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Shinzo Abe's Assassination and the Impact on U.S.-Japan Relations

On July 8, 2022, a gunman assassinated former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, arguably Japan's most powerful politician, jolting Japan just days before parliamentary elections. Abe, the longest serving prime minister in postwar Japan, was campaigning in the central Japanese city of Nara when he was shot with a home-made gun; he died shortly thereafter. The assassin, a 41-year old man, reportedly targeted Abe because of the former leader's support of a religious group that he claimed bankrupted his mother. The shooting stunned Japan, where gun violence is rare and restrictions on gun ownership are among the strictest in the world. From 2017 to 2021, Japan recorded 60 shootings and 14 total shooting deaths.

Abe, 67, was poised to play a lasting role in Japanese politics as an elder statesman. As premier from 2012 through 2020 (in addition to a year-long term in 2006-2007), he accelerated Japan's trend toward developing a more capable and flexible military force, passing major security legislation advancing these goals and centralizing Japan's national security bureaucracy. Abe also prioritized several domestic economic reforms and pursued generally expansionary economic policies as well as closer trade and economic ties with the United States. After resigning in 2020, he remained politically active, pushing for Japan to increase its defense spending, acquire more advanced military capabilities, and take a more assertive stance toward China, especially its threats to Taiwan—all moves widely supported by the U.S. government.

Japan is one of the United States' key Indo-Pacific partners, and Abe's assassination raises several questions that could affect congressional consideration of U.S. policy in the region. Will Abe's sudden death spur his party—the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which Abe dominated for a decade—to deepen its support for his legacy and policy positions? Will more extreme forces take up the mantle of the LDP's hawkish wing, potentially including those who fear U.S. abandonment and seek greater autonomy in developing their own military capabilities? Or will Abe's passing diminish the influence of these groups? Given his influence, does Abe's death remove a ballast of stability for the U.S.-Japan partnership?

Abe's Foreign Policy Legacies

International leaders responded to the news with sorrow and praise for Abe's role in leading Japan to a more assertive role on the global stage. Abe was known as a key architect of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept—much of which the United States subsequently adopted as its own policy—and a champion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement. After President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the proposed TPP in 2017, Abe played a

decisive role in salvaging the deal with the remaining 11 members. The resulting Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) demonstrated Abe's determination to support a regional rules-based order in the face of challenges from China. Abe forged new security and trade initiatives with Europe, Southeast Asia, Russia, and India. He was also one of the principal promoters of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("the Quad") among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States.

One of Abe's overriding goals was for Japan to better compete economically, diplomatically, and militarily with China. Yet he also sought to engage Chinese leaders to manage bilateral tensions. Abe courted Russian President Vladimir Putin in part to try to prevent Moscow and Beijing from developing a closer relationship. Conversely, under his leadership Japan's relations with South Korea plummeted to near all-time lows, complicating U.S. policy in the region.

U.S.-Japan Relations Under Abe

Abe was a stalwart supporter of the U.S.-Japan alliance who worked closely with Presidents Obama and Trump to strengthen the operational capabilities of the two militaries and align U.S. and Japanese strategies toward the Indo-Pacific. Obama and Abe together made historic visits to Hiroshima and Pearl Harbor, and in 2015 Abe became the first Japanese prime minister to address a joint meeting of Congress. Abe developed a close rapport with Trump that sustained the relationship despite the U.S. withdrawal from the TPP, U.S. imposition of tariffs on Japanese steel and aluminum on national security grounds, and Trump's skepticism of alliances. In 2019, Trump and Abe completed two limited trade deals covering some goods and digital trade that did not require U.S. congressional approval.

Abe's nationalist views on Japan's history of colonialism and invasion during the first half of the 20th century at times generated controversy in Japan and abroad. Abe was associated with groups and promoted individuals to important posts who rejected the narrative of Japanese aggression and victimization of other Asians. Early in his premiership, some observers voiced concern that his leadership could harm U.S. interests in the region by inflaming historical tensions. Examples include a 2013 visit to a controversial shrine that honored Japan's wartime dead—including several Class A war criminals—and his suggestion that women forced to provide sex to Imperial Japanese soldiers were not coerced into the military's extensive brothel system. However, Abe generally tended to avoid making major inflammatory statements and drew widespread praise for his pragmatic foreign policy. Japan's regional standing and relationships generally improved during his tenure, aside from China and

South Korea. During visits to the United States and Australia, Abe made speeches expressing regret for World War II.

July 10 Upper House Elections

After Abe's assassination, Japanese leaders moved ahead with planned national parliamentary elections two days later. In the vote, the LDP and its coalition partner, Komeito, increased their majority in the Upper House of Japan's Diet (parliament) from 57% of the seats to 60%, despite economic difficulties such as accelerating inflation. Abe's death did not appear to alter the results significantly. The victory of current Prime Minister Fumio Kishida was roughly in line with many pre-assassination polls. The LDP and Komeito control over 60% of the Diet's Lower House, giving the coalition a commanding majority in both legislative chambers. Diet elections do not need to be held until 2025, giving Kishida a likely three-year window to promote his policies.

One of Kishida's biggest obstacles is likely to come from within the LDP, which is comprised of a number of factions that often battle and horse-trade fiercely with one another for power and influence. Abe, as the leader of the largest and hawkish faction, was able to overcome many of the intra-party battles that had hobbled previous premiers, and to unify the party in support of his policy goals. It is unclear whether Kishida, who leads a much smaller faction, will possess this type of political heft. A mark of Abe's influence was that Kishida, who historically has been associated with a more dovish foreign policy, campaigned on Abe's hawkish stances. Abe's faction has no clear successor, which could allow Kishida to adopt a more moderate stance on foreign policy.

The Future of Abe's Policy Priorities

With the LDP's firm control of the Diet, Kishida could potentially cement elements of Abe's policy agenda, many of which could strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance. After leaving office, Abe advocated for Japan to raise its defense spending to 2% of its GDP, in line with NATO countries. Kishida has supported this move. Japan for decades has limited defense spending to 1% of GDP, although this is custom rather than law. Although many analysts doubt that Japan will precipitously double its defense budget, the LDP has indicated it intends to raise it substantially. New iterations of three major documents—the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Program Guidelines, and the Mid-Term Defense Program—are due to be published by the end of 2022, and could reflect Abe's vision of how Japan should distribute its resources. The U.S. government has long supported Japan investing more in its defense and has a keen interest in the content of these documents.

Somewhat uniquely among regional leaders, Abe was a forceful supporter of Taiwan, and helped move Japan toward a more muscular framing of the urgency of defending Taiwan from potential Chinese aggression. After leaving office, he argued "A Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency, and therefore an emergency for the Japan-U.S. alliance." These sentiments were echoed by his successors, as well as Japan's Defense Minister, Abe's brother. Just months before his death, Abe weighed in publicly on the controversial questions of whether the United States should abandon its longstanding cross-Strait policy and commit to defending Taiwan "against any attempted Chinese invasion." Abe often drew parallels

between Russia's invasion of Ukraine and PRC threats against Taiwan, a sentiment that bolstered Kishida's support for Ukraine.

Shortly before resigning for health reasons in 2020, Abe called for Japan to develop the ability to launch offensive missile attacks against adversary bases. Although the LDP had been considering this step for years, Abe's endorsement advanced the debate. The release of national security documents this year could establish a policy on pursuing this capability, a notion that many would have considered taboo a decade ago. Questions remain about how Japan would acquire this capability, including the extent to which it would be developed in cooperation with the United States.

Analysts observe Abe achieved mixed success in his program to revitalize Japan's economy through expansionary monetary policy, fiscal stimulus, and structural reforms, but many credit Abe with bringing a sense of urgency to debates over Japan's economic challenges. Kishida is promoting a "new form of capitalism," a thus-far vague platform that continues many of Abe's initiatives but also seeks to be more productive, equitable, and sustainable. One concrete element has been Kishida's creation of a new economic security ministerial post. Japan has joined the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

Constitutional Revision Prospects

Kishida has said he would like to explore the process of amending Japan's constitution, a chief Abe goal. The document has not been revised since U.S. officials drafted it during the 1945-1952 occupation of Japan. The LDP supports amending the language of Article 9, which says, "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes ... land, sea, and air forces ... will never be maintained." In practice, Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) are among the world's ten best-funded militaries. In 2014, the Abe government reinterpreted Article 9 to allow the SDF to act in support of an ally that is under attack, a right known as "collective self-defense." Abe and other conservatives have argued that Article 9 explicitly should reflect these changes.

Despite Abe's longevity in office and his political strength, amending Article 9 proved elusive for him. Revising the constitution is a rigorous process, requiring the approval of two-thirds of legislators from both houses of the Diet and then approval by a majority in a national referendum. Polls indicate the public is divided on whether amendments are needed, and widespread disagreement exists on *what* amendments should be made. Komeito, a party with pacifist roots, may not support amending Article 9 in the direction the LDP prefers; its position likely will be decisive because of its electoral importance to the coalition. Official U.S. statements have usually said that adjusting the constitution is up to the Japanese people, but some observers argue that Japan abandoning some or all of Article 9 could benefit U.S. security interests.

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