



# Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's Address at a Joint Meeting of the U.S. Congress Revived the Initiative in Public Diplomacy

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## Experts' Views on Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's Address

Prime Minister Abe Shinzo delivered an address from the stage at a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress on April 29, 2015 as the Prime Minister of Japan, the first such address in 54 years. He was the fourth Prime Minister to deliver such an address following Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato 54 years ago, Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, the grandfather of Prime Minister Abe, 58 years ago and other predecessors on this occasion. It was, in fact, the first time for a Japanese Prime Minister to deliver an address in front of all the members of the Senate and the House of Representatives at a joint meeting of the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Partly due to the fact that this year is the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, before Prime Minister Abe's address, most attention was only focused on his wording in terms of historical perception, for example, whether or not an apology for comfort women would be included in the address.

Even so, Prime Minister Abe repeatedly presented messages that depicted his strong determination for the future, such as "Reforms for a stronger Japan," "Pride in developing international peace together with the United States following World War II and determination to maintain peace," "Realization of the kind of world where finally women are free from human rights abuses," "Proactive contributions to peace" and "A sturdy U.S.–Japan alliance."

In the end, what was the message that Prime Minister Abe wanted to deliver that could not be read simply from the superficial meaning of the words in his address? How did the U.S. government, Congressmen, media and the public take the address? How should Japan behave in the future?

Prime Minister Abe's address at the joint meeting of the U.S. Congress was enthusiastically received with over ten standing ovations from the participating Congressmen and observers. After the address, the Speaker of the House, Representative John Boehner, issued a statement, "We can



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hope future generations will look back on this day as a proud and pivotal moment in the history of our alliance."

Apart from those who are sure to make negative criticisms, Prime Minister Abe's address was generally positively received by the U.S. Congress and the community of those involved in Asian policy in the United States.

Dana Rohrabacher, a member of the House of Representatives and a former speechwriter for President Ronald Reagan, told reporters that the



Prime Minister addressed the issues of historical perception with dignity and gave the address an “A-plus.” The *Wall Street Journal* also appraised that Prime Minister Abe Shinzo delivered a vintage performance at the joint meeting.

There were many ingenious references in the Prime Minister’s address that captured the hearts of the U.S. audience. At the beginning of the address, the Prime Minister named distinguished figures in the Congress who been ambassadors to Japan and referenced late Senator Daniel Inouye. This led the audience to realize that the U.S. Congress had steadily supported the U.S.–Japan alliance. The Prime Minister’s private memories, mainly from his stay in the United States when he was a student, also provided additional color to the address.

### **Uninhibited display of the reconciliation between Japan and the United States**

In particular, the Prime Minister touched the hearts of the audience when he mentioned the deep repentance that he felt during his visit to the World War II Memorial and said, “I offer with profound respect my eternal condolences to the souls of all American people that were lost during World War II.” Caught by emotion, some Congressmen present reportedly had tears in their eyes.

The handshake between Lt. Gen. Snowden Lawrence and the former Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications Shindo Yoshitaka, a grandson of General Kuribayashi Tadamichi, who was the commander in chief of the Japanese garrison during the Battle of Iwo Jima, was a well-arranged scene that embodied the significance of overcoming the position of the winner and the loser. This display, a model of the power of reconciliation, which occurred during the Japan–U.S. summit joint statement, was a powerful moment that showed the strong reconciliation between Japan and the United States.

By stating feelings of deep remorse, and the fact that Japan’s actions brought suffering to the people of Asian countries, and by upholding the views expressed by previous prime ministers, Prime Minister Abe responded to the deepest concerns of the audience to a certain extent. As these statements were made after his deep condolences for the American people who died in the war, the audience must have taken the statements as sincere feelings of remorse.

Loud self-assertion is often considered to be a way to strengthen public diplomacy, but if such an assertion is not accepted by the counterparties, it becomes meaningless. In this respect, the Prime Minister’s address has been evaluated as one that stated what needed to be stated in accordance with the discourse in the United States.



## The way of expressing historical issues were also accepted

The success of the address can actually be judged by whether or not its purposes in terms of public diplomacy was achieved more than how it was received by the audience.

In my opinion, the first purpose was to prevent the widespread acceptance in the United States of the allegations made by China and South Korea that Japan is the one destabilizing the region, mainly due to historical perception. The second purpose was to ensure support in the United States for the alliance with Japan by strongly supporting the international order and regional order led by the United States and showing Japan's readiness to share responsibility.

The Prime Minister's address accomplished these purposes appropriately. The strong reconciliation between Japan and the United States has been obtained and the way Prime Minister Abe addressed the historical issues has clearly been accepted by the majority of the people in the United States. As long as Japan itself does not stray from the line it has set out, neither China nor South Korea can expect to have a strong impact on the United States, even if they make an effort to make an issue of historical perception in the United States. Moreover, the Prime Minister concluded his address by stating Japan's proactive stance in the fields of the economy and security and referring to the Japan–U.S. alliance as an alliance of hope. This is believed to have left an impression with the positive characteristics of the alliance.

The Prime Minister's address must be evaluated appropriately from the aspect that it made it possible to revive Japan's initiative in international public relations in the year commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, a seemingly unfavorable environment for Japan. On the other hand, if the Abe administration takes disappointing actions in relation to certain issues, such as in a new statement from the Prime Minister in August, TPP or the U.S. bases in Japan, opinions in the United States may change easily. The address made by President Park Geun-hye at a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress was received enthusiastically in 2013, but the relationship between the United States and South Korea has not necessarily been sound since.

In essence, like diplomacy, public diplomacy have no end either. It is expected that by taking advantage of the horizon that the Prime Minister's address has explored, and by striving to exert synergies through appropriate actions both in Japan and overseas, new opportunities for public diplomacy will be created continually.



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