

Japan, Friend of the United States

by Michael Curtis



Is Japan a great power or a middle power? It is not a member of the UN Security Council and is ultimately dependent on U.S. protection, yet it is a major regional power that helped contain communist regimes during the Cold War. It has the third largest economy in the world and is ranked as having the world's fourth most powerful military. Its leaders do not want to revise the militarism of the past, the rising sun, but they are prepared to play a larger role in international affairs. Japan has already acted as peacemaker in Cambodia, the island of Mindanao, and Myanmar. The rising star flag with its 16 red rays, often seen as symbol of militarism and imperialism, is rarely flown by civilians, though Japan has never formally apologized for imperial crimes.

The resignation of Shinzo Abe at age 65 as prime minister of Japan provides an opportunity to evaluate the role of the

Asian country with a population of 120 million, largely ethnically homogeneous though it has 17 million foreigners.

Shinzo Abe, scion of prominent political family, grandson of a prime minister, and son of a foreign minister is the first prime minister to have been born after World War II, and the youngest since the War, when in 2006 he first took the head position which he occupied for a year before resigning through illness. His second stint as leader started in December 2012 when Abe was 58, and lasted for almost eight years, making him the longest serving prime minister in Japanese history. He represents political stability after there had been seven leaders in seven years. His political party, Liberal Democrats, of which he has been the leader, won landslide victories in 2014, 2017 and 2019. The party won 33% of the vote and 218 of the 465 seats in the House of Representatives, and 39% of the vote and controls 170 of the 245 seats in the upper chamber.

Though Abe has been plagued by political problems as well as by Covid-19, he resigned because of illness, having suffered for some time from ulcerative colitis, a chronic intestinal disease which has no known cure. His successor is like to be a politician loyal to Abe, the 71 year old Yoshihide Suga, chief cabinet secretary, partly press secretary, partly chief of staff, who comes from a more humble background, son of a strawberry farmer, and who worked in a cardboard factory and fish market before entering politics. He is unlike his boss in two ways: he is believed to favor a free market but apparently lacks any explicit grand vision; and he does not play golf, as Abe has done with the U.S. President.

Abe is generally regarded as a conservative nationalist, but in practice he has been a pragmatic realist in both internal and foreign affairs. As a nationalist, he has been unwilling to define the character of World War II or to discuss war crimes by Japanese soldiers, "I think we have to wait for the estimation of historians." At best, he speaks of Japanese

“self-defense” in the War. But he strengthened ties with the U.S. and had cordial relations with his golf partner President Donald Trump, sought alliances with Australia and India to contain China, and been more assertive on the international scene, though uncomfortable with South Korea over the “comfort women” issue.

Abe is best known for his economic policies, popularly known as Abenomics, and proposed economic and social reforms in a country whose population is aging, and has a low birth rate. In essence his aims were to encourage economic growth, reduce unemployment, increase corporate earnings, enter into trade agreements, reduce the public debt, and revive the sluggish economy. The proposals were aimed with three “arrows:” bold and aggressive monetary policy, easing money by the Bank of Japan; flexible fiscal consolidation; and accelerate growth with government spending.

It partly worked as stock market prices increased as did consumer spending, the yen was weakened, thus helping exports and equity markets, and large firms. *The Economist* journal called Abenomics a mix of reflation, government spending and a growth strategy. The economic policy maintained a sense of stability, encourage start-ups, cut red tape, led to record employment. Steady inflation stimulated higher investment and spending, the Bank of Japan set a target of 2% inflation and bought trillions of government bonds.

But problems arose. The inflation rate of 2% was not reached. Consumer taxes rose twice, first from 5 % to 8 % in 2014, then 10 % tax increase in 2019. Public debt has risen as a percentage of GDP. The electricity market was liberalized, and two trade deals were reached, but there was little structural reform. One deal in September 2019 was a mini deal with the U.S. with exchange of US beef, pork and wheat in exchange for U.S. tariff reductions on a number of Japanese industrial products.

Abe tackled both internal social problems and international affairs. He was interested in increasing the role of women. At the UN on September 26, 2013 he spoke of the need for the international community to increase women's empowerment, and gender equality. In Japan the female employment rate did rise to about 66%, but this has rapidly declined as the result of Covid-19. In politics, the intention of Abe was not fulfilled. Only 47 of the 465 members of the House of Representatives are women, only 12% of legislators, senior officials, and managers are women, and only three of Abe's 20 cabinet ministers were women. However, the governor of Tokyo, Yuriko Koike, is a woman.

As a nationalist Abe wanted to revise Article 9 of the constitution to permit Japan to maintain military forces. His electoral slogan in 2012 was "take back Japan." He favored bolstered defense with new amphibious weapons, and also allowing Japanese forces to maneuver outside the country's borders. In 2015 he sponsored legislation that permitted Japanese troops, Self-Defense forces, created in July 1954, to engage in overseas combat and take part in missions, as in peacekeeping in the Sinai peninsula in 2019 alongside allied forces.

Even while prime minister, he visited Yasukuni shrine several times. The shrine is supposed to house not only the bodies of the war dead but also the "souls" of the dead. Two controversies have resulted. One is that because of the principle of separation of state and religion in Japan, it is improper for a government official, especially the prime minister, to visit a shrine. The other factor is that due to the nature of war crimes committed by some of the inmates it is even more improper for them to be honored by political figures.

On the international stage, Abe had good relations with the U.S. and with the 54,000 U.S. troops in Japan and with Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi. But still unresolved is the

dispute, 70 years old, with Russia over four islands that Japan calls Northern Territories, and Russia, the southern Kirils, over which Russia took control after World War II when it deported all Japanese. Now, a Russia community lives on the isles which are surrounded by rich fishing grounds, and may have offshore resources of oil and gas. In 1956 Russia restored diplomatic relations with Japan, but the latter never recognized the four islands as part of the Russian Kiril chain. Nevertheless, Abe wanted to strengthen political and economic relations with Russia, investing in Russia, holding joint military exercises and cultural exchanges of art collections. and suggested joint projects on the disputed isles. But the disputes with China over the uninhabited Senkaku islands and over Japan's sovereignty of Okinawa, where the U.S. has a large base, remain.

A troublesome painful and divisive issue is the continuing dispute with South Korea over the stations, really brothels, established 1932 to 1945 for "comfort women" who were forced to have sex with Japanese men every day, before and during the World War. At first, Abe questioned the role of military coercion in the recruitment of the women, estimated variously at 80,000 to 200,000, but in 2014 and December 2015 he upheld the apology, the Kono statement of August 1993, that the military did play a role, and agreed to a fund, about 1 million yen, to support the remaining women victims.

Covid-19 has led to problems in Japan as elsewhere. Among them are a vast economic decline, over 7% in the second quarter of 2020, the postponement of the summer Olympic games due to be held in Tokyo in July 2020, and delay in trade arrangements with the EU, and expanding, after the U.S. pulled out of it, the Trans-Pacific trade partnership to lower tariff and other barriers to trade, and indirectly to reduce dependence on Chinese trade.

Japan seeks to be a normal country with stable government, a self-defense force and no military aspirations. The U.S.

should maintain and welcome close relations with it.