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Japan - Abe’s assassination: meanings and memory

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As efforts to revive him faltered in the crucial hours after he was shot by a gunman last Friday, the world began taking stock of the sizable influence that former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe wielded in many areas of public life. Even as he resigned in 2020 for health reasons, after almost eight years in office, he remained Japan’s most prominent, and perhaps most influential and controversial politician.

The general sentiment within Japan and among world leaders was uniformly one of shock and a deep sense of loss. Shock, in particular, because gun violence is virtually unknown in the country, and Japanese politics is not as polarized and vitriolic as it is elsewhere. But the immediate reactions to his death in other sectors were not always what one might expect.

Bloomberg, for example, reports that the value of the Japanese yen rose to as high as 0.5 percent against the US dollar, in anticipation of a change in the Bank of Japan’s current policy of monetary easing. Abe had been a staunch advocate of keeping interest rates low as an integral part of a bid to stimulate growth in an economy that has been in the doldrums for far too long. His death could signify the end of this policy.

In progressive circles in Japan, the former prime minister’s reputation as a shrewd right-wing politician easily eclipses his image as a defender of peace and democracy in the Indo-Pacific region. He was best known for his campaign to amend the US-imposed Japanese peace constitution. Under this constitution, Japan formally renounces the sovereign right of belligerency.

Abe argued that new conditions in the world today urgently demanded a change in the constitution’s restrictive language—notably Article 9, which bans Japan from establishing an army that has war potential. He famously sought to reinterpret the meaning of self-defense, which alone constitutionally justifies Japan’s maintenance of a standing army, to include the notion of “collective self-defense.” That kind of flexibility in language would technically permit Japan to send combat missions abroad alongside its allies.

Critics view Abe’s advocacy of a better-armed Japan as symptomatic of a broader remilitarization policy that is reminiscent of Japan’s wars of aggression and conquest in Asia. Corollary to this is the public attitude, also associated with Abe, that it is time Japan stopped apologizing for atrocities committed by its forces in World War II. This attitude silently articulates the view that Japan was equally a victim—something that the museums in Hiroshima and Nagasaki very subtly but effectively signify.

In a society where symbolism matters very much, every visit by a prominent figure to the Yasukuni Shrine, a Shinto shrine commemorating those who died in the service of Japan—including war criminals—is big news. The battle for memory never ceases. Accordingly, Shinzo Abe’s repeated past

visits to Yasukuni always sent a message filled with enduring meanings. Days after his resignation in August 2020, he went to the shrine, he wrote on Twitter, “to report to the spirits about his retirement.” He did the same thing in 2013, a year after taking office.

The late Emperor Hirohito, in whose name Japanese soldiers fought and died in World War II, was known to have visited Yasukuni eight times since the end of the war. He stopped these visits, however, after the inclusion of known war criminals in the shrine’s iconography. Not one of Hirohito’s heirs ever visited the shrine, suggesting a break with the resurgent militarism and nationalism of the political establishment.

Not much information about the former prime minister’s assassin has been shared with the media by police investigators. Seeing the mop-haired bespectacled face of the gunman on TV, I thought at first that 41-year-old Tetsuya Yamagami might be a disgruntled university dropout. Little did I suspect that the man had been a soldier, having previously served in Japan’s Maritime Self-Defense Force, the country’s Navy. How this experience shaped his political views, or whether his dastardly crime proceeds from political conviction, is something we don’t know yet, though this is likely being investigated.

But I have encountered many young Japanese who are at pains to locate themselves in Asia, not as citizens of a state that alternately identifies itself as aggressor and victim, but simply as members of an ethnic Japanese nation. The product of textbooks that gloss over Japan’s wartime role as an aggressor, they are proud to be Japanese, though they are wary of their political leaders’ active forays in the world of geopolitics.

As my friend, the late Japanese public intellectual Yoshiyuki Tsurumi put it in one of his early writings: “To be sure, we should be proud of the ethnic nation, but we need to formulate nationalism from an entirely new perspective, so that this pride will not degenerate into self-imposed subservience within the power relations of the great nations.”

He was clearly referring to Japan’s postwar relationship with America, the country that gave Japan its peace constitution, but which, at the same time, has also sought to deploy it as its junior ally in Asia.

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P.S.

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