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ABE'S DIPLOMATIC ACHIEVEMENTS AND TASKS FOR SUGA

Matake Kamiya

- Shinzo Abe will be remembered as a consequential prime minister who advanced a vision of the international order that would be comfortable both for Japan and the rest of the international community, and promoted the international cooperation necessary to achieve such an order.
- Abe took a liberal diplomatic posture precisely because he is a nationalist. Hoping to make his country great and knowing that it is impossible for Japan to achieve that goal on its own, Abe needed to value international cooperation in order to promote interests significant to Japan, particularly the maintenance of the liberal rules-based international order.
- Japan's new prime minister Yoshihide Suga should carry forward his predecessor's efforts to transform Japan into a country that can lead international cooperation to protect the liberal rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. From that perspective, Suga's diplomacy has made a good start.

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The diplomacy of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during his second tenure of seven years and eight months from the end of 2012 increased Japan's presence in the world to an unprecedented level. He advanced a vision of the international order that would be comfortable for Japan and would bring a better future for the international community, and promoted the international cooperation necessary to achieve such an order. Abe's diplomacy will be remembered as such.

Abe clearly presented Japan as a protector of the liberal rules-based international order led by the United States, in which all countries, large and small, pay considerable respect to international rules underpinned by guiding principles or values that include democracy and the rule of law and refrain from pursuing their claims unilaterally by force. In recent years, this order has been seriously challenged and tested by attempts to change the status quo through force from two major authoritarian states, China in Asia and Russia in Europe.

Abe stood up to these challenges through a series of diplomatic measures. His major diplomatic achievements included the strengthening of the US-Japan alliance by revising the Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation, taking a leading role in ensuring the conclusion of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) after US withdrawal from the original TPP, and proposing the vision of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)." All of these demonstrated Abe's determination to put Japan in a leadership role in defending the liberal rules-based international order.

Particularly notable was Abe's proposal of the FOIP, which inspired the United States to initiate its new regional strategy under the same name. It has also been accepted by Australia and India, and has been welcomed by many countries in Southeast Asia and Europe. It is unprecedented for a vision of a future international order originating from Japan to exert such a major influence on the international community. In the face of the Trump administration's America First posture, many international relations experts around the world even argued that the future of the liberal international order rested on the shoulders of Abe.

For a country to form an international order desirable for itself, collaboration with other countries is indispensable. Abe promoted Japan's cooperation with other countries through his "diplomacy that takes a panoramic perspective of the world map," in which he made eighty-one foreign trips in less than eight years, visiting eighty countries and regions in total. He made more than twenty visits to Indo-Pacific countries (including ASEAN countries, India, Australia and East African countries), and

participated in the annual United Nations General Assembly every year during his tenure. For Japan, close and solid relations with the United States are particularly important as the basis of its international cooperation. Abe as a prime minister made consistent efforts to strengthen the alliance between the two countries and won trust from both the Obama and Trump administrations. He was arguably the only leader who succeeded in “educating” President Donald Trump without making him angry.

In order for a country to lead the building of an international order, it is necessary that the country itself assume substantial roles in international efforts to that end. Abe throughout his tenure consistently tried to enhance Japan’s readiness to do so with considerable success. A strong diplomacy needs to be supported by a strong economy. Abe’s economic policy of Abenomics helped Japan pull itself out of the long doldrums of the post-Junichiro Koizumi years, and the Japanese economy consequently regained “vitality.” In the field of security, Abe, under his policy of “proactive contributions to peace” based on the principle of international cooperation, successfully enhanced what Japan can actually do for international peace and security to a considerable extent, while retaining the merits of Japan’s postwar pacifism. He did so by introducing a series of new security policies that included a constitutional reinterpretation to allow the limited exercise of the right of collective self-defense and enacting new peace and security legislation.

Foreign observers may wonder why Abe, a well-known nationalist, consistently maintained a liberal diplomatic posture emphasizing the importance of international cooperation. In fact, he emphasized the importance of international cooperation precisely because he is a nationalist. Abe wanted to make his country great. He knew, however, that it is impossible for Japan to achieve that goal on its own. Understanding that Japan can become great when and only when it successfully cooperates with other countries in a desirable manner, Abe consistently attached importance to cooperation with other countries in order to promote Japan’s significant interests, particularly the maintenance of the liberal international order.


The author strongly hopes that Japan’s new prime minister Yoshihide Suga will sustain and further develop these positive orientations of Abe’s active diplomacy. From that perspective, Suga’s diplomacy has made a good start. On September 20, four days after he came into office, he selected Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and US President Trump as the counterparts for his first two telephone summit talks and confirmed with these leaders the importance of Japan-Australia and Japan-US cooperation to achieve the FOIP. On October 6, the Suga administration hosted the

second Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting in Tokyo and the four ministers affirmed the importance of the Quad countries broadening cooperation with other countries for the realization of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." The ministers also agreed on regularizing this Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting going forward. Later in October, Suga selected Vietnam and Indonesia, two major powers in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) whose initiative is considered key to realizing the FOIP, as the destinations of his first foreign visit since taking office. In Hanoi, Suga delivered a speech titled "Building Together the Future of Indo-Pacific" and emphasized the significance of cooperation between Japan and the ASEAN countries. More recently, as soon as major US news media projected Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 US presidential election, Suga congratulated him in a Twitter post and expressed his desire to "further strengthen the Japan-US Alliance and ensure peace, freedom, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond." Suga reiterated these points in his telephone conversation with Biden on November 12. On November 17, Suga welcomed Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison in Tokyo. In their summit meeting, the two leaders affirmed that Japan and Australia will together work toward realizing a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific."

These actions by Suga clearly demonstrated to the international society that the new prime minister is determined to continue Japan's diplomatic efforts to maintain the liberal international order in Asia and beyond under his administration, based on his recognition of the significance of international cooperation for that purpose while valuing the US-Japan alliance as the linchpin.

While Abe's diplomacy was generally successful, it was not without problems. In particular, his attitude toward the two largest revisionist states, China and Russia, sometimes left the impression of inconsistency. While standing firm against the challenges by these two countries to the liberal rules-based international order, Abe also sought to improve Japan's relations with these countries. Abe believed that Japan could not afford exceedingly bad relations with China due to its geographical proximity. With regard to Russia, he tried to cultivate close personal relations with President Vladimir Putin in order to achieve the conclusion of a Japan-Russia peace treaty based on a solution to the Northern Territories issue acceptable to both sides. Consequently, observers were sometimes perplexed by the peculiar "softness" involved in Abe's approach toward Beijing and Moscow.

Whether Japan will be able to maintain its current high presence in the international community will depend on whether Suga is able to carry forward his

predecessor's efforts to transform Japan into a country that can lead international cooperation to protect the liberal rules-based order while correcting its shortcomings. 

Matake Kamiya is Professor of International Relations at the National Defense Academy of Japan and Adjunct Fellow of the Japan Institute of International Affairs.