



# Looking Back at Prime Minister Abe's Diplomacy: A Political Legacy of the Long-term Abe Administration—Leadership for liberal international order

Kanehara Nobukatsu, Former Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary, Professor of Doshisha University

Interview by Nakamura Kiichiro, Editor-in-Chief of *Gaiko* (Diplomacy)



The Second Abe Cabinet was inaugurated on December 26, 2012.

Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

—Professor Kanehara, you were appointed Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary with the formation of the second Abe Cabinet.

**Prof. Kanehara Nobukatsu:** I remember suddenly being told to go to the Prime Minister's Office on December 28, the day the Abe Cabinet was formed. When forming the Cabinet, a team of three was set up under Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide and Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Sugita Kazuhiro. It consisted of Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary for Internal Affairs Sasaki Toyonari (from the Ministry of Finance) (later replaced by Furuya Kazuyuki), Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary for Security Takamizawa Nobushige (from the Ministry of Defense), and myself who was in charge of External Affairs. We had excellent teamwork.

—What was the feeling at the time of the formation of the second Abe Cabinet?

**Kanehara:** It felt like being on a jet aircraft hit by air turbulence as key policy bills were made one after the other right from the start of the Cabinet, and I just had to work as hard as I could as a member of the crew. The engine was on full throttle from the beginning. Some policies faced strong opposition so my colleagues and I used to say things like “Who knows when we’ll go into a tailspin?” It was enjoyable work that felt worth doing, amid the air of tension that hung over us every day.



Prof. Kanehara Nobukatsu

—The initial velocity was not like previous Cabinets.

**Kanehara:** Importantly, this was Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s second time on the mound, so I think he felt strongly that there were many things unrealized during the first administration (2006–2007) that he wanted to accomplish. Moreover, the Cabinet members included heavyweights like former prime minister Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Aso Taro and Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga, and the core of the Cabinet really consisted of competent politicians. In the party, we had people like Vice-President of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Komura Masahiko, providing a stable lineup. Another key point is that we had many in the secretary team for the Prime Minister and Chief Cabinet Secretary for whom it was their second time working in the Prime Minister’s Office, so they were well-versed in how to operate the Cabinet.

## The Right Time for Legislation for Peace and Security

—You mentioned “things unrealized,” but what were the priorities of the second Abe Cabinet?

**Kanehara:** The first thing we did in the area of diplomacy and security was to create the National Security Council (NSC). The bill had been prepared at the time of the first Abe Cabinet so the new law was made based on that to establish the NSC as well as the National Security Secretariat (NSS) as its secretariat. The NSC was Prime Minister Abe’s personal initiative. In the prewar period, the Empire of Japan collapsed, because the civilian control of the military was completely lost. Built with that bitter historical experience, I agreed with the Prime Minister about the need for the Cabinet to have strong institution that could unite politics and diplomacy with military affairs. The NSC is the pivot of civilian control after all.

The Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets (2013) was also important. The reason Japan can share information with the “Five Eyes” countries now is because we have finally established a strict system for protecting state’s secrets.

The next issues, which also got more resistance from the opposition parties, were the matters of the Legislation for Peace and Security (2015) that has allowed Japan the use of right of collective self-defense as well as the Statement on the 70th Anniversary of the End of the World War II.

—Yes, the Legislation for Peace and Security (enforced on September 30, 2015) was quite heavily criticized by the opposition parties and some media outlets.

**Kanehara:** Controversial issues like security (the Japan–US Alliance, the Self - Defense Forces [SDF]), the Constitution, education, and historical perception are like “vestiges” of the 1955 system and there is a certain number of people who oppose government policy as a conditioned response. In 1955, reflecting the Cold War, Japanese domestic politics was polarized between Liberal Democratic Party and Japan’s socialist party. When debating the Legislation for Peace and Security, it was often said that “public opinion is split in two,” but I don’t think that was the case. When it comes to the restrained exercise of the right of collective self-defense, I believe the majority of the Japanese people well understand that the international environment around Japan has changed considerably and that this requires a realistic response. Even inside the then Democratic Party of Japan, which opposed this, there were at least some, mainly key figures and young persons, whose real feeling was that they understood this need. We kept receiving tall orders from the Komeito, the LDP’s coalition partner, but we achieved very fruitful discussions between Liberal Democratic Party and Komeito; the ruling coalition.

The turning point came when three constitutional scholars expressed that the legislation was unconstitutional in the hearing at the Commission on the Constitution of the House of Representatives on June 4, 2015. The opposition parties switched to total resistance tactics and some of the media outlets aligned with this, thus instantaneously turning it into a tense political situation like sheer power struggle. When the government and ruling parties face the total opposition without compromise, they just have to check their timing and push past it. The Cabinet approval rating dropped for a time, but it soon recovered. I think this is another sign that “the time was right” rather than the other way around.

—The establishment of the NSC and the Legislation for Peace and Security brought significant development to Japan’s legislation on security.

**Kanehara:** There was development, but it will probably take another four or five years before we master the system. The position of Secretary General of the NSS now went from Yachi Shotaro, who used to work at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to Kitamura Shigeru from the National Police Agency, but what’s important now is whether people from the various agencies that support the NSS, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and the National Police Agency (intelligence), can come together and create a new organizational culture for the NSC.

To be frank, our biggest challenge is whether civilian control will operate in an emergency. Let’s say a situation develops where the SDF has to start to fight in a defensive operation, then the SDF will move like the torrential water unleashed from the water gate of a dam. Meanwhile, the government has to coordinate national affairs on a large scale in a range of areas, including foreign affairs, protecting the people, finances, transportation, logistics, and radio communication, since it’s a national emergency. The prime minister, elected leader from the people has to take command of both SDF military operations and all government affairs. Japan has no such experience. A key issue will be how the government can accumulate experience centering on the NSC that assists the Prime Minister. I think we still have most of the climb ahead of us.

## The Historical View Expressed in the Statement on the 70th Anniversary of the End of the World War II

—The “Statement on the 70th Anniversary of the End of the World War II” (statement by the Prime Minister on August 14, 2015) was announced in that same 2015.

**Kanehara:** For the government, the Statement was more difficult to handle. With the historical perception issue, the historical view of the various victors like the US, the UK, France, China, and the Soviet Union, lumped together as “anti-fascist democratic forces,” has become a kind of “standard,” and whenever something deviates from that, there will be criticism coming domestically and from abroad.

I understand the Statement to have two pillars. The first is that Japan, now as a leader of the liberal international order, regrets what ought to be regretted. The other is that the international community itself has matured ethically over the course of the hundred years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so that Japan’s actions should be objectively praised in the context of world history.

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the world became divided into a two-story structure consisting of the Western colonial empires at the top and the Asian and African colonies at the bottom. This unjust international order was demolished in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by a liberal value system of absolute equality of respecting individual rights and the world order assumed a flat single-story structure as countries in Asia and Africa became independent and racial discrimination was repealed as an institution.

Japan caused the Manchurian Incident after the military authorities completely out of the civilian control started acting rashly in the 1930s, moving to pursue the expansionist national interests by force. That was a mistake. However, there was nothing wrong about the ideal of a free and equal international community that does not differentiate on the basis of race, religion, or ethnicity that the Japanese had pursued since the prewar period. This is the new historical view expressed in the Statement and I think it was widely accepted by the Japanese people. Most Japanese have been seeking an objective and proud historical narrative such as the Statement. At the same time, it is unfortunate that some outdated media outlets did not go beyond superficial reporting about the “four keywords” [appeared in the Statement by Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi in 1995; apology, remorse, colonial rule and aggression] and refrained from talking about the historical view and world vision of the Statement as a whole.

—How did you view the reactions from abroad or the historical views of individual countries?

**Kanehara:** Looking at the reactions from abroad, I think a new image of Prime Minister Abe as a liberal patriot took hold in the US. China and South Korea have their own domestic circumstances and they naturally react accordingly.

To China, the historical issues are primarily a strategic diplomacy card for keeping Japan at bay. Secondly, and this is a more fundamental issue, patriotism and historical perceptions have become an important ideology for giving legitimacy to the rule of the Communist Party of China (CPC).

I’ll add about the latter that the communist ideology lost its luster as China moved toward reform and opening up, thus turning the socialist economy into a mere shell of what it was meant to be. Then, history—meaning the “founding myth” of modern China as the CPC expelled the invader Japan during World War II—was pushed to the fore as an ideology to replace communism. The historical issues were

created in inseparable conjunction with reform and opening up in the era of Deng Xiao Ping. I think we need to consider how the historical perceptions are an extremely political ideological tool in China, for inspiring patriotism in the people, suppressing various domestic dissatisfactions, and avoid the “Peaceful Evolution” theory of the liberal countries. The historical issues represent the potential wrath of the giant dragon that is China.

——How about South Korea?

**Kanehara:** What’s difficult about South Korea is that their domestic cold war is still ongoing because of the continued existence of North Korea. During the democratization of South Korea in 1987, leftists were released from prison and the domestic cold war commenced. Since democratization, South Korea has seen repeated rigid debate between conservatives and progressives, as if copying the conflict between left and right in the domestic cold war that Japan had in the 1960s. The historical issues with Japan are indispensable for the left to attack the right as “Japanese puppets” in South Korean domestic politics. In fact, there are many belonging to the left who don’t even consider the historical issues as a diplomatic matter with Japan. Just like it took half a century for Japan to overcome its domestic anti-Americanism, I think a more mature strategic discussion between Japan and South Korea will become possible as South Korea undergoes a generation shift.

### **The Strategic Worldview as Seen in the TPP and FOIP**

——You advanced the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement in the area of economic diplomacy.

**Kanehara:** Not just the TPP, but free trade agreements like the Japan–EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and the Japan–US Trade Agreement on goods (TAG) have also become precious infrastructure in the global economy. Especially significant is the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP, the so-called TPP11), which Japan struggles mightily with to put together after the US dropped out. That is the first case where Japan took the lead to create a mega free trade zone.

The TPP11 is an economic cooperation agreement, but if we start holding regular TPP11 summits in the future, then they will necessarily come to have meaning as political meetings and could potentially become extremely important strategic meetings. If the US returns to the table, then the strategic significance will increase even more. I think the reason China is showing interest in the TPP11 is because they are thinking about its possible political functions in the future.

——I take it that you’re saying that the Abe Administration has a grand strategic vision.

**Kanehara:** This is not limited to the TPP, but Abe Diplomacy is built on a sense of strategic balance to find more friendly nations and reduce the number of enemies in an effort to stabilize relations with China on equal terms, bearing in mind that China is becoming increasingly powerful as well as is oriented toward a vertical world order. For Japan, this means having the alliance with the US as the foundation, pulling in Australia and India, bringing together the ASEAN countries, deepening relations with fellow democratic countries in Europe, maintaining friendly relations with Russia, and making relations with China equal and stable.

In this sense, the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity: Japan’s Expanding Diplomatic Horizons,” which was launched by Foreign Minister Aso Taro in the first Abe Cabinet, and the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) of the second Abe Cabinet are ideas that go in the same direction. In short, they are oriented toward maintaining a flat liberal international order.

The concept of a liberal international order is what is known as the rules-based international community in Europe. This is an exceedingly common-sense worldview in the liberal West, but it can’t be said to have won widespread acceptance in Japan yet. Seen from this perspective, Prime Minister Abe and Deputy Prime Minister Aso are two of few foreign policy makers who have this internationally popular worldview. In reality, I don’t think there’s been any prime minister in recent years with an interest in foreign policy as great as Prime Minister Abe.

### **“Strengthening the Functions of the Cabinet” (and the Prime Minister’s Leadership) Is a Fruit of Reforms over Many Years**

——A “strong Prime Minister’s Office” has taken charge of policies under Prime Minister Abe and Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga. What was your perspective from the inside?

**Kanehara:** As I said in the beginning, this was the second administration of Prime Minister Abe, so a major element was that we could build a “Team Abe” that brought together a strong lineup in the form of cabinet members, party executives, and a secretary team with deep knowledge of the Prime Minister’s Office.

——But wouldn’t it be difficult to actually move the bureaucratic organization and develop policies with unity in the Prime Minister’s Office alone?

**Kanehara:** As you say, a big component at the heart of this was the realization of “Strengthening the Functions of the Cabinet” since Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro’s Prime Minister’s Office reforms in the 1980s and Prime Minister Hashimoto (Ryutaro)’s administrative reforms in the 1990s.

——It was frequently reported that Executive Secretary to the Prime Minister Imai Takaya had a lot of power...

**Kanehara:** You need to understand that everyone in “Team Abe” had their own roles. The role of the political leader is to supply the bureaucratic organizations with a grand political course as well as to explain it to the general public and persuade them of it, and it’s this interface with the people that is their biggest job.

Meanwhile, actual policy implementation requires moving the bureaucratic organization. The Special Advisor and Executive Secretary to the Prime Minister acts as the Prime Minister’s “alter ego” and has the job of accurately conveying the Prime Minister’s intentions down to the bureaucratic organization. Yet since the actual moving limbs are the bureaucratic organization, the Prime Minister’s intentions and his secretary’s instructions need to be factorized, the work subdivided and organized to facilitate the actions of the bureaucratic organizations, and proposals coming from the various

ministries and agencies at times sent back for reworking. That's the role of the officers of the Cabinet Secretariat (CAS) under Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Sugita. If this doesn't function properly, the Prime Minister's Office will drift away from the bureaucratic organization in Kasumigaseki to collude with LDP policy tribes and ministry leaders, thereby creating a world rampant with the pursuit of "ministerial interests" and "private interests."

That power is diffused and it's unclear who's in charge was long a characteristic and defect of Japanese politics. In order to rectify this, deputy cabinet secretaries like Mr. Ishihara Nobuo (in office 1987–1995) from the Ministry of Home Affairs (currently the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications), Mr. Furukawa Tejiro (in office 1995–2002) from the Ministry of Health and Welfare (currently the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare) worked in their capacity as administrative officers to strengthen the functions of the Cabinet. Now Mr. Sugita Kazuhiro is deputy chief cabinet Secretary, and under him come the Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretaries like me.

Up until the 1990s, the CAS's main task was to schedule Cabinet meetings without having much of a say on policy. The Act for Partial Revision of the Cabinet Act of the Mori Yoshiro Cabinet (2000–2001) gave the CAS authority to plan and coordinate principal policies. The CAS is a direct "retainer" or king's men of the Prime Minister and Chief Cabinet Secretary. The number of staff members have been bolstered considerably. It's thanks to the establishment of a system where the Prime Minister's intentions are translated into instructions from the Prime Minister's Office to Kasumigaseki or the bureaucratic organization that the Prime Minister is now able to exercise so much leadership.

—There has been criticism that "bureaucrats are spontaneously and anticipatorily granting special treatment (*sontaku*) to the Prime Minister's Office because it controls the personnel affairs of each ministry and agency through the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs."

**Kanehara:** I think the Prime Minister should take political leadership over the bureaucrats, and it is a standard governance style among developed countries in the West. There's nothing strange about the Prime Minister, as the superior, exercising leadership over the bureaucratic organization, as the subordinate. That's political leadership in a democratic state.

Even so, the relationship between the political leadership and the bureaucracy is more complex than that. No matter how brilliant the Prime Minister, it would take three or four years to steer the massive Japanese governments as his own limbs. Thus, I guess any leadership exercised by a Prime Minister will be difficult to achieve unless the administration persists for a relatively long period.

—If policy is developed under the leadership of the Prime Minister, then the way politicians try to coordinate interests in the ruling party will change too.

**Kanehara:** A straightforward example is the TPP. Previous FTA negotiations had been Japan asking the other countries to open up their automobile market in exchange for liberalization for agricultural produce. The government always racked its brains tremendously over the latter, so that the trade issues to a considerable extent became domestic affairs as they coordinated with actors in the agricultural sectors and the LDP's farm policy tribe.

The TPP was groundbreaking in that the Japanese government's TPP Headquarters was established in 2015, in which a high ranking Domestic Coordinator was assigned to coordinate domestically on the basis of instructions from the Prime Minister and Chief Cabinet Secretary. The first one to take up the post was Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary Sasaki Toyonari. It was groundbreaking that he maneuvered behind the scenes at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, the Ministry of Finance, and the LDP's farm policy tribe while also being able to aggregate the Prime Minister Office's negotiation policy and engaging in the negotiations. It's unmistakably true that one of the Abe administration's achievements was the creation of a new form of trade negotiations that coordinates domestically while negotiating externally at the same time. This new approach proved so effective. The TPP Headquarters then went on to work its magic in the Japan–EU EPA and TAG negotiations as well. I think the TPP Headquarters will become like the Office of United States Trade Representative (USTR) in the future.

### **Lead the Unity of the Western World!**

——Prime Minister Abe Also Made his Presence Felt in the Summit Diplomacy.

**Kanehara:** Right now, the Prime Minister himself is the playmaker of diplomacy. Next to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, he is the one who has attended the most G7 Summit meetings and he's a leader in the discussions. He was the only leader in the world who could face the hard-to-please President Trump on equal terms at the Japan–US Summit Meeting.

——Please tell us again about the achievements of the Abe Diplomacy and the future of Japan.

**Kanehara:** The first achievement of the Abe Diplomacy has been the establishment of a strategic outlook that seeks worldwide strategic balance with the emergence of China in mind as well as diplomatic practice to realize that. Secondly, we took the lead in securing the liberal international political and economic order that is being created in Asia. I believe it comes down to these two points. The foundation of this is the individualistic and liberal philosophy that is deeply rooted in the Japanese of the postwar era, coupled with trust in the current liberal world order.

I think the conflict between the US and China will continue. The US has recently been decoupling from China in the areas of semiconductors and telecommunications, but this is something that really can't work effectively unless the whole West does it. It's only when the whole West is united that a powerful message can be sent to China. The US presidential elections are coming up soon, but I think that Japan will keep sending this message to the US and the other Western countries, and in particular, I believe that Japan is expected to stand at the forefront of the development of the liberal international order in Asia.

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Graduated from the University of Tokyo in 1981 and entered the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Served as Director of the Policy Coordination Division, Foreign Policy Bureau, Deputy Chief of Mission in Seoul, Republic of Korea, and Director-General of the International Legal Affairs Bureau before being appointed Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary with the formation of the second Abe Cabinet in 2012. He was concurrently appointed to the newly established Deputy Secretary General of National Security Secretariat in 2014. He retired from public office in 2019. His publications include *Senryaku gaiko genron* (A grand strategy of Japan for the 21st century) and *Rekishi no kyokun* (Lessons of History: Reasons of Japan's failure and the future national strategy).

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