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# Japan's Grand Strategy: The Abe Era and its Aftermath

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## The end of an era

On 28 August 2020, when Abe Shinzō formally announced that he was stepping down as Japan's longest-serving prime minister in its constitutional history, he stressed how 'the most important thing in politics is results'.<sup>1</sup> Facing a relapse in the medical condition that had forced him to step down as prime minister for the first time in 2007 after just a year in office, he admitted that his health had deteriorated to a point that he could risk making errors. With public frustration about the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic translating into plummeting approval rates, and continued media rumblings over political funding scandals, informed observers noted that he understood he had to make way for new leadership.<sup>2</sup> The 'iconoclastic' politician that had set out to reenergise a sluggish economy, revise the post-war constitution, and change Japan's role in international affairs was departing the scene having advanced his agenda, but – by his own admission – before he could fully deliver 'results' on key issues he had set his gaze upon.<sup>3</sup>

How significant was Abe's second stint in power? How should we assess the results of 'Abe 2.0'? What does success look like for Japan's longest-serving prime minister? These questions are particularly relevant because they allow us to examine how lasting his legacy is going to be and to address an equally important question: what does this all tell us about what to expect from Japan's new prime minister, Suga Yoshihide? Will he ever be anything other than the Abe 'continuity candidate', or 'Abe 3.0'?

Opinions stand divided. Japan experts have already started to weigh in examining different aspects of Abe's policy reforms and their impact in the foreseeable future.<sup>4</sup> Positive assessments have measured his success, generally focusing on Abe's political results, in three areas. Domestically, he fully capitalised on reforms that have empowered the Prime

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<sup>1</sup> 'Abe Naikaku Sōri Daijin Kisha Kaiken' 28 August 2020, [https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/98\\_abe/statement/2020/0828kaiken.html](https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/98_abe/statement/2020/0828kaiken.html); Robin Harding and Christian Shepherd, 'Shinzo Abe to Step Down as Japan's Prime Minister', *Financial Times*, 28 August 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/201aa32b-5e72-4e48-aa4e-1901b66d505d>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael J. Green, 'Shinzo Abe's Decision to Step Down', *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, 28 August 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/shinzo-abes-decision-step-down>.

<sup>3</sup> Editorial Board, 'What's at Stake for Shinzo Abe's Successor?', *The New York Times*, 02 September 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/02/opinion/shinzo-abe-japan.html>; Tobias Harris, 'Shinzo Abe Will Be a Tough Act to Follow', *Foreign Affairs*, 22 September 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/japan/2020-09-22/shinzo-abe-will-be-tough-act-follow>. Tobias Harris, *The Iconoclast: Shinzō Abe and the New Japan* (London: Hurst, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Auslin, 'The Abe Era Ends, Cheering China, Concerning Washington', *Foreign Policy*, 28 August 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/28/abe-japan-resignation-united-states-ally/>; Zack Cooper and Jeffrey W. Hornung, 'Abe's Resignation Could Leave Japan Less Secure – and Destabilize its U.S. Alliance', *The Rand Blog*, 08 September 2020, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/09/abes-resignation-could-leave-japan-less-secure-and.html>; Robert Ward, 'Abe Resignation: A Full In-Tray for His Successor', *IISS*, 28 August 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/08/abe-shinzo-resignation-japan-prime-minister-successor>.

Minister's Office, the *Kantei*, with a stronger capacity to implement policy.<sup>5</sup> In security matters, although he did not achieve his signature goal of revising the 'peace clause' Article 9 of the constitution, Abe expanded the potential boundaries of Japan's participation in international activities and partnerships.<sup>6</sup> Diplomatically, Abe reengineered Japan's international outlook and leadership role, receiving even the questionable endorsement of United States President Donald J. Trump. In a tweet soon after the news of Abe's resignation Trump defined him as 'the greatest Prime Minister in the history of Japan'.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, Abe achieved this under the shadow of systemic challenges such as an ageing population, tight domestic fiscal constraints, a more mercurial US, and an increasingly assertive China.<sup>8</sup>

Critics have taken a different view of Abe's political journey. On the one hand, the recent poor performance of the economy has raised questions over the long-term significance of his premiership. In August 2020, for example, second-quarter GDP data indicated that Japan had recorded its worst quarterly economic contraction since the end of the Second World War.<sup>9</sup> This was largely owing to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, but was aggravated by the negative impact on the economy of Abe's decision to raise the consumption tax again in October 2019. By the time Abe stepped down, for some his eponymous 'Abenomics' policy and 'three arrows' for economic reform—monetary, fiscal and structural—seemed to have failed to deliver the domestic conditions that would 'spark higher growth beyond more reliance on external demand'.<sup>10</sup> Other critics have focused on the domestic and security reforms that Abe introduced. These have weakened significantly the post-war normative arrangement of a 'pacifist' or 'anti-militaristic' Japan as much as the country's traditional approach to internationalism.<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, Japan was back as an international

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<sup>5</sup> Giulio Pugliese and Alessio Patalano, 'Diplomatic and Security Practice under Abe Shinzo: The Case for Realpolitik Japan', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 76, 2020:4, 615-632; Alessio Patalano, *Shinzo Abe and Japan's Strategic Reset* (London: Policy Exchange, 2020), <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/shinzo-abe-and-japans-strategic-reset/>; Adam P. Liff, 'Japan's National Security Council: Policy Coordination and Political Power', *Japanese Studies*, Vol. 38, 2018:2, 253-279.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew L. Oros, *Japan's Security Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Adam P. Liff, 'Japan's Security Policy in the "Abe Era": Radical Transformation or Evolutionary Shift?', *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 1, 2018:3, <https://tnsr.org/2018/05/japans-security-policy-in-the-abe-era-radical-transformation-or-evolutionary-shift/>; Wilhelm Vosse and Paul Midford (eds.), *Japan's New Security Partnerships: Beyond the Security Alliance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); Alessio Patalano, 'Natural Partners in Challenging Waters? Japan-NATO Co-operation in a Changing Maritime Environment', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 161, 2016:3, 42-51.

<sup>7</sup> Takako Hikotani, 'Trump's Gift to Japan', *Foreign Affairs*, Sept./Oct. 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2017-08-15/trumps-gift-japan>; Corey Wallace, 'Japan's strategic contrast: continuing influence despite relative power decline in Southeast Asia', *Pacific Review*, Vol. 32, 2019:5, 863-97.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Fackler, 'Ex-Premier is Chosen to Govern Japan Again', *New York Times*, 26 December 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/27/world/asia/shinzo-abe-selected-as-japans-prime-minister.html>. Also, Richard J. Samuels and Corey Wallace, 'Introduction: Japan's Pivot to Asia', *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, 2018:4, 703-710.

<sup>9</sup> 'Japanese Economic Slump Threatens to Tarnish Abe's Legacy', *The Japan Times*, 18 August 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/08/18/business/japan-economic-slump-shinzo-abe/>.

<sup>10</sup> Leika Kihara and Takaya Yamaguchi, 'Abenomics Fails to Deliver as Japan Braces for post-Abe Era', *Reuters*, 28 August 2020, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-japan-economy-abenomics-analysis/abenomics-fails-to-deliver-as-japan-braces-for-post-abe-era-idUKKBN25O0TT>.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Gustafsson, 'Long Live Pacifism! Narrative Power and Japan's Pacifist Model', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, 2019, 502-520; Karl Gustafsson, Linus Hagström, and Ulv Hanssen, 'Japan's Pacifism is Dead', *Survival*, Vol. 60, 2018:6, 137-158; Hugo Dobson, 'Is Japan Really Back? The "Abe Doctrine" and Global Governance', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 47, 2017:2, 199-224.

actor but not necessarily for the better, with the country's pacifist profile being the main casualty, and questions about the longer-term sustainability and efficacy of Abe's strategy.

In this article we engage with the above questions to argue that Abe Shinzō's era as prime minister has indeed brought about significant change in Japan as an international actor and that these changes are likely to endure. We expand on the literature that has offered assessments of the strong impact of the Abe years to demonstrate how his premiership was successful in attaining many of its self-declared objectives. In so doing, we articulate how, when Abe returned to power in 2012, he had a clear grand strategy – a 'doctrine' – that he implemented and adjusted elements of in an adaptable, 'realpolitik' fashion.<sup>12</sup> In the first section of the article, we take our cue from the international relations approach to grand strategy to examine Abe's ability to articulate and mobilise all the military and non-military elements of national power to attempt to preserve and enhance his vision of Japan's long-term interests.<sup>13</sup> In the second section, we explain how the ways in which Abe set out to implement his grand strategy had mixed outcomes and that his approaches were refined as international events unfolded.

Taken altogether the first two sections show that Abe largely successfully charted a new grand strategy, an 'Abe Doctrine', that breaks fundamentally from the past trajectory, and today continues to set the frameworks, the practices, and the tools of Japan as an international actor. We advance the debate on the nature and impact of Abe's changes in Japan by showing that criticisms of his reforms prevent us from appreciating the two most potentially significant 'results' of the Abe years: Japan's greater level of perceived 'agency' in international affairs, and its concomitant enhanced 'converging' ambitions and power to influence the surrounding international environment. This is what sets Abe's Japan apart today, and we suggest that the country will not revert to a more reactive, if not passive, role in the foreseeable future. Against this review of Abe's legacy, in the third section we chart how Suga is likely to build on his predecessor's results and perpetuate the framework of the Abe Doctrine as grand strategy. Yet, he is also likely, we argue, to deviate in some crucial respects on the practices of implementation as well as on the emphasis on certain key foreign policy issues that proved insurmountable and costly for Abe.

## **The 'Abe Doctrine': a framework for Japan's new grand strategy?**

From Abe's return to power in 2012 to his resignation as prime minister in 2020, Japanese foreign and security policy was sufficiently distinct to be termed as an 'Abe Doctrine'. Such policy choices reflect the significant departure from the so-called 'Yoshida Doctrine' (named after its originator Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, in office 1946-1947 and 1948-1954) that had previously dominated Japan's post-war strategic trajectory.<sup>14</sup> For Abe, as famously

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan's Foreign and Security Policy Under the 'Abe Doctrine': New Dynamism or New Dead End?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Pugliese and Patalano, 'Diplomatic and Security Practice under Abe Shinzo', *op. cit.*, 618-620.

<sup>13</sup> Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombroski, Simon Reich (eds.), *Comparative Grand Strategy: A Framework and Cases* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 7-8.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan's Foreign and Security Policy Under the 'Abe Doctrine': New Dynamism or Dead End?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

sloganeered and encapsulated in his dramatic return to power at the end of 2012, the overriding objective of the new cabinet was not just a personal political revival. Abe's return would further mean that 'Japan was Back' as a significant international player and that the pledge by the governing Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) revisionist factions to domestically 'take back Japan' (*Nihon o torimodosu*) would facilitate the restoration of Japanese foreign policy.<sup>15</sup>

The Abe Doctrine was constructed by Abe himself and embraced by many of the key revisionist and establishment figures around him in the LDP. These senior elites included Suga, a close advisor to Abe since his first administration and his chief cabinet secretary throughout the second mandate – making Suga also the longest holder of his government role in Japanese history. Abe's doctrine was driven by a belief that as an advanced industrial democracy Japan should recover its place among the great international powers as a 'Tier-one country'. The Abe doctrine placed a premium on a Japan that could contribute to shape international affairs, not merely to react to them. Indeed, this renewed status, propelled by reinvigorated economic and military capabilities, was vital for Japan to successfully navigate the ever more severe regional and global challenges that it faced.

In turn, for Japan to restore its national power and throw off past malaises, this meant Japan had to 'escape from the post-war regime' (*sengo dakkyaku*) that was regarded as essentially imposing upon Japan since 1945 the identity of a defeated power with a constrained resolve to assert its international interests.<sup>16</sup> The Abe Doctrine thus sought to displace the Yoshida Doctrine that was viewed as culpable in creating the international and domestic post-war order for Japan and perpetuating the regime of defeat and a 'small' Japan on the international stage.<sup>17</sup> As Abe hoped for in his first administration, Japan would instead move towards becoming a proud and 'beautiful country' (*utsukushii kuni*).<sup>18</sup> At heart, Abe's grand strategy sought to re-empower Japan with a sense of agency by drawing on a wide set of tools of statecraft, from the economic weight of the world's third-largest economic power to Japan's far from negligible military capabilities. Japan's grand strategy under Abe would aim for a voice on how the international system was to be sustained and evolve.

### **Dismantling the Yoshida Doctrine**

In this respect, the Abe Doctrine was designed to bring about a fundamental transformation. Indeed, it would look to systematically dismantle the three key international tenets of the Yoshida Doctrine. Abe would firstly move away from a minimalist and reactive defence posture and instead look to upgrade key areas of the Japan Self Defence Forces' (JSDF) capabilities, remove the constitutional constraints on the use of military power for international security, and enable Japan to participate in collective-self defence forms of security cooperation. Secondly, Japan would move away from a similarly minimalist level of commitment towards the US-Japan security treaty, and constant hedging against alliance

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<sup>15</sup> Shinzo Abe, 'Japan is Back', CSIS, Washington D.C., 22 February 2013, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/us\\_20130222en.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/us_20130222en.html).

<sup>16</sup> Tobias S. Harris, *The Iconoclast: Shinzō Abe and the New Japan* (London: Hurst, 2020), pp. 47-58.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher W. Hughes, 'Japan's Grand Strategic Shift: From a Yoshida Doctrine to an Abe Doctrine?', in Ashley J. Tellis, Alison M. Szalwinski and Michael Wills (eds.) *Strategic Asia 2017-18: Power, Ideas and Military Strategy in the Asia-Pacific* (National Bureau of Asian Research, Washington, Seattle, 2017), pp. 72-105.

<sup>18</sup> Abe Shinzō, *Utsukushii Kuni E*, Tokyo, Bunshun Shinsho, 2006.

dilemmas, and function as a more fully-fledged and integrated US-Japan alliance partner. Thirdly, Japan would look to exercise more overt leadership in East Asia and beyond, refusing to accede to a rising China's dominance in the region, and shifting from default engagement with Beijing to more pronounced counterbalancing role vis-à-vis Chinese foreign policy assertion if deemed necessary.

Abe's doctrine would also look to tackle what he perceived as the domestic roots of Japan's international underperformance as established by Yoshida's post-war order. This entailed the need to address two longstanding legacies. On the one hand, the Abe Doctrine was poised to draw a line under 'masochistic' interpretations of Japan as a wartime aggressor through denial or relativising history issues—at times overtly early on in the administration and at others more insidiously. For Abe, these narratives hindered domestic appetite for a wider realm of the politically possible and were instrumentally mobilised by other states to cow Japan's international presence.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the Abe Doctrine envisaged removing mechanisms introduced in the immediate post-war period to demilitarise and democratise Japan. Notably, this included a desire to reinterpret and revise the 1947 constitution and, most particularly, Article 9. These mechanisms were thought to have had the effect to deracinate Japan's essential national identity and sense of patriotism, and its status as a truly sovereign state, owing to the inability to integrate the use of military power within the tools of statecraft in the pursuit of national security.<sup>20</sup>

The signature approach of the Abe Doctrine was defined, therefore, by an attempt to shake loose from past constraints and to demonstrate greater Japanese autonomy and international agency. Abe's determination was that Japan would no longer be robbed of its ability to lead regionally and globally. Rather it would now be able to present itself as a proactive power with strong economic and military capabilities to bring in working with other partners, and to convene and organise itself international frameworks to further its international interests.<sup>21</sup> To that aim, Abe's doctrine also sought to propound, if with some inconsistencies in adherence and implementation with regard to courting authoritarian regimes, values-oriented diplomacy—focusing on the rule of law, free markets, human rights and democracy. This would enable Japan to aspire to present itself as a rule-setter, bastion of the liberal economic order, and to place Japan in contradistinction to competitors like China.<sup>22</sup> The essence of Abe's grand strategy was aptly summed up in Japan's first National Security Strategy (NSS) as a vision aimed at moving Japan from 'passive pacifism' to 'a proactive contribution to peace' (*sekkyoku-teki heiwashugi*) internationally.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Michal Kolmaš, *National Identity and Japanese Revisionism: Abe Shinzō's Vision of a Beautiful Japan and its Limits* (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 69-72; Christian G. Winkler, *The Quest for Japan's New Constitution: An Analysis of the Visions of Constitutional Reform Proposals 1980-2009*, London, Routledge, 2011, pp. 50-58

<sup>20</sup> Christopher W. Hughes, 'Japan's Security Trajectory and Collective Self-Defense: Essential Continuity or Radical Change', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1, Winter 2017, pp. 93-126.

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth B. Pyle, *Japan in the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 374-378.

<sup>22</sup> Hugo Dobson, 'Is Japan Really Back? The "Abe Doctrine" and Global Governance', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 47, no. 2, p. 204; Christopher W. Hughes, 'Japan and the South China Sea Disputes: Emerging Power Politics and "Fake Liberalism"', in Huiyun Fung and Kai He (eds.) *US-China Competition and the South China Sea Disputes* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 82-97.

<sup>23</sup> Japan Cabinet Secretariat, 'National Security Strategy', 17 December 2013, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryoku/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>

### **Reengineering the machinery of domestic and foreign policy**

For a new grand strategy to be fully implemented, Abe needed to ensure that the *Kantei* would be in a position to set policies and ensure that these are implemented across government. Hence, his vision should not be disentangled from his pursuit of greater centralisation over Japan's traditionally fragmented post-war domestic structures for foreign policy-making. Abe, in large part supported by Suga, looked to exploit administrative reforms already in train to consolidate the *Kantei's* control over the devising and implementing of foreign and security policy, and with a facility to bypass other ministries where necessary.<sup>24</sup> The creation under Abe of Japan's first National Security Council (NSC) in December 2013 and its adoption of the NSS were designed to significantly assist his administration's ability to centrally coordinate foreign policy in a way not undertaken to date in post-war Japan.<sup>25</sup>

Domestic policy-making fragmentation weighed on Abe's mind because of the need for Japan to have greater control over its foreign policy practice in the face of challenging international structural circumstances. The Abe Doctrine was calculated to equip Japan to respond and manage the developing security and foreign policy landscape, and especially those pivotal challenges presented by the US-Japan alliance and the rise of China. For Abe, as for all previous Japanese administrations, the overriding priority was the strengthening of the US-Japan relationship in order to maintain the US-centred global liberal economic and regional security orders from which Japan had benefited so greatly in the post-war period. Abe knew that for Japan to act as a rule-setter, the existing international system needed to be maintained as the overarching framework within which to act.

Yet, Abe's administration was also aware that US-Japan ties were not unproblematic and that it would need to be more proactive in managing and going further in committing to the relationship than any of its predecessors. Abe and his advisors were all too aware of the US's continuing long-term relative hegemonic decline, and its concomitant declining ability and willingness to provide public economic goods and defend unconditionally its allies, so posing new alliance dilemmas for Japan, fuelling its fears of abandonment. The potential challenge for Japan under the administration of US President Barack Obama was the US's refusal to act as the world's policeman in every regional conflict, even possibly including North Korea, and potential G2-type strategic accommodation with China. The Trump presidency compounded these issues with its apparent disregard for upholding the US's own liberal international trading and democratic order, and its capricious and transactional approach to dealing with security treaty partners. The Trump approach included demands for greater financial contributions to the costs of US regional bases and deployments, with Japan as no exception, and the president even openly musing about the future necessity of the US-Japan alliance.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Aurelia George Mulgan, *The Abe Administration and the Rise of the Prime Ministerial Executive* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Adam P. Liff, 'Japan's National Security Council: Policy Coordination and Political Power', *Japanese Studies*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2018, pp.253-279; Japan Cabinet Secretariat, 'National Security Strategy', 17 December 2013, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Takako Hikotani, 'Trump's Gift to Japan: Time for Tokyo to Invest in the Liberal Order', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 96, no. 5, pp. 21-27; Reiji Yoshida, 'Japanese Officials Play Down Trump's Security Treaty Criticisms, Claim

The conclusion drawn by Abe in dealing with both presidencies was that Japan could only mitigate risks of US decline by deepening its investment in shoring up US hegemony and presence in the East Asia region, and as clearly preferable to any abdication of the regional order to China. In practice, this meant the Abe Doctrine's simultaneous attempts to upgrade Japan's capabilities and agency in organising the region, and the tightening of US-Japan alliance military cooperation and integration.<sup>27</sup> Abe's objective was to demonstrate Japan's indispensability to the US and thus its status as a more equal alliance partner, to exert influence on US strategic choices, and where necessary supplement for the gaps in US diplomatic and economic leadership in the region.<sup>28</sup>

The Abe Doctrine also felt equipped to deal with China's rise as the other principal international challenge for Japan. Abe recognised the inescapable need to coexist and cooperate with China economically, but also that Japan should be prepared to compete with Chinese diplomatic influence in region and, if necessary, to increasingly counterbalance militarily the threats posed by China to Japanese territorial and maritime security interests.<sup>29</sup> The Abe Doctrine posited that the only way to deal with China was from a position of strength—and, indeed, that this was the only position China would respect. That would allow for selective engagement and competition. In turn, this meant Japan boosting its own national strength, upgrading the US-Japan alliance, and working with a range of partners to constrain China and bring it to dialogue and the negotiating table.<sup>30</sup> In this way, it was also hoped that Japan in being able to influence both US and Chinese international behaviour could obviate becoming caught in the midst of looming Sino-US confrontation.

### **'Agency' through 'convening power'**

Japan under Abe sought to exercise renewed agency and buttress the country's approach to the US and China by displaying proactivity in relations with a range of other regional states and continuing work to diversify ties diplomatically, in economic statecraft and militarily. Abe's government, as with all administrations before him, continued to view the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a crucial arena and set of partners to counter China's rising influence—assiduously visiting every ASEAN state in the first 18 months of his second premiership and looking to make common cause over issues of the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and maritime security in the South China Sea. Japan sought also to forge closer economic links between Japan and Southeast

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President's Remarks Not Always "Official" US Position', *Japan Times*, 2 July 2019,

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/07/02/national/politics-diplomacy/japanese-officials-play-trumps-security-treaty-criticisms-claim-remarks-not-always-official-u-s-position/#.Xh2licj7SUK>.

<sup>27</sup> Adam P. Liff, 'Unambivalent Alignment: Japan's China Strategy, the US-Japan Alliance, and the "Hedging" Fallacy', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2019, pp. 453-491.

<sup>28</sup> Ellis S. Krauss and Hanns W. Maull, 'Germany, Japan and the Fate of the International Order', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, vol. 62, no. 3, 2020, pp. 166-167.

<sup>29</sup> Shinzo Abe, 'Asia's Democratic Security Diamond,' *Project Syndicate*, 27 December 2012, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe>; Jeffrey W. Hornung, 'Japan's Growing Hard Hedge Against China', *Asian Security*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2014, pp. 97-122.

<sup>30</sup> Yomiuri Shimbun Seijibu, *Abe Kantei vs Shū Kinpei: Gekika Suru Nicchu Gaikō Sensō* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2015).

Asian states to offer an alternative to China's development model and help reducing Japan's own risk of increasing asymmetric economic interdependence with China.<sup>31</sup>

The second Abe government further vowed to pick up where it left off from its first iteration in looking to court India as a democratic and stronger economic and security partner to check Chinese influence. Indeed, it was an inherent part of the Abe Doctrine to press forward vigorously with bilateral relations with other key US allies and partners in the region—not to hedge against the US-Japan alliance, but to 'network' the traditional US bilateral hub-and-spokes security architecture in order to undergird the US's security presence.<sup>32</sup> Although Abe's own attitude towards South Korea as part of his regional vision was often felt to be inconsistent and suspect, there were initial hopes for – even expressed by Abe himself – and some substantive moves towards, enhanced Japan-South Korea security cooperation to respond to threats from North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes. Japan under Abe from early on looked to place strong emphasis on Australia as an emerging military partner and 'quasi-ally'.<sup>33</sup>

### **New regional frameworks and coalitions**

The Abe Doctrine also set out to assert Japan's agency to foster and convene new regional frameworks to complement those centred on the US. In the security sphere, ever since his return to power, Abe sought to revive the 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue' (known as 'the Quad') involving the US, India, Australia, and Japan. The Abe Doctrine's emphasis on seeking like-minded liberal partners even meant interest in presenting Japan as a credible security partner out-of-region with major European actors such as the UK and France as much as NATO and, towards the end of his mandate, the European Union (EU).<sup>34</sup>

In economic statecraft, Abe rapidly perceived the possibilities of joining with the Obama administration's sponsorship of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). After the US withdrew from the deal in 2017, Japan became one of the main leaders of the TPP's successor, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), in order to create a framework to set the rules of the game in trade and, importantly, to create a coalition of the 'like-minded' as a means of containing China.<sup>35</sup> Japan's potential agency and ambition to shape the regional economic and security order, reached its apogee with the articulation in 2016 of the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) concept. FOIP as a tool of economic statecraft presented a construct flexible and attractive enough to incorporate

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<sup>31</sup> Paul Midford, *Overcoming Isolationism: Japan's Leadership in East Asian Security Multilateralism* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 155-157.

<sup>32</sup> Wilhelm M. Vosse and Paul Midford (eds.), *Japan's New Security Partnerships: Beyond the Security Alliance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), p. 177.

<sup>33</sup> Tomohiko Satake and John Hemmings, 'Japan–Australia Security Cooperation in the Bilateral and Multilateral Contexts', *International Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 4, 2018, pp. 815–34.

<sup>34</sup> Alessio Patalano, "'Natural Partners" in Challenging Waters? Japan-NATO Co-operation in a Changing Maritime Environment', *RUSI Journal*, vol. 161, 2016:3, 42-51; Michito Tsuruoka, 'Abe Shinzo's Legacy in Japan-Europe Relations', *The Diplomat*, 14 September 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/shinzo-abes-legacy-in-japan-europe-relations/>.

<sup>35</sup> Saori N. Katada, *Japan's New Regional Strategy: Geoeconomic Strategy in the Asia-Pacific* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), pp. 116-118; Takashi Terada, 'Japan and TPP/TPP-11: Opening the Black Box of Domestic Political Alignment for Proactive Economic Diplomacy in Face of "Trump Shock"', *Pacific Review*, vol. 32, no. 6, 2019, pp. 1041–69.

quality infrastructure and other economic cooperation with regional states and beyond to Africa and South Asia. Its appeal as a vision for Asia that reinforced the stability of the existing order influenced the Trump administration thinking as it developed its own Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2019, albeit cast in more military terms. Crucially, FOIP allowed for presentation of an alternative regional vision to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>36</sup>

### **Post-war legacies**

Finally, the Abe Doctrine, in line with its own fundamental belief that Japan had to cast off the burden of past constraints, sought to remake Japanese international strategy by dealing with diplomatic legacies of the post-war period, or as Abe himself increasingly declared in the latter stages of his premiership a 'general settlement of the post-war' (*sengo sōkessan*). After his statement visit to Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013 to honour Japan's war dead and the accompanying international criticism, Abe was determined that Japan would not have history used against it again as diplomatic leverage, and crafted his statement on the 70th anniversary of the ending of the war in 2015 as an attempt to walk a fine line in not giving ground on his revisionist historical beliefs, while offering enough of the standard expressions of Japanese remorse for the damage wrought by the war close off the need for further Japanese apologies on history.<sup>37</sup> He then looked to Obama's visit to Hiroshima in May 2016 and his own visit to Pearl Harbour in December of the same year to draw a line under US-Japan bilateral history issues and any attempts to influence the US to critique Japan over history.

Within this context, Abe came to fix upon above all on a peace treaty with President Vladimir Putin's Russia and return of the four islands that were occupied by the Soviet Union in 1945, which Japan calls the Northern Territories and Russia calls the Southern Kurils, as a central plank to release Japan from post-war constraints. Abe's other ardent long-term and headline ambition carried over from his first administration – and a cause that had expedited his rise in national politics – was to seek a settlement of the issue of North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens.<sup>38</sup> Abe initially supported Obama's 'strategic patience' and containment of North Korea, allowing Japan some diplomatic space to seek a diplomatic solution with the North, and then lined up behind Trump's policy of 'maximum pressure' in the hope of coercing North Korea into cooperation. Both issues figured high on Abe's agenda at the beginning of his second mandate and both remained by Abe's own admission unfinished business when he stepped down. Overall, therefore, given the articulation of a strategy that aimed to bring Japan back at the very top of the international arena, how successful was Abe, and what do these successes and failures entail for the new prime minister?

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<sup>36</sup> 'Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development', 27 August 2016, [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97\\_abe/statement/201608/1218850\\_11013.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201608/1218850_11013.html); Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, *Japan's Efforts for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, May 2020, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e\\_000278.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e_000278.html); Yuichi Hosoya, 'FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy', *Asia-Pacific Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 18-28.

<sup>37</sup> 'Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe', 14 August 2015, [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97\\_abe/statement/201508/0814statement.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201508/0814statement.html).

<sup>38</sup> Christopher W. Hughes, 'The Political Economy of Japanese Sanctions Towards North Korea: Domestic Coalitions and International Systemic Pressures', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 79, no. 3, 2006, pp. 455-481.

## **Abe's realpolitik: the art of adaptive ways and means**

Abe's new grand strategy had clear objectives against which to measure Japan's comeback. It was, however, adaptable in the ways in which it pursued these goals. Abe was concerned not merely with advancing his agenda, but also how to 'wield power effectively' to balance ideals and outcomes.<sup>39</sup> No better example articulates this point than Abe's visit to New York to attend the United Nations General Assembly in September 2016. On that occasion, he took the time to meet the then Democratic presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton. He did not, however, meet her Republican rival, Trump. To many observers, it came therefore as a surprise that only some two months later Abe was able to become the first foreign leader to meet president-elect Trump.<sup>40</sup> But as always, for Abe, the alliance was a key factor in how Japan would be able to shine internationally and adopt a 'pro-active' posture. The meeting was thus an early opportunity to know first-hand the new president and test how political change in Washington would continue to affect Abe's agenda. As argued elsewhere, in this respect, Abe was prepared to pursue realpolitik as a politician.<sup>41</sup>

At a structural level, relationships with the US and China underwrote Abe's ability to deliver change for Japan. With the US, the main objective was to create greater balance in the relationship, with Japan becoming a more effective ally as a way to elicit greater leverage over the US. Concurrently, it was important for Abe to ensure maximum support from his ally. When Abe returned to power in 2012, a sense of urgency that derived from the deteriorating relationship with Beijing, especially in relation to the Senkaku Islands, which China claims and calls the Diaoyu, informed this objective.<sup>42</sup> By 2015, Abe had managed to introduce a series of measures designed to set solid foundations for a new and more effective role within the alliance. He had enacted a Designated State Secrecy Law to reinforce Japan's ability to swap key military intelligence and defence industrial data with the US; secured a reinterpretation of Article 9 by July 2014 of the constitution to allow Japanese military participation in forms of collective self-defence; and passed new security legislation in September 2015 that would enable Japan to more 'seamlessly' (*kirime no nai*) work alongside the US and other partners under specific circumstances.<sup>43</sup>

### **Broader guidelines for Japan-US defence cooperation**

One of the most important areas of transformation in the alliance concerned its 'software'. Indeed, as Japan was carrying out the reforms above to allow the JSDF to support of Japanese statecraft, in April 2015 the two governments also agreed to new guidelines for defence cooperation; the first revision of this bilateral agreement to better facilitate the

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<sup>39</sup> Harris, *The Iconoclast*, op. cit., 49.

<sup>40</sup> Yuki Tatsumi, 'Japan's Abe to Meet President-Elect Trump. Why Now?', *The Diplomat*, 11 November 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/japans-abe-to-meet-president-elect-trump-why-now/>.

<sup>41</sup> Pugliese and Patalano, 'Diplomatic and Security Practice under Abe Shinzo', op. cit., 618-620.

<sup>42</sup> Alessio Patalano, 'Seapower and Sino-Japanese Relations in the East China Sea', *Asian Affairs*, Vol. XLV, 2014:1, 47-49.

<sup>43</sup> Richard J. Samuels, *Special Duty: A History of the Japanese Intelligence Community* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2019), pp. 205-208; Hitoshi Nasu, 'Japan's 2015 Security Legislation: Challenges to its Implementation under International Law', *International Law Studies*, Naval War College, RI, Vol. 92, No. 249, 2016; 250-280; National Institute for Defence Studies, 'Japan: Revising Security Legislation and the Japan-US Defence Cooperation Guidelines', *East Asian Strategic Review*, 2015, 39-57.

operationalisation of the US-Japan alliance since 1997. One of the most remarkable aspects of the revised defence guidelines concerned a critical shift in emphasis of cooperation: removing the rigid separation in previous guidelines of bilateral cooperation into 'Japan' and 'regional' contingencies, to emphasise that bilateral cooperation should now be global, and not necessarily restricted geographically, as in past formulations, to Japan itself or the surrounding region, and that cooperation should stretch the full gamut from peacetime operations to wartime contingencies. Another key objective was to establish mechanisms to allow the alliance to work operationally on a daily basis through seamless responses. These were the Alliance Coordination Mechanism (ACM) and the upgraded Bilateral Planning Mechanism (BPM). The ACM in particular drew benefits from recent experience, not least the operations during the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011, which had exposed limits in alliance operational cooperation.<sup>44</sup> This focus on peacetime operations downplayed previous geographic boundaries to the alliance, specifically widening its scope to new domains like cyber and space. The breadth of these changes enhanced integration with the US, offered a seal of approval to a more proactive Japan beyond the boundaries of Northeast Asia, but also planted the seeds for greater strategic and operational dependency on its military machinery.

The Japanese commitment to the alliance yielded positive results despite the political costs caused by domestic public opinion opposition – with large-scale protests outside the Japanese National Diet protesting the security legislation not seen since the 1970s – to the idea of an enhanced security profile.<sup>45</sup> Abe was certainly successful in enhancing leverage over both the Obama and Trump administrations on issues of significance to his agenda. Notwithstanding the Obama administration's initial reticence when Beijing escalated tensions over the Senkaku Islands by deploying law-enforcement cutters inside their territorial waters in 2012, President Obama himself eventually confirmed in 2014 that Article 5 of the US-Japan security treaty encompassed the defence of the islands.<sup>46</sup> This did not mean that the alliance would be automatically involved in the military defence of the islands, but it did satisfy the Japanese government at a time of increasing Chinese pressure through increasingly regular law-enforcement vessels deployments around the islands and the adoption by Beijing in December 2013 of an East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), which included the islands.<sup>47</sup> Obama similarly continued to support relocation plans of the US military base at Futenma in Okinawa, and supported attempts to settle history issues with his visit to the Hiroshima atomic bombing memorial – often seen as a triumph of Japanese diplomacy to gain implicit agreement from the US that acts of remembrance rather than repeated apologies were now sufficient to remove history issues from the diplomatic agenda for Japan.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> National Institute for Defence Studies, 'Japan: Upgrading of National Security Policy', *East Asian Strategic Review*, 2015, 312-313.

<sup>45</sup> 'Support for Japan's Abe Sags After Security Bills Passed', *Reuters*, 21 September 2015, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-japan-security/support-for-japans-abe-sags-after-security-bills-passed-idUSKCN0RL08Z20150921>.

<sup>46</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 'Joint Press Conference with President Obama and Prime Minister Abe of Japan', Tokyo, 24 April 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/24/joint-press-conference-president-obama-and-prime-minister-abe-japan>

<sup>47</sup> Patalano, 'Seapower and Sino-Japanese Relations in the East China Sea', *op. cit.*, 48.

<sup>48</sup> Emma Chanlett-Avery, and Ian E. Rinehart, *The U.S. Military Presence in Okinawa and the Futenma Base Controversy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2016), 16-17,

Abe managed well his personal relationship with President Trump. This did not mean, however, that political results were easier to secure given Trump's frequent references to the uneven nature of the alliance, rumoured requests to double or even quadruple Host Nation Support (HNS) spending for the maintenance of US bases in Japan, and pressure for Japanese automakers to increase production in the US.<sup>49</sup> While these issues continued to litter the management of the alliance and came at the cost of concessions to the US especially on trade, Abe managed to have his signature FOIP framework endorsed and adopted by the Trump administration.<sup>50</sup> Within this context, Abe also raised with Trump the question of the US reconsidering joining the CPTPP agreement. Trump's unwillingness to change his view on the matter contributed, however, to ensuring Japan's pushing ahead with the CPTPP and its centrality in forging this key framework of regional economic architecture. Indeed, Japanese leadership in CPTPP now represents a significant strategic asset that the administration of President Joe Biden should not undervalue, particularly since the conclusion of the China-centred 15-country strong Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) mega trade deal in November 2020.<sup>51</sup> Japan's assumption of the chair of the CPTPP in 2021 will give Tokyo important leverage for ensuring that the bloc continues to develop, even if the US does not return in the short term.

### **Strength and adaptability with regard to China**

Insofar as China is concerned, Abe's primary goal was to engage Beijing from a position of strength, keeping the door open for economic engagement when possible, while preventing bilateral issues from becoming chronically debilitating, and, most notably, seeking to prevent changes of *status quo* in the territorial and maritime boundary delimitation disputes in the East China Sea. Abe's China policy was conducted under less than ideal circumstances. Chinese President Xi Jinping's aim to consolidate his power at home and expand Chinese influence overseas made early interactions with Beijing testy and requiring a degree of firmness.<sup>52</sup> By 2017, as both Xi and Abe had consolidated their domestic power bases, Abe could more easily de-emphasise areas of disagreement with Beijing, and especially as the Trump administration was increasing trade pressure on China and Japan, making for a degree of grounds for common cause. Sino-US tensions allowed him to focus instead on the complementarity of his FOIP initiative with Beijing's BRI.<sup>53</sup> This was taking place however at a time of significant timing in bilateral ties, as 2018 was also the 40th anniversary of the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship. To mark the anniversary,

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<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42645.pdf>; Ayako Mie, 'Obama Makes History, Confronts Past in Hiroshima', *The Japan Times*, 27 May 2016, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/05/27/national/politics-diplomacy/obama-pays-historic-visit-to-hiroshima/>.

<sup>49</sup> Sam Nussey, 'Trump Asks Japan to Hike Payments for U.S. Troops to \$8 Billion: Foreign Policy', *Reuters*, 16 November 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-usa-idUSKBN1XQ06F>; 'Trump Pressed Japan's Abe to Build More Vehicles in the U.S.', *Reuters*, 27 April 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-japan-idUSKCN1S30KO>.

<sup>50</sup> Department of Defence, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington, DC: Department of Defence, 2019), 3-6.

<sup>51</sup> Zack Cooper and Hal Brands, 'It is Time to Transform the US-Japan Alliance', *Nikkei Asia*, 25 October 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/It-is-time-to-transform-the-US-Japan-alliance>.

<sup>52</sup> Takashi Shiraishi, 'Shinzo Abe is Redefining Japan's China Policy for a Generation', *Nikkei Asia*, 12 February 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Shinzo-Abe-is-redefining-Japan-s-China-policy-for-a-generation>.

<sup>53</sup> Hosoya, 'FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy', *op. cit.*, 24-25.

in October 2018 Abe became the first Japanese prime minister to visit China in seven years, signing some 52 memoranda of cooperation across a wide range of areas (and Abe secured an agreement for Xi to visit Japan at a future point, originally scheduled for spring 2020 but postponed due to the COVID-19 crisis). From a maritime security perspective, in May of the same year, Tokyo and Beijing agreed to a maritime and air communication mechanism aimed at enhancing crisis prevention in the East China Sea.<sup>54</sup> The mechanism did not indicate the timeline for its implementation and, crucially, did not extend to their respective coast guards, leaving what today accounts for the majority of unaddressed frontline encounters.

Indeed, a glance at the evolution of the maritime situation around the Senkaku Islands indicates that Abe opted for a three-pronged strategy to deal with Chinese behaviour. Firstly and operationally, this approach combined tactical push-backs on intrusions in the territorial waters around the islands with clear 'red-lines', including the option of initiating maritime security operations (MSO) as provided under Article 82 of the JSDF Act in case forces in theatre were to exceed the Japan Coast Guard's capabilities.<sup>55</sup> Secondly, in terms of capabilities and posture, the Abe cabinet allocated financial resources for acquiring relevant military and law-enforcement capabilities for dealing with 'offshore islands' scenarios.<sup>56</sup> Thirdly, at the diplomatic level, the Abe government sought to draw international attention to Chinese behaviour in several ways. Japan's official publications, most notably the 2020 edition of the defence white paper, highlighted the 'relentless nature' of Chinese assertiveness.<sup>57</sup> In international fora such as G7 summits the Japanese government secured support for the importance of respecting the 'rule of law' in the management of maritime disputes.<sup>58</sup> Abe's decision to regularly deploy the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Forces (JMSDF) to Southeast Asia on missions in support of capacity building for good governance at sea, such as in the case of the *Ship Riders* initiatives, further reinforced and amplified his government's message.

Abe's approach proved that his government was willing to stand up to a more assertive China. But his government was also adaptable in that it modulated how it sought to put pressure on Beijing through domestic initiatives, operational behaviour, and international outreach. In this respect, Japanese strategy was successful in widening international attention on the dynamics in the East China Sea and constraining the boundaries of Chinese actions. However, this strategy has had limits. In July 2020, Beijing intensified its 'grey zone' activity around the Senkaku Islands, seeking not merely to showcase its presence around the disputed territory, but also to exercise control and, as a result, to directly challenge Japanese administrative control. The chasing of Japanese fishing vessels inside the territorial waters

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<sup>54</sup> Alessio Patalano, 'What is China's Strategy in the Senkaku Islands?', *War on the Rocks*, 10 September 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/what-is-chinas-strategy-in-the-senkaku-islands/>.

<sup>55</sup> Kentaro Furuya, 'Maritime Security – The Architecture of Japan's Maritime-Security System in the East China Sea', *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 72, 2019:4, 30-31.

<sup>56</sup> A. Patalano, 'Japan as a Maritime Power: Deterrence, Diplomacy, and Maritime Security' in Mary M. McCarthy (ed.), *The Handbook of Japanese Foreign Policy* (Routledge, 2018), 163-165.

<sup>57</sup> Japan Ministry of Defence, *Defence of Japan Digest* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defence, 2020), [https://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w\\_paper/wp2020/DOJ2020\\_Digest\\_EN.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/wp2020/DOJ2020_Digest_EN.pdf).

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Wilson and Kiyoshi Takenaka, 'G7 Agrees Need Strong Message on South China Sea; China Says Don't "Hype"', *Reuters*, 26 May 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-g7-summit-idUSKCN0YH016>.

around the islands would suggest an intention to challenge control by exercising law-enforcement rights.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Beijing has more recently signalled interest in regaining a degree of leadership through stronger trade links within the region as showcased with the conclusion of the RCEP, and its declared intention to explore a trilateral trade agreement with Japan and South Korea. Still, Japan's own central role in the CPTPP agreement might help mitigating the deterioration of the maritime balance and elicit some influence in how China seeks to regain lost political ground.<sup>60</sup> If so, Abe's strategy towards China would have proved to have been somewhat effective in its approach.

### **A new doctrine of defence engagement**

The policy area in which the Abe Doctrine departed the most from Yoshida's is defence. Changes in defence occurred both in terms of policy and posture. On matters of policy, Abe abolished Japan's longstanding principle of a self-imposed 1% of GDP defence spending cap and reversed previous trends by increasing the defence budget on a yearly basis.<sup>61</sup> This change was complemented from 2014 by the final removal of the bans on arms exports in place since 1967 and 1976—adopting instead the 'Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology'. In the regional context, Japanese defence spending remained dwarfed by that of China. But the new trend allowed Japan to announce from 2018 onwards the conversion of two helicopter destroyers into fixed-wing aircraft carriers, plans to strengthen its arsenal with the acquisition of the largest inventory of F-35 combat aircraft after the US, the development of hypersonic missiles to be deployed in the second half of 2020s, and the development of a new cyber force and investments in dual-use technologies for the military use of space—to name just a few of the significant procurements to upgrade the qualitative capabilities of the JSDF.<sup>62</sup> Larger budgets were coupled with a renewed contribution of uniformed officers to the national security policy-making process, notably through military personnel assigned to senior positions within the National Security Secretariat.<sup>63</sup> On matters of posture, the Abe administration produced two defence review documents, or National Defence Programme Guidelines (NDPG), that oversaw the transition towards a doctrine that put a premium on a dynamic approach to defence and the capacity to operate across multiple domains.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Patalano, 'What is China's Strategy in the Senkaku Islands?', op. cit..

<sup>60</sup> Kentaro Iwamoto, 'Asia Forms World's Largest Trading Bloc RCEP After Years of Talks', *Nikkei Asia*, 15 November 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Trade/Asia-forms-world-s-largest-trading-bloc-RCEP-after-years-of-talks>.

<sup>61</sup> John Wright, 'Abe Scraps Japan's 1 Percent GDP Defense Spending Cap', *The Diplomat*, 29 March 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/abe-scraps-japans-1-percent-gdp-defense-spending-cap/>.

<sup>62</sup> Robin Harding, 'Japan to Raise Military Spending to New Record', *Financial Times*, 20 December 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/9e897000-22ef-11ea-b8a1-584213ee7b2b>; Paul Kallender and Christopher W. Hughes, 'Japan's Emerging Trajectory as a "Cyber Power": From Securitization to Militarization of Cyberspace', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1–2, 2017, pp. 118–45; Paul Kallender and Christopher W. Hughes, 'Hiding in Plain Sight? Japan's Militarization of Space and Challenges to the Yoshida Doctrine', *Asian Security*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2019, pp. 180–204.

<sup>63</sup> Alessio Patalano, *Shinzo Abe and Japan's Strategic Reset: The Rise of the Kantei and Why it Matters to the UK Integrated Review* (London: Policy Exchange, 2020), 11–12, <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Shinzo-Abe-and-Japan%E2%80%99s-Strategic-Reset.pdf>; Sheila A. Smith, *Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019), p. 146.

<sup>64</sup> Tomohiko Satake and Yuji Maeda, 'Japan: New National Defense Program Guidelines', *East Asian Strategic Review*, 2019, 205–232.

The Abe Doctrine transformed Japan's defence policy and posture, widening the ways and means in which peacetime military activities could support Japanese statecraft. Japan's important contribution to the disaster relief operations in the aftermath of the 2013 typhoon in the Philippines had presented Abe with a clear example of the potential effects of a more robust agenda of defence engagement.<sup>65</sup> The 2014 NDPG gave a first indication of a desire to enhance presence, building primarily on longstanding naval diplomatic initiatives across Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. In 2018, a new NDPG confirmed and further expanded this approach. In particular, Abe's decision to focus on engagement in the troubled waters of the South China Sea to support and reassure local state actors, and an enhanced leadership role in the counter-piracy operation in the Indian Ocean represented a tailored way to underwrite Japan's commitment to Indo-Pacific security and international order as they later became enshrined in FOIP.<sup>66</sup>

Aware of the limits of Japanese material capabilities, the Abe government pursued agency by seeking to fill in the gaps of American regional leadership and by countering Chinese assertive behaviour. It did so by playing predominantly to Japan's strengths – by investing in maritime capacity building and by showing commitment through naval presence. The expansion of Chinese military might – especially its capacity to project power at sea in the Indian and Pacific Oceans – was raising wider regional awareness over the centrality of sea-lanes and sea cables to regional stability, connectivity and prosperity. The entrenchment of maritime disputes and challenges to the established US-led maritime 'order' compounded this trend, especially in the aftermath of the 2016 ruling on the South China Sea by the Permanent Court of Arbitration which, if anything, underlined the lack of legal foundations in Chinese claims.<sup>67</sup> Hence, the Abe government focused its efforts on naval activities that directly fed into the image that Japan wanted to project: an engaging and pro-active security actor seeking to maintain the international status quo. Port calls, regular visits and exercises represented the building blocks to establish new, or reinforce existing, partnerships, with notable examples of such Japanese activity in Vietnam, the Philippines and Australia.<sup>68</sup>

By the time the Abe government adopted FOIP in 2016, Japan was already well positioned to showcase a robust role as an actor that was shaping maritime security from the western Indian Ocean to the Sea of Japan. This was a remarkable change underwritten by an ability to target ways to boost Japan's profile. Japan's enhanced cooperation with NATO and the EU in the counter-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden, and raised its leadership game in maritime security by taking command of the multinational task group, CTF-151, based at Combined Maritime Forces in Bahrain. Abe in this respect was building on longstanding engagement with Europe, being the only Japanese prime minister to address twice NATO's decision-making body, the North Atlantic Council (NAC) in 2007 and in 2014. In 2019, he also concluded a milestone trade agreement with the EU, the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), that was seen as an important pillar to help uphold the

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<sup>65</sup> Alessio Patalano, 'Beyond the Gunboats: Rethinking Naval Diplomacy and Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Relief in East Asia', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 160, 2015:2, 32-39.

<sup>66</sup> Alessio Patalano, 'Japan as a Maritime Power: Deterrence, Diplomacy, and Maritime Security' in Mary M. McCarthy (ed.), *The Handbook of Japanese Foreign Policy* (Routledge, 2018), 155-172.

<sup>67</sup> Alessio Patalano, 'Commitment by Presence: Naval Diplomacy and Japanese Defense Engagement in Southeast Asia' in Jeff Kingston and James Brown (eds.), *Japan's Foreign Relations in Asia* (Routledge, 2018), 100-113.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-111.

liberal economic order in the absence of US-leadership.<sup>69</sup> At the bilateral level too, Abe worked with considerable success to strengthen partnerships with major European powers, notably the UK and France. In both cases, '2+2' mechanisms involving meetings among ministries of defence and foreign affairs were normalised, regular opportunities for joint exercises were created, and practical opportunities for defence industrial cooperation were also explored.<sup>70</sup>

Of no less significance, the maritime focus of Abe's efforts to establish Japan's reputation as a reliable and constructive security partner allowed Japan to maximise the positive impact of capacity-building programmes with countries like Sri Lanka. This contributed to building influence with key emerging states. Crucially, Japanese activities were pursued in coordination with close allies, notably the US, empowering Japan with a convening power that further enhanced the country's influence. Indeed, this worked also to the US's advantage. For example, the historic JMSDF first visit to Cam Ranh Base in Vietnam in 2016 not only signalled a growing bilateral relationship, but it also facilitated the subsequent and equally significant visit by the US Navy. In addition to a more persistent maritime presence, to ensure that defence engagement produced maximum effect, the Japanese government increased the number of defence attaches, from 49 in 36 embassies in 2012, to 58 in 40 embassies and two government missions by 2015.<sup>71</sup>

Under Abe, other important successes concerned the development of bilateral and multilateral ties with Australia and especially India. In particular, India has certainly emerged as a key defence engagement partner, with a particular emphasis on maritime cooperation. In December 2013, the two countries conducted the second bilateral exercise – covering basic manoeuvre and security training – only to see the opportunities for training growing in frequency and scope on a very short order. The following year, Japan joined India's Malabar exercise (conducted with the US) and became a permanent member of the exercise in 2015.<sup>72</sup> This is India's prime military exercise covering missions from high-end warfare to maritime security and interdiction operations.<sup>73</sup> By 2016, the two countries added regular counter-piracy bilateral exercises, comparing practices and command structures. In a similar fashion, visits to India by Japanese uniformed chiefs became a regular occurrence. Increased defence engagement also contributed to the development of other formats such as trilateral cooperation with the US and the Quad initiative.

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<sup>69</sup> Patalano, 'Natural Partners in Challenging Waters', op. cit.; Axel Berkofsky, Christopher W. Hughes, Paul Midford and Marie Soderberg (eds.) *The EU-Japan Partnership in the Shadow of China* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>70</sup> Luis Simón and Ulrich Speck (eds.), 'Natural Partners? Europe, Japan and Security in the Indo-Pacific', *Royal Elcano Institute Policy Paper* (Madrid: 2018), <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/e1b07fbd-ac5f-4d8d-874c-1fe1b7ff1892/Policy-Paper-2018-Natural-Partners-Europe-Japan-security-Indo-Pacific.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=e1b07fbd-ac5f-4d8d-874c-1fe1b7ff1892>.

<sup>71</sup> Data in JMoD, *Japan Defense Focus*, 2013:41; JMoD, *Japan Defense Focus*, 2015:62.

<sup>72</sup> Japan Ministry of Defense (JMoD), *Defense of Japan* (Tokyo: Japan Ministry of Defense, 2016), 453-454; Franz-Stefan Gady, 'India, US, and Japan to Hold "Malabar" Naval War Games This Week', *The Diplomat*, 05 June 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/india-us-and-japan-to-hold-malabar-naval-war-games-this-week/>.

<sup>73</sup> Ankit Panda, 'India-Japan-US Malabar 2017 Naval Exercises Kick Off with Anti-Submarine Warfare in Focus', *The Diplomat*, 10 July 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/india-japan-us-malabar-2017-naval-exercises-kick-off-with-anti-submarine-warfare-in-focus/>.

### **Unfinished business: Russia, the Koreans, and escaping the post-war**

Abe's vigorous approach and degree of success in bringing Japan back at the heart of international security stands in contrast with the much less satisfactory diplomatic results in its immediate neighbourhood. That is certainly the case with regard to Russia, South Korea and North Korea. With these three relationships the Abe Doctrine failed to resolve the legacies of the past and allow Japan to move forward from the post-war legacy. Indeed, in different ways, relations with Russia and South Korea weakened Japan's ascending international outlook. Abe's repeated efforts to establish a rapport with President Putin – involving a total of no less than 27 bilateral summits – did not advance Japanese goals. During these encounters, Abe set forth proposals for joint-economic activities to create an opening and trust with a view to creating a new formula for a bilateral peace treaty and the initial partial return to Japan by Russia of two of the four islands of the Northern Territories/Southern Kurils. However, his efforts made almost no progress as Russia proved non-committal on Japanese proposals and added conditions for the return including no US bases on the islands.<sup>74</sup>

Moreover, Abe's approach garnered little support both domestically and internationally. On the domestic front, conservatives decried Abe's willingness to potentially give up territory to Russia. Internationally, Japan's desire to court Russia and more restrained support in international sanctioning of its behaviour, especially in the aftermath of the chemical agent attack in Salisbury in the UK, raised questions about Abe's credibility in his support for the 'rules-based order'.<sup>75</sup>

The deterioration of ties with South Korea has similarly highlighted the limits of Abe's agenda. In August 2015, on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, Abe had reaffirmed his country's 'deep remorse and heartfelt apology' for the wartime suffering on all Asian people, suggesting the desire to move past historical tensions with neighbouring states. Yet, Abe found Japan needing to find a political solution to an issue that continued to remain also highly emotionally charged with South Korea. In December of the same year, Abe and South Korea's then-president, Park Geun-hye, signed an agreement in attempt to resolve the dispute over Korean women forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army. The Japanese government committed ¥1 billion (some US\$8 million) via a private foundation established in South Korea to provide care for the women in an agreement that sought to offer a 'final and irreversible solution' to the outstanding issue of individual suffering.<sup>76</sup> Through the agreement, the Japanese government harboured the expectation that the South Korean government would work to bring about a sense of settlement amongst its citizens and cease to position the comfort women issue within bilateral ties. After Park's fall from power in 2017, however, the limits of this approach were fully exposed. Abe was seen to have conceded little from the South Korean perspective in offering only a limited apology for the comfort women issue, and

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<sup>74</sup> Michito Tsuruoka, 'Resetting Japan-Russia Relations: Challenges for a New Prime Minister', *The Diplomat*, 07 October 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/resetting-japan-russia-relations/>.

<sup>75</sup> James D.J. Brown, 'Japan and the Skripal Poisoning: The UK's Fair-Weather Friend', *The Japan Times*, 27 March 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2018/03/27/commentary/japan-commentary/japan-skripal-poisoning-u-k-s-fair-weather-friend/>.

<sup>76</sup> Krishnadev Calamur, 'Japan Says Sorry for Its Crimes Against Wartime "Comfort Women"', *The Atlantic*, 28 December 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/12/japan-korea-comfort-women/422016/>.

with most of the concessions seen to be made on the Korean side. The deal proved unworkable for the domestic politics of the new President Moon Jae-in administration from 2017 onwards, leading to the dissolution of the private foundation, and the issue continuing to generate bilateral tensions. The fact that the deal had also largely been brokered by the intervention of the Obama administration to prevent deteriorating ties between two allies, further added to the sense that it had been made under duress without addressing underlying issues, and also questioned Japan's true agency in being able to deal itself with its closest neighbour.

The critical blow to Japan-South Korea relations arrived in 2018, when the South Korea's Supreme Court ruled to uphold compensation awards against Japanese companies for their wartime conduct, with awards of around US\$100,000 to each of the victims who had brought the cases. The verdict caused consternation in Japan with the government pointing out that the judgements violated the 1965 Treaty of Basic Relations between the two countries that had settled all outstanding claims for colonial compensation.<sup>77</sup> Tensions intensified to the point that Japan, in mid-2019, imposed export controls on the transfer of key substances and parts for use in South Korean semiconductors—raising questions about Abe's willingness to stand up for the liberal trading order. The episode underlined how – despite decades of diplomatic efforts – a shared understanding of how to deal with the wartime legacy is missing and it seemed unlikely that this would change under Abe's premiership.

For the Abe government, however, the court ruling was symptomatic of a deeper impasse in relations for which it felt South Korea was to blame. Spats had in fact occurred around defence and security cooperation – an area where both governments had made steady progress in recent years through the bilateral intelligence sharing pact, the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), regular senior military talks, and joint exercises. In 2018, a South Korean military exercise near the disputed islets in the Sea of Japan, which South Korea controls and calls Dokdo and which Japan claims and calls Takeshima, heightened tensions. This was later followed by a request from South Korea that the JMSDF not hoist its 'Rising Sun' naval ensign during an international fleet review, and an alleged fire control radar lock-on by a South Korean naval vessel against a Japanese maritime patrol aircraft.<sup>78</sup> The post-war era was far from over in bilateral relations.

On North Korea too, Abe's doctrine was not capable of delivering intended results. Abe had been following the issue of the Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean Special Forces since Koizumi Junichirō's premiership (2001-06) and was personally committed to find a solution to it. However, Abe's efforts to establish a line of communication with North Korea's leader, Kim Jung-Un, had to be carried out against two very different American

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<sup>77</sup> Alessio Patalano, 'Seoul, Tokyo Need to Move Beyond History to Grow Ties', *The Business Times*, 27 December 2018, <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/opinion/seoul-tokyo-need-to-move-beyond-history-to-grow-ties>.

<sup>78</sup> Joyce Lee and Kiyoshi Takenada, 'Japan to Skip Naval Event after South Korea Protests over "Rising Sun" Flag', *Reuters*, 05 October, 2018, <https://cn.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-japan-flag/japan-to-skip-naval-event-after-south-korea-protests-over-rising-sun-flag-idUSKCN1MF0DZ>; Mike Yeo, 'Accusations Fly between South Korea and Japan over "Threatening" Maritime Manoeuvres', *DefenseNews*, 24 January 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2019/01/24/accusations-fly-between-south-korea-and-japan-over-threatening-aircraft-maneuvers-radar-targeting/>.

diplomatic approaches. Neither Obama's 'strategic patience' policy, nor Trump's 'maximum pressure' represented ideal frameworks against which Abe could secure his objectives. In fact, especially under the Trump administration, the opposite was true. Abe managed to obtain some assurance from Trump and Moon that they would mention the question of the abductees to Kim, but to little effect for Japanese interests. Abe also secured little to no support on matters of missile programmes that affected Japan's security the most, especially with regard to North Korea's short and medium-range missiles, which were not addressed in Trump's interactions with Kim.<sup>79</sup> Japanese policy-makers feared that Trump had abandoned Japan in favour of headline-making diplomacy with North Korea, and Abe's position on North Korea became increasingly isolated as he was only leader in Northeast Asia unable to effect a summit with Kim.

In all, these three foreign and security policy issues remained Abe's most significant pieces of unfinished business and certainly the weak spots of his doctrine's attempt to bring a close to the post-war period. Moreover, Abe was to remain frustrated in his greatest ideological goal of constitutional revision. Even though he recalibrated his ambitions for revision in the face of domestic opposition for a seemingly much more moderate set of reforms- proposing the revision of paragraphs one and two of Article 9 to recognise that the 'JSDF is maintained as an armed organisation to take necessary self-defence measure—he still ran out of time and political capital to achieve revision by his original stated goal of 2020. Arguably, Abe's reinterpretation of Article 9 to allow for collective self-defence was in substance a more significant change to Japan's defence posture, but Abe's inability to sweep away the constitution as the last vestige of the post-war order was perhaps his main personal regret.

### **Suga comes to the scene: a doctrine to stay**

Abe's resignation speech in August 2020 gave a clear assessment of what remained to be accomplished for the Japanese government, giving the impression that he was almost setting the tone for the expectations he had for his successor. This was no coincidence. As chief cabinet secretary throughout Abe's second premiership and a member of Abe's 2006-07 cabinet, Suga was both close to Abe politically and instrumental in implementing his policy agenda. Moves by Suga soon after taking office pointed to continuity. Suga's new cabinet, announced in September 2020, inherited many of the key figures from Abe. Eight of the 20 portfolios were reappointed, including the foreign minister, Motegi Toshimitsu, and the economy, trade and industry minister, Kajiyama Hiroshi. Kōno Tarō, a key figure in the second Abe administration, first as foreign minister and then as defence minister, remained in the cabinet, albeit moved to the administrative reform portfolio.

### **Continuity in the big picture**

Suga's initial diplomatic activity highlighted this further. The foreign ministers' meeting of the Quad in October in Tokyo and the (virtual) Mekong-Japan Summit in November allowed Suga to affirm key elements of Abe's FOIP initiative, including maritime domain

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<sup>79</sup> Jesse Johnson, 'Trump's De Facto Blessing of North Korean Missile Tests Sends Ominous Message to Japan', *The Japan Times*, 28 August 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/08/28/national/trump-blesses-north-korea-tests-japan/>.

awareness and ensuring the rule of law.<sup>80</sup> Suga's first overseas visits, to Vietnam and Indonesia in October, were also symbolically important. The choice of countries echoed the first foreign visits of by Abe in his second administration in January 2013 and served to affirm the centrality of the Abe-era 'Indo-Pacific' concept in the Suga administration's thinking. En route to Vietnam, Suga underscored the point, describing Japan as an 'Indo-Pacific nation'.<sup>81</sup> Suga's tweak at the November 2020 ASEAN summit of the Abe-era 'free and open' values-based Indo-Pacific formulation to a less prescriptive 'peaceful and prosperous' Indo-Pacific caused some controversy about potential weakening of the concept as a means to counter China's influence and consistent component of strategy, but is unlikely to change the substance of Japan's original FOIP policy in the region.<sup>82</sup>

Suga's call at the November meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum to expand the CPTPP also suggested continued momentum behind Abe's coalition-building diplomacy.<sup>83</sup> The CPTPP has taken on greater importance as a channel for Japan's influence in the region since the signing of RCEP, which, once ratified by its 15 members, will become the world's largest trade bloc. As the largest economy in the CPTPP and the second-largest economy in RCEP and by virtue of its free-trade and economic partnership arrangements with a number of ASEAN countries and Australia, Japan sits at the centre of Asia's spaghetti bowl of trade deals. Tokyo is thus well placed to build and sustain coalitions within RCEP in order to balance China's influence. In a similar vein, Suga will continue to build relations with India and Australia. National and economic security will remain important areas of focus for Suga – witness the Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement, announced during Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's visit to Tokyo in November, which provides a legal framework to allow reciprocal visits for personnel and assets from both countries' armed forces, or the continued efforts by Japan, Australia and India to develop supply-chain alternatives to China in the region.<sup>84</sup>

### Changes of priority and nuance

Although Suga's perception of Japan's international position resemble Abe's, important shifts in priorities and nuance from his predecessor are already under way. In part this reflects the dramatic changes wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic on the domestic economy in 2020. Suga inherited an economy in the middle of its worst recession since the end of the Second World War. Prospects for recovery in 2021 are so uncertain that Japan's GDP may not regain its 2019 level until 2023, or even 2024. Fiscal stimulus to counteract the economic damage of the pandemic will leave Japan with a public-debt-stock-to-GDP ratio of nearly 270% by the end of 2020, with little prospect of a substantial improvement into the middle of

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<sup>80</sup> 'The 12th Mekong-Japan Summit Meeting', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 13 November 2020, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/page3e\\_001078.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/page3e_001078.html).

<sup>81</sup> PM's Office of Japan Twitter account, 18 October 2020, [https://twitter.com/JPN\\_PMO/status/1317828835732201474](https://twitter.com/JPN_PMO/status/1317828835732201474).

<sup>82</sup> "'Jiyū de Hikareta Indotaihei'yō' Bei Jiki Seiken Dō Suru', *Asahi Shimbun*, 8 December 2020, p. 4; Shushō Kantei Twitter account, 14 November 2020, <https://twitter.com/kantei/status/1327545525806108673>.

<sup>83</sup> 'Suga Shushō "TPP Kakudai de Jiyū Bōeki o" APEC ni Messēji', *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 20 November 2020, <https://r.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO66453380Q0A121C2MM0000>.

<sup>84</sup> 'Japan, Australia and India to Launch Supply Chain Initiative', Bloomberg, 1 September 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-01/japan-australia-and-india-to-discuss-supply-chains-alliance>.

the current decade.<sup>85</sup> This compares with Abe, who, when he took office for the second time in December 2012, could look forward to buoyant economic growth in 2013, partly on the back of 'Abenomics' monetary policy loosening. The debt-to-GDP ratio at that time was a still high but broadly stable 230%.

Suga's immediate priority will therefore be economic recovery. The tight electoral calendar will increase the urgency of this. The next lower house election must be held by late October 2021. Assuming this election is held before then and the LDP retains at least a large majority—even if reduced from Abe's landslide of 2017—Suga will also have to face an LDP leadership election in September 2021; he is currently serving out the remainder of Abe's final three-year term. The next upper house election is in mid-2022. Personal diplomacy was a hallmark of Abe's second premiership; he made some 80 visits abroad in this period. Economic priorities and elections suggest that Suga is unlikely to have the time repeat this feat, even once the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic itself is past.

Suga has also been quick to make subtle institutional changes that will alter the balance of Japan's domestic and foreign policy formation. Under Abe's second premiership, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) enjoyed significant influence in policy-making, and its personnel were well represented in key advisory roles to the prime minister. Suga's conducted a reshuffle soon after taking office of these positions and disbanded the Council on Investments for the Future (*Mirai Toshi Kaigi*).<sup>86</sup> Abe used to chair the council's meetings as this was one of the important drivers of 'Abenomics' and a conduit for METI influence on policy. This move thus marked an important change of policy dynamics. Although Suga has set up a replacement body to deliberate policy, the Growth Strategy Council (*Seicho Senryaku Kaigi*), this is chaired by the chief cabinet secretary and not the prime minister. Hence, it has been downgraded in terms of institutional status compared with its predecessor. Also striking is Suga's seeking of advice from non-political experts—in the first month of his premiership he had more than 70 engagements with private-sector figures, compared with just 24 for Abe at the start of his second premiership.<sup>87</sup> Suga's preference therefore seems to be for a more diverse policy making environment than was the case under Abe, with no one policy group able to dominate.

Other ministries such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) or the Ministry of Finance may see their influence rise as a result of these changes. A bigger role for MOFA, for example, augurs for a deemphasising of economic issues in some areas of foreign policy. Policy towards China may take a harder edge. Imai Takaya, a key foreign policy advisor to Abe and formerly with METI, was a driver of a moderate thawing of Abe's attitude to China's BRI and willingness to cooperate with the BRI in third countries where these projects met Japanese standards. But with Imai's stepping down as special advisor to the prime minister with Abe's departure, MOFA may return to greater influence on security concerns. Imai was a driver of Abe's persistent courting of President Putin, ostensibly over

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<sup>85</sup> 'World Economic Outlook, October 2020: A long and Difficult Ascent', IMF, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/09/30/world-economic-outlook-october-2020>.

<sup>86</sup> 'All Abe's Men: Japan's Economy Ministry Sidelined Under Suga', *Nikkei Asia*, 17 September 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Japan-after-Abe/All-Abe-s-men-Japan-s-economy-ministry-sidelined-under-Suga>.

<sup>87</sup> 'Suga Seiken Ikkagetsu, Menkai Shita Minkan 70 Nin, Seisaku Ni Chiken Hanei', *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 15 October 2020, <https://r.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO64993140U0A011C2PP8000?s=5>.

seeking a solution to the bilateral dispute over the Northern Territories/Southern Kurils but also with a view to building economic relations with Russia. Given the lack of reciprocity from Moscow and the cost to Abe's political capital as a result, Suga may well prefer to park efforts to improve relations with Russia for the moment. Similarly, Suga, whilst declaring continuity of support for some of Abe initiatives, may devote less energy to them given their inherent difficulty. Suga will surely wish to continue to press North Korea on the abductions issue, but it will be less of a personal badge of honour or shame to achieve an outcome; and while all LDP leaders will seek constitutional revision it may not be on the top list of issues for Suga to tackle.

### **A new US administration, fresh challenges**

A change of president in the US will also bring challenges. The Trump administration catalysed some of Abe's most important policy successes, including the CPTPP and the EU-Japan Economic and Strategic Partnership Agreements (EPA, SPA, launched in 2018). This reflected two factors: first, Abe's efforts to shore up the rules-based international order in the face of the centrifugal pressures unleashed by Trump; and second, the policy space for Japan opened up by Trump's focus on China. The latter gave Japan cover to harden its China policy, albeit to a lesser degree than Trump's, while periodically incentivising China to reach out to Japan to offset US pressure. The bipartisan consensus in Washington over China's strategic threat to the US augurs against a complete volte face in China policy by the Biden administration. But greater ambiguity is likely, particularly if President Biden seeks to co-opt Chinese support in areas such as climate change and global health security. Japan will thus fear grand bargain accommodation between Washington and Beijing that leaves its policy positions towards China exposed.<sup>88</sup>

Although Suga will undoubtedly prioritise US-Japan relations over everything else, pressures around the Japan-US security alliance will remain.<sup>89</sup> Biden will focus more than Trump did on managing the alliance, but Washington will also continue to push Japan to do more to support the relationship. The burden sharing discussion may broaden from Japanese financial support for the US military presence in Japan to allowing the US greater use of bases and facilities, or even joint R&D on military technology, such as space-based systems and unmanned systems. Tokyo may also come under pressure from Washington to improve its toxic relations with South Korea. Biden played a key personal role in 2013-14 in easing tensions between Seoul and Tokyo triggered over differences in shared history, not least because of US concerns over the impact of fractures in the Japan-South Korea relationship on its ability to counter China and North Korea.

Other agendas for the US-Japan alliance could include an active role for Japan in the Taiwan Strait, but the Suga administration's defence activism remains to be seen. The Abe government's decision to scrap the land-based Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defence system in June 2020 had the potential to widen the scope of discussion on Japan's future missile and defence capability, including a strategic shift to Japan possessing 'enemy base strike

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<sup>88</sup> Y.A., 'A view from Japan, The Virtues of a Confrontational China Strategy', *The American Interest*, 10 April 2020, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/04/10/the-virtues-of-a-confrontational-china-strategy/>

<sup>89</sup> Suga Yoshihide, *Seijika no Kakugo* (Tokyo: Bunshun Shinsho, 2020), pp. 203, 210.

capabilities' (*teki kichi kōgeki nōryoku*) for the first time. At this writing, however, the Suga administration looked set to technically solve the missile defence gap by constructing two additional Aegis destroyers, despite the pressure that this would place on Japan's maritime forces, which are already facing personnel shortages.

Suga also appears unlikely to as yet take the step of Japan overtly adopting an enemy strike military doctrine. A further revised NDPG due at the end of 2020 is likely to continue to equip the JSDF with a latent enemy strike capability as it extends the range of GSDF Type-12 surface-to-ship missiles and acquire long-range cruise missiles, but may stop short of declaring these openly as strike capabilities or fashioning a doctrine of retaliatory strike and instead refer more broadly to enhancing Japan's 'deterrence power'.<sup>90</sup> Despite the increasing demand to enhance security of Japan's defence industrial base, Suga has not yet articulated plans to protect technologies and to boost R&D in dual-use emerging technologies to respond to Beijing's rapid advancement of the civil-military fusion strategy.

### **Suga's digital reform push**

While circumstances may thus militate against the Suga administration deploying the grand strategy swagger of its predecessor, the prime minister's domestic policy focus on digital reforms point to a clear effort to build on Abe's legacy. Suga's digital push is not new — in January 2020 economy and fiscal policy minister, Nishimura Yasutoshi, outlined a 'digital new deal' for Japan that included digitalisation of the country's bureaucracy as well as development of post-5G systems, quantum and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies.<sup>91</sup> Some ¥1.7 trillion (US\$16.3 billion) was earmarked for digital-related funding in 2020/21.<sup>92</sup> But the COVID-19 crisis has raised the urgency of policy action, exposing the shortcomings in Japan's administrative digital infrastructure. The delays in disbursing pandemic-related financial support in mid-2020, for example, were directly attributable to the still small percentage of administrative tasks that are transacted online — under twelve percent of the total according to the Japan Research Institute.<sup>93</sup>

Suga plans to create a new 'Digital Agency' to coordinate Japan's digital policy, which is now split between the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIAC) with a predictable drag on the efficiency of policy formation. The digital focus dovetails with other domestic priorities for Suga, including reforming Japan's large but inefficient small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector and raising the productivity of the economy in order to boost growth. The digital

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<sup>90</sup> 'Teki Kichi Kōgeki Hoyū Kisazu', *Asahi Shimbun*, 10 December 2020, p. 1.

<sup>91</sup> 'Economic Policy Speech by Nishimura Yasutoshi, Minister of State for Economic and Fiscal Policy to the 201st Session of the Diet', Cabinet Office, 20 January 2020, <https://www5.cao.go.jp/keizai1/2020/0120keizaienzetsu-en.pdf>.

<sup>92</sup> 'Ryōshi, AI, Posto 5G Nado ni 1.7 Chō En, Seifu no 2020 Nen "Digitaru Yosan" o Sōzarai', *Nikkei xTECH*, 6 January 2020, <https://xtech.nikkei.com/atcl/nxt/column/18/00001/03430/>.

<sup>93</sup> 'Twenty Years On, Japan Government's Digital Ambitions Still Stuck in Piles of Paper', Reuters, 24 July 2020, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-japan-economy-digital/twenty-years-on-japan-governments-digital-ambitions-still-stuck-in-piles-of-paper-idUKKCN24P0J0>.

reform push also sits alongside Suga's broader desire to effect institutional change by breaking down barriers between Japan's siloed and turf-conscious government agencies.<sup>94</sup>

Suga's digital reforms are still in their early stages and focused on digitalising government paperwork and integrating the government's information-technology systems. But the policy makes strategic sense when viewed as an important step in building a base to boost Japan's ability to project power and be a global 'rule shaper' over the longer term. Japan has fallen behind its rich-country peers in terms of its digital capabilities—witness its slippage in terms of global cross-border data flow volumes from fifth in 2001 to 11th in 2019 according to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).<sup>95</sup> This reflects both Japan's institutional fragmentation as well as the largely domestic focus of Rakuten, LINE, Yahoo Japan and other Japanese internet platform companies. Japan is similarly lagging in areas such as cloud computing providers and 5G. NEC, for example, which is Japan's largest telecommunications equipment and systems supplier, only has a 0.7 percent share of global 5G base stations.<sup>96</sup> Reinforcing and multiplying digital and technological resources affects national competitiveness and gives a country credibility and leverage in digital rule-making and cooperation. The latter becomes even more important for a medium to large-sized power such as Japan given the trend towards great power techno-nationalism and the resulting fragmentation of technological ecosystems.

### **Sustaining Abe's 'connectivity' legacy**

Although the need to secure 'connectivity' animated FOIP and other areas of Abe's economic statecraft, digital policy for much of his second administration was largely focused on digital rules making. The e-commerce chapters of the CPTPP and EPA, or the 'Osaka Track', which Abe launched at the Osaka G20 meeting in 2019 in order to secure 'data free flow with trust' are good examples of the rules focus.<sup>97</sup> This reflected Abe's identification of Japan's strategic need to secure access to other countries' data for its developments in emerging technologies and the lack of existing rules in what is still a new area. Suga's domestic digital and technological development will be critical to sustaining the 'connectivity' within Abe's foreign policy structures. ASEAN, a fulcrum of FOIP, is an important testbed in this regard. Notwithstanding Japan's existing digital transformation programmes in the region, competition from China is already fierce. China is already well embedded digitally in the region, dominating the region's e-commerce and so knitting it more tightly into China's distribution networks and payments systems. Parts of the region even lead Japan in terms of the volume cross-border data flows.

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<sup>94</sup> PM's Office of Japan Twitter account, 16 September 2020, [https://twitter.com/jpn\\_pmo/status/1306264578137890816?lang=en](https://twitter.com/jpn_pmo/status/1306264578137890816?lang=en).

<sup>95</sup> 'China Rises as World's Data Superpower as Internet Fractures', *Nikkei Asia*, 24 November 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/China-rises-as-world-s-data-superpower-as-internet-fractures>.

<sup>96</sup> 'NEC Sees Huawei's Woes as Chance to Crack 5G Market', *Financial Times*, 1 July 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/502a3a39-4c3a-4ee0-a3a9-7ad734081537>.

<sup>97</sup> 'Defeatism About Japan is Now Defeated', World Economic Forum, 23 January 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/01/abe-speech-transcript/>.

## **Conclusion: Abe's legacy, out on a Suga-high?**

Suga inherits from Abe a different Japan from the country that Abe inherited in 2012. As we have shown in this article, under Abe's leadership, Japan has remerged as a primary actor in international affairs. It stands at the centre of many of the main economic, political, and security mechanisms in regional architecture. It has assumed greater leadership role in key processes like the CPTPP, and in key relationships beyond the alliance with the US, from Australia, India, and ASEAN, to partners in Europe and NATO. Suga has inherited a Japan with a renewed sense of agency that draws upon the political capacity to convene and coalesce larger groups of states and is underwritten by a more confident potential resort to the use of military power as a tool of statecraft to support stability. It is perhaps symptomatic of this change that in 2013, when Abe visited Vietnam in his first overseas trip he announced the 'strategic' nature of the bilateral relationship. In October 2020, when Suga visited Vietnam he described how strategic the relationship had become through an agenda of cooperation that encompassed digital economy initiatives, cyber security cooperation, and even the possibility of arms export.

We have argued that today Japan is no longer the country that operated under the aegis of the Yoshida doctrine and that it now operates under Abe's doctrine. It pursues agency in security matters through the alliance with the US, and it no longer merely benefits from its 'warm' embrace. The alliance with the US remains a core pillar of Japanese foreign and security policy, but in it, Japan has sought to evolve as a more equal partner, with mixed success, and certainly a more pro-active one – crucially networking and strengthening links with other bilateral partners of the US, notably Australia and India. Abe's agenda included also the development of new networks with actors in Southeast Asia increasingly concerned about Chinese ambitions, from Vietnam, to the Philippines and Indonesia, but also in the Indian Ocean, notably with Sri Lanka. Within this context, the Abe Doctrine has rejected a passive approach to security and developed an unprecedented defence engagement activism that has underwritten the country's credibility. In this respect, one key question is how Suga will draw upon Abe's legacy to consolidate Japan's new-found convening power. Suga has an opportunity to do so with CPTPP and through the connectivity agenda inherent to Abe's grand strategy and enshrined in FOIP.

In the paper we have also indicated that a significant factor in Abe's successful areas of operationalising his strategy was his ability to adapt to evolving circumstances and be willing to adjust his approach where necessary. He had a realpolitik approach to policy implementation. Given the open questions concerning the state of the Japanese economy in the immediate future, Suga will have to be similarly flexible and proactive, with a primary attention to find ways to allow the multiplicity of Indo-Pacific strategies within and outside the region to work together constructively. In this respect, it will be interesting to observe how Suga relates to South Korea's newly announced Southern Policy, Seoul's own take on the Indo-Pacific and what type of opportunities a post-Brexit tilting of the UK towards the Indo-Pacific might add to an already growing bilateral relationship between London and Tokyo. Under Abe, maritime security led the way in Japan's security activism because of its links to the stability of the main 'economic arteries' connecting the Indo-Pacific from within and beyond its boundaries and to the need to sustain a rule-based order. Under Suga, maritime security cooperation is likely to remain a significant role in Japan's defence

engagement agenda, but digital connectivity, cyber security cooperation, and resilience of supply chains might very well gain greater primacy. If so, this could very well be Suga's own way to create a FOIP 3.0.

Yet, for as much as Abe was capable to empower Japan with a new grand strategy, how far forward Suga will be able to take it will depend on two factors. Structurally, the new Biden administration's approach to the Indo-Pacific will matter in Japan's calculus. While the consensus in Washington over competition with China is unlikely to change, how the next administration intends to tackle the Indo-Pacific and its wide array of economic and security issues remains to be seen. The Biden team has thus far made clear that it intends to mend alliances and relationships that had been undermined by Trump. What does that entail for the Indo-Pacific? Will Biden tend to focus more on Transatlantic relations where ties seem more fractured? In his first phone call with Suga, Biden referred to the objective of a 'secure and prosperous' Indo-Pacific, as opposed to Suga's reference to a 'free and open' one. What should one read in this subtle but significant shift in emphasis? Domestically, Suga's priorities will be a stronger economy, a clear pathway to address Covid-19, a renewed tech capability, with foreign and security initiatives perhaps requiring more collaboration with partners. That may be more possible with some partners for a Japan that has changed as an actor and partner due to the new legacy of the Abe Doctrine. The game is on.