

PERSPECTIVE

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Southeast Asia-Japan Ties after Abe and Trump

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Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga (R) speaks next to a monitor displaying the virtual meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden (top L), Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison (bottom L) and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the virtual Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) meeting, at his official residence in Tokyo on March 12, 2021. Tokyo may lobby certain Southeast Asian countries to join the Quad. Photo: Kiyoshi Ota, POOL, AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide’s priorities are to combat Covid-19, realign Japan’s supply chains and address the pandemic’s economic fallout. Support for his leadership in the 2021 general elections is contingent on his performance in these areas.
- With Washington now having an experienced foreign policy and national security team in place, Suga is unlikely to play the same influential role in the US-Japan alliance as Abe did during the Obama and Trump years.
- Abe’s domestic legacy, along with Japan’s challenging external environment, suggests that Suga is almost certain to continue along his predecessor’s neo-conservative path towards Japan becoming a “normal” state.
- Tokyo can be expected to intensify its engagement with Southeast Asia, reaffirming the “silent” leadership role it has played in the region, both within and outside the rubric of the US-Japan alliance.
- Japan will want continued access to Southeast Asia for raw materials, labour, markets, and alternative supply chain locales. Additionally, it will seek to assist the region in building quality infrastructure, fighting the pandemic, and providing an alternative to China’s economic enticements.
- Tokyo may lobby certain Southeast Asian countries to join the Quad.

INTRODUCTION

Many observers perceive that there will be more continuities than breaks in Japan's foreign policy under Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide. While largely inheriting the fruits of Abe's foreign policy achievements, Suga is at the same time constrained by the perimeters of the practices and systemic constraints Abe instituted. Suga's immediate priorities are to combat the Covid-19 epidemic, realign Japan's supply chains and cope with the economic fallout from the pandemic. The success of these tasks will determine the level of support for his leadership in the general elections to be held on or before 22 October 2021. As at January 2021 Suga's approval/disapproval ratings had dropped to 39%/49% respectively in a Yomiuri poll as the pandemic worsened in Japan.¹ Southeast Asia should therefore anticipate some adjustments in Japan's foreign relations, particularly in tone and rhetoric, and at the same time expect Tokyo's fundamental concerns and policy trajectory to remain relatively constant.

SHINZO ABE'S LEGACY ON JAPAN POLITICS AND FOREIGN POLICY

Of the 32 Japanese prime ministers² since the Second World War, Abe has the distinction of being the longest-serving individual. His unprecedented long political reign enabled him to make a distinctive impact on both Japan's domestic politics and foreign policy.³ He arguably achieved an unprecedented consolidation of power⁴ in the *Kantei* (Prime Minister's office),⁵ and successfully shifted Japanese foreign policy towards one premised on neo-realist realpolitik considerations.⁶ His achievements mark a watershed departure from postwar Japan foreign policy, with scholars attributing the changes as the "Abe Doctrine".⁷ The *Kantei* Suga inherits is therefore one that has been "turbo-charged" due to his predecessor's overwhelming success.

Abe's political longevity has the following domestic characteristics: a political brand-name⁸ with a clear conservative policy agenda that appealed to traditional Japanese nationalism⁹ as well as a forward looking agenda¹⁰ that the Japanese could identify with and support; shrewd political machinations that reduced traditional pork-barrel factional politics and increased the power of the LDP Party President in electoral politics; and promotion of neo-conservatism through narratives of hope and vision¹¹ and through the language of democracy. Externally, the North Korea threat¹² and China's rise have been the most important geopolitical developments that facilitated Abe's political platform, enabling the prime minister to rein in three important traditional sources of power within the Japanese political ecosystem, i.e. the Japanese media,¹³ the bureaucracy,¹⁴ and the fractious Liberal Democratic Party,¹⁵ with more conservative support.¹⁶ Although some commentators have lauded him as a champion for a liberal international order,¹⁷ Abe's efforts to "normalise" Japan comes at the cost of eroding the institutions that had come to define Japan as a peaceful state in the post-war era.

"NORMALISATION" OF JAPAN'S SECURITY POSTURE UNDER SUGA YOSHIHIDE

Suga has promised to carry on Abe's work and steer Japan in the same conservative direction as his predecessor. In continuing the narratives and policy adjustments that ensure that Japan stays the course of achieving the "Beautiful Japan" Abe envisaged, Suga will have to keep pandering to the neo-conservative constituency to rally support in the general elections that are to be held by October 2021. For starters, Suga's national security strategy will need to continue Abe's legacy in three key areas: (1) Eroding pacifism through the rehabilitation of the use of

military force and through remilitarisation; (2) Adapting US-Japan alliance to serve Japan's needs; and (3) Revising the Constitution.

The erosion of pacifism¹⁸ seeks to socialise Japanese society to the use of military force. For Japan to remilitarise and to undertake a more pro-active (as opposed to reactive/passive) defence posture, and to reacquire the sovereign right to use force like any normal state, it needs to overcome the post-war pacifist norms that have come to define Japan as a nation since 1945.¹⁹ There are two aspects to this. The first involves changing the hearts and minds of ordinary Japanese on the necessity for this transformation. Abe has done an extremely good job in persuading the public of how dangerous the world they live in is and of the need for Japan to remilitarise. The second part is to legalise policy changes that are needed to effect such a normalisation, with Constitutional revision as the ultimate goal.

Today, advocates for remilitarisation can be divided into three broad categories.²⁰ There are those who seek remilitarisation in order to strengthen the US-Japan alliance (Alliance Supremacists); then there are those who believe that Japan needs a strong military to thrive in the global community (the UN Believers); and finally, there are those who believe that remilitarisation is necessary to ensure Japan's survival in a new and dangerous world (New Realists). Most, if not all, advocate doing this within the rubric of US-Japan alliance.

Suga will no doubt continue Abe's legacy in trying to adapt the US-Japan alliance in such a way as to suit Japan's goals. The key question is whether Japan can continue to do so as an equal partner to the US and not be relegated to junior partner status in the alliance. When he was Chief Cabinet Secretary (2012 till 2020), Suga assisted Abe with a number of initiatives to ensure that Japan could function more effectively as an alliance partner. These included upgrading the Japan Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) to ministry status in 2007;²¹ establishing in December 2013 a National Security Council with streamlined bureaucratic and intelligence capabilities; and introducing several legislations to deploy the JSDF to support US-Japan overseas operations, thereby cementing Japan's right to Collective Defence.²² Japan's latest effort is aimed at enhancing the US-Japan alliance by bringing in new partners such as India²³ and Australia²⁴ to form the Quad dialogue. Suga is likely to continue Abe's legacy through the institution of Quad plus, possibly by bringing in Southeast Asian partners.

Without the pandemic, Suga would very likely be already trying to amend the Constitution,²⁵ which the neo-Conservatives have been pushing for. The Japanese public has been lukewarm so far to their efforts to amend or abolish the Article 9 war-renouncing clause.²⁶ Regardless of the pushback,²⁷ Abe himself has expressed regrets that he was unable to meet his goal of amending Article 9 by 2020.²⁸ A Constitutional amendment first requires two-thirds of the Diet's votes for the proposed amendments to be approved before it can be put to a referendum.²⁹ The Diet has been debating a Constitutional Amendment law since 2018, with fierce opposition from left-wing parties such as the Communist Party of Japan. The Covid-19 epidemic has all but stopped the deliberations, but it is likely that the Constitutional amendment law will be voted on sometime in 2021.³⁰ If this happens, the substance of the actual Constitutional amendment will be discussed during the Suga administration, assuming he is still in power then. Suga is well aware of the difficulty of revising the Constitution, and his appointment of Nobuo Kishi³¹ as defense minister is therefore a political masterstroke in more ways than one.³² At the very least, it is an expression of reverence for his predecessor's conservative nationalism, political strategy and realpolitik maneuvers, even though it has been widely acknowledged that Suga is not as ideological and nationalistic as Abe.³³

As Suga has the support of the factions³⁴ and former Prime Minister Abe,³⁵ his chances of re-election look good initially with a 74% popularity rating in September 2020. The approval rating for his government on 16th January 2021 fell to around 33% before climbing 5% to 38% a month later in polls conducted by Mainichi Shimbun, the Japanese daily. The failure of Abenomics³⁶ means that there are lingering doubts whether Suga is the correct long-term choice for Japan. His relative lack of broad-based support within the LDP also works against him. With the deterioration of the socio-economic situation in Japan being attributed fully to the pandemic, the crisis may have given the LDP (and Suga) a respite as the nation looks to a steady hand to guide it through the crisis. If popular support for the LDP falls, or if the current pandemic and economic crisis worsen,³⁷ he is likely to face a leadership challenge.

Under the Obama and Trump administrations, Japan had played a more active and dominant role in the US-Japan alliance. First, for most of the Obama period, Japan “held the fort” in Southeast Asia while the United States was distracted by the War on Terror.³⁸ Second, Abe became the intellectual architect³⁹ of important initiatives within the alliance. Third, because of Abe’s ability to manage the mercurial Trump, he was popularly known as the “Trump whisperer.”⁴⁰ To many observers, Abe was the senior statesman in the US-Japan alliance.⁴¹ There was also a perception then that Tokyo had silently replaced the United States as the dominant and reliable power in Southeast Asia. However, with a strong and experienced foreign policy and national security team currently in Washington, the United States is likely to resume the dominant partner role in the US-Japan alliance.

Within Japan, there are those who regard a Democratic administration as likely to be weak on China, and they have reacted to Biden’s win with dismay.⁴² The Biden administration does not have much leeway to reverse Trump’s position on China, given how the domestic mood has changed against China. This means that Sino-US tensions will probably remain high, and this would impact on Japan’s own recovery as well. Tokyo has drawn important lessons from its interactions with Trump’s America, and there are indications that Japan may take measures to ensure that it is equipped to deal with the president that United States has, as opposed to the one they want.⁴³ In this regard, Suga’s government is likely to maintain Abe’s legacy of undertaking a series of pro-active and independent diplomatic and defense initiatives outside of the US-Japan alliance to hedge Japan’s position. Southeast Asia will therefore become more important to Japan in this regard.

IMPLICATIONS FOR JAPAN’S RELATIONS WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA

Japan’s relations with Southeast Asia improved significantly with the introduction of the Fukuda doctrine.⁴⁴ Tokyo strengthened its economic linkages⁴⁵ and extended Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to help the Southeast Asian countries grow and prosper.⁴⁶ In the post-Cold War world, Japan further expanded its influence by undertaking peacekeeping⁴⁷ and peacebuilding operations⁴⁸ and stepping up ODA to the region. Under Abe’s stewardship, Southeast Asia became more important to Japan⁴⁹ as a political lobby and strategic counterweight⁵⁰ to China, particularly in the maritime domain.⁵¹ Suga regards Southeast Asia in the same manner. Like Abe,⁵² Suga’s first diplomatic trip as prime minister was to Vietnam and Indonesia, and not to the United States. Japan seeks to strengthen its ties with Southeast Asia to bolster its own security, a realisation underscored by Covid-19 when global supply chains and the flow of critical goods were disrupted due to over-reliance on the Chinese market.

Going forward, Tokyo will seek to further reduce its asymmetric reliance on the Chinese economy. On the one hand, Japan will “delink”⁵³ its cutting-edge high-tech industries, especially those with dual-use applications, from the Chinese market. On the other hand, it will leverage on China’s growth by strengthening cooperation in non-sensitive sectors. These include producing chemicals, equipment and components for products assembled in China.⁵⁴ With Japan’s two main strategic partners, the United States and India, still mired by the pandemic and the intensifying economic malaise, maintaining access to the Chinese market is now even more important for Tokyo.

Southeast Asia will be a key plank in Tokyo’s market diversification strategy. Even before the pandemic, factories were already adopting a “China + 1” strategy to diversify their risks and reduce dependence on China’s supply chain. Tokyo’s effort to set aside JP¥243.5 billion (US\$2.2 billion) in 2020 to help Japanese firms relocate from China to ASEAN countries such as Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines have borne some fruit.⁵⁵ This is on top of the JP¥57.4 billion (US\$541 billion) fund that Japan set aside for companies to move out of China to Japan or Southeast Asia.⁵⁶ By end 2020, 37 out of 81 Japanese firms had received their government’s subsidies and relocated their factories from China to Vietnam. Thailand was the second popular option, with 19 firms.⁵⁷ In 2020, Japan was the sixth largest investor in Vietnam with US\$786 million in investment, with 57% of Japanese firms there indicating that they have intention of expanding their operations.⁵⁸

By cultivating closer economic ties with Southeast Asia, Japan strengthens its access to raw materials and labour, and is able to build more resilient supply chains. Conversely, Southeast Asia benefits from the greater employment opportunities and the technologies that Japanese companies bring, thereby boosting their economic growth prospects. Suga has expressed Japan’s interest to engage in a wide variety of bilateral cooperative projects in the region going forward – but the realisation of this is contingent on Japan’s own financial situation after the pandemic.

Most Southeast Asian countries, minus Singapore, Thailand and Brunei, have continued to benefit from Japan’s ODA throughout the pandemic (see Appendix). Other than long-standing items of ODA cooperation in areas such as building infrastructure and economic corridors, Tokyo has been quick to institute pandemic-related aid. Japan’s Covid-19 assistance ranges from extending funding to help the region acquire medical supplies (testing kits) and equipment for its hospitals and training its personnel to fight infectious diseases, to providing financial assistance to local companies to weather the negative impact of Covid-19. The biggest funding packages went to the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar and Cambodia.

Unlike China, Japan does not employ vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia. This is due to two main reasons. The first is that the Covid rates in Japan were largely contained for most part of 2020. Hence, there was no sufficiently large pool of candidates for the testing of vaccines. The second, and perhaps a more important reason, is that the Japanese are inherently suspicious of vaccines. This is due to past lawsuits related to the side effects of vaccines against the Japanese government.⁵⁹ Hence, the government has been extremely cautious in approving the use of vaccines. For instance, even though there were announcements as early as in August 2020 that the anti-viral flu drug “Avigan” developed by Japan’s Fujifilm Holdings would begin clinical trials in The Philippines as a possible Covid-19 treatment drug,⁶⁰ the company’s global ambitions were thwarted after government officials deferred approval of the Avigan treatment as a Covid-19 drug in December 2020.⁶¹ In February 2021, Japan finally started to receive the

first doses of overseas vaccine, only after Suga bypassed the bureaucracy to secure supplies directly from the drug maker.⁶²

In the security realm, Japan has stepped up efforts to persuade Southeast Asian nations of the importance of its conception of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) throughout 2020. Tokyo emphasised the importance of the FOIP concept not only to the maritime Southeast Asian states, but also the mainland Southeast Asian countries.⁶³ Most recently, Japan expressed its concerns over rumors’ surrounding Cambodia’s intention to host a Chinese naval presence in the country.⁶⁴

Beyond maintaining a proactive diplomatic posture, Japan recalibrated its ODA strategy to help selected claimant states improve their maritime capabilities to better monitor China’s activities and defend their respective legal claims in the South China Sea. Japan concluded its first arms export deal in 2020 after the ban on such exports was lifted in 2014 when Mitsubishi Electric announced that it would be supplying early warning radar systems worth JP¥10 billion (US\$94.5 million) to The Philippines.⁶⁵ Japan is negotiating for items such as planes and vessels to be exported to Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines. To reinforce its Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, Japan appears to be trying to lobby Southeast Asian states such as Vietnam and The Philippines to become partners of the Quad in the form of a Quad Plus arrangement.⁶⁶ This might come through an invitation for an informal dialogue or even an option to join an exercise; the Quad itself is expected to evolve from an informal organization into something formal.

Japan still faces formidable challenges in Southeast Asia. While Japan and Southeast Asia appear to be drawing closer due to their common concerns over China, it does not mean that their common interests will propel them to act in unison against China. In general, the preference of Southeast Asian countries is to be friends with the major and middle powers. Even though they may view Japan more favourably, Tokyo might also find it difficult to sustain the increasing amount of ODA needed, particularly if China’s economic might increases and the needs of the regional countries surge after the pandemic. It is also possible that Japan will enter into another period of revolving door prime ministerships if Suga fails to hold onto power.

Japan’s sustained engagement of Southeast Asia over the last few years was only possible because of Abe’s long reign. The jury is still out on whether Suga will be able to hold onto power and correspondingly deliver the depth of commitment and consistency we saw over the past decade in Japan-Southeast Asia relations.

Japan's Assistance to Southeast Asia in 2020 (Selected)

<p>Country</p> <p>(Total Covid Cases / Deaths so far)</p> <p>Figures are accurate as at 8th March 2021 in decreasing order</p>	<p>Covid-19 Assistance</p> <p>Administered by Foreign Ministry and/or Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) often in conjunction with relevant partner agencies if applicable</p> <p># Costs cited as presented in source document; corresponding approximate amount converted by author using rates as at Feb 2020 is cited in parathesis</p>	<p>Other Noteworthy Assistance extended or completed by Japan</p> <p>Administered by Foreign Ministry, or Ministry of Defence in conjunction with contractors and/or Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and/or other relevant agencies in single or multi-year basis but received in 2020</p> <p># Costs cited as presented in source document; corresponding amount converted by author using rates as at Feb 2020 is cited in parathesis</p>
<p>Indonesia</p> <p>1386556/ 37547</p>	<p>Japan extended US\$13.6 million (JP¥1.5 billion) emergency aid through WHO/UNICEF (March 2020)</p> <p>JP¥2 billion (US\$19 million) grant given as emergency Covid-19 aid to revamp health and medical equipment in Indonesia. Financed through collaboration between Japan and Asian Development Bank (July 2020)</p> <p>JP¥50 billion (US\$475 million) loan for 15 years pledged by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Ministry of Finance and Asian Development Bank for Covid-19 Active Response and Expenditure Support (July 2020)</p> <p>JICA committed to help Indonesia strengthen capacity for early warning</p>	<p>Japan offered aid of JP¥27.9 billion (US\$250 million) for the rebuilding of Central Sulawesi infrastructure after September 2018 earthquake (January 2020)</p> <p>Japan offered to help in the development of the Jakarta MRT network, Java North Line and Patimban port, and the development of Natuna Island as well as the infrastructure of outer islands (January 2020)</p> <p>Japan made JP¥31.8 billion (US\$302 million) loan for natural disaster assistance and management (February 2020)</p> <p>Japanese grants to Indonesia totaled JP¥5 billion (US\$47.5 million); JP¥2.2 billion (US\$20</p>

	<p>and response system for infectious diseases (September 2020)</p>	<p>million) for Provision of Fisheries Supervision Vessels, Repair and Equipment of Fisheries Control Vessel Components and JP¥3 billion (US\$28.5 million) for the development of the fisheries sector in the outer islands of Indonesia.</p> <p>Japan to assist Indonesia in anti-counterfeit goods efforts (March 2020) and infrastructure projects such as port development and waste water treatment facilities (April 2020).</p> <p>Japan to provide JP¥64.36 billion (US\$607 million) loan for Jakarta underground water pipe construction project and flood control project (April 2020)</p> <p>JICA assisted Indonesia in sustainable fishing programme (December 2020); establishment of maternal health program (November 2020)</p> <p>The first “2+2” meeting since 2015, which is Japan’s only 2+2 meeting in Southeast Asia; reaffirmed the Free & Open Indo-Pacific concept and cooperation in field of maritime law enforcement (October 2020)</p> <p>Negotiations on export of destroyers to Indonesia (November 2020)</p>
<p>The Philippines</p>	<p>JP¥2 billion (US\$19 million) for provision of state-of-the-art medical equipment such as CT scanners, X-</p>	<p>Japan concluded first arms export deal since the ban was lifted in 2014.</p>

<p>597763/ 12521</p>	<p>ray machines; MRI systems to hospitals to be administered by JICA (June 2020)</p> <p>JP¥50 billion (US\$475 million) COVID-19 Crisis Emergency Support (Jul 2020)</p> <p>Trial of Japan flu drug Avigan for Covid treatment in The Philippines (Aug-December 2020)</p>	<p>JICA signed a contract to supply two new 94m-long Multi-role Response Vessels for PCG amounting to JP¥14.45 billion (US\$137 million) (February 2020)</p> <p>Mitsubishi Electric announced that Japan will supply early warning radar systems worth JP¥10 billion (US\$95 million) to The Philippines (March 2020)</p> <p>The Philippines steps up cooperation with Japan on cyber-defense and drone capabilities (October 2020)</p> <p>JICA also completed a host of ODA projects in 2020 that included the building of new roads, water systems and irrigation facilities and bridges worth 105 million pesos (JP¥230 million / US\$2.2 million)</p>
<p>Malaysia 314989/ 1177</p>	<p>Bilateral discussions on the possibility of easing travel for travelers (September 2020)</p>	<p>Collapse of the Pakatan Harapan government and the onset of the pandemic meant that Mahathir's plans to further solidify Malaysia's economic ties with Japan are put on hold, at least until the pandemic is over.</p>
<p>Myanmar 142034/ 3200</p>	<p>JP¥43 billion (US\$408.5 million) loan extended; Out of this, JP¥15.22 billion (US\$144.5 million) designated as loans for small and medium companies to cushion the impact of Covid-19 with the remainder being for development of East-West Economic Corridor (November 2020)</p>	<p>The other JP¥27.78 billion (US\$264 million) is designated for development of the East-West Economic Corridor; i.e. to build a bridge that crosses into Thailand, Laos and Vietnam to improve Indochina connectivity (November 2020)</p>

<p>Singapore 60046/ 29</p>	<p>Reciprocal green lane launched for essential business travel (September 2020)</p>	<p>Japanese FM Motegi visited Singapore to discuss vaccine multilateralism; CPTPP & ASEAN economic engagement (August 2020)</p>
<p>Thailand 26441/ 85</p>	<p>Agreement to facilitate short-term travel for essential businesses and economic exchanges (November 2020)</p>	<p>JICA to help Thailand prepare for supply chain restructuring via knowledge exchange (September 2020)</p>
<p>Vietnam 2524/ 35</p>	<p>ODA grant of JP¥2 billion (19 million for US), of which 1.8 billion (US\$17 million) are given to Vietnam directly; JP¥200 million (US\$1.9 million) for agents appointed by Japanese government (payout over August 2020-January 2022)</p> <p>Agreement to establish green lanes for business (October 2020)</p>	<p>Agreement in principle reached for Japan and Vietnam to step up defence and economic ties; Japan to export defence equipment and technology to Vietnam (patrol planes and radar) (October 2020)</p> <p>Japan reaffirmed commitment to help Vietnam build infrastructure, digital technology and supply chain resilience; Japan to continue helping Vietnam in human resource development (October 2020)</p> <p>Japan reaffirmed “free and open Indo-Pacific” and stressed the need to maintain peace, security, freedom of navigation and overflight in</p>

		South China Sea (October 2020)
Cambodia 1011/ 0	A US\$230 million (JP¥24 billion) grant to fight Covid-19 [including the purchase of security vehicles], with an additional concessional loan of JP¥25 billion (US\$238 million) to combat the ill effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on Cambodia's economy (October 2020)	<p>Provided emergency relief goods (tents, water purifiers, blankets, generators, plastic sheets) in response to flooding in Cambodia (October 2020)</p> <p>Japan emphasised the FOIP framework to Cambodia and expressed concerns about the prospects of a Chinese naval base in Sihanoukville where both China and Japan have made major investments (ODA loan of US\$209 million for port development)</p>
Brunei 190/ 3	Established Green Lane for essential business travel (October 2020)	<p>One ambassadorial call on Sultan of Brunei (February 20)</p> <p>One ambassadorial level interaction on general cooperation in cultural and political affairs (February and October 2020)</p>
Timor Leste 122 / 0	Japan offered US\$4.6 million (JP¥428 million) grant to equip hospitals and institutions to fight Covid-19 (June 2020)	Ongoing JICA projects include human resource development assistance; infrastructure projects such as school building and port development
Laos 47/ 0	Japan offered US\$3 million (JP¥314 million) to Laos to strengthen Covid-19 response through UNOPS. Funds are for procurement of protective equipment for frontline medical workers, and equipping laboratories	Ongoing JICA projects that include transferring technical expertise to maintain bridges; human resource development in terms of teacher training; power quality improvement

	<p>at medical institutions at Central and provincial levels (June 2020)</p> <p>Japan has also assisted Laos in training personnel in the combating of infectious diseases since 2014.</p>	
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¹ “Japan PM Suga’s approval sinks further on Covid19 pandemic response”, The Straits Times, 18 January 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/japan-pm-sugas-approval-sinks-further-on-covid-19-pandemic-response>.

² This number excludes “caretaker” prime ministers who were essentially administrator place-holders in between elections. Prime Ministers who left office before returning for a second term are counted once.

³ Only a few prime ministers can genuinely claim to have an impact on Japan’s foreign policy in a big way: Yoshida Shigeru (introduction of the Yoshida doctrine), Kishi Nobusuke (the revision of US-Japan Security Alliance) Fukuda Takeo (introduction of the Fukuda doctrine) and Koizumi Junichiro (assertive diplomacy that foreshadows Abe’s neo-conservatism).

⁴ Kingston, Jeff, “In Japan under Shinzo Abe, more power to the PM, but to what end?”, The Japan Times, 23 September 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/09/23/commentary/japan-shinzo-abe-power-pm-end/>.

⁵ The shifting of the centre of power towards the Prime Minister’s office began during Junichiro Koizumi’s tenure when Abe Shinzo was the Chief Cabinet Secretary from October 2005 to September 2006; also see Shinoda, Tomohito, Koizumi Diplomacy, Japan’s Kantei Approach to Foreign and Defense Affairs (Seattle & Washington, University of Washington Press, 12 February 2007).

⁶ Auslin, Michael, Japan’s New Realism: Abe Gets Tough, Foreign Affairs, March/April 2016, pp. 125-134; Envall, David, The “Abe Doctrine”: Japan’s New Regional Realism, International Relations of the Asia-Pacific, vol. 20: 1, 2020: 31-59.

⁷ Hughes, Christopher, An “Abe Doctrine” as Japan’s Grand Strategy: New Dynamism or Dead-End? In The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, vol. 13, 30: 4, <https://apjif.org/-Christopher-W.-Hughes/4832/article.html>.

⁸ Jain, Purnendra, Political Dynasties Dominate Japan’s Democracy, Australia and the Region Commentary, vol. 6: 3, March 2018, <https://ajrc.crawford.anu.edu.au/department-news/12278/political-dynasties-dominate-japans-democracy>; also see Fackler, Martin, “Japan’s Political Dynasties Come Under fire but prove Resilient”, The New York Times, 14 March 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/15/world/asia/15japan.html> and Scartozzi, Cesare, “Hereditary Politics in Japan: A Family Business”, The Diplomat, 9 February 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/02/hereditary-politics-in-japan-a-family-business/>.

⁹ Surak, Kristin, “Shinzo Abe and the rise of Japanese nationalism”, New Statesman, 15 May 2019, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/asia/2019/05/shinzo-abe-and-rise-japanese-nationalism>

¹⁰ Koll, Jesper, Abe’s Lesson in Stability and Pragmatism, The Japan Times, 13 September 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/09/13/commentary/japan-commentary/abes-lesson-stability-pragmatism/>.

¹¹ Abe’s most powerful rhetoric is premised upon the “restoration” of Japan to its glory days of the 1970s and 1980s by suggesting the “lost decades” of the 1990s are over, and emphasizing the importance of identity politics including rehabilitating Japan’s wartime past; attacking and sidelining

critics and political opponents for “shaming” Japan; and shifting the national discourse to one where the spotlight is on the grandiose future for the Japan that lies ahead.

¹² Hughes, Christopher, "Super-Sizing" the DPRK Threat: Japan's Evolving Military Posture and North Korea", *Asian Survey* (2009), vol. 49, no. 2, pp 291-311, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2009.49.2.291>.

¹³ When he was Koizumi's Chief Cabinet Secretary, Abe was very attuned to the importance of a savvy media strategy for the government. As prime minister, Abe worked hard to challenge the traditional media whom he perceived to have “bullied” him during his first term. In his second term, he worked assiduously on a comprehensive social media strategy to appeal directly to Conservative voters who perceived that the traditional press had been unfair to Abe. He has not hesitated to control or intimidate the traditional media by calling them out, enacting reforms or making legislative changes. Abe abolished rotating interviews with different broadcasters, and only granted interviews to those that favoured him. TV news anchors who criticised him were removed, and broadcasters who were found to “unfairly” criticised him were shut down. See Osaki, Tomohiro, “In Trump-esque fashion, Abe on offensive against Japan's established media”, *The Japan Times*, 3 May 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/05/03/national/trump-esque-fashion-abe-offensive-japans-established-media/>. Also see Fackler, Martin, *The Silencing of Japan's Free Press*, *Foreign Policy*, 27 May 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/27/the-silencing-of-japans-free-press-shinzo-abe-media/>.

¹⁴ Abe was able to reduce the power of the bureaucracy by appointing “representatives” from important ministries as liaison officers to the Kantei. The expansion of the staff of the Chief Cabinet Secretary office was instrumental in shifting important executive decision-making functions to the Kantei. Abe also instituted regular meetings with his key staff to promote smooth communication, and ensured that his agenda was kept simple and focused – a lesson learnt from his first term. He implemented systematic planning and exercised care in personnel arrangement. These reforms ensured his political longevity and accorded him time and space to push for his platform; also see Pugliese, Giulio, “Kantei diplomacy? Japan's hybrid leadership in foreign and security polity”, *The Pacific Review*, 2017, vol. 30: 2, pp. 152-168.

¹⁵ Under his tenure, Abe reformed the electoral rules to ensure that lower house elections were more party-centred, and strengthened the power of the party leadership to endorse political candidates and allocate funds. This considerably weakened the candidates, factions and by extension the *Genro* (party elders), thus allowing the prime minister to make personnel choices with less hindrance. See Tekenaka, Harukata “Reforms and Results: A Look at Abe's Staying Power as Prime Minister”, 26 December 2018, <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/a06201/#>.

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- ²⁷ While the challenging external environment facing Japan has facilitated the neo-Conservative agenda, Abe’s and Suga’s efforts to eradicate resistance and tame the domestic debate have often been met with resistance, particularly from the Japanese media. For instance, Abe has long sought to challenge and suppress the traditional media (such as Asahi Shimbun) for “hurting” the image of Japan by failing to remain “neutral” in terms of highlighting “only one aspect of a polarizing issue” [referring to the comfort women issue] or for focusing on scandals linked to him. Likewise, Suga as Chief Cabinet Secretary has had a combative relationship with the press. Japan has dropped from 22nd to 66th position in the Reporters without Borders Press Freedom Index. Suga is not viewed as a favourable candidate to improve press freedom. See “A media adversary’s long battle with Japan’s new Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide”, Global Voices, 27 September 2020, <https://globalvoices.org/2020/09/27/a-media-adversarys-long-battle-with-japans-new-prime-minister-suga-yoshihide/> ; Japan’s Press freedom saw a sharp drop; Global Journalist Blog, 14 February 2013, <https://globaljournalist.org/2013/02/japans-press-freedom-saw-a-sharp-drop/>; also see Sekiguchi, Toko, “Japan Slips in Press Freedom Ranking”, The Wall Street Journal, 13 February 2015, <https://www-wsj-com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/articles/BL-JRTB-19218>.
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- ³⁰ This law essentially covers topics such as revisions allowing the establishment of polling stations in commercial facilities when holding a referendum on constitutional revision, making it easier to vote. “Japan parties agree to vote on amendments to national referendum law early next year”, The Japan News, 2 December 2020, <https://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0006970225>.
- ³¹ Nubuo Kishi is actually the younger brother of Shinzo Abe, but was given away for adoption to his maternal uncle’s family. The younger Kishi grew up with his grandfather Nobusuke Kishi who was purportedly close to Chiang Kai-shek, but remained out of politics for the first part of his career. Kishi

is quintessentially a neo-Conservative, pro-Taiwan, and advocates military first-strike capabilities and Constitutional amendments. His appointment reassures neo-Conservatives, rallies political support for Suga, pays homage to former PM Kishi and Abe, and perhaps even allows Suga to continue to govern whilst diluting Abe's influence. See "Nobuo Kishi, Abe's younger brother, seeks to carve out new role as Japan's defense chief" The Japan Times, 17 September 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/09/17/national/politics-diplomacy/nobuo-kishi-defense-chief-abe/>.

³² As Chief Cabinet Secretary, Suga was widely seen to be the more pragmatic and less ideological than Abe, and close to pro-China LDP Sec-General Nikai. As prime minister, Suga will need to dispel the impression that he is pro-China. Given that Suga himself does not come from a political dynasty or enjoy broad-based support in the party, and that any potential prime minister would need to court the support of the Conservative forces, his appointment of Kishi is intended to galvanise political support and reassure those constituencies. Besides, if the constitutional revision fails to materialise, it would be difficult for Suga to be blamed if Kishi was involved. There is also the possibility that in appointing his brother, Abe might be required to keep a distance from policy making for proprietary reasons, thus giving Suga more political latitude.

³³ The Suga administration is also likely to strive for a Peace Treaty with Russia and continue to try to repatriate the Japanese hostages from the DPRK, although they might be on the backburner given current circumstances. Abe has indicated that these two objectives along with Constitutional revision were important goals he was not able to achieve before leaving office.

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³⁸ Khong, Yuen Foong, "Who will replace the US in Southeast Asia?", East Asia Forum, 6 September 2017, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/09/06/who-will-replace-the-us-in-southeast-asia/>

³⁹ In Abe's first term, he came up with the idea of values-based diplomacy and he further proposed an "arc of democracy" that links Japan to "like-minded states" in Southeast Asia, India and even Russia, excluding China. See "Japan's Values-oriented diplomacy", The New York Times, 21 March 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/21/opinion/21iht-edfouse.4978402.html>; This idea of an "arc of democracy" evolved to become the basis of the Quad. Shinzo Abe was also instrumental helping India move closer to the United States in order for the vision to materialise.

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⁴² For instance, Haruo Kitamura said on national TV, "From FDR to Truman to Obama, nothing great happens to Japan under a Democratic president ... At least Trump brought up the North Korean abductees at the U.N", just as Taro Kimura commented: "We will be in big trouble when Biden wins, because he will suck up to China". Quoted in Sposato, William, "Some in Japan are already missing

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