

HOW SHINZO ABE RESTORED JAPAN'S GLOBAL STANDING

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During a visit to the United States in February 2013, shortly after becoming Japan's Prime Minister for the second time — a post he would hold longer than any other Japanese leader — Shinzo Abe declared, "Japan is back".

Those three words would come to define Mr. Abe's unique and unparalleled legacy on Japan's politics, both at home and abroad, where he did more than any other Japanese leader to raise Japan's standing on the world's stage.

Mr. Abe's untimely passing on Friday, after being shot by an attacker during a campaign event for a parliamentary election, brings down the curtain on the career of a leader who redefined Japanese politics and diplomacy.

When Mr. Abe first took the top job in 2006, few would have predicted the legacy he would leave behind. His first stint lasted only a year, and he left it as an unpopular leader tainted by political controversies.

Japan's politics, in forever churn, saw numerous leaders come and go, and when Mr. Abe returned for a second innings in 2013, he promised to end the cycle of uncertainty and given Japan a measure of stability that had eluded its political life, as well as restore its image in the world.

On both fronts, he certainly succeeded. Over the subsequent seven years, Mr. Abe, who retired in August 2020 because of health issues, became his country's longest-serving PM.

"Japan is not, and will never be, a tier-two country," he had said in the 2013 speech, outlining three foreign policy priorities. The first was in making Japan a leader in the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region, a term that is now in vogue but one that Mr. Abe was among the first to popularise, even invoking it in his 2007 address to the Indian Parliament when he reflected how "the Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity".

Global commons

Secondly, he wanted Japan to step up to become "a guardian of the global commons" in an increasingly contested maritime domain, and to work closely with "like-minded democracies", such as the U.S., India, Australia and South Korea. Indeed, Mr. Abe can be credited with being the most vocal proponent for the Quad, which has now been renewed after years of dormancy.

Japan, he argued, needed to cast away the burden it was still carrying from its Second World War-imposed Pacifist Constitution and assume more security responsibilities, particularly amid rising Chinese influence in Asia. This stand often brought him in the crosshairs of Beijing. Mr. Abe also wanted Japan to be a leader in regional trade.

While he failed to change Article 9 of the Constitution, under his watch, Japan amended laws that will allow its armed forces to be deployed overseas and the military for the first time took

part in exercises on foreign soil. Indeed, he broadly succeeded on all three goals, Hiroyuki Akita, a commentator at Nikkei in Tokyo, told *The Hindu* in an interview at the time of Mr. Abe's retirement. "He made great achievements in foreign and security affairs. In particular, he strengthened the U.S.-Japan alliance significantly, and based on that, he established a base for regional security cooperation by the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia [Quad]."

Deepening relations with India, both on the investment front and through stepped-up security cooperation under the Quad, had been a priority for Mr. Abe's foreign policy, although some initiatives he championed, such as the bullet train corridor, were slow to take off.

Mr. Akita said his other lasting legacy will be his shepherding of the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, seen as an economic counter to China. "While the Trump administration leaned toward trade protectionism, the Abe administration managed to establish TPP even without the U.S., thereby enabling the Asia Pacific region to somehow maintain a momentum of free trade," he said.

Consequential PM

Richard McGregor, Senior Fellow at the Lowy Institute and author of *Asia's Reckoning: China, Japan, and the Fate of US Power in the Pacific Century*, said, "there is no doubt that Abe has been a hugely consequential Prime Minister, even without achieving two of his main goals, a revision of the country's postwar Constitution and a peace treaty with Russia."

"He has substantially rebuilt relations with Beijing, even as Japan has competed head-on with China on influence and investment in the region, and without conceding on territorial issues. He has also made Japan perhaps the most respected diplomatic player in the Indo-Pacific, which is saying something, given Japan's size relative to the US and China," he said, also speaking to *The Hindu* following Mr. Abe's retirement two years ago.

On China, Mr. Abe was less hawkish than many expected him to be, both home and abroad, as he balanced a fine line between courting China economically while mounting a robust counter to China's deepening influence in the region.

"Diplomatically and economically, he has improved relations with China," said Yoshikazu Kato, an expert on Japan-China relations.

While not budging on Japan's sovereignty, he at the same time made some concessions such as agreeing a four-point consensus on the East China Sea in which, Mr. Kato said, Japan "finally acknowledged territorial disputes existed, which it previously did not."

While Mr. Abe might have changed Japanese foreign policy, it is "an open question to whether he has changed the country itself", said Mr. McGregor. "There is still little public support for constitutional revision to free up the military, despite rising threats from China and North Korea," he said. "Japan itself is still caught in the dilemma of many countries in Asia, of relying on an alliance with the U.S. for security, and for its economic future, on China. Japan's choices into the future are only going to get harder."

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