²⁵ However, the two governments’ respective interpretations varied somewhat. The Trump administration placed greater emphasis on military engagement with regional democracies, whereas Japan emphasized infrastructure investments and trade liberalization. U.S. officials openly discussed countering and competing with China, while Japanese officials generally eschewed such framings to attract widespread support, especially from Southeast Asia.²⁶ Nonetheless, it was remarkable how enthusiastically the United States and other governments embraced the language and principles of regional engagement that the Abe government proposed.

Although Japanese officials generally refrained from publicly framing it as such, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific was a regional vision that contrasted with that of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. To compete with Beijing, the Abe government established the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure in 2015, a \$110 billion initiative in collaboration with the Asian Development Bank. A variety of related initiatives followed, including a Japan-U.S.-Australia trilateral initiative focused on infrastructure, the Quality Infrastructure Investment Partnership with the World Bank, and the Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure with the European Union.²⁷ The Abe government’s emphasis on quality

.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe (accessed November 26, 2020).

25. Authors’ observation from various meetings that included U.S. and Japanese policymakers.

26. Yuichi Hosoya, “FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2019), pp. 18–28.

27. MOFA, “The Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure Between Japan and the European Union,” <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000521432.pdf> (accessed November 25, 2020).

represented pushback against China's claims that existing development aid arrangements were cumbersome and insufficient to meet regional demand. Japan emphasized quality infrastructure to advertise the reliability of projects implemented by existing donors and international aid agencies, as well as their transparency, accountability, and sustainability. Japan scored an important diplomatic victory at the Group of 20 Osaka Summit in 2019, when member states adopted quality infrastructure principles. This included China, which had faced mounting criticism over its management of the Belt and Road Initiative.²⁸

Consistent with its "free and open" regional vision, the Abe government also pursued a proactive economic agenda that reversed conventional perceptions of Japan as a free trade laggard. After U.S. withdrawal from the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2017, Japan resuscitated it with the remaining 10 members. The move was widely heralded for defending the liberal international order in the face of an inward-looking Trump administration.²⁹ The Abe government combined this international engagement with domestic liberalization under the banner of "Abenomics," which included reforms of politically influential, traditionally protected sectors such as agriculture.³⁰

Beyond the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Abe government also sealed major trade agreements with the European Union, Australia, and Mongolia, and it deepened cooperation with Southeast Asia. Additionally, it made significant progress on a trade agreement with the United Kingdom and the 15-member Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a multilateral trade agreement including economic powerhouses China and South Korea. Both were signed soon after Abe's resignation. His government also negotiated an agreement on digital trade with the Trump administration with the intention of setting the standard for future multilateral negotiations.

Whereas the Abe government exercised proactive global leadership on free trade, its policy toward international organizations—another key pillar of the liberal international order—was mixed. Some Japanese officials saw the Trump administration's aggressive approach toward international organizations as a potential opportunity to promote practical reforms. There was precedent for this: in the 1980s, Japan had exploited the hostility of the Ronald Reagan administration toward the United Nations to achieve

28. "In Blow to China, Japan's 'Quality Infrastructure' to Get Endorsement at Osaka G20," *Japan Times*, June 25, 2019.

29. Solís, "Follower No More?"

30. Patricia L. MacLachlan and Kay Shimizu, "Japanese Agricultural Reforms under Abenomics," in Hoshi and Lipsky, eds., *The Political Economy of the Abe Government*, pp. 421–44.

reform.³¹ However, during Abe's tenure, there was little to show for this effort. Nevertheless, reforming multilateral institutions takes time, and it remained conceivable that Japan's quiet diplomacy under Abe on issues such as reform of the World Trade Organization's dispute settlement mechanism would eventually bear fruit under his successors.

In several cases, the Abe government adopted a relatively aggressive stance toward international organizations that paralleled the Trump administration's strong-arm tactics. Emblematic of this approach was Japan's 2018 withdrawal from the International Whaling Commission, which was widely criticized and undercut the country's claims to support a rules-based maritime order. Japan also threatened to cut funding to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) over the organization's decision to include documents related to wartime atrocities in the Memory of the World Register. To critics, these actions muddled the narrative of Abe's Japan as a champion of the liberal order. They also represented a nontrivial shift away from Japan's previous approach to the two organizations, which had emphasized reforms from within as the best way to address Japanese dissatisfaction.³²

When Abe came to power in 2012, there was significant concern that he would pursue a revisionist agenda *vis-à-vis* Japan's pre-1945 history and antagonize regional neighbors. However, compared to these initial expectations, Abe proved relatively pragmatic with some notable exceptions. He did visit the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in 2013 but refrained from doing so during the remainder of his tenure. The most successful acts of historical reconciliation were probably the reciprocal visits U.S. President Barack Obama and Abe made to Hiroshima and Pearl Harbor, which were warmly received by both sides.

Although relations with China were tense throughout Abe's tenure, this was largely driven by geopolitics, geoeconomics, and the Senkaku Islands dispute rather than historical memory per se. The sharp escalation of the Senkaku dispute occurred before Abe returned to power, especially after Beijing responded severely to Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko's government's purchase of three of the islands from their private Japanese owner in September 2012. After Abe and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, held their first summit meeting in November 2014, relations stabilized, though the repeated maneuvers of Chinese government vessels near the Senkaku Islands continued to fester. In the latter half of

31. Phillip Y. Lipsky, "Reformist Status Quo Power: Japan's Approach toward International Organizations," in Funabashi and Ikenberry, eds., *The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism*, pp. 107–32.

32. Phillip Y. Lipsky, "How Do States Renegotiate International Institutions? Japan's Renegotiation Diplomacy Since World War II," *Global Policy*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2020), pp. 17–27.

Abe's tenure, he actively pursued improved bilateral relations, including a 2018 trip to Beijing. Even the Abe administration's robust engagement of Taiwan did not significantly derail these efforts. In short, history issues were not a primary source of friction in Japan's bilateral relations with China under Abe.

Japan's relations with South Korea present a striking contrast. After taking office, President Park Geun-hye (2013–17) refused to meet with Abe for more than two years, due in large part to history issues. Their first summit meeting occurred in late 2015. It was followed by an agreement that claimed to resolve the issue of comfort women “final[ly] and irreversibl[y],” in return for Japanese financial support for a fund to compensate victims. However, reception of the agreement was sharply polarized in Korea, and international activism by human rights groups continued.³³ Under President Moon Jae-in (2017–), antagonism over historical issues deepened further. The Korean Supreme Court ruled in 2018 that alleged victims of wartime Japanese forced labor could pursue damages *vis-à-vis* Japanese corporations—an issue the Japanese government considers resolved by the 1965 bilateral Treaty on Basic Relations. The controversy led to an exchange of economic retaliatory measures, and a Korean threat—eventually withdrawn—to abandon an intelligence-sharing agreement with Japan. Despite U.S. efforts to improve political relations and deepen security and intelligence cooperation between its two allies, Japan-Korea frictions remained largely unresolved as Abe left office.

Abe's Foreign Policy: Three Levels of Analysis

In no democratic country is foreign policy formulated, much less implemented, by fiat or in a domestic political vacuum. Nor is foreign policy completely determined by international forces. Japan is no exception. To assess foreign policymaking during Abe's tenure, as well as the implications for the post-Abe era, we develop an analytical framework drawing on the three levels of analysis (or “images”) widely used by scholars of international relations and first articulated by Kenneth Waltz.³⁴

The first level of analysis emphasizes *the role of national leaders*. It leads us to examine the personal ambitions, ideology, and specific policy goals of Abe himself and to interrogate whether Abe dominated Japanese foreign policymaking to the extent that was widely asserted during his tenure. Although leaders can play an important role in shaping foreign policy outcomes, policy initiatives primarily attributable to an individual tend to be fragile and therefore unlikely to persist for long after that leader leaves office.

33. Mary M. McCarthy, “The Enduring Challenge of History Issues,” in Hoshi and Lipsky, eds., *The Political Economy of the Abe Government*, pp. 511–33.

34. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*.

The second level of analysis is *the domestic political context* of Japanese foreign policymaking. This leads us to examine factors such as the shifting preferences and influence of interest groups, coalition politics, and broader changes in domestic institutions. During Abe's tenure, how much did domestic factors shape foreign policymaking by facilitating, or constraining, change? Once established or reformed, domestic institutions often exert effects that extend beyond the political tenure of individual leaders. Given this, how consequential were the Abe government's domestic institutional reforms?

Whereas the first two levels focus on factors within Japan, the third level of analysis emphasizes *the international system*. It leads us to consider the role of geopolitical and international economic vicissitudes in compelling or constraining foreign policy decisions. How important were factors such as the changing military balance of power in East Asia, China's growing economic influence, and the policies of the United States in shaping the Abe government's foreign policy decision making? Reforms motivated primarily by international factors should prove durable beyond Abe's resignation, as they are a response to external forces largely beyond the control of any individual Japanese leader.

In his seminal book *Man, State and War*, Waltz considered the levels of analysis primarily as distinct sources for the causes of war, but they can be extended more generally to analyze all aspects of foreign policy decision-making.³⁵ Furthermore, we see value in considering the levels of analysis not only as *sources* of variation but also as *constraints* on foreign policymaking. For example, a foreign policy reform agenda originating from the first level may be blocked by constraints attributable to the second level, and vice versa. Classifying foreign policy priorities based on this framework illuminates the political forces that either enabled or hindered the Abe government's foreign policy priorities. Of course, we acknowledge that the lines between the three levels are often blurred in the real world. However imperfect, the three lenses nevertheless offer a useful framework for assessing the drivers of major foreign policy developments under Abe and, accordingly, his legacy. Of the three levels of analysis, the third is most likely, and the first least likely, to prove impervious to Abe's resignation.

The First Level of Analysis: Abe's Individual Influence on Foreign Policy

Without any doubt, Abe was deeply interested and actively involved in foreign policymaking during his tenure. Early in his career, Abe was private secretary to his father (Abe Shintarō) while the latter was foreign minister. The experience reportedly impressed upon young Shinzō the importance

35. Ibid.

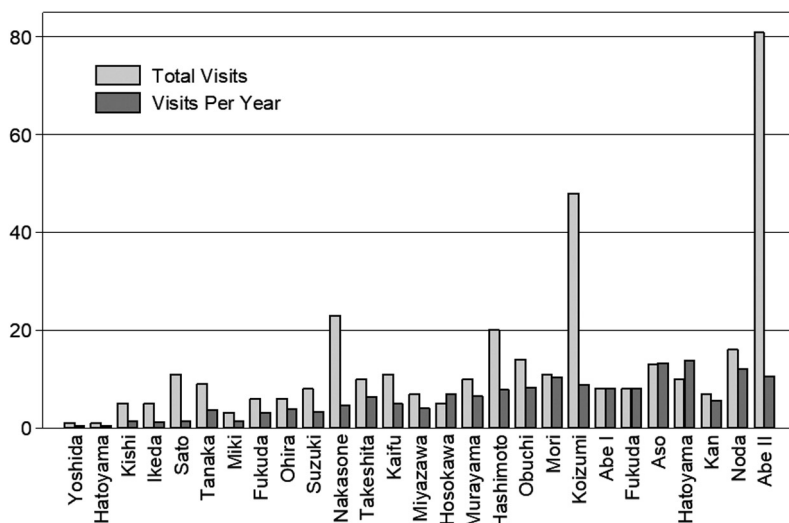


Figure 1. Foreign Visits by Japanese Prime Ministers, 1952–2020

Sources: Authors' calculations based on Katō Junpei, "Sengo Nihon no shunō gaikō," *Gaimushō chōsa geppō*, No. 1 (2002), pp. 77–104; Shushō Kantei, "Naikaku seido to rekidai naikaku," <https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/rekidai/ichiran.html> (accessed February 17, 2021); Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Sōri daijin no gaikoku hōmon ichiran," October 22, 2020, https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/kaidan/page24_000037.html (accessed February 17, 2021).

of cultivating personal relationships and trust with foreign leaders.³⁶ After becoming a Diet member himself in 1993, Abe gained additional exposure to foreign affairs, culminating in service as chief cabinet secretary in the Koizumi Junichirō government (2001–6), and then a brief stint as prime minister (2006–7). Abe thus returned to power in 2012 with considerable experience in foreign policy.

As prime minister, Abe invested significant time in diplomacy. Overseas, carefully planned visits to all 10 ASEAN member states during his first year were a harbinger of the expanded regional and global leadership role he coveted for Japan. Abe traveled frequently and cultivated close, personal relations with foreign counterparts. He shattered Koizumi's record of foreign visits by a Japanese prime minister (48), ultimately logging 81. (See Figure 1.) The government actively touted Abe's busy overseas travel schedule as evidence of Japan's proactive global role.³⁷ On an annualized basis, the frequency of Abe's overseas visits was high but not exceptional.

36. Tobias Harris, *The Iconoclast: Shinzo Abe and the New Japan* (Hurst, 2020), p. 36.

37. For example, MOFA, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2020* (MOFA, 2020), pp. 13–14, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100105301.pdf> (accessed November 1, 2020).

Nonetheless, the combination of Abe's long tenure and busy travel schedule made him a familiar face in diplomatic circles and among foreign leaders—a nontrivial advantage over his predecessors.

Abe's courting of U.S. President Donald Trump exemplifies his personal investment in proactive diplomacy as well as its limitations. After Trump's surprising 2016 election victory, Abe visited the president-elect in New York, establishing a personal rapport over the next four years that former U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton later described as "Trump's best personal relationship" among foreign leaders.³⁸ Abe's extensive personal connections with foreign counterparts, combined with Trump's disinterest and lack thereof, sometimes placed Abe in an intermediary role between the United States and foreign leaders. Most notably, Abe flew to Iran in 2019 to help stem hostilities between Washington and Tehran, though the trip did not significantly reduce tensions.³⁹

The policy consequences of Abe's frequent engagement with Trump remain a matter of debate: Japanese policymakers suggest it gave Japan influence over U.S. policy regarding regional security cooperation and North Korea. It may also have averted more serious bilateral frictions over contentious issues like host nation support for U.S. forces in Japan and exchange rate policy. However, it did not prevent Trump from withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, on which Abe had personally expended political capital, or lambasting Japan for allegedly unfair trade practices. Japan was ultimately compelled to pursue regional free trade without the United States and negotiate a bilateral trade agreement on largely unfavorable terms.⁴⁰

Abe was equally energetic in personally orchestrating foreign policy-making within the Japanese government. For example, he was instrumental in establishing the National Security Council in December 2013 and chaired and convened it 241 times—a rate far more frequent than predecessor institutions under previous prime ministers.⁴¹ He also met with foreign and defense ministry vice ministers more frequently than vice ministers from all other ministries combined.⁴²

38. "Trumped by 'The Donald'?" *Japan Times*, June 23, 2020.

39. "Shinzo Abe's Mission to Iran Ends in Flames," *Washington Post*, June 14, 2019.

40. Ayumi Teraoka and Shihoko Goto, "RESOLVED: Abe's Investment in His Relationship with President Trump Has Advanced Japanese Interests," January 30, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/resolved-abes-investment-his-relationship-president-trump-has-advanced-japanese-interests> (accessed November 25, 2020).

41. Authors' calculations based on data from "Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi kaisai jōkyō," Shushō Kantei, <https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/anzenhosyoukaigi/kaisai.html> (accessed November 7, 2020).

42. "Gaikō anpo, medatsu menkaisū," *Asahi shinbun*, December 27, 2019. Data run through December 25, 2019.

Beyond his personal experience and interest, Abe came into office with a long track record of publicized ambitions to transform Japan's foreign policy.⁴³ Core to his personal philosophy was the notion of "escaping the postwar regime," which he saw as an imposition by the U.S.-led allied occupation that shackled Japanese foreign policy and postwar society. Abe saw the LDP's *raison d'être* as twofold: to revive Japan's war-torn economy and to revise the U.S.-drafted 1947 constitution. Although Japan's rapid postwar economic recovery achieved the first goal, efforts to revise the constitution by LDP leaders, including by Abe's grandfather, Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke (1957–60), had repeatedly failed. As a recent biography notes, Abe "wanted nothing more in his political life than to change the constitution, the enduring symbol of Japan's defeat and its subordinate independence."⁴⁴

Abe returned to power in 2012 viewing the "postwar regime" as the root cause of significant problems in Japanese foreign policy. From his perspective, Japan's excessive focus on economic growth had undercut the notion that "the Japanese government would take responsibility for the lives, wealth, and territory of Japanese citizens."⁴⁵ Remediating this required moving beyond issues of historical memory to confront contemporary foreign policy challenges head-on. Advisors in Abe's inner circle often mentioned constitutional revision, a peace treaty with Russia, and resolution of the North Korea abductee issue as his top personal priorities. Revealingly, Abe himself singled out these issues during August 2020 remarks announcing his resignation.⁴⁶

During his nearly eight years in office, Abe invested considerable political capital to make progress on what he saw as unfinished business of the postwar era. However, the ambivalence of key political allies and the public stymied constitutional revision. For example, in courting Kōmeitō, the LDP's junior coalition partner, over constitutional reform, Abe and the LDP made significant concessions *vis-à-vis* Article 9. The net effect was that the proposal Abe ultimately tabled as prime minister entailed minor and symbolic change that merely asserted the constitutionality of Japan's Self-Defense Forces. It fell far short of the LDP's decades of far more ambitious proposals, which had greater potential to achieve a more fundamental transformation of Japan's foreign policy that Abe and his allies had long sought.⁴⁷ Despite these major substantive concessions, Abe's revision effort still failed.

43. See, for example, Abe Shinzō, *Utsukushii kuni e* (Bungei Shunjū, 2006).

44. Harris, *The Iconoclast*, p. 312.

45. Abe Shinzō, *Atarashii kuni e* (Bungei Shunjū, 2013), p. 254.

46. "Abe Shushō, hinin hyōmei," *Asahi shinbun*, August 29, 2020.

47. Adam P. Liff and Ko Maeda, "Electoral Incentives, Policy Compromise, and Coalition Durability: Japan's LDP–Komeito Government in a Mixed Electoral System," *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2019), pp. 53–73.

Abe's other attempts to overcome the postwar regime were hemmed in by external factors beyond his control. The 2015 comfort women agreement with South Korea, explicitly designed to be "final and irreversible," proved to be neither: domestic political opposition in Korea meant it did not meaningfully outlast the Park administration that signed it.⁴⁸ Abe aggressively courted Russian President Vladimir Putin, holding 27 summits intended to resolve the Northern Territories dispute and negotiate a formal peace treaty.⁴⁹ Despite taking considerable political risks by floating the possibility of a territorial compromise, Abe left office without any deal.⁵⁰ Finally, no major progress was achieved with North Korea on abductees, despite Abe's personal investment of considerable time and energy since he rose to national prominence on the issue in the early 2000s.⁵¹

Abe's desire to move Japan beyond the postwar regime reflected a personal conviction developed from his youth and through his long political career.⁵² It is thus striking that his core personal priorities ended up as arguably the least successful aspects of his government's foreign policy agenda. Abe's personal ambitions were repeatedly frustrated by domestic political and international factors, to which we turn next.

The Second Level of Analysis: Domestic Politics of Japanese Foreign Policy

Understanding the domestic political context in which the Abe government formulated and attempted to implement foreign policy is essential to contextualizing its legacy. A first enabling feature was a respite from the political volatility and frequent leadership turnover that had plagued previous administrations, including Abe's first in 2006–7. This can be attributed to the fortuitous timing of Abe's return to power—immediately following the Democratic Party of Japan's electoral implosion after three years in control—and a deliberate governance approach designed to buttress his rule. Political stability in turn facilitated the Abe government's efforts to pursue key foreign policy priorities.

In each of the three Lower House elections while Abe was LDP president (2012, 2014, 2017), the LDP won over 60 per cent of seats, and the

48. Hyun-Soo Lim, "Not 'Final and Irreversible': Explaining South Korea's January 2018 Reversal on the 'Comfort Women' Agreement," *Yale Journal of International Law*, February 1, 2018, <https://www.yjil.yale.edu/not-final-and-irreversible-explaining-south-koreas-january-2018-reversal-on-the-comfort-women-agreement/> (accessed November 26, 2020).

49. "'Nitō henkan' e no tenkan minorazu," *Asahi shinbun*, August 30, 2020.

50. James D. J. Brown, "Time for Japan to Reassess Its Russia Policy," *Japan Times*, July 26, 2019.

51. "Ratchi mondai wa, naze susumanai no ka," *NHK seiji magajin*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.nhk.or.jp/politics/articles/feature/40601.html> (accessed July 19, 2021).

52. Harris, *The Iconoclast*, chapters 3–4.

LDP-Kōmeitō coalition enjoyed a roughly two-thirds supermajority. In the less powerful Upper House, the coalition also enjoyed clear majorities. Japan's Lower House electoral system—a mixed system that emphasizes single-member districts—put the LDP in a commanding position as the opposition splintered.⁵³ Opposition parties also failed to expand their appeal to rural regions, crucial for securing Upper House majorities. Among other things, this made it less risky for Abe to pursue trade deals that would expose Japan's agricultural sector to international competition.

Abe and his allies also adopted a governance model that drew lessons from past experiences and exploited Japan's new political institutions. This model combined economic revitalization under the banner of "Abenomics" to appeal to reform-oriented Japanese voters, careful management of Abe's public image, the strategic use of elections to achieve party discipline, and enhanced centralization of authority.⁵⁴ For example, after predicting a 10 per cent hit to Abe's public approval rating following passage of the controversial 2013 Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets, then Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide put it up for a vote immediately after Upper House elections so the government could pivot back to more popular Abenomics themes before the next Lower House election.⁵⁵ Abe's public approval rating was relatively consistent and averaged just below 50 per cent during his tenure, among the highest levels of any Japanese prime minister.⁵⁶

Abe's stable public support and willingness to call snap elections to overcome resistance from LDP backbenchers—first demonstrated in 2014 to quell a revolt from LDP fiscal hawks allied with the Ministry of Finance—also facilitated exceptional stability in key foreign policy-relevant cabinet posts. During his nearly eight-year tenure, Abe had only one chief cabinet secretary, three ministers of foreign affairs, and two national security advisors. In short, domestic political stability—attributable to both fortuitous circumstances and deliberate strategy—created an exceptionally supportive environment for the Abe government's foreign policy agenda.

A second enabling feature of Abe-era domestic politics was the continuation of the decades-long trend of increased centralization of foreign policymaking authority under the prime minister.⁵⁷ Major institutional reforms

53. Yukio Maeda and Steven R. Reed, "The LDP under Abe," in Hoshi and Lipscy, eds., *The Political Economy of the Abe Government*, pp. 87–108.

54. Takeo Hoshi and Phillip Y. Lipscy, "The Political Economy of the Abe Government," in Hoshi and Lipscy, eds., *The Political Economy of the Abe Government*, pp. 3–40.

55. Ōshita Eiji, *Abe kantei "kenryoku" no shōtai* (Kadokawa, 2017), pp. 180–81, 241.

56. NHK Yoron Chōsa, <https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu/> (accessed October 1, 2020).

57. Aurelia George Mulgan, *The Abe Administration and the Rise of the Prime Ministerial Executive* (Routledge, 2018), chapter 3.

under Abe included the creation of a Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs, which reviews appointments to high-level administrative posts,⁵⁸ and the aforementioned establishment of the National Security Council to formulate and implement foreign policy through a centralized process headquartered in the cabinet.⁵⁹ The consolidation and centralization of executive power facilitated important shifts in the pattern of Japanese foreign policymaking toward a whole-of-government approach. A noteworthy case in point is the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, which is multidimensional, with both security and economic aspects that would have been previously handled by distinct, heavily siloed government ministries.⁶⁰

However, institutional reforms have also created greater scope for the politicization of Japanese foreign policymaking. Politicians increasingly exert greater influence compared to bureaucrats, and the electoral system can incentivize politicians to sometimes pursue more confrontational foreign policy approaches.⁶¹ Japan's approach toward South Korea near the end of Abe's tenure utilized economic countermeasures in response to historical legacy issues. Threats to withdraw funding from UNESCO over history issues were analogous: foreign ministry bureaucrats sought to protect Japan's international reputation by avoiding withdrawal threats, but political prerogatives prevailed.⁶²

A third enabling factor for foreign policy change was more permissive public opinion. On some key issues, during the Abe era Japanese public opinion proved less resistant to calls for reforms by elites than in decades past. This is a culmination of longer-term trends. Traditional, cold war-era debates about the legitimacy of the U.S.-Japan alliance and the Self-Defense Forces are long gone from mainstream politics. The public now generally agrees with elites that Japan's regional security environment is increasingly volatile, even threatening, and foreign policy must adapt. For example, clear majorities view China and North Korea as threats to Japan's vital interests, have deeply negative feelings toward both, and identify a strong national defense posture and close security ties with the United States as crucial for Japan's national security.⁶³ A 2018 survey showed that the Japanese public

58. "Naikaku jinjikyoku, 5-gatsu ni setchi," *Nikkei shinbun*, April 11, 2014.

59. Adam P. Liff, "Japan's National Security Council: Policy Coordination and Political Power," *Japanese Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2018), pp. 253–79.

60. Harukata Takenaka, "Institutional Reforms and Japanese Security Policy: Free and Open Indo Pacific and the Japanese Prime Minister," paper prepared for American Political Science Association Annual Meeting in Washington DC, August 28, 2019.

61. Amy Catalinac, *Electoral Reform and National Security in Japan: From Pork to Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

62. Lipsy, "Reformist Status Quo Power."

63. For example, see "Jieitai bōei mondai ni kansuru yoron chōsa," Yoron chōsa (naikakufu), January 2018, <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h29/h29-boue/index.html> (accessed November 1, 2020); Craig Kafura, "Public Opinion and the US-Japan Alliance at the Outset

supports strengthening security ties with the United States and other countries to balance China as well as acquisition of stronger indigenous defense capabilities to strengthen deterrence.⁶⁴ And it is not just conservative politicians who have pushed major defense reforms. Before Abe's return to power, left-of-center DPJ prime ministers also promoted institutional changes and more assertive security policies. In short, recent years have witnessed both public and non-LDP elite opinion becoming increasingly accepting of Japan adopting a more proactive defense posture.

Domestic political changes also facilitated the Abe government's embrace of free trade. The political influence of import-competing producers has been in secular decline due to long-term structural shifts. The number of workers employed in agriculture has been declining for decades, and the average age of a Japanese farmer is now 68, making pensions and health-care more pressing concerns than agricultural tariffs.⁶⁵ Concurrently, polls indicate the public generally supports Japan adopting an active leadership role in promoting free trade—despite the rise of global populism and even during a period when the United States was not an enthusiastic partner.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, neither Abe nor his government had a free hand to pursue foreign policy ambitions. Domestic *constraints* were also important in shaping the vector of Japan's foreign policy trajectory. Most significantly, though public support for opposition parties was weak throughout Abe's tenure, LDP support was hardly robust. This left Abe potentially vulnerable if he pushed too far, too fast on issues for which public support was lacking. The ruling coalition's success in national elections since 2012 was not evidence of widespread popular support for its policy agenda. Rather, the ruling coalition benefited electorally from the combination of relatively reliable core supporters and voter apathy: compared to the 2009 Lower House election, Abe's victories saw turnout decline by 10 (2012), 17 (2014), and 16 (2017) percentage points.⁶⁷ Voters with no party affiliation have constituted a majority of Japan's electorate in recent years. These volatile, floating voters are capable of swinging elections by turning out in large numbers, as the

of the Trump Administration,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, February 2017, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/Public%20Opinion%20and%20the%20US-Japan%20Alliance%20at%20the%20Outset%20of%20the%20Trump%20Administration%20PDF%20Report.pdf> (accessed November 1, 2020)

64. Adam P. Liff and Kenneth Mori McElwain, “Japan and the Liberal International Order: A Survey Experiment,” in Funabashi and Ikenberry, eds., *The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism*, pp. 359–76.

65. Nōrinsuisanshō, “Nōgyō rōdōryoku ni kansuru tōkei,” <https://www.maff.go.jp/j/tokei/sihyo/data/08.html> (accessed February 10, 2021).

66. Liff and McElwain, “Japan and the Liberal International Order.”

67. Sōmushō, “Kokusei senkyo no tohyōritsu no suii ni suite (Heisei 28-nen 9-gatsu),” September 2016, https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000255919.pdf (accessed December 18, 2020).

LDP learned from its crushing defeat to the DPJ in 2009.⁶⁸ After the DPJ experiment, many voters supported the LDP because they perceived a lack of alternatives.⁶⁹ For these reasons, Abe and his allies had a clear incentive to exercise caution when approaching issues that could generate significant voter backlash. Public ambivalence, if not outright opposition, to policy priorities like Article 9 revision thus constituted an important domestic constraint throughout his tenure.⁷⁰

Another important reason that Abe was not able to assert his will to the extent that the discourse of *Abe ikkyō* suggested relates to features of the ruling coalition itself. This was especially true in the case of defense policy. The LDP and Kōmeitō have always been strange bedfellows, and their partnership since 1999 is one of political convenience if not necessity—not a reflection of agreement on major foreign policy issues. A particularly salient manifestation of this tense dynamic is stiff internal resistance from Kōmeitō and its pacifistic, lay Buddhist support base to the conservative LDP's most coveted defense policy reform objectives. Abe and the LDP therefore had clear electoral incentives to avoid openly antagonizing their junior coalition partner's core supporters. They dialed back their policy ambitions accordingly.⁷¹

Finally, fiscal constraints cannot be ignored. Even before the massive COVID-19-related emergency stimulus in the Abe government's final months, Japan's public debt ranked first in the world as a percentage of GDP. Fiscal pressures are intensifying over time due to health and pension spending associated with a rapidly aging population. This placed nontrivial constraints on the Japanese government's ability to boost defense and foreign aid expenditures in support of Abe's foreign policy ambitions.

The Third Level of Analysis: International Systemic Factors

Abe's second prime-ministership coincided with significant changes in Japan's international environment. The regional balance of power shifted against Japan, driven primarily by China's rapid economic rise and military modernization. The nuclear and missile threat from North Korea grew as Pyongyang tested what it claimed were its first-ever thermonuclear weapon and intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching the continental

68. Tanaka Aiji, "Mutōhasō no kore made to genzai," July 18, 2012, <https://www.nippon.com/ja/in-depth/a01104/> (accessed August 21, 2020).

69. E.g., "NHK Poll: Cabinet Support Rate at 46%," January 9, 2017, https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20180109_32/ (accessed December 18, 2020).

70. "69% Oppose Change to Japanese Constitution's War-Renouncing Article 9, Poll Shows," *Jiji*, June 22, 2020.

71. Liff and Maeda, "Electoral Incentives, Policy Compromise, and Coalition Durability."

United States. The Trump administration created doubts about U.S. commitments to alliances, free trade, and other aspects of the liberal international order widely seen within Japan as fundamental to its postwar peace and prosperity.⁷²

The transformation of Japan's regional security environment accelerated during Abe's time in office, motivating many of the defense-related institutional reforms and policy shifts his government pursued.⁷³ At the top of the list were concerns about China, which increased its military budget by over 66 per cent during Abe's tenure to a level nearly six times larger than Japan's.⁷⁴ China's military continued its rapid expansion and modernization. Beijing pursued expansive and controversial territorial and maritime claims in the East and South China Seas. It also increased political and military pressure on Taiwan. Meanwhile, friction between China and the United States worsened significantly. These challenges provided an impetus for a variety of defense reforms. Concerns about China featured prominently in government reports and provided a justification for a robust response.⁷⁵

Viewed from Tokyo, a second major security concern was the rapid improvement of North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile capabilities. During Abe's tenure, Pyongyang tested four nuclear weapons and over one hundred missiles of various ranges and payloads⁷⁶—including new missiles designed for strikes against Japanese territory, U.S. bases throughout the western Pacific, and the U.S. homeland. In 2017, North Korea's aggressive rhetoric and actions almost precipitated a direct confrontation with the United States as President Trump threatened “fire and fury” and took a series of escalatory actions. Japan's 2020 Defense White Paper identified North Korea as presenting an urgent national security crisis.⁷⁷ In response to this perceived threat, the Abe government made additional investments in missile defense, worked closely with the United States on North Korea policy, and considered acquiring independent strike capabilities.

These state-based threats also increased attention on so-called emerging domains. The proliferation of hypersonic Chinese and North Korean

72. Adam P. Liff, “Proactive Stabilizer: Japan's Role in the Asia-Pacific Security Order,” in Funabashi and Ikenberry, eds., *The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism*, pp. 39–78.

73. “Heisei 31 nendo ikō ni kakaru bōei keikaku no taikō ni tsuite,” Bōeishō, December 18, 2018, p. 1, <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/pdf/20181218.pdf> (accessed July 22, 2020).

74. “SIPRI Military Expenditure Database,” <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex> (accessed February 7, 2021).

75. E.g., *Bōei hakusho* (Bōeishō, 2020), pp. 56–89.

76. “Understanding North Korea's Missile Tests,” April 24, 2017, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/understanding-north-koreas-missile-tests/> (accessed November 22, 2020); Missile Defense Project, “Missiles of North Korea,” June 14, 2018, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/dprk/> (accessed November 22, 2020).

77. *Bōei hakusho*, pp. 90–112.

ballistic and cruise missiles threatened to overwhelm Japan's limited missile defense systems. The rapidly advancing technologies and threats in space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum posed new challenges for Japan's defense planners and motivated investments in new units and capabilities to better identify, understand, track, and counter them.⁷⁸

In short, many national security reforms and policy shifts the Abe government pursued were direct responses to what numerous leaders across the political spectrum acknowledged as Japan's dramatically changing security environment. Key lines of effort built on the work of predecessor administrations, including that of the left-of-center Democratic Party of Japan.

Japan's economic statecraft under Abe was also powerfully affected by international developments beyond his control. A key example was the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which leading experts identified as "the most important trade initiative for Abenomics."⁷⁹ Both the Obama and Abe administrations invested significant political capital concluding the agreement in late 2015—which the Abe cabinet's Economic Revitalization Headquarters called "a reform no one thought possible."⁸⁰ To the Abe government's dismay, in January 2017, Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States from the agreement. This threatened a key pillar of Abe's domestic and foreign policy agenda. However, the Trump administration's indifference also created room for Japan to step up in a new leadership role. Over the next four years, the Trump administration's protectionism, along with the broader rise of global populism, presented Japan with both challenges and opportunities.

In the global development and infrastructure space, China's expanding ambitions also compelled a Japanese response. Beginning early in Abe's tenure with Xi Jinping's famous proposal for what would become the Belt and Road Initiative, China committed enormous sums to finance overseas infrastructure projects. This included \$200 billion through state banks, \$100 billion through the Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank, and \$50 billion through the Silk Road Fund.⁸¹ These initiatives challenged Japan's regional leadership, and concerns emerged about Beijing's use of investment projects to gain geopolitical advantages. Japan's energetic regional

78. For Japan's official perspective on its changing security environment and new domains, see Bōeishō, "Heisei 31 nendo ikō ni kakaru bōei keikaku no taikō ni tsuite"; *Bōei hakusho*, pp. 41–44.

79. Mireya Solís and Shujiro Urata, "Abenomics and Japan's Trade Policy in a New Era," *Asian Economic Policy Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2018), pp. 106–7.

80. "Keizaizaisei honbun," 2016, p. 1, http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/keizaisaisei/pdf/2016_honbun1.pdf (accessed December 18, 2020).

81. Hong Zhao, "China–Japan Compete for Infrastructure Investment in Southeast Asia: Geopolitical Rivalry or Healthy Competition?" *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 28, No. 118 (2019), p. 566.

diplomacy under Abe, such as its emphasis on quality infrastructure, can be traced directly to these international developments.⁸²

Discussion

We now turn to an assessment of the relative importance of individual, domestic, and international factors in shaping Japanese foreign policy during Abe's prime ministership. As we argued above, it is useful to think of each of the three levels of analysis as a potential source of both facilitating and constraining factors. We readily acknowledge that the boundaries between the levels can blur in the real world. Yet they nevertheless provide a useful, albeit imperfect, analytical framework. Among other purposes, the levels help us critically reflect on widespread assertions that Abe had an *individually* transformative impact on Japanese foreign policy. In turn, the framework allows us to also draw significant implications for Japan's foreign policy trajectory in the post-Abe era.

Regarding the first level of analysis, it is striking that Abe left office after nearly eight years without achieving his paramount individual priorities. He himself underscored this reality during the emotional August 2020 news conference at which he announced his intention to resign and reflected on his legacy. Abe expressed "overwhelming sorrow" (*danchō no omoi*) for failing to achieve key policy objectives: namely, revising Japan's constitution, resolving the decades-old issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea, and signing a peace treaty with Russia.⁸³ Despite the common perception of *Abe ikkyō*, domestic and international constraints loomed large as his cherished, personal priorities ultimately foundered.

However, it is noteworthy that the first level does not emerge as a meaningful constraining factor under Abe. Japanese prime ministers can accelerate foreign policy change, but they can also stymie reforms through indifference, risk aversion, or personal opposition. Abe was clearly not a case of the latter. He espoused and enabled controversial reforms—including a reinterpretation of Article 9—that risked his domestic public approval. He invested considerable personal attention, time, and political capital in the management of foreign policy. Abe's busy travel schedule and cultivation of personal relationships with foreign counterparts meant prime minister apathy was not a factor in constraining the conduct of Japanese diplomacy under his watch.

In our judgment, the second level of analysis is where the Abe government leaves its most durable foreign policy legacy. It exercised considerable agency over domestic politics, accelerating foreign policy-relevant institu-

82. Ibid., pp. 566–67, 573.

83. "Abe Shushō, jinin hyōmei."

tional shifts that will almost certainly outlast Abe. The former prime minister and his close advisors adopted a governance model carefully tailored to Japan's contemporary political institutions, which his successors will likely seek to emulate. His government accelerated the centralization of administrative authority and improved interagency coordination, facilitating top-down political leadership. In economic policymaking, Abe benefited from a secular decline in the influence of the traditionally protectionist agricultural sector and the opposition parties' failure to capitalize. However, he also accelerated existing trends by pursuing agricultural reform and taking on Japan Agricultural Cooperatives under the banner of Abenomics. These were important shifts over which the Abe government exercised active agency and which are likely to become durable legacies.

Nevertheless, domestic politics also constrained the Abe government. Public opinion was increasingly permissive toward foreign policy reforms that addressed Japan's deteriorating security environment and opened Japan's market to competition. The Japanese public, however, remained ambivalent about some of Abe's key personal priorities, most importantly Article 9 revision. The LDP's deceptively weak support base and electoral codependence with Kōmeitō also compelled Abe to moderate his ambitions. Lastly, fiscal constraints frustrated calls for dramatic spending increases on defense and other foreign policy priorities. In sum, domestic political constraints played a nontrivial role in watering down and stalling key aspects of Abe's foreign policy agenda.

Turning to the third level of analysis, the Abe government's foreign policy decision making occurred in a dynamic, and at times volatile, regional and global environment. Abe confronted diverse geopolitical and geoeconomic vicissitudes largely beyond his government's control. These nonetheless powerfully shaped his foreign policymaking and facilitated key reforms. Some of these regional trends predated 2012, but they accelerated significantly during Abe's tenure. Others were novel, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Trump administration's skepticism of free trade and traditional alliances. The Abe government actively implemented a variety of measures in response to these external shifts. Concerning national security, it prioritized reforms and policy shifts to strengthen Japan's ability to deter and respond to potential contingencies. Its economic policies sought to address novel challenges from China, reinvigorate Japan's regional leadership, and ameliorate the impact of perceived U.S. retrenchment.

International factors clearly motivated important foreign policy shifts under Abe. However, by their nature, international systemic factors are relatively less susceptible to a Japanese leader's individual initiative. In other words, a different prime minister would have confronted similar challenges and faced strong pressures to respond similarly. As a case in point, tensions with China over the Senkaku Islands had already intensified in 2010

and 2012. In response, the Democratic Party of Japan government initiated significant reforms to Japan's national security policy and institutions, upon which the Abe government built. Similarly, it was Abe's predecessor, Noda Yoshihiko, who in 2011 announced Japan's initial intent to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership. During Abe's tenure, Japanese opposition parties generally expressed opposition to Abe's foreign policies on procedural rather than substantive grounds, such as pointing out inconsistencies with his prior statements. They focused their fire primarily on his administration's domestic political scandals. In short, Japan's rapidly changing international environment was a major driving force behind some of the Abe government's foreign policy initiatives. However, there are manifold reasons to suspect a different prime minister—even, potentially, from another party—would have responded similarly.

The international system also constrained Abe's foreign policymaking. By their nature, these constraints were largely beyond his government's control. For example, it seems extremely unlikely that any Japanese prime minister would have been able to dramatically alter the course of China's military modernization, North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, or Trump-led disruption. Japanese officials including Abe sought to change Trump's mind about the merits of trade cooperation and alliance relationships, but it was hardly surprising that they achieved only limited success. And despite Abe's active efforts, a peace treaty with Russia was ultimately impossible without a partner in Moscow willing to close the deal. The shifting regional balance of power and Japan's relative decline are largely driven by external developments over which Japanese leaders have only marginal influence.

Conclusion

The 2012–20 Abe government stands out for its longevity as well as for its sweeping foreign policy ambitions. Taken collectively, our survey of Japan's foreign policy under Abe reveals significant change, but also continuity. In security policy, the Abe government implemented internal reforms aimed at facilitating strategic and centralized decision making in the political executive, as well as enabling rapid responses to crises and the vicissitudes of international politics. Externally, the overriding theme was an effort to bolster Japan's own strengths while simultaneously deepening and diversifying international partnerships. The Abe government also took on an important international leadership role in support of the liberal international order as the Trump administration retreated. However, the increasingly influential role of politicians in the foreign policymaking process created greater linkages between domestic political impulses and foreign policy decisions. In some instances, this undercut Japan's newly embraced role as a defender of the liberal order.

As a leader, Abe Shinzō sought to transform Japan's foreign policy, and he was widely credited with exercising exceptional individual agency. Yet, our critical assessment of the relative significance of individual, domestic, and international factors during Abe's nearly eight years in power leads to a nuanced conclusion—one with important implications for future Japanese foreign policymaking. Abe had a major impact, but his individual influence should not be exaggerated. After all, from constitutional revision to resolving the North Korea abductees issue to an elusive peace treaty with Russia, he failed to achieve key personal priorities. Nevertheless, Abe's energy, experience, and initiative facilitated and accelerated reforms consistent with domestic political and international structural changes. Abe's most durable legacy will likely prove to be domestic reforms that will affect Japanese foreign policymaking well beyond his tenure.

To conclude that widespread narratives exaggerate Abe's individual impact is not to deny his agency or influence. Abe altered Japan's image as a nation plagued by frequent leadership turnover and struggling to exercise international leadership. He accelerated important institutional reforms, and his busy diplomatic schedule and active management of the foreign policy apparatus reflected a clear desire to enhance Japan's international stature. Undoubtedly, Abe left office in 2020 with a list of foreign policy accomplishments. However, his track record also demonstrates that there are clear limits on the ability of a Japanese leader to fundamentally transform the country's foreign policy. To exaggerate the individual significance of *any* prime minister is to risk overlooking the other, sometimes larger forces reshaping Japan's foreign policy trajectory—forces that will remain important even now that Abe has passed the baton to his successors.

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