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## Shinzo Abe's successor must maintain a delicate balancing act

The prime minister's legacy will be a record of accomplished diplomacy that offers important lessons



One of Shinzo Abe's major achievements was the forging of the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement — and its subsequent reinvention after the US pulled out of the deal © Getty Images

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As [Shinzo Abe steps down](#) after eight years as Japanese prime minister, the focus at home is on who will succeed him.

The ruling Liberal Democratic party are weighing three candidates, with [Yoshihide Suga](#), the current chief cabinet secretary, in pole position. Under Mr Suga, Japan would probably see a continuation of Mr Abe's policies. But whoever is chosen to be the next leader, their most critical quality will be diplomatic prowess. In that regard, Mr Abe was exceptional. His legacy will be a record of accomplished diplomacy.

The deterioration of US-China relations over the past decade forced Mr Abe to [perform a balancing act](#) between the two superpowers. His goal was to protect both Japan's alliance with the US, which remains the cornerstone of national security, and its trade with China, which [represents 20 per cent](#) of Japan's total exports.

Mr Abe learnt early on the importance of maintaining a robust alliance with the US, something the preceding administration had not always managed to do. Starting in 2010, China, Russia and South Korea all tested Japan's resolve in defending its sovereignty in disputed territories with intrusions of vessels or visits to such areas by heads of state.

When Mr Abe took power in 2012 he sought to expand Japan's role in regional and global security to strengthen relations with the US, an effort that culminated in former US president [Barack Obama's visit to Hiroshima in 2016](#) and Mr Abe's reciprocal trip [to Pearl Harbor](#). With President Donald Trump, he bonded over rounds of golf and other displays of camaraderie.

With Chinese president Xi Jinping, who took power the month before Mr Abe, mending fences turned out to be more arduous. But Mr Xi's [planned state visit to Japan in April](#), though postponed due to Covid-19, suggested a warming relationship, as did the rhetoric about the countries being "[eternal neighbours](#)" at a summit between the leaders in Osaka last year. There have also been setbacks, not least the failure to [resolve a territorial dispute](#) with Russia, [which Mr Abe singled out](#) as a regret upon his resignation.

What lessons are there for Mr Abe's successor in this careful foreign policy stance? First, Japan is likely to become a more independent, yet fully trusted, American ally. As the US develops a long-term strategy to compete with China, a more resilient Japan will be a useful partner. At the same time, India and other Southeast Asian countries welcome a more confident Japan as a proactive and stabilising regional influence.

One of Mr Abe's major achievements was the forging of the ambitious Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement — and its subsequent reinvention after Mr Trump summarily pulled the US out of the deal. The decision to rebuild the agreement as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, with all the original signatories bar America, showed what Japan could achieve independently.

Second, hard realism will be necessary for dealing with China in the future. The approach should be one of coexistence and competition, which is language China understands. Mr Abe, a pragmatist, skilfully side-stepped the ideological fight between the US and China. And China has seemed to appreciate this tactic with a show of respect.

Finally, Mr Abe has taken the middle ground in domestic politics while reining in nationalist forces and preventing divisive populism from emerging. In 2015, on the 70th anniversary of the end of the second world war, he acknowledged previous statements of contrition from Japanese leaders for the country's "actions during the war" while [declining to add a new apology](#) on behalf of his own administration, seeming to draw a line under the past. His successor should take note.