



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG POLICY BRIEF

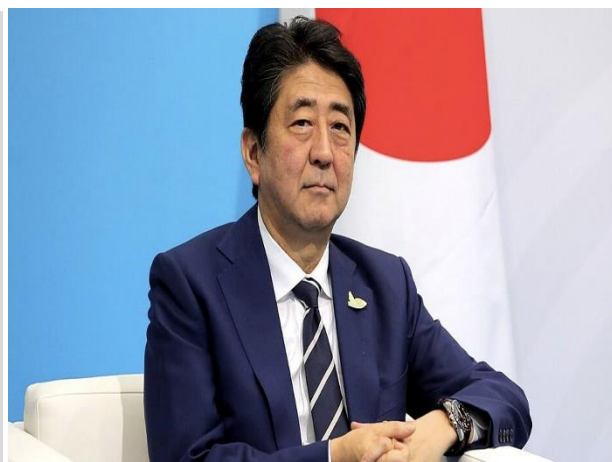
Shinzo Abe: Architect of Japan's Renewal, Anchor of Japan-India Relations

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Volume VII, Issue 29

July 10, 2022



Delhi Policy Group

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www.delhipolicygroup.org



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ABOUT US

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Since 2016, in keeping with India's increasing global profile, DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's regional and global role and its policies in the Indo-Pacific. In a realist environment, DPG remains mindful of the need to align India's ambitions with matching strategies and capabilities, from diplomatic initiatives to security policy and military modernisation.

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Cover Photographs:

Shinzo Abe, Japan's longest serving Prime Minister. Source: Twitter

Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a dinner hosted by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at his holiday home in Yamanashi, Japan on October 28, 2018. Source: Hindustan Times

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Anchor of Japan-India Relations**

by
Hemant Krishan Singh

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Shinzo Abe: Architect of Japan's Renewal, Anchor of Japan-India Relations

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Introduction

Shinzo Abe, Japan's most transformational leader in a generation, has tragically fallen to an assassin's bullets. India has lost a trusted friend and champion of India-Japan partnership, Asia and the world a towering and charismatic statesman, and Japan a dynamic and inspired leader who ushered in political stability and set his nation firmly on the path of national renewal. He was Japan's longest serving prime minister, and even after leaving office for health reasons in September 2020, remained a powerful force in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, leading its largest faction and laying down his life in an election campaign rally. Abe leaves behind an irreplaceable void, but also a legacy that will hopefully endure.



Shinzo Abe, Japan's longest serving Prime Minister. Source: Twitter

India's relations with Japan were already being re-shaped by new strategic undercurrents, but with Abe's departure from the scene, these may now enter a new and more nuanced phase. Abe had only just assumed the chairmanship



of the 119-year-old Japan-India Association on May 24, which will have to find a new helmsman at a time when his steady hand was needed most.

Abe's Legacy for Japan

Shortly after Shinzo Abe's unprecedented political reprise to become Japan's prime minister for the second time in late 2012, this author had described the historic moment in the following terms:

"Japan's economic revival, resilient strategic posture, enhanced defence capability, resolute regional diplomacy and renewed national coherence will help realise its potential as a 'normal nation' anchored in Asia. Shinzo Abe has a historic opportunity to make this a reality. Several emerging nations in Asia, including my own, will applaud his success."¹

It is increasingly evident today that Abe delivered on much of that promise during his nearly nine years in office (December 2012- September 2020).

Abe leaves behind an indelible imprint on Japan's internal polity. During his second tenure, the Japan prime minister's office accumulated substantial powers to coordinate government functioning and policy making. An entirely new national security apparatus came into being. These changes became crucial instruments of Japan's national revival and global influence under Abe's leadership.

Abe's bold assertion in February, 2013 that "Japan is back" and will never be a second tier nation gave new meaning to Japan's strategic posture, restoring its global relevance and signalling greater contributions to the security and geopolitics of Asia. Abe was also the main force behind Japan's reinvigorated diplomacy, visiting more than 80 countries and raising Japan's profile on the world stage.

Amidst widespread speculation about Japan's secular decline when he assumed office in 2012, Abe strongly believed that declinism was not Japan's inevitable destiny, and that the domestic transformations he envisaged would provide the determinants of its future vitality. He began with the primary source of national power, the economy. Ending Japan's deflationary spiral became central to "Abenomics", even though the success of his "three arrows" economic strategy was uneven.

¹ Hemant Krishan Singh, "Japan's Existential Challenge", Gaiko magazine, March 2013 issue.



Abe was acutely conscious that Japan's regional influence in Asia could not be sustained by uni-dimensional power alone. Progressively but surely, he worked to remedy the unsustainable gap in Japan's comprehensive national power, while changing its orientation towards "proactive pacifism". His policies embodied his conviction that it was only with the reassurance of a robust economy and security posture that Japan could resume its pathbreaking contributions to Asia's progress.

Abe was also aware that Japan must assume greater responsibility for buttressing Asian security. There was gradual progress during his term in office, but this goal is moving closer towards becoming a reality today.

Abe has frequently been described as a "conservative nationalist" and a "hawkish" and even "controversial" leader in some Western circles, often accompanied by calls for "restraint" even from allies. It is seldom understood what his conservatism and aspiration for Japan's place in the world was all about, so a reality check can be a useful guide.

It is a supreme irony that Japan, which led the Asian renaissance and economic resurgence after centuries of Western domination, is still struggling to resume its existence as a "normal nation". Japan's predicament in Asia is astounding when compared to trends in Europe, where former aggressors and colonisers have found quiet comfort among each other. Clearly, we Asians must derive lessons from the old continent if we are to aspire to a common future in an "Asian century".

Far from being a "revisionist", Abe endeavoured to move Japan beyond the "history issues" of its militarist-imperialist past based on the established fact that since 1945, Japan has scripted an entirely different path of constitutional democracy, resolute pacifism and internationalist purpose from which it has never deviated. Abe valued the revival of Japan's self-esteem and agency as a sovereign nation, while remaining steadfast in his commitment to the US-Japan alliance as the cornerstone of Japan's global outlook. He can hardly be faulted for being an impassioned advocate and architect of Japan's national revival in the 21st century.

Abe's most daunting challenge proved to be securing greater public recognition of the dangers confronting Japan, which necessitated reconsideration of self-imposed limitations that have long constrained Japan's ability to play a meaningful role in bolstering regional security. He was eventually unable to make progress on revising Article 9 of Japan's war renouncing "peace constitution", imposed in 1947 under US occupation, to

explicitly recognise Japan's right to maintain a self-defence military. However, under his stewardship, Japan reinterpreted Article 9, passed new security laws to assume a larger collective security role alongside the US, increased defence spending and strengthened its military capability. This has provided the basis for continuing progress in Japan's defence and security posture under his successors.

In the strategic conceptualisation of regional security architecture over the past decade and a half, Abe's role has been vital: from the initiation (2007) to the revival (2017) of the Quad forum for security dialogue and policy coordination between the major maritime democracies of the Indo-Pacific, to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept which enjoys widespread recognition today. This will remain his hallmark contribution to the stability of the littoral and maritime space that India and Japan book-end.

After stepping down, Abe has continued to play an influential role in Japanese politics, strategic thinking, and foreign policy, often shaking up the country's staid political and bureaucratic establishment with new ideas, recent examples being nuclear weapons sharing with the US for more effective deterrence and calling upon the US to explicitly commit to the defence of Taiwan. His untimely death is likely to have an impact on the future direction of Japan's policy making, both domestic and external.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a dinner hosted by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at his holiday home in Yamanashi, Japan on October 28, 2018.

Source: Hindustan Times



Abe and India

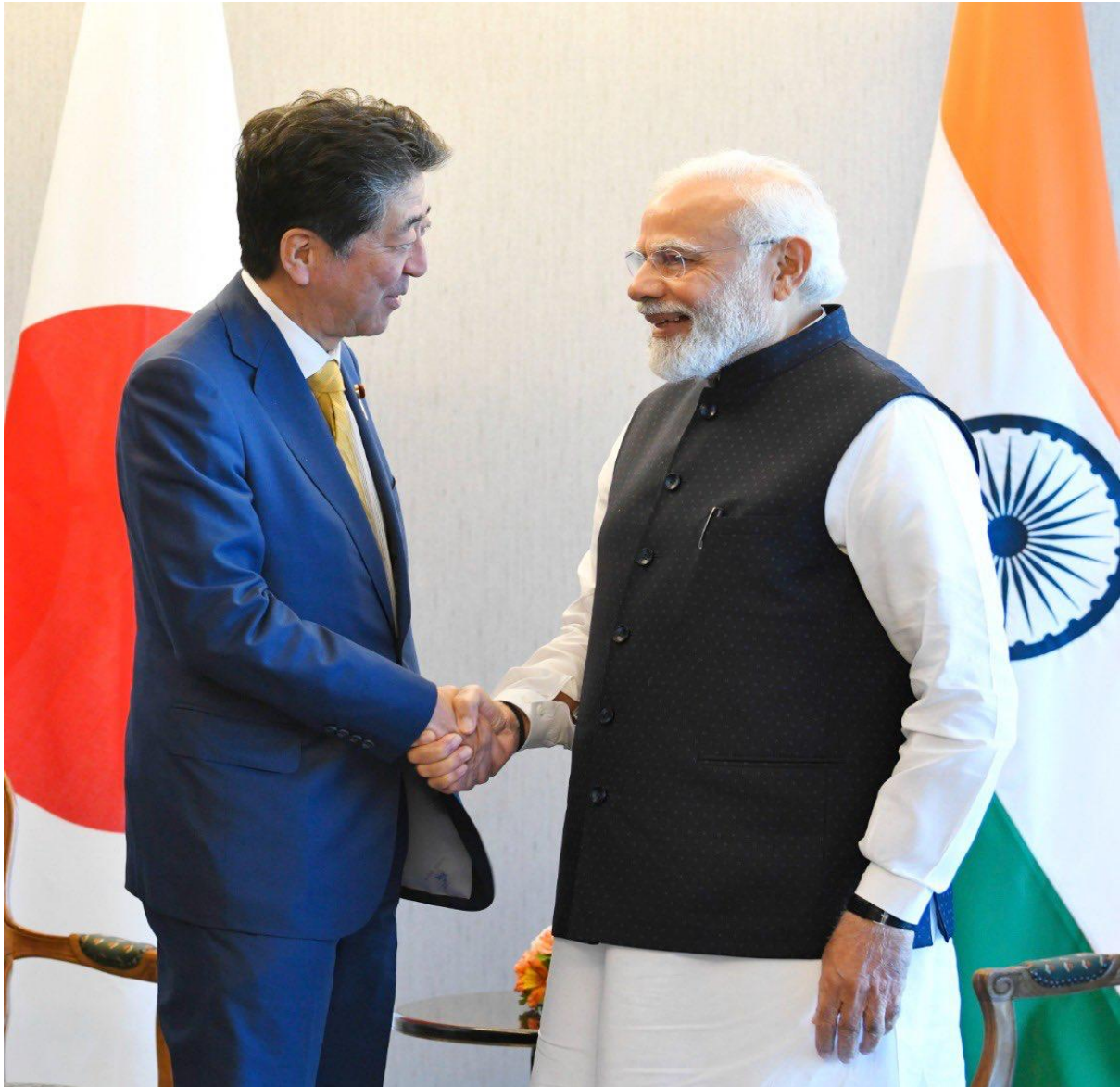
There is no question that Abe had a special regard for India, and that he enjoyed an extraordinary warmth and special rapport with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In this respect, Abe will be irreplaceable. He was the main anchor for Japan's relations with India, which he saw as vital in their own right and not as a reflection of their respective ties with the US. It is only befitting that India recognised his contributions by conferring the prestigious Padma Bhushan award on him in 2021. India also declared a day of national mourning on July 9, and Prime Minister Modi himself penned an effusive public tribute to his dear friend Shinzo Abe.

Abe's abiding commitment to forging strategic ties with India was founded on the legacy of his maternal grandfather Nobusuke Kishi (PM of Japan from 1957-1960), who was deeply moved by India's efforts to confer legitimacy on post-war Japan, which included becoming the first Asian country to accept Japan's overseas development assistance in 1957.

In his 2007 book 'Towards a Beautiful Country: My Vision for Japan', Abe wrote that it would "not be a surprise if in another decade, Japan-India relations overtake Japan-US and Japan-China ties." That expectation certainly did not transpire, for a variety of reasons. But what Abe was able to achieve was no less remarkable: a comprehensive, all-encompassing bilateral partnership, vital to both nations and the Indo-Pacific region, consequential for the welfare of their peoples, and critical to India's rise.

Abe will perhaps be most remembered for his remarkable and visionary address to the Indian Parliament on August 22, 2007 embracing India in a "broader Asia" and envisaging the dynamic coupling of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. This effectively foresaw the emergence of the Indo-Pacific a decade later.

There was a continuous stream of progress in bilateral relations under Abe, which were upgraded to a strategic and global partnership in 2006, and again to a "special" strategic and global partnership in 2014. Based on these and several other foundational agreements that followed, India-Japan relations have progressed steadily across the fields of trade and investment, economic infrastructure and development, civil nuclear technology, and defence and security. This process may have slowed somewhat over the last two years, but the forward momentum continues unchanged.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi meeting Shinzo Abe on May 24, 2022 in Tokyo, Japan.
Source: Twitter

As Abe himself repeatedly affirmed, India and Japan have a mutual stake in each other's success. There is no other major power equation in Asia like that between India and Japan, with their shared liberal democratic values, absence of historical grievances and growing strategic convergences. Hopefully, Abe's powerful legacy will endure and continue to shape Asian stability, security and prosperity during the course of this century. Standing together, India and Japan can rise to their full potential, expand their strategic space, and play a commensurate role as major powers in Asia and the Indo-Pacific. That, in sum, was Abe's foremost desire.



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