

## Abe Shinzo talks about Japan's diplomacy during the seven years and eight months he was in office: Reinforcing the Japan-US alliance, the foundation of Japan's revitalization

The second Abe administration was the longest in modern Japan and Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's track record on foreign and security policy has earned high marks. What were his thoughts and decisions as he faced an increasingly severe situation in Northeast Asia as Prime Minister? We listen to the former prime minister's thoughts, with a focus on Japan-US relations and the issue regarding perceptions of history.

### Tanaka Akihiko, President of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)

**Tanaka Akihiko:** You were in charge of the longest running government in Japan's modern history and negotiated with world leaders. What events left a big impression on you?

**Abe Shinzo:** There have been many... In June 2013, six months after the second administration was inaugurated, the G8 Summit was held in Lough Erne, in the United Kingdom. This was before the 2014 Crimean crisis, so Russia was also a participant. One of the important themes was the Syrian issue, and determining the G8's stance on the Assad administration.



Tanaka Akihiko,  
President of GRIPS



G8 and EU leaders photographed on June 17, 2013  
Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

Basically, only Russian President Vladimir Putin was standing up for the Assad administration, and the remaining seven countries were either calling for Assad to be removed from power or criticizing him strongly. Debate among the leaders was very intense. The G7/G8 summits were opportunities for the leaders to unleash their skills, marked by their insights and their true intentions. This was a crucial difference from the G20 and other international summits.

## Witnessing Putin's strength at the G8 Summit

**Tanaka:** You faced one of the most severe conflicts in international politics shortly after the start of your second administration.

**Abe:** That very much describes the situation. President Putin's stance left a strong impression on me. While other leaders were calling for Assad to resign, Putin said that he did not care if Assad resigned. However, he asked who would govern Syria next? He challenged us to name the person. The G7 leaders said they had the Free Syrian Army, in response to which Putin asked if the Free Syrian Army had ever won a battle. He said they are "moderates" and that "moderates" do not fight. He said that he knew that the west were selling weapons to them and that they were reselling them to others. Putin asked if they were really ready to govern Syria. This was realism.

**Tanaka:** Did the United States take a particularly tough approach toward the Syrian issue?

**Abe:** Yes, they did. Unlike Europe and Japan, which had their own interests and wanted to avoid a worsening of their relations with Russia, the United States took a strong stand. In connection with our earlier discussion, President Obama severely criticized the Assad administration for the use of chemical weapons and pushed President Putin into a corner, saying that the United States had evidence. Putin countered, saying he had heard that line before. He said "Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction [WMD], did it?" Putin was never on his back foot against the seven other nations. Indeed, he appeared almost dominant.

I do not want to say that Putin was right. Whether good or bad, his ideas were based on a strong concept of power politics believing that in the Middle East, the ruthless and strong win. Looking at ISIL [the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant] and other Islamic extremists that subsequently emerged, I think that, in hindsight, Putin had a good understanding of the reality in the Middle East.

**Tanaka:** It sounds difficult to reach a consensus.

**Abe:** The Japanese way of thinking is that there must be something that the eight leaders can agree on, even without reaching a fundamental agreement, and I worked to find that area of agreement.

Japan wanted to avoid a critical conflict with Russia because there was a summit scheduled with President Putin following the G8 Summit. Territorial issues remain between Japan and Russia and we must move forward with peace treaty negotiations. Moreover, as we share a huge neighbor in China, we need a cooperative relationship with Russia and so our approach needs to be different from the approaches of Europe and the United States. The summit was an opportunity for us to squarely face this difficult reality.

## NSC, the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets and the Legislation for Peace and Security

**Tanaka:** From the beginning, your second administration was energetic and dealt with serious pending matters, including the establishment of the National Security Council [NSC], the Act on the Protection of

Specially Designated Secrets and the “2015 Legislation for Peace and Security,” and the formulation of the Statement on the 70th Anniversary of the End of World War II. Each of these issues would be administration-defining for any administration. What were your policy priorities?

**Abe:** Government stability is a major prerequisite for dealing with challenging issues and that was something my first administration was unfortunately lacking. The diplomatic imperative for my administration was to develop and adopt specific policies to secure national safety and at the same time improve Japan’s international presence amid the severe international situation in Northeast Asia. To accomplish this, it was necessary to readdress issues that had been left unfinished five years prior.



Party Leaders’ Debate on the Fundamental National Policies was held on December 4, 2013  
Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

The first issue that I took on was the NSC. To develop a fundamental strategy for diplomacy and security policy, I appointed Yachi Shotaro, the former Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, to be the Secretary General of the National Security Secretariat. The NSC was established in December 2013, and we simultaneously published the National Security Strategy [NSS]. The most important role of the NSC was to organically control diplomacy, the Self-Defense Forces and intelligence under the auspices of the Prime Minister. However, regarding intelligence, our position on confidentiality was not sufficient in Japan, and that made it difficult for our allies to fully trust us. Accordingly, we drafted the Bill on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets (SDS Act) at the same time. The NSC and the SDS Act are one set.

**Tanaka:** Then in 2015, the Legislation for Peace and Security was enacted.

**Abe:** Another mission of my administration was to shore up the Japan-US alliance, which had been shaken during the previous Democratic Party of Japan [DPJ] administrations. How can we develop the alliance so that both nations are able to substantively help each other in response to changing times? The answer to this question was the Legislation for Peace and Security. The fundamental direction of the bill had been laid out by the Advisory Panel on Reconstruction of the Legal Basis for Security, of which you were one of the members, during my first administration. In my second administration, we wrote the bill referring to reports from the Advisory Panel, which had been reestablished.

Japanese fighter planes and Aegis warships are now able to protect US aircraft carriers and bombers, for example. This mission is being carried out 15 to 16 times a year and I think that it was crucially important in fortifying the Japan-US alliance.

**Tanaka:** Has it been also useful politically in managing Japan’s relations with the United States?

**Abe:** I believe so. In particular, it had great implications when it came to the Trump administration. President Donald Trump often spoke about how the United States was forced to bear an excessive burden for global security, that its allies should take on more of that burden and that the concept of the alliance itself should be reviewed if allies were not able to do so. To a significant degree, these comments reflect

the thinking of the United States and its public opinion, and Trump was direct and explicit in expressing this thinking. During the Summit, I was challenged by Trump. He noted that if North Korea were to attack Japan, the United States would surely fight to defend Japan. However, if the United States were to be attacked by another country, would Japan be able to do anything at all?

I explained that this was why we had formulated the Legislation for Peace and Security. We changed the interpretation of the Constitution to ensure mutual aid for the Japan-US alliance. I lost 10 points in my support rating because of it. I gave specific explanations, including the Japan Self Defense Force's escorting of American ships. For the most part, Trump appeared convinced. Had we not had the Legislation for Peace and Security, we would have faced incomparably more severe pressure in terms of the cost of stationing US troops in Japan, for example.

### **Special relationship with President Trump**

**Tanaka:** You became friendly with two American presidents, Obama and Trump. Their individual characters are very different.

**Abe:** The two are very different people. President Obama has a businesslike manner. He is a lawyer, so he would say, “we will have a meeting if we have an important topic to discuss. For example, a fifteen-minute meeting will suffice if we meet with this person on that topic.” President Trump, on the other hand, would say, “let’s meet and talk about various things over dinner.” Conversation topics covered a wide range of public and private subjects. In contrast, Obama focused on business so that things would proceed smoothly as planned [laughs]. They had contrasting approaches also in that sense.

**Tanaka:** Your reputation for effective diplomacy with President Trump has been established internationally. The relationship the two of you developed began in 2016 when you met with Trump immediately after the US presidential elections. Why did you decide to meet him?

**Abe:** In September that year, in the runup to the election, I met with presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in New York when I attended the United Nations General Assembly. This was scheduled at an early stage as it was widely predicted, including by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, that Hillary would surely win the 2016 election [laughs]. When the planned meeting with her was only several days away, I, a politician, changed my mind, as anything can happen in an election. I approached the Trump camp about a meeting, although it was possible that they would refuse my proposal due to the short notice. Regrettably, Trump’s schedule was full and I was introduced to his friend Wilbur L. Ross, a lawyer. Ross later became Secretary of Commerce in the Trump administration. My connection to Trump was hanging by a thread.

I decided to meet with Trump immediately after he was elected president because he had repeated misconceptions of the alliance during the election campaign. I was afraid that the Japan-US alliance would drift apart unless they were corrected quickly.

**Tanaka:** People were voicing concerns and cynicism about Trump in the United States and in Europe. Under these circumstances, it must have been a risk to visit him.

**Abe:** Although some criticized me for taking the time to meet with Trump before his inauguration, I thought that the situation warranted the meeting. I was going to attend the APEC leaders' summit in Peru and planned to make a side trip to the United States. I called Trump directly and asked him where he would be on that date. Wherever he would be, I would come and meet him. The plan for our meeting in New York was made.



Meeting with the President-elect of the United States on November 17, 2016  
Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

Trump had a preoccupation with the perceptions of him as a strange figure, both at home and abroad. I think that he was grateful that a prime minister from Japan, a G7 member country, came to meet him quickly.

I had three objectives for the meeting. One was the economy. Japan's investment has created employment in the United States. Japan exports approximately 1.7 million automobiles to the United States. But Japanese automobile manufacturers also manufacture approximately 3.7 million automobiles in their factories in the United States and export them to the rest of the world. I spoke about this nonstop. The second purpose was to explain the security situation. North Korea was an urgent issue, and the medium- to long-term issue was China. China is pursuing a program of unilaterally changing the status quo in Northeast Asia. To achieve a military balance with China as it emerges, Japan and the United States must work closely together. The last purpose was golf. I suggested that we play golf together in the near future. To my surprise, he carefully listened to what I had to say.

**Tanaka:** This probably led to the first Japan - US summit in February 2017.

**Abe:** There had been concerns about the possibility that President Trump would make stringent demands about the Japan-US alliance. However, as things turned out, a substantive joint announcement was made, as it referred to a commitment to deter Chinese aggression and the application of Article 5 of the Japan-US Security Treaty to the Senkaku Islands. I think that this positive result was due to my discussions with Trump before his inauguration, in addition to the Legislation for Peace and Security in 2015.

### **Participating in defining the rules for TPP11**

**Tanaka:** On the other hand, the United States withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement. Was the United States worried about Japan promoting the TPP without the United States?

**Abe:** I tried to persuade President Trump to remain in the TPP several times but was not able to change his thinking. A fair amount of resistance notwithstanding, he insisted on fulfilling his election platform, including the withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement. I can understand his position. However, I was absolutely sure that, considering my relationship with him, he would not harbor distrust or intervene as Japan promoted the TPP without the United States.

Other TPP countries were watching Japan after the US withdrew. Seeing how they reacted, I felt early on that Japan could still go ahead with the TPP. Although I said in a Diet session that US participation would be essential in an attempt to rattle the United States, when I visited Australia and Southeast Asia in January 2017, I proposed the revival of the TPP without the United States to Australian Prime Minister Turnbull. In my subsequent visit to Vietnam, I broached the same subject with Prime Minister Phuc.

**Tanaka:** The international community, including the United States, values the important role that Japan has played in building international economic systems through the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership [the CPTPP, or TPP11]. However, the United States demanded bilateral talks after it withdrew from the TPP. There was heightened concern in Japan due to this pressure from the United States. Pessimistic views that Japan would be intimidated were widespread at that time.

**Abe:** Following the conclusion of the CPTPP and during the process towards the signing of the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement [EPA], the ranching and farming industry associations in the United States made their voices heard. As they are a base of support for the Republican Party, I believed that negotiations between Japan and the United States would be unavoidable. However, Japan had signed the CPTPP and could not make any compromise that exceeded this foundation. Economic Revitalization Minister Motegi Toshimitsu negotiated with United States Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer. In spite of the extreme intensity of the negotiations, there was the aspect that making proposals was facilitated by the fact that the framework for negotiations already existed. After I announced my intention to step down, President Trump said in our last telephone conversation, “Shinzo may have beaten me in our trade negotiations.”

## **New historical perspective expressed in the Statement on the 70th Anniversary of the End of World War II**

**Tanaka:** I would like to ask about Japan-China and Japan-South Korea relations. After your second administration took office, I felt that these relationships were close to their nadir, considering the Senkaku Islands issue with China and the issue surrounding the compensation of comfort women in South Korea. What was your thinking about diplomacy with those countries?

**Abe:** We had established an agreement with China during my first administration regarding a mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests. Based on this agreement, the Japanese government has taken an uncompromising stance on Chinese government vessels' continuous incursions into Japan's waters near the Senkaku Islands. With the avoidance of physical loss on-site as the first priority, we reinforced the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) patrol boats and deployed Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) ships for vigilance and surveillance activities. Some media outlets reported that, during the DPJ administrations, when Chinese warships were in sight, JMSDF ships were to move back out of sight. In fact, out of excessive fear of conflict, the government at that time was extremely bound to fewer vigilance and security methods to address incursions into Japan's territorial land, air and waters. Needless to say, this was not a deployment of security forces. My Cabinet made it sure that JCG ships be deployed closer to Chinese ships while JMSDF ships show their presence behind, thus preventing China from changing the facts on-site.

I met Park Geun-hye when she was South Korea's opposition leader. For this reason, I had some hope for an improvement in relations between Japan and South Korea. I think that she was very cautious and avoided being called pro-Japan as the daughter of the late Park Chung-hee.

When I went to pray at Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013, the atmosphere surrounding the two countries deteriorated further, but I didn't lose hope to improve relations.



Japan-South Korea Summit Meeting on November 2, 2015  
Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

**Tanaka:** Did you plan to visit Yasukuni Shrine early on? Looking back at that time, I think that your administration was dealing with the situation with the goal of not provoking the ire of China or South Korea until around the fall of 2013. However, as there had been no signs from either country of any improvement in the situation, I surmise that you may have thought it best to visit Yasukuni Shrine at this exact time.

**Abe:** It is hard to answer that question [laughs]. I did think that I would visit the shrine at least once while I was in office as prime minister, before any initiatives to improve relations.

There were issues between Japan and China/South Korea. I thought that there should be frank discussions with the leaders of both countries, without holding back. However, both countries tried to impose conditions on the holding of summits, for example. These meetings are held to solve issues and if the other side demands that Japan first make unilateral concessions, we cannot accept that demand. Although I thought that it would take some time for either country to change its behavior, I felt that I would just have to wait.

However, based on diplomacy that takes a panoramic perspective of the world map, I thought that, if there were no developments in the relationships Japan had with China and South Korea, I would not be impatient, but rather reinforce Japan's presence by strengthening our relationships with the United States and the countries in Southeast Asia, while at the same time criticizing China for its advances in the South China Sea, for example, and using Japan's enhanced presence as a foothold for reengaging with China and South Korea.

**Tanaka:** Around that time, your statement on the 70th anniversary of the end of the World War II attracted attention.

**Abe:** As the Murayama Statement on the 50th anniversary and the Koizumi Statement on the 60th anniversary already existed, I questioned at first whether it was necessary to make a statement every ten years. However, I mentioned during my first administration that one of the missions of the Abe administration was to make a "departure from the postwar regime." I believed that it was a mission of my cabinet as a conservative administration to put an end to the conditions abnormally created in the postwar era. Accordingly, I established the Advisory Panel on the History of the 20th Century and on Japan's Role and the World Order in the 21st Century to prepare the Statement on the 70th Anniversary of the End of World War II. Around the same time, I delivered speeches overseas, including the speech in the Parliament of Australia [July 2014], the speech at Bandung and the Address to a Joint Meeting of the US Congress [both in April 2015].

**Tanaka:** Australia was a country that had looked sternly on Japan regarding World War II.

**Abe:** In January 2014 when I attended the Davos Conference, then Prime Minister Abbott requested that we talk for only 15 minutes. As I had visited Yasukuni Shrine the previous month, I thought that he would complain about it. However, he praised my speech at the Davos conference and said that he would assent to my stance on Japan's taking a global role in the realm of security. He felt that Japan did not need to be devalued because of the war. Having heard this, I spoke to the Australian Parliament to show our sympathy for the soldiers who had lost their lives in the war and to their families and focused on our sense of gratitude, rather than apologies or reflection, to the people who overcame difficulties, had a generous attitude toward Japan and made efforts to develop relations between Japan and Australia. The response I received was great, and it led to my address to the US Congress later.

**Tanaka:** With this background, you announced the Statement on the 70th Anniversary of the End of World War II.



PM Abe and President Obama visited Hiroshima on May 27, 2016  
Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office



PM Abe visited the Pearl Harbor Visitor Center with President Obama on December 27, 2016  
Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

**Abe:** A decisive difference between The Murayama Statement and my statement is that Murayama's statement only focused on Japan, while my statement developed a discussion on the 100-year span of history to shed light on the shape of the international community in those days. One hundred years ago, European countries had colonies all over the world. Invasion and colonial domination were not issues limited only to Japan. They were issues of the entire world. Based on this, I proposed a reconsideration upon the 70th Anniversary of the End of World War II. I think that a positive result of my proposal was President Obama's visit to Hiroshima and my visit to Pearl Harbor the following year. These marked a true reconciliation between Japan and the United States.

### **History should not be politicized**

**Tanaka:** In fact, the Statement on the 70th Anniversary of the End of World War II was a message that China, South Korea and Japanese people who had been critical of Japanese perceptions of history had to



accept to a certain degree. After taking this course of action, it was not easy for these countries to make the issue of Japan's perception of history a diplomatic issue.

**Abe:** I agree. I mentioned the reconciliation between Japan and the United States earlier. Another issue was the December 2015 agreement on the comfort women issue with South Korea. This was the result of Yachi's resilience through difficult negotiations over a one-year period. As a result, the foreign ministers of both countries held a press conference for the world to witness the announcement that the issue was resolved finally and irreversibly. Regarding this, the Moon Jae-in administration subsequently violated the agreement, so some criticize it as meaningless. Although the Moon administration's actions are extremely regrettable, Japan is able to demand that South Korea keep the promise that it made. We can call on the international community to recognize our argument as rational.

**Tanaka:** As such, both the Statement on the 70th Anniversary of the End of World War II and the agreement on the comfort women issue reinforced Japan's position internationally. However, conservative pundits supporting you appeared to be unhappy.

**Abe:** It is an important point. There was severe criticism particularly regarding the agreement on the comfort women issue. This is one of the dilemmas of a conservative government. As diplomacy engages with others, it is not easy to protect Japan's national interests and raise its reputation in the international community. For example, regarding the perception of history, all matters related to Northeast Asia become political documents rather than academic studies of facts and sharing of them. Under these circumstances, I think that we need to take a gradual approach, making step-by-step strategic moves. Twenty years after the Murayama Statement, we announced a statement indicating new perspectives to the international community and committing internationally to the agreement on the comfort women issue. Five years have passed and I think that this has been gradually recognized by conservative opinion leaders.

**Tanaka:** When did you begin to have this perspective on diplomacy and strategy?

**Abe:** Reflection on my first administration had a great influence. Politicians must achieve results. Even if the score is 60 out of 100, I believe that a politician must make decisions and move forward with necessary measures if they lead to the advancement of the national interests.

*Translated from "Tokubetsu intabyu "Abe gaiko 7nen 8 kagetsu wo kataru (I)" –Nihon Fukkatsu no Ishizue to natta Nichibeidomei Saikyoka (Special Interview "Abe Shinzo talks about Japan's diplomacy during the seven years and eight months he was in office: Reinforcing the Japan-US alliance, the foundation of Japan's revitalization)," Gaiko (Diplomacy), Vol. 64 Nov./Dec. 2020pp. 6-15. (Courtesy of Toshi Shuppan) [March 2021]*

---

**ABE Shinzo**

Former Prime Minister of Japan

Born in 1954. Graduated from Seikei University. After working at Kobe Steel, Ltd., Abe Shinzo worked principally as a secretary to the Foreign Minister. As the candidate approved by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in the former first district of Yamaguchi Prefecture, he won a seat in the House of Representatives for the first time in 1993 and later held seats in the Diet for nine consecutive elections. During that time, he was named Chief Cabinet Secretary in the Diet and Secretary-General of the LDP, among other posts. He was Prime Minister (from 2006 to 2007 and 2012 to 2020) for a total of 3,188 days, 2,822 of them consecutively, both the longest in the history of Japan's constitutional politics.

**TANAKA Akihiko, Ph.D.**

President of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)

Tanaka graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Graduate School of Political Science in 1981 (with a Ph.D.). He has served as a professor at the University of Tokyo and as an Executive Director and Vice President of that institution. He was previously President of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) before taking up his current role in 2017. Since 2019 he has worked as the Editor-in-Chief of this publication. His published works include *Posuto kuraishisu no sekai* (The Post-Crisis World), *Ajia no naka no Nihon* (Japan in Asia: Post-Cold-War diplomacy) and *Atarashii chuusei* (The New Middle Ages: The World System in the 21st Century.).

---