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ESSAY

After Abe, Japan Tries to Balance Ties to the U.S. and China

With China rising and the U.S. ever less predictable, Japan is reassessing its security arrangements

By Richard J. Samuels

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Shinzō Abe was the most ambitious and successful agent of change in Japan’s foreign and security policy in a half-century. The former prime minister, who held office from 2006 to 2007 and then from 2012 to 2020, was assassinated on July 8. By the end of his tenure, there was a clear “Abe Doctrine” for a more proactive Japanese posture on national security, but one of his principal aims remained unmet: He was never able to revise Article 9, also known as the “peace clause,” of the constitution imposed on Japan by the U.S. in 1947. The provision renounces war and the maintenance of “war potential” as the sovereign right of the nation.

Abe was able to achieve his aims by reinterpreting the constitution and by undoing many of the constraints the country imposed on itself during the Cold War to reassure its neighbors and voters. He managed to create Japan’s first functioning National Security Council and helped ensure that the country could have a proper Ministry of Defense. He made it possible for Japan’s military to field offensive weapons without tying itself in knots, to export arms and to come to the aid of the U.S. military in a pinch—a capability that previous interpretations of the constitution ruled out.

At the same time, Abe worked to reduce Japan’s dependence on Washington, no doubt because he observed China’s rise and was concerned that the relative decline of the U.S. might lead it to become an unreliable ally. So he shored up Japan’s strategic position by creating a quadrilateral security dialogue with Australia, India and the U.S. and by forging bilateral strategic partnerships with Australia, the U.K. and the Philippines.

Finding the right distance between the world’s two largest military and economic behemoths has been the most important strategic choice facing Japan for more than a

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decade. This “Goldilocks challenge”—of “getting it just right” with the U.S. and China—has kept Tokyo on its toes.

Under allied occupation after World War II, Japan was forced to accept U.S. supremacy in Asia as the foundation of its foreign and security policies. The cheap ride on U.S. security guarantees dealt a blow to Japan’s

status, but it wasn’t a bad deal: U.S. support abetted Japan’s stunning technological and economic reconstruction and consolidated the country’s liberal democracy. Japan became the world’s second largest economy. But today the China that Japan once contemptuously occupied has now raced ahead of it, and the consequent shift in the regional balance of power has elevated national security issues in Japanese politics.

China’s power now dwarfs Japan’s. In absolute terms, China’s GDP is 2½ times the size of Japan’s and its military spending is five times greater. At the same time, Japanese policy makers have lost some confidence in American staying power in the region as a consequence of President Trump’s unpredictable demands and President Biden’s messy withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Under these conditions, Japanese strategists have tended to fall into four broad categories. Those who don’t wish Japan to position itself too closely to either the U.S. or China prefer that the country mount an autonomous defense. Doing so would require Japan to assume the expense and risk of acquiring and sustaining an independent military capability—thereby freeing itself from having to hedge bets on a provocative China or a distracted America. Japan would provide for itself in a “self-help” world. This was the approach promoted by the late Shintarō Ishihara, a popular and outspoken former governor of Tokyo who harbored higher aspirations, but it has never found widespread support.

Tokyo’s second strategic option is to resolve its dilemma in favor of China. This course has attracted some in the business community who emphasize the benefits to be reaped from a robust relationship with the newest global economic giant. Japan could contribute to the construction of a China-centered East Asian economic bloc, rather than missing out on its advantages. Tokyo leaned in this direction under Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama more than a decade ago, but as China has become stronger and more provocative, such an accommodation has become less plausible.

Those who fear China's hegemony more than they value the benefits of its economic growth are drawn to a third option, which is to embrace the U.S. more tightly. Abe preferred this course, which is identified with military realists who judge that Japan cannot balance China or deter North Korea on its own. These realists see U.S. power in the neighborhood as benign and stabilizing—even indispensable. Setting aside their doubts, they would double down on Washington's protection to keep it on side and maintain its status as the dominant power in the region. Doing so would entail greater defense spending and cooperation with South Korea, as well as openly discussing a response to China's threats to reunite Taiwan with the motherland.



Not all Japanese strategists believe that the country really has to choose. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's wing of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, including his foreign minister, Yoshimasa Hayashi, holds that better economic relations with Beijing need not be purchased at the price of diminished relations with Washington. Japan has much to gain from sustaining both: Healthier economic relations with China might insulate Japan from shocks like the one it suffered with the abrupt U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2017, while a strong security alliance with Washington would protect Japan from Chinese military coercion. To hold these relationships in balance requires confidence both that China's rise will benefit the Japanese economy and that Washington's security guarantee is ironclad.

Every Japanese leader has flirted with this middle course. Who wouldn't wish to have their cake and eat it too? Even Abe made pre-pandemic overtures to Xi Jinping. Indeed, all of Japan's recent prime ministers—and aspirants—have migrated across the strategy board. Mr. Hatoyama backed off from appearing to tilt toward China, and Prime Minister Kishida

is today posing as a military realist.

Shinzo Abe left the stage at a critical moment for Japanese decision makers. The Russian invasion of Ukraine left many anxious about the implications for Japan's security. Days after the Kremlin's offensive began, Abe suggested discussing a shared nuclear deterrent with the U.S. Soon thereafter, Japanese commentators and politicians released a torrent of "lessons learned" from Ukraine for possible inclusion in the national security strategy and new defense guidelines that will codify Japan's security posture before the end of this year.

Getting China right while keeping the U.S. on side will meet Japan's Goldilocks challenge for the time being and serve as a fitting testimony to Abe's outsize ambitions and accomplishments.

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