

The Curious Case of Japanese Leadership in Global Summitry

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Media Centre – G7 Summit. Over recent years Japan's prime minister Abe Shinzo has emerged as the comeback kid of Japanese politics. Tainted and written-off after a widely perceived failed first stint as prime minister from September 2006 to September 2007, he unexpectedly became the first post-Occupation politician to return to the position of prime minister on 26 December 2012. Since then Abe's reputation and position has gone from strength to strength. He has scotched reports of Japan's decline and become inexorably associated with the resurgence of a strong Japan. In May 2013, [The Economist](#) photo-shopped Abe's face onto the body of Superman on its front cover with the headline 'Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No... It's Japan!' In June 2014, one [widely published commentary](#) boldly argued that the Japanese prime minister was 'the most effective national leader in the world right

now.... an example that the rest of the world should be following'. One senior scholar of Japan's international relations has recently suggested the emergence of a distinct but risky '[Abe Doctrine](#)' in foreign and security policy. At the end of 2014, Abe won a second consecutive landslide election, ended the annual turnover of Japanese prime ministers that began with his first period in office in 2006, and appeared secure in his position for the foreseeable future.

These assertions of Japan's revived fortunes and emphasis on the leadership role of Prime Minister Abe therein stand in stark contrast to the previously received wisdom that Japan was in some kind of absolute or relative decline, as well as suffering from an associated leadership vacuum. The leadership of a rebooted Abe 2.0 is seen to have manifested itself in a

number of issue-areas. These range from reviving Japan's economy under the eponymous set of policies known as 'Abenomics' (consisting of monetary easing to target inflation, fiscal stimulus including a ¥10 trillion package and the promotion of growth strategies through structural reform) to attempting to turn Japan into a more 'normal' country in security terms through a 'proactive contribution to peace', and reinterpreting Japan's self-imposed ban on the right to collective self-defence.

It is entirely understandable that economic and security policies have received the lion's share of attention when exploring the questions of whether Japan's decline has been halted and reversed, as well as the role of Abe in any such revival. Yet, at the same time, the narrow focus on these areas is unfortunate. This is because other policy areas, such as global summitry, represent an overlooked but pertinent avenue of enquiry into Abe's leadership skills.

This is for two reasons. First, analysis of global summitry can shed insight on the

challenge for Japan represented by the global rebalancing of power. Particularly since the Global Economic Crisis of 2008-9, this has manifested itself in the perceived irrelevance and attempted reform of the central mechanisms of global governance, mostly established by the US in the Cold War period. This apparent decline in the influence and relevance of the traditional institutions of global governance, such as the G7 and G8, has appeared to mirror temporally and also compound Japan's own decline as it has closely aligned itself with these now seemingly defunct groupings. Second, several of these mechanisms of global governance, especially the more informal, *ad hoc* ones such as the G7, G8, G20 and World Economic Forum, place a much greater emphasis on the central role played by the president, prime minister or chancellor. So, if we wish to gauge the leadership of Abe, or any leader for that matter, these mechanisms of global governance represent an opportunity by which an individual leader can assert him/herself at a time of reform and reordering.

So, how has Abe fared in terms of being a leader in global summitry? One trend that has clearly emerged is that Abe has moved away from Japan's traditional diplomatic role characterized as an [internationalist middle power](#) and nowhere is this more evident than in the case of global summitry. Across the range of alphanumeric configurations that have proliferated across the architecture of global governance in recent decades, but particularly in the G7 and G8, Japan has traditionally cherished its seat at the top table of global summitry, acted in its self-appointed role as representative of Asia, mediated between the US and Europe, and taken its great power responsibilities seriously as evidenced by its high levels of compliance with summit commitments and its hosting of relatively and consistently successful summits (at least according to the ongoing analysis of the [G7, G8](#) and [G20 Research Groups](#)).

In the place of this internationalist, middle power role, Abe has used global summitry to promote a more narrowly focused, nationalist and revisionist agenda focused on staunching Japan's perceived material

and moral decline, particularly in relation to the rise of China. Take the most recent example of the last G8 summit held in June 2013 at Lough Erne, Northern Ireland (the 2014 Brussels Summit of the G7 was hijacked by events and ended up becoming more of an *ad hoc* response to the Russian annexation of Crimea, conflict in Ukraine and Russia's suspension from the G8). In the field of economics, Abe's goal was to pitch his 'Abenomics' programme to his fellow leaders but largely with a domestic audience in mind. Abe sought to preempt open criticism at the summit from some G7 leaders of the unpredictable and negative effects of quantitative easing and the weakening of the yen on the global economy by explaining 'Abenomics' and then claiming international endorsement. As a result, the policy could be presented at home as an international commitment in order to secure further leverage in the face of domestic opposition.

In the field of security, Abe's other [avowed goal](#) was 'to state Japan's clear stance based on our national interests with regard to the North Korea nuclear and abduction [of Japanese citizens by North Korean

agents] issues'. Again, he was successful in securing his fellow leaders' support over these issues. More radically, an agreement was endorsed at Lough Erne for the creation of a comprehensive agreement promoting UK-Japan intelligence sharing and the joint development of defence equipment. The agreement allows Japan to provide the UK with defence technology despite the fears of some that this contradicts the principles that have historically banned the export of weapons and related technology. It demonstrates Abe's willingness to see Japan's role enhanced in the political/security area without being overly constrained by postwar taboos.

If attention is extended to the broader G8 process of that year then a similar approach comes clearly into focus. The G8 foreign ministers' meeting held in April 2013 prior to the leaders' meeting focused on measures to prevent sexual violence in conflict. While the Abe administration stated that it would support this initiative from the viewpoint of the human rights of women, Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio emphasized that [the focus of G8](#)

[discussions](#) be limited to the 21st century and avoid discussion of historical cases. This was for fear that the Abe administration would be criticized for its revisionist position that questions the level of coercion employed in the system of enforced sexual slavery, euphemistically known as the 'comfort women', used by the Imperial Japanese Army during the Second World War.

So, Abe's participation in the Lough Erne Summit highlighted key elements of his evolving foreign policy 'doctrine': secure Japan's great power status by building an economically strong Japan, promote a more proactive and robust Japanese security role, and engage in historical revisionism to challenge postwar taboos and constraints. Sadly, this is at the expense of Japan's traditional internationalism and has little to do with demonstrating leadership in global governance.

Turning to this year's G7 summit that has just concluded at Schloss Elmau, Abe came to Germany with a number of objectives that reflect a continuation of the 'Abe

Doctrine'. As it regards managing the rise of China, on the one hand Abe was keen to have a statement included in the summit declaration related to maritime security and, although not a claimant in the dispute, ideally condemning China's land reclamation and construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea as well as highlighting the implications for territorial disputes in the East China Sea (to which Japan is a claimant). On the other hand, Abe was faced with possible divisions on the issue of China's proposed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) with the United Kingdom, Italy, France and Germany already committed to joining the initiative whilst Japan stalls on its decision harboring concerns surrounding transparency, standards and quality in the AIIB's governance and lending practices. The Schloss Elmau Summit provided an opportunity for Japan to communicate its concerns to its fellow summiteers.

The outcome of the summit was largely positive for Abe. As regards the issue of maritime security and the South and East

China Seas, Abe employed the strategy of likening China's grab for territory in this region to Russia's in Ukraine in order to elicit the support of his fellow G7 leaders. He repeatedly stressed the importance of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and condemned the unilateral use of force by the strong against the weak. Whilst having to be careful not to alienate Putin and jeopardize the positive upturn in Japanese-Russian relations since Abe took office, it paid dividends as the [final declaration](#) expressed concerns (without explicitly mentioning China) over 'tensions in the East and South China Seas... [and strongly opposed] the use of intimidation, coercion or force, as well as any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo, such as large scale land reclamation'.

At the same time, in his post-summit press conference, Abe echoed the leaders' declaration and stressed numerous times how it was the shared values of freedom, democracy, basic human rights and the rule of law that bind the G7 leaders together and give it its defining character as forum. This all chimes with the 'values-oriented diplomacy' targeted at isolating

China that was the [signature foreign policy initiative](#) of his previous administration. At this summit, it allowed him to reinforce the comparison between Russia and China and bring the world's attention to the South China Sea.

Abe also took the opportunity afforded by his post-summit press conference to emphasize that the legislation his administration has introduced to enable Japan to exercise its right of collective self-defence was in line with accepted interpretations of the Japanese Constitution, despite recent opposition within Japan. He also stressed the safeguards and conditions in place to ensure Japan would only exercise the right of collective self-defence appropriately.

As regards security and defence, the goal of including a statement of condemnation not only over North Korea's nuclear and missile programme, but also the abduction issue, could be taken as a given, especially considering Abe's personal interest in the issue and participation in the first high-level Japan-North Korea summit in 2002, as well as the regular inclusion of similar

statements in G7 and G8 documents since 2003.

Finally, no doubt he would have been happy with a section in the declaration dedicated to women's economic empowerment as this forms part of the third pillar of 'Abenomics' that stresses structural reform. However, there are [considerable doubts](#) as to the sincerity and motivation of Abe's intentions.

Next year represents an important year for [Asian leadership and global summitry](#) as Japan hosts the G7 and China hosts the G20. Despite the distractions of a US presidential election and UK referendum on Europe, clear opportunities exist for a coordinated response that puts Asian issues firmly on the agenda. However, numerous obstacles remain. The Abe administration's continued shift away from Japan's traditional internationalism towards a more narrowly focused defence of its great power status, a high-profile security role in response to the rise of China and historical revisionism stand out as some of the highest hurdles to overcome.

The recent BBC drama [37 Days](#) documented the diplomatic efforts in the run-up to the outbreak of World War One and put the following words into the mouth of Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Minister: 'It's what happens to great powers when they shrink; the world shrinks with them and then they cease to think about consequences'. In many ways, this captures the recent evolution and future direction of Japan's role in global

summitry under the Abe administration as it grapples with its decline by focusing on domestic issues and turns away from global leadership.

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