

Australian Outlook

In this section

Shinzo Abe: Remembering the Architect of Indo-Pacific Strategy

25 Jul 2022

By Dr Ashok Sharma and Professor John Blaxland



Share

**Perhaps no other leader has shaped the modern strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific as much as Shinzo Abe. He will be missed.**

The assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has shocked the world. But Japan's longest serving prime minister has left a remarkable imprint both domestically and internationally. After being stricken by both the 1997 East Asian financial crisis and the 2009 global economic slump, Abe guided Japan through a series of fiscal reforms. The distinctive sociological and demographic traits of Japan, however, precluded economic policies and structural reforms from being as successful as he had hoped.

Abe's legacy in foreign and security policy, however, is particularly striking. For much of the post-war period, Japan had shied away from broad-based strategic thinking and regional leadership roles. But by making important constitutional amendments, Abe incrementally moved Japan away from its post-World War II pacifism and worked towards building a stronger and more internationally-engaged self-defence force. He did this by modernising the force and increasing military spending. This was a move characterised by opponents as sinister, stoking nationalist and militarist sentiments in a revisionist manner that played down past wrongdoings — but it is best understood in light of China's unsettling assertiveness and fears over a distracted and disrupted United States. Abe's initiatives were pivotal, particularly on Indo-Pacific security, where he bolstered Japan's bilateral and multilateral relations with the USA, India, and Australia. Abe was integral in forming the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, conceptualised a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, and was a persistent advocate for enhanced trade ties through a Trans-Pacific Partnership.

From being a staunch supporter of Japanese nationalism to being an outspoken internationalist, Abe's influence could be seen far and wide. Abe played a leading role in shaping the Indo-Pacific concept by broadening the strategic canvas of the Pacific Ocean. The term was popularised by Abe when he addressed the Indian Parliament in 2007, outlining his vision of the “confluence of the two seas” between the Indian and Pacific oceans. This set the path for the inclusion of India in the strategic framing, acknowledging and highlighted the geopolitical significance of India to the grand geostrategic equation of the Indo-Pacific. Successive US administrations followed Abe's lead. The “free and open Indo-Pacific” idea was promoted by Japanese officials in Washington in 2017 and in 2018, the US Defense Department changed the name of the region's senior military command from Pacific Command (PACOM) to Indo-Pacific Command (INDO-PACOM), demonstrating Abe's influence. US president Joe Biden acknowledged Abe as “a champion of the Alliance between our nations and the friendship between our people.” The idea of the Indo-Pacific conceptualised was the biggest contribution of Abe that will be cherished as a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific is touted as the key to global prosperity in the 21st century.

Even ASEAN, ever wary of causing offence in China, signed up to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific – a clever way of acknowledging Abe's work while also carefully avoiding a commitment to it being “free and open.”

Widely respected in democratic countries for his forthright positions on China, Abe shaped the Indo-Pacific strategy. He was a key figure in the creation of the Quad, which started as an unofficial coalition following the Tsunami that rocked the Indian Ocean in 2004. The Quadrilateral military drills in 2007 were the first step towards the re-imagination of the strategic landscape as being about the Indo-Pacific. This evolved into the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue which re-emerged after a decade long hiatus. Abe worked on developing strong ties with the Quad nations at the bilateral and multilateral levels. He continued working on strengthening the security ties with the United States, along with a strategic partnership with Australia, but the highlight was building a comprehensive and

robust strategic partnership with India – a country which had been on the other side of Cold War geopolitics, more closely aligned with the Soviets than the Americans.

Abe worked assiduously, persuading India, a traditionally wary and circumspect player in world affairs, to join him in backing the Indo-Pacific concept. From the “India Japan Strategic and Global Partnership” in 2006 with India’s Manmohan Singh to the “Special and Strategic Partnership” with Narendra Modi, the relationship between India and Japan has blossomed in the political, strategic, and commercial arenas. Japan was the first nation with which India began a 2+2 (foreign and defence ministries) dialogue. It joined the US-India Malabar naval exercises in 2015, and signed the Japan-India civil nuclear accord in 2016, putting an end to Japanese opposition to India’s status as a nuclear power. On the economic front, Tokyo rose under Abe to become New Delhi’s 12th-largest trading partner, thanks to growing Japanese investments in India. Both of India’s most recent prime ministers, Modi and Singh were his close friends.

When the United States lost its appetite for multilateral trade initiatives, Abe sought to fill the gap, energetically resuscitating the moribund Trans Pacific Partnership to bolster regional trade ties while leaving an opening for the United States to resume its mantle of economic leadership, through the Comprehensive Progressive Trans Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

On bilateral ties with Australia, Abe was unparalleled, having visited five times, and overseen an unprecedented deepening of ties. Building on the 1957 commerce agreement with Australia signed when his father was Prime Minister, Abe invested in deepening and broadening trade, investment, and security ties ranging from the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2007, a Special Strategic Partnership in 2014 (covering law enforcement, border security counter terrorism, disarmament, peace operations, and humanitarian relief operations) and the Japan-Australia Economic Partnership Agreement of 2015.

Abe made every effort to ensure that like-minded democratic countries cooperate in a coordinated way against a much more assertive and disruptive China. Japan’s international posture today can be directly linked to Abe’s pivotal leadership. He will be cherished on both ends of the Indo-Pacific.

Dr. Ashok Sharma is a Visiting Fellow at Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Coral Bell School of Asia-Pacific Affairs, the Australian National University. Dr. Sharma is also an Academic Fellow of the Australia-India Institute at the University of Melbourne; a Visiting Fellow at the University of New South Wales Canberra at the Australian Defence Force Academy; and an Adjunct Associate Professor at the Institute for Governance & Policy Analysis, University of Canberra.

Professor John Blaxland is the Professor of International Security and Intelligence Studies at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Coral Bell School of Asia-Pacific Affairs, the Australian National University.

Related Articles



Great Powers in 2018: Japan's Regional Offensive

By Professor Aurelia George Mulgan

27 December 2018

As the United States retreats, Japan is assuming the mantle of leadership in the Asia-Pacific region.



Preempting Incel-Inspired Violent Extremism in Asia

By Joseph Franco

30 July 2020

The attacks inspired by the incel movement could be considered the first form of violent extremism to originate online. While deeply rooted in the North American context, incel discourse could find itself a welcome audience in Asia.



Sweaters and Soft Power: the Uniqlo Story

By Tets Kimura

03 April 2018

Japanese clothing empire Uniqlo has recently expanded across Australia. So, how did your latest jeans purchase contribute to Japanese soft power?