

Japan – U.S. Relations under the Abe Doctrine: Shifting Policy in East Asia Regional Stability

Hendra Manurung

*Jababeka Education Park, Jl. Ki Hajar Dewantara
Kota Jababeka, Cikarang Baru, Bekasi
President University Campus, Indonesia*

h_manurung2002@president.ac.id

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Abstract

Reelection of Shinzo Abe as Prime Minister provides a favorable climate for both Donald Trump's first presidential visit to Japan and an improvement of Chinese-Japanese-U.S. bilateral relations. In the 22 October 2017 ballot, Abe's dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its coalition partner Komeito, secured a two-thirds majority in the House of Representatives, the lower house of Japan's bicameral legislature. The coalition already holds a supermajority, required for amending the constitution, in the upper house. It justified Abe for calling the national elections a year earlier than needed to secure a public mandate for addressing the growing North Korean threat and to validate popular support for deepening national economic reforms, which have had recent success in boosting Japan's growth rate and the stock market. Still the outcome gave Abe a mandate for his policies. However, his stewardship was unclear as several other factors contributed to LDP's overwhelming victory. At the structural level, Japan's first past the post-electoral system tends to amplify electoral wins in comparison to proportional representation systems. Abe's foreign and security policies highly charged with ideological revisionism contain the potential to shift Japan onto a new international trajectory in East Asia. Its degree of articulation and energy makes for a doctrine capable of displacing the Yoshida Doctrine that has been Japan's dominant grand strategy in the post-war period. Abe will remain pragmatic and not challenge the status quo. However, Abe has already begun to introduce radical policies that appear to transform national security, US-Japan alliance ties and relations with China and East Asia. The Abe Doctrine is dynamic but high risk. Abe's revisionism contains fundamental contradictions that may ultimately limit national effectiveness.

Keywords: *Abe Doctrine, Shinzo Abe, national leader, Japan, regional security.*

Introduction

In December 2002, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's stunning return to power in a landslide election victory, and the consolidation of his leadership in a repeat victory in December

2014, heralded the resurgence, also for Japan, of a more assertive, high-profile and high-risk foreign and security policy. Abe's status was as an arch revisionist ideologue, combined with the track record of his first administration in 2006 to 2007. It indicated that he would inevitably harbor intentions to shift Japan towards a more radical external agenda characterized by a defense posture less fettered by past anti-militaristic constraints, a more fully integrated US–Japan alliance and an emphasis on value-oriented diplomacy with East Asian states and beyond.

It emphasized how Abe's diplomatic agenda (*Abe Gaikō*) that has been so distinctive and forcefully articulated in the past years might be labeled as a doctrine capable of rivaling, and even of displacing the doctrine of Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru that has famously determined Japan's entire post-war international trajectory. In contrast to Abe's more muscular international agenda, the so-called Yoshida Doctrine from Yoshida Rosen, forged in the aftermath of the total defeat in the Pacific War, has long emphasized the need for a pragmatic and low-profile foreign policy, a highly constrained defense posture, reliance but not over-dependence on the US–Japan security treaty and the expedient rebuilding of economic and diplomatic ties with East Asian neighbors¹.

In mid-March 2013, the ongoing dispute between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea or known in China as the Diaoyu Islands triggered a national controversial debate about the trajectory of Japanese politics, and the return to power of the old guard; Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), further enlivened it. Moreover, as LDP's comeback leader, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is such a self-assertive figure that the argument has become inflamed. The Japanese and the international media have already concluded the matter, coalescing around the idea that Japan is presently undergoing a policy shift to the right. But the truth is not so simple, and this consensus conclusion is neither accurate nor useful². The objective of this paper was to engage and to assess the significance of the 'Abe Doctrine' for Japan's international trajectory and whether it would lend new dynamism or actually reinforce the dead-end diplomacy of recent Japanese administrations.

The impact of the 'Abe Doctrine' can best be comprehended through its underpinning revisionist ideology. Abe's ideology derives from a tradition of pre-war colonial and wartime attempts to assert for Japan a position as a first-rank nation and leader within Asia and a post-war ambition to be regarded as an autonomous state, US equal partner and liberal-capitalist power facing down authoritarianism. Abe's pursuit of this role demands the casting off of international and domestic constraints imposed by defeat and the negative burden of history. In order to end the post-war regime and return Japan to great power status, the Doctrine must overturn taboos on constitutional revision, patriotic education, the historical legacies of the 'comfort women' or 'Jugun Ianfu', the Tokyo Tribunals and prime ministerial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine.

The Abe Doctrine: From Post-War Regime to Great Power

The Abe Doctrine has always contained the potential to set Japan on a new international trajectory³. Nevertheless, after Abe's return to the premiership for a second stint, a feat for a Japanese politician, previously achieved only by Yoshida in the post-war period, he remained keen to stress the continuities with past policies. Japanese government policy-makers have been at pains to deny that Abe was in any way a dangerous nationalist, and to stress that his design was simply to tackle the domestic and international constraints that have prevented Japan from overcoming its past torpor in foreign and security policy⁴. This view of Abe as essentially pragmatic and able to rein in his more radical instincts has been corroborated by a range of other commentators who predicted that in his second premiership he would prioritize the consolidation of his domestic political support, most especially because his first administration foundered owing to apparent inattention to the basic management of domestic politics, a hyperactive foreign policy and ultimate failure to deliver on security promises to the US for the prolongation of the Japan Self-Defense Force's (JSDF) refueling operations in the Indian Ocean in support of the international coalition in Afghanistan⁵.

Despite protestations that Abe is essentially pragmatic in outlook, it is clear that his worldview has always been underpinned by a strong revisionist ideology now fully surfacing as the principal driver of Japan's foreign and security policies. Abe and his supporters' perspective stands in contrast to the previously dominant paradigm of the Yoshida Doctrine which, apart from being broadly conservative in orientation, was largely bereft of ideological content and functioned on the basis of expedient adaptation of Japan's national interests to the prevailing status quo in the East Asian regional and US-led international systems. It is this strong ideological content and disposition to overturn the status quo which charges Abe's foreign policy with energy and makes it worthy of a true competitor doctrine to that of Yoshida.

The Yoshida Doctrine was focused on Japan's cautious navigation through the post-war international system as a defeated and low-profile power. The Abe Doctrine is fixated on the recognition of Japan's position as a first-rank advanced industrial democracy, and hence the rightful restoration of its place amongst the great powers, even if this necessitates attempts to adjust rather than adapt to the extant international system. Abe's vision for Japan is derived from a tradition of revisionism prevalent amongst much of his Seiwa Seisaku Kenkyūkai faction (Fukuda Takeo - Abe Shintarō - Mori Yoshirō faction; currently Machimura Nobutaka faction) within the LDP, the ideological and organizational lineage which is ultimately traceable back to Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, his grandfather and founder of the progenitor faction⁶.

Kishi Nobusuke, a former bureaucrat involved in the industrial development of Japanese-controlled Manchukuo, and later Minister of Munitions during the war and thus involved in the Japanese colonial project for the integration of the region under the Greater East

Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, was originally arrested under the post-war Allied Occupation as a 'Class A' war crime suspect⁷. Later, Kishi avoided trial by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East and was able to reenter politics after the end of the Occupation. He found his faction and eventually attained the premiership from 1957 to 1960. Kishi's faction and brand of conservative politics attracted to his banner a number of right-wing nationalist and anti-communist politicians.

Kishi strove above all to begin to restore Japan's national autonomy as a great power and portrayed himself as a Cold War warrior in support of the US security strategy in the region and globally. He sought autonomy in a fashion— somewhat reminiscent of the Pan-Asianism ideology of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. It was to resuscitate a vision of Japan as a leader of a new Asianism or 'Ajia no Meishu', and in particular the leader of a more integrated Southeast Asia, in order to demonstrate to the US that Japan was not an isolated state and was capable of international initiatives and deserved of more equal status⁸. Most notably, Kishi made his first overseas trips as Japan Prime minister to the Asian countries and the first by any Japanese prime minister to the region in the post-war era, rather than take up the ritual homage like other Japanese premiers to the U.S. Kishi engaged in vigorous diplomacy in Southeast Asia; in 1957 he visited Burma, Thailand, South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Philippines, and put forward a proposal for the creation of a Southeast Asian Development Fund under Japan's

direction. Also in the same year, Kishi visited Taiwan as a demonstration of his anti-communist credentials. He also visited India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Australia and New Zealand.

Japan Policy in Asia

Kishi Nobosuke's other most famous endeavor was the revision of the US and Japan Security Treaty in 1960 to strengthen the Cold War bilateral cooperation and most crucially to attempt a more equal standing for Japan as a security partner. The Japanese domestic political unrest surrounding Kishi's strong-arm tactics in pushing the revision through the National Diet triggered his eventual resignation.

The Kishi faction was, for much of the remainder of the Cold War period, marginalized from power by the LDP's other more domestically powerful factions: the Kōchikai (Ikeda Hayato - Ōhira Masayoshi Miyazawa Kiichi faction-currently Kishida Fumio faction) and Heisei Kenkyūkai/Tsushima (Satō Eisaku - Tanaka Kakuei-Takeshita Noboru faction currently Nukuga Fukushirō faction). The LDP mainstream helped to fully consolidate the so-called 1955 system or 'Gojūnen Taisei' of uninterrupted LDP one-party dominance and a pragmatic focus largely on domestic economic growth and maintenance of the Yoshida Doctrine in line with the foreign policy.

However, as the LDP mainstream factions' economic policies and political support faltered after the end of the Cold War period with the collapse of the Japanese economic bubble,

the anti-mainstream was able to regain power in the guise of Prime Minister Mori's faction. Apart from a brief period the LDP was out of power, displaced by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) between 2009 and 2012, the Mori faction has proceeded to produce four of the five last LDP prime ministers, including the most famously Koizumi Junichiro between 2001 and 2006 and Abe for his two terms in office. The consequence of the breakdown of Japan's post-war 1955 system, increasing political instability and the return of the descendants of the Kishi faction from the right of the political spectrum to capture power was the creation of opportunities for Koizumi, but most particularly Shinzo Abe, to implement their long-held ideological program for the transformation of the Japanese domestic and foreign policies.

Koizumi, although an initiator of significant changes in foreign and security policies and applauded by many for his willingness to overcome past restraints to enable actions such as the dispatch of the Japan Special Defense Force to support US-led coalitions in Afghanistan and Iraq, was arguably less ideologically oriented and more opportunistic in foreign policy, seeking to use these issues to build international legitimacy to effect his true ideological agenda of neoliberal reform for the Japanese economy and political system. In contrast, Abe is arguably less ideological in economic policy, only experimenting with 'Abenomics' as an opportunity to create the second time round the domestic political support necessary to provide a free hand to pursue his true ideological agenda in foreign policy⁹.

Since 2012, Abe's ideological stance and objectives in many ways echo those of his grandfather in seeking recognition of Japan's standing amongst the first rank, or '*Tier One*', of capitalist powers, recovery of its autonomy as an international player, recognition as a crucial US partner and leader in Asian countries, and confrontation of hostile authoritarian regimes in the contemporary period in the guise of China and North Korea¹⁰.

Shinzo Abe argues that this project for the restoration of Japan as a great power can be achieved only by overturning the constraints of the past imposed on Japanese freedom of international action. Abe and the Japan Revisionists posit that defeat in the Pacific War, the meting out of the victor's justice of the Tokyo tribunals and the conviction of 'Class A' war criminals without alleged precedent in International Law, the unwarranted singling out of Japan as an aggressor in East Asia compared to other imperial great powers, and the externally imposed reforms for the demilitarization of the Japanese Occupation (1939-1945) have created a burden of history that has robbed Japan of its true national identity and vitality.

Hence, for Shinzo Abe and his supporters it is only by unburdening itself from this so-called masochistic or 'Jigyaku-Teki' history and by escaping from the post-war or 'Sengo Dakkyaku' regime can be viewed essentially as a regime of defeat that Japan can start to rehabilitate its national strength and autonomy¹¹. Abe has talked of Japan restoring its sense of national patriotism, along with a new stress upon the promotion of the values of democracy, liberal market economy and the rule of law. It is all values drawn in implicit yet deliberate contradistinction to the authoritarianism of China and North Korea¹².

Shinzo Abe, who returned to power in late 2012 following the Liberal Democratic Party's landslide victory in the Diet's lower-house elections, has pushed aggressively to realize his ambitious agenda. Within a year of being elected, Abe instituted sweeping reforms to the national security apparatus. In December 2013, Japan announced the formation of a National Security Council (NSC) modeled after that of the United States. The council streamlines the Prime Minister's decision-making process while breaking down the various bureaucratic barriers that have impeded effective crisis management. Tokyo also enacted a controversial state-secrets law that tightened the government's control of sensitive and classified information, enabling the NSC to centralize the handling of intelligence.

The ASEAN Summit in Manila, Philippines, on 14 November 2017 resulted in 4 (four) commitments made by ASEAN leaders and its counterpart on the South China Sea dispute, terrorism, humanitarian crisis in the Rakhine State of Myanmar, and the Korean Peninsula Crisis¹³.

Thus, if Abe was expected to take any radical action in international policy, the general consensus was that it would wait until securing a working majority in the Upper House elections in July 2013 to match the straight majority secured by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in the Lower House in the December 2012 elections¹⁴. At the tactical level, Abe skillfully exploited the recent resurgence in his popularity and the division among the LDP's opponents. The main opposition Democratic Party, disintegrated into rival conservative and leftist wings; neither did well on 22 October 2017.

Moreover, even then the presumption was that Abe would be wary of pushing his strongest revisionist agenda for fear of disaffecting the LDP's dovish New Komeito coalition partner, of worsening the already fraught relations with China and South Korea and even of alienating a US not keen to see Japan unsettling the strategic landscape as it was in the midst of a 'rebalance' towards the East Asia region. Japan's major focus under Abe was instead thought to be domestic economic recovery, and if there was to be any radicalism and international risks posed, these were to be in the form of his eponymous policy of 'Abenomics' and its associated 3 (three) arrows of massive quantitative easing, fiscal stimulus and economic restructuring. These predictions surrounding Abe's agenda were largely borne out for the first six months of his administration. Despite Abe's stated intent at the start of his administration to review the Japanese government's statement on the 'comfort women' (Jugun Ianfu) issue which was an ambition held over from his first premiership that his government subsequently backed away in early 2014, conscious of the negative reaction domestically and internationally.

Moreover, even though Abe's Cabinet was replete with noted right-wing conservatives, three of whom had visited the controversial Yasukuni Shrine on 15 August 2013 to commemorate the anniversary of Japan's defeat in the Pacific War, the prime minister himself stayed away. Instead, he seemed content to stress his revisionist credentials with photo opportunities sitting in a Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) main battle tank and

Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) trainer jet¹⁵. Furthermore, even though Abe maintained a tough stance towards China in the ongoing tensions in the East China Sea over the Senkaku/Diaoyu territorial dispute and issues of maritime security, he began to initiate vigorous diplomacy with the US and other East Asian states to project Japan's international presence in contradistinction to China. His administration did not pursue the hard-line security options intimated in the LDP's election manifesto. Abe himself repeatedly called for dialogues with China and stressed Japan's attachment to a form of revamped 'proactive contribution to peace' (*Sekkyoku-Teki Heiwashugi*).

Abe's apparent restrained statesmanship won plaudits domestically and internationally: efforts to revitalize the Japanese economy earned him the depiction of a Superman-like figure on the cover of *The Economist* in May 2013¹⁶. Abenomics garnered praise at the Group of Eight (G8) summit in the UK in June. It appeared overall that Abe's slogan 'Japan is back' was highly credible¹⁷. However, from autumn 2013 onwards, the full guise of Abe's revisionist agenda, and thus the propensity for setting Japan on a new radical trajectory in foreign and security policy, has become readily apparent.

Abe's initiation of new developments in Japan's defense doctrines and capabilities and the US–Japan relations provided the first signs of a revisionist agenda coalescing in line with the expectations of many commentators¹⁸. Nevertheless, Abe's decision to pay an official visit to the Yasukuni Shrine on 26 December 2013, exactly within one year of his assuming office, indicated not only that his revisionism was gathering momentum but also that there were now diminishing constraints on the full extent of the prime minister's ambitions. The visit surprised and drew sharp criticism from policy-makers and the public not only in China and South Korea but also in the US, and even the wider international community, as a highly provocative move with potentially deep ramifications for Japan's international reputation and regional stability.

Now that Abe's 'true colors' (Abe-iro) and revisionist agenda are finally revealed, and he appears secure in power until possibly 2018, questions have begun to fly about the significance of Japanese foreign and security policies. Japanese government policy-makers have remained engaged in increasingly problematic attempts to deny Abe's nationalist or even militarist bent and to stress continuities with past policies, whilst at the same time arguing that the prime minister's challenging of taboos is essential for Japan to overcome its malaise in responding to external pressures from China and North Korea and expectations from the US and the international community for a wider commitment to global security.

Meanwhile, those critical of Abe have ramped up their arguments that he is intent on an irresponsible campaign of overturning post-war constraints on Japanese military power that will only worsen security relations with China and alienate South Korea and other East Asian partners. The objective of this paper was to engage and assess the significance of the 'Abe Doctrine' for Japan's international trajectory and whether it will lend new dynamism or actually reinforce the dead-end diplomacy of recent Japanese administrations. The paper undertook this task by analyzing in depth the ideological foundations and policy objectives

of the ‘Abe Doctrine’ and how it plays out across three pivotal dimensions, or another three policy arrows, of Japan’s foreign and security policy: Japanese defense capabilities; the evolution of the US–Japan alliance; and relations with China, South Korea, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other key states in the Asia-Pacific region.

Moreover, in appraising the impact of the ‘Abe Doctrine’ across these three dimensions, the writer argues that whilst neither apologist or critical views of Abe as a figure of post-war continuity nor a rewind to a pre-war ultranationalist past are entirely accurate, there can be no doubt that his administration is fundamentally revisionist and nationalist in outlook and is thus set upon, and in fact is already shifting Japan towards a radical trajectory. This can be seen in the rapid-fire changes to security policy in the form of the new National Security Strategy (NSS) and the National Security Council (NSC), State Secrecy Law, Three Principles of Defense Equipment Transfers and most significantly breach of the ban on the exercise of the right to collective self-defense.

In US–Japan relations, Abe has moved ahead with the first revision of the Defense Guidelines since 1997 with the aim of enabling Japan to support the US in not just the East Asia region but also in global contingencies; the plans for the massive relocation of US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma within Okinawa; and Japanese participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). They are all designed to boost the US Rebalance to the region. In East Asia, Abe’s diplomacy has looked into building a coalition of like-minded states to assist in the quiet encirclement of China. In turn, this paper argued that even though the rise of the ‘Abe Doctrine’ is undoubtedly generating a more proactive Japanese foreign policy and has achieved some quick wins in raising international profile and influence. Over the medium- to long-term, the policy is strategically short-sighted, hard to sustain and ultimately counter-productive to Japan’s national interests. Hence, this paper tended towards a verdict more in line with the critiques of the ‘Abe Doctrine’ that view it as steering Japan towards a new dead end in foreign and security policies, a dead end largely of Japan’s own making which will result not only in an eventual lack of international momentum but also, along the way, serious long-term collateral damage to regional relations. It moves towards emphasizing the rise and then probable failure of the ‘Abe Doctrine’. The signs are already apparent that the Abe administration is beginning to struggle in the substantive implementation of domestic and foreign policies that can be understood as largely inevitable because of a series of internal and hence inescapable contradictions.

These relate, perhaps ironically, to a doctrine that might pride itself on a clearly articulated ideology and strategy, and to ideological tenets that are fundamentally incompatible with the mechanisms and objectives that it seeks to utilize and achieve.

The eventual conclusion is that the ‘Abe Doctrine’ is likely to riven with its own contradictions that rather than producing a new and clear strategic paradigm for Japan, or reverting back to the previous traditions of the Yoshida Doctrine, it reinforces an increasingly prominent and

long-term trend in Japanese foreign policy characterized at various turns by unpredictability, obduracy and antagonism towards regional neighbors and even the US, or what might be termed as a new ‘Resentful Realism’.

Conclusion

As the first non-Western country to modernize its society, government, and economy, Japan has been one of the most powerful Asian states since the late nineteenth century up to the present time. Despite over two decades of economic stagnation, it remains highly developed, and its economy is slowly adjusting to a postindustrial era. The Shinzo Abe government is competent and organizationally complex, while elites in both the public and private sectors are highly educated and capable. Japan’s natural resources are limited, but its other national resources are well-developed.

Indeed, though hampered by groupthink and risk aversion, Japan’s political, corporate, and intellectual leaders achieve high levels of national performance, despite ongoing internal rivalry, group interests and the lack of individual leadership. These strengths translate into military capabilities that are unmatched by most states in the Asia-Pacific region. However, Japan’s self-imposed restrictions on overseas military operations and an unwillingness to build a military force commensurate with its economic size have resulted in a smaller and less operationally experienced military than would otherwise be expected.

Japan’s greatest need is to embrace radical structural reform in its economy, thereby revitalizing innovation and competitiveness and sparking sustainable postindustrial growth. Therefore, Japan should embrace Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s plans for a more regionally and internationally engaged foreign policy integrated with other Asian leaders’ political economy interests that offer unstinting liberal support for an open, pursuing rules-based order in Asia-Pacific.

Japan must expand and modernize its military, even beyond Abe’s current plans, and free itself from domestic restraints that prevent it from playing a central role with liberal allies in maintaining regional stability.

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End Notes

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- ¹² Yachi Shōtarō. (2013). *Abe Senryaku Gaikō no Kakushin: Kachikan, Tetsugaku o Kyōyū Shi “Ajia” to Gasshō Suru’*. *Gaikō* Vol. 18, March 2013, p. 28.
- ¹³ KOMPAS. (2017). “ASEAN Raih Jaminan China dalam Isu LCS. 15 November 2017.
- ¹⁴ *Global Asia*. Vol. 8, no. 2, Summer 2013, pp. 78–82. Abe secured victory in the 16 December 2012 election for the House of Representatives, with the LDP attaining an outright majority of 294 seats in the 480-seat chamber. This represented a gain of 176 seats following the LDP’s own crushing defeat at the hands of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in the previous 2009 election. The LDP in coalition with the New Komeito Party and its 31 seats had a total majority of 325 seats. In the House of Councilors election on 21 July 2013, the LDP gained 31 seats for a total of 115 seats. Together with the 20 seats of the New Komeito, Abe’s coalition administration gained a working majority in the 242-seat chamber, bringing to an end the so-called ‘twisted’ or divided National Diet that had hampered the DPJ in its legislative agenda. Abe called a snap election for the House of Representatives on 14 December 2014, in which the LDP lost three seats, and the New Komeito gained four seats, meaning that the coalition retained its majority.
- ¹⁵ Abe’s photo opportunity in an ASDF T-4 trainer jet on 12 May 2013 inadvertently caused controversy in parts of East Asia when it was pointed out that the 731 number of the jet evoked memories of the notorious Unit 731 that researched biological and chemical warfare during the Second Sino-Japanese War of 1932–1945.
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