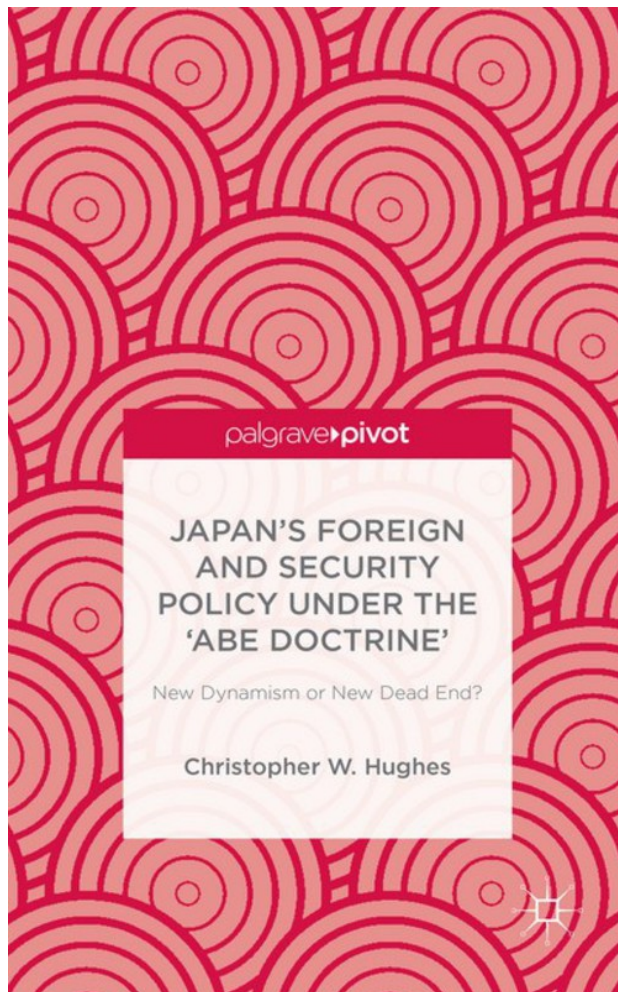


An ‘Abe Doctrine’ as Japan’s Grand Strategy: New Dynamism or Dead-End?

Christopher W. Hughes



Doctrine’ suggests, Abe’s status as an arch-‘revisionist’ ideologue, combined with the track record of his first administration in 2006-2007, made clear that he would move aggressively to shift Japan towards a more radical external agenda—characterized by a defense posture less fettered by past anti-militaristic constraints, a more fully integrated US-Japan alliance, and an emphasis on ‘value-oriented’ diplomacy with East Asian states and beyond. Indeed, Abe’s diplomatic agenda has been so distinctive and forcefully articulated in past years that it might be labeled as a doctrine capable of rivaling, and even of displacing, the doctrine of Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru that has famously charted Japan’s entire post-war international trajectory. In contrast to Abe’s more muscular international agenda, the so-called ‘Yoshida Doctrine’, forged in the aftermath of total defeat in the Pacific War, has long emphasized for Japan the need for a pragmatic and low-profile foreign policy, a highly constrained defense posture, reliance but not over-dependence on the US-Japan security treaty, and the expedient rebuilding of economic and diplomatic ties with East Asian neighbors.

Prime Minister Abe Shinzō’s stunning return to power in the December 2012 landslide election victory, and the consolidation of his leadership in a repeat victory in December 2014, has heralded the resurgence for Japan of a more assertive, high-profile, and high-risk, foreign and security policy. However, as [Japan’s Foreign and Security Policy Under the ‘Abe](#)

Three faulty foreign policy arrows

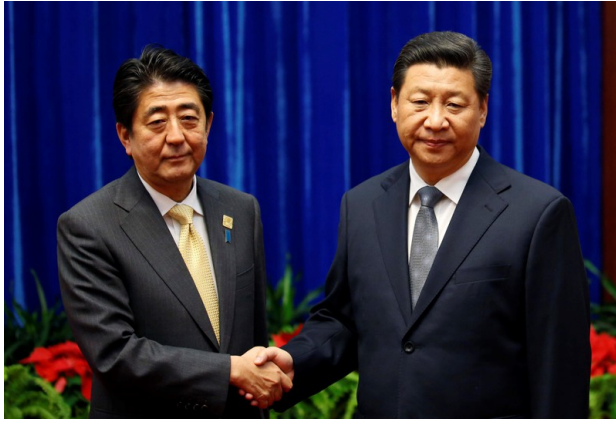
Abe has begun to shunt Japan in new radical directions in terms of its security posture. The list of Abe’s ‘reforms’ thus far includes the establishment of the National Security Council; National Security Strategy; State Secrecy Law;

Three Principles of Defense Equipment Transfers; revised ODA Charter; revised National Defense Program Guidelines; and currently legislation to enable the exercise of collective self-defense, US-Japan relations (revision of the Defense Guidelines, pushing ahead with the Futenma Replacement Facility; attempts to complete the Trans-Pacific Partnership), and Japan-East Asia relations (historical revisionism in regard to musing on the legitimacy of the Kōno and Murayama statements, and the 2013 visit to Yasukuni Shrine; the pursuit of values-oriented and hyper-active diplomacy; and the ‘encirclement’ of China). Indeed, for much of Abe’s second period in office, this agenda has seemed irresistible as the prime minister has looked to challenge domestic and international taboo after taboo, and thus to finally bring to an end the ‘post-war regime’ and usher in Japan’s return as an autonomous great power, supposedly an equal partner of the US, and a state capable of exercising leadership in East Asia (or a code word for countervailing leadership against China’s rising influence).



Angry scenes in the National Diet as the governing parties ram through security legislation

Nevertheless, questions and signs continue to emerge as to whether Abe’s foreign policy really has the ideological and material staying power to achieve its high ambitions, and whether it can shift Japan away from its post-war track and onto a new trajectory. The first agenda of security policy has progressed rapidly for Abe, culminating thus far in the ramming of collective self-defense legislation through the National Diet’s Lower House in July 2015. But there are signs of resistance kicking in domestically from the LDP’s New Kōmeitō partner and a number of the opposition parties, and public opinion over collective self-defense. The second agenda of strengthening US-Japan relations has proved harder, with security ties moving ahead but signs of repeated gridlock on Okinawa, and slower progress on the TPP, and US watchfulness on Abe’s revisionism and the impact on its ‘rebalance’ and East Asian stability. The third agenda of Japan-East Asia relations has progressed the least. Despite Abe’s grandiose plans for reasserting regional leadership and the implicit ‘encirclement’ of China, the ASEAN states have only been enlisted to a limited degree in this effort, perceiving the real intent to be to contain China; South Korea has drifted away from Japan strategically, at times towards China; and China itself has simply refused to engage in depth with Japan, continuing to bolster its position in the region and in some ways encircling and challenging Japan. The Abe-Xi Jinping summit in November seems to have resulted more from Sino-Japanese stalemate than any inspired moves by Japan to gain strategic advantage. Abe’s three arrows of his foreign and security policy, hence, risk becoming as mixed in their accuracy and effect as the three arrows of ‘Abenomics’.



Abe-Xi summit in November 2015: who is encircling whom?

Three great contradictions of the ‘Abe Doctrine’

Abe has only served two and half years as prime minister in this stint and may enjoy several more years following his victory in the December 2014 elections to continue to pursue his radical agenda. But the probability is that the Abe Doctrine, whilst making substantive differences to Japan’s foreign and security policy, will continue to fall short of its ambitions, and perhaps ultimately run into the sand. This is because of three fundamental inherent and irreconcilable contradictions. Essentially, these result from the fixation of the Abe Doctrine on attempting to escape the post-war order and the humiliations to national pride and sovereignty imposed during that period, and the fact that this in many ways only leads to Japan becoming further entrapped in the past with resultant tensions for the implementation of current policies and relations.

The first great contradiction is the assertion of the Abe Doctrine that it is founded upon the

promotion of universal liberal values in order to uphold the status quo of the international order. The facts of Abe’s foreign and security policy are that it is, of course, essentially revisionist in tone: the focus on overturning the reforms imposed by the Occupation, the judgments of Tokyo War Tribunals, and Japan’s previous statements on history oriented toward the region, are a challenge to existing international law and norms. Hence, while Japan may argue that it is China that is determined to upset the international status quo, the Abe Doctrine means that Japan also at times has to be bracketed in that category. The result is not just that Japan’s assertions of leadership based on universal values lack credibility and efficacy in East Asia, but that its approach also conflicts with the outlook of many states, and not least that of the US which founded the existing international order of the postwar period upon those very liberal values.

If the Abe Doctrine’s claims to uphold the liberal order can be said to be often fundamentally illiberal and conflictual, then its second great contradiction is the belief that the post-war regime can be brought to an end by constantly revisiting, and in certain instances unilaterally reinterpreting, past history. For again, this generates regional tensions and leads to the prolongation of Japan’s predicament of being caught in the constraints of the past. The apparent belief of Abe and the revisionists, as they prepare next month for a new statement on the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Pacific War, is that Japan by openly challenging historical interpretations of the colonial past, or more often slyly marginalizing the Kōno and Murayama statements, will eventually achieve a watershed moment of domestic and international acceptance or acquiescence in the abandonment of these taboos and the consequent constraints on Japanese foreign policy. However, all the evidence points to the

reality that the Abe Doctrine's emphasis on revisiting the colonial past and Occupation period only serves to deepen regional animosities over history and territory, and to isolate Japan diplomatically. In this way, the Abe Doctrine's plans for regional leadership are thwarted, and the postwar period of national resentment and constraints is in actuality perpetuated for Japan.

The third and perhaps greatest contradiction of the Abe Doctrine is the belief that Japan can finally recover true autonomy and independence in the post-war period through increased dependence on the US. Abe views Japan as reasserting its position as a first rank power alongside the US through deepening bilateral cooperation. But this conception is deeply flawed, not only because Japan under Abe is already finding it difficult to follow through on key policy cooperation promises, but just as importantly because the doctrine's revisionism actually presents the bilateral relationship with fundamental incompatibilities of ideology and values that undercut the potential for cooperation from the start.

The first problem for the bilateral relationship within this contradiction is that Abe's hopes for more equal ties with the US cannot by definition materialize as long as Japan continues to lock itself into dependency on the US in a range of political, economic and security affairs. Abe's attempts to strengthen Japan's great power profile through deepening integration into the military alliance can only really spell dependency. Japan's gearing of its security doctrines and capabilities in the proclamation of collective self-defense and the revised Defense Guidelines in the service of US-Japan alliance curtails rather than builds genuine security autonomy. The Abe administration's determination to construct the Futenma Replacement Facility in Okinawa and

the long-term presence of US foreign troops on Japanese soil again indicates a relationship of dependency, as does the constant seeking of security reassurances from the US in regard to Japanese control of the Senkaku islands in its dispute with China. Hence, the reality is that the Abe Doctrine is in many ways reducing Japan's autonomy in international affairs, and this will only be compounded as its revisionism leaves it more isolated in East Asia with a limited range of other feasible regional partners even when taking into account the burgeoning relationship with Australia. Japan will thus only become more susceptible to US pressure, so breeding concerns over alliance dilemmas of abandonment and entrapment, and potential resentment against the US rather than correcting that tendency.

The second problem wrapped up within this third great contradiction, is that whilst the Abe Doctrine may actually be continuing to cede Japanese autonomy to the US and even if Japan might acquiesce in the vulnerabilities and to an extent the resentment that this relationship creates for the security benefits it generally provides, nevertheless this relationship is still likely to be fraught with other difficulties borne of ideological incompatibilities and tensions. Japan's illiberalism under the Abe Doctrine and fascination with revisionism, as seen in dealings with past statements on colonial history, Yasukuni, and revisiting Occupation reforms, has the potential to place Japan and the US at genuine loggerheads. This type of dynamic has already been witnessed over the US dissatisfaction with Abe's questioning of the Kōno Statement on the 'comfort women' issue and the necessity felt by the US to push Japan back into line on the issue. The consequence of the Abe Doctrine's seeking autonomy and status through the bilateral alliance—in fact a process of a failed logic leading to enhanced dependence on the US, coupled with enhanced ideological incompatibilities between the US

and Japan—is to lock Japan more into the US alliance, and again thus more into the post-war system, and to again generate probable resentment at Japan’s essential subjugation to the US.

Resentful Realism redux?

In conclusion, therefore, the Abe Doctrine, although a bold attempt by the prime minister to break out of a pattern of a perceived decline in Japan’s international presence and generate a new path for grand strategy, has a strong probability of ultimate failure due to problems in execution and conception. The policy is clearly wrongheaded in attempting to tackle Japan’s international security problems by predicating its approach on an ideological revisionism that contains the potential to undercut cooperation with East Asia and the US. Instead, a truly liberal approach that conversely emphasizes more genuinely Japan’s successes of the post-war period and is borne from the reforms of the Occupation, a desire to remove history from the agenda of ties with East Asia and the US, and conceives of a more autonomous security policy less fettered to that of the US, might actually function as a more effective alternative to Abe’s brand of foreign policy

Until Japan corrects the radical revisionism of the Abe Doctrine, the likely outcome for Japan’s foreign and security policy is not a strong and cooperative Japan but one that may be characterized by ‘Resentful Realism’. In contrast to ‘Reluctant Realism’ that sees a comfortable alliance with the US, careful calibration of ties with East Asia and China, and contribution to a stable balance of power, ‘Resentful Realism’ might see a Japan driven by fear of China, lack of trust in the US, and a

continuing desire for the reassertion of national pride and autonomy. The fact that Japan will be unable to achieve confidence and security given the structures and doctrine promoted by Abe will only aggravate tensions and mean that Japan will be a more unpredictable ally and player in general in the East Asia region, so posing risks for regional ties and security, and Japanese security—the very opposite of what an ‘Abe Doctrine’ originally promised to deliver for Japan’s grand strategy.

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Notes

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