

Japan's Foreign and Security Policy Under the 'Abe Doctrine': New Dynamism or New Dead End? by

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Prime Minister Abe's legacy will rest on his attempts to redefine Japan's relative position of power in the international system and marks a departure from the narrative of Japan being a reactive state.¹ In 2013, he envisioned 'Japan is back'² while responding to the larger debate concerning Japan's strategic future, as captured by Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye who raised a pertinent question: 'does Japan desire to continue to be a tier-one nation, or is she content to drift into tier-two status?'³ Given the fluidity in East Asian geopolitics and China's arrival as a key variable in the international system, Japan has been forced to respond to the asymmetrical power politics. As China is carving out a sphere of influence for itself which is increasingly eclipsing Japan's international stature, Abe has the task of presenting the case of where and how does Japan fit in.

With Chinese President Xi Jinping articulating the 'Chinese dream', his grand strategic ambitions like the Belt and Road Initiative, underscoring Chinese pre-eminence in Asia with 'new type of great power relations' and performing a critical role in designing the international financial order, Japanese Prime

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Minister Abe is adjusting to the new challenges in the Asia-Pacific and competing for strategic space and regional influence. He has articulated, though in ambiguous terms, his vision for Japan as a 'proactive contributor to peace'. Abe's greatest achievement in office is certainly his political will and determination to navigate through the fierce policy debates and redefine the contours of Japanese post-war security identity in concrete terms. By reinterpreting the narrow scope of Article 9 of the pacifist constitution, Abe has demonstrated Japan's willingness to proactively contribute to shaping the regional order—one that is favourable to Japanese interests.

However, is the approach that Japan has adopted under Prime Minister Abe sustainable? That is the fundamental question that Christopher W. Hughes addresses in this seminal work. With a huge body of literature on Japanese foreign and security policy and Japanese remilitarisation debate to his credit, he is widely acclaimed for his scholarship on Japan. In his previous work, *Japan's Remilitarisation* (2009), Hughes argued that Japan is inclining towards a more confident military role and Tokyo's remilitarisation will augment its international security character and reinforce the United States (US)–Japan alliance in regional and international security matters. However, it has to be cautiously managed so that it does not undermine stability. Hughes has also published *Japan's Security Policy and Ballistic Missile Defence* (2008; second edition forthcoming). He has contributed to the literature on Japanese security in yet another important work, *Japan's Security Agenda: Military, Economic, and Environmental Dimensions* (2004), where he explores if Tokyo's comprehensive approach to security policy is a feasible alternative paradigm. His research interests also include Japanese radicalism and terrorism, regionalism in East Asia, traditional and non-traditional security policy in post-Cold War and North Korea's political and economic relations.

In *Japan's Foreign and Security Policy under the 'Abe Doctrine'*, Hughes delivers a rich critique of what he calls the Abe doctrine. There are six chapters in the book and each reflects critical thinking and in-depth analyses of the fundamental issues in Japanese foreign and security policy. The book documents important developments in the policy landscape and suggests that despite the prognosis that the unfolding reforms under the Abe administration are 'limited and proportionate', these are in fact substantial in undoing the

constraints on the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF). He situates the ‘dynamic but also high risk’ Abe doctrine vis-à-vis the Yoshida doctrine and argues that while Abe’s posture is crafting a more proactive foreign policy and has witnessed some initial success in elevating Japan’s global profile, strategy-wise the policy is myopic, unsustainable and eventually damaging to Japan’s national interests in the long term and would have collateral damage in terms of regional relations. This is the central theme that runs through the six chapters of the book, critically evaluating the trajectory from Yoshida doctrine to Abe doctrine, its ideological underpinning, investigating the entrapment debate in the US–Japan alliance and examining Abe’s diplomacy in encircling China. This culminates into the heart of the work where Hughes identifies three great contradictions in the foundation of Abe doctrine and argues the case of Japan becoming an example of ‘Resentful Realism’, contrary to the narrative by Michael Green in his book, *Japan’s Reluctant Realism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). ‘Resentful Realism’, as articulated, is a circumstance where Japan is driven by alarm over China, trust deficit with the US, and an aspiration for reiteration of national pride and autonomy.

The book suggests that Prime Minister Abe’s foreign and security policy, shaped by ideological revisionism, has the ability to push Japan on a new international course. Hughes cogently argues that the Abe administration is essentially revisionist and nationalist in its approach and is pushing Japan onto a radical path. However, Abe’s revisionism is impregnated with fundamental contradictions that could eventually limit the value of this doctrine. The strength of this work lies in analysing the underlying incongruities in the doctrine itself. First, while the doctrine is built on universal and liberal values of the international system, Abe’s revisionist approach challenges the prevailing international norms and is thus inconsistent. Second, even though the doctrine strives to end the post-war order by way of historical revisionism, nonetheless the emphasis on history generates tensions not only in East Asia but also with its most valued strategic partner, the US. Finally, the Abe doctrine’s aim to achieve real autonomy and independence for Japan in the post-war period by locking Japan in increased dependence on the US is conflicting. The book rightly assesses that the doctrine has delivered mixed results, with Abe’s security policy

enabling Japan to shoulder greater international responsibilities, and navigating the issue of asymmetrical responsibilities in US–Japan relations and adversely affecting the Japan–East Asia relations.

As the region marked the 71st anniversary of World War II and nationalism grips East Asia, Hughes's work captures the evolving trajectory on historical revisionism and manifestly points at the role of Abe and revisionist group in attempting to promulgate a counter-narrative of history, especially the 'Kono statement' and 'comfort women issue'. Abe's efforts in what can be termed as radical revisionism are well documented in the book. However, from a more objective viewpoint, it is under Abe's leadership that Japan reached a historic agreement with South Korea on the issue of comfort women. Though Abe did not offer a personal apology in his August Statement marking the 70th anniversary of the war, he did mention that the 'position articulated by the previous cabinets will remain unshakable into the future'²⁴ and referred to the sufferings of comfort women. This reflects a tight ropewalk for Abe, balancing the powerful right-wing domestic constituency pressure and catering to the expectations of regional neighbours together with Japan's most important ally, the US, who at that time was apprehensive about the deteriorating relations between two of its key regional allies.

More importantly, while the book suggests that this doctrine, despite being brave, may not prove to be enduring, it does not elaborate on any policy prescription, course correction or recommendations for the Abe administration. What is also unclear is the author's expectations from other stakeholders, including the factions within Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), opposition political parties in Japanese democracy, interest groups and civil society, in acting as checks and balances to this doctrine. A key source of Abe's boldness lies in his political capital garnered from the lack of choices to voters in the absence of an effective opposition. While Japan is infamous for revolving door of Prime Ministers, Abe has managed to take advantage of a divided opposition, cleverly timed the 2014 election to pre-empt his internal and external opponents, displayed his political acumen by framing the election as a referendum on Abenomics (and pushing the divisive security and foreign policy issues outside the periphery of policy debates), consolidated his political power by averting attention from nationalist dogmas and

placing livelihood issues at the epicentre of the election campaign, and later claiming the mandate as a sweeping consent for his entire policy agenda.⁵

Hughes's book holds immense value for the strategic community and Japan watchers given its sharp focus, rich content and comprehensive critical analysis. The work has been published at an opportune time and takes stalk of the policy shifts, evolving debates and trends on some of the most critical issues shaping East Asia today—Japan's approach to nationalism, historical revisionism, Yasukuni shrine, Tokyo tribunals, comfort women issue, among others. It is certainly a qualitative value addition to the literature given the evolving regional security situation when Japan's neighbours are struggling to grasp what role Japan, as Prime Minister Abe continues to shape it, will play in shaping the future of the Asia-Pacific.

NOTES

1. Kent Calder, 'Japanese Foreign Economic Policy Formation: Explaining the Reactive State', *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 4, July 1988, pp. 517–41; Kenneth Pyle, *The Trade Crisis: How will Japan Respond?*, Seattle, WA: Society for Japanese Studies, 1987.
2. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'Japan is Back', Policy Speech by Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, at Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 22 February 2013.
3. Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, 'The U.S.–Japan Alliance: Anchoring Stability in Asia', Report of the CSIS Japan Chair, August 2012.
4. 'Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe', Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet, 14 August 2015.
5. Robert J. Pekkanen, Steven R. Reed and Ethan Scheiner, 'Conclusion: Japan's Bait-and-Switch Election 2014', in
6. Robert J. Pekkanen, Ethan Scheiner and Steven R. Reed (eds), *Japan Decides 2014: The Japanese General Election*, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 265–78.

