

*On the day of his funeral service, we consider the full legacy of Shinzo Abe.  
David Leonhardt - New York Times*



*A tribute to Shinzo Abe, Japan's longest-serving prime minister. Kimimasa Mayama/EPA, via Shutterstock*

### ***A complex nationalist***

*Shinzo Abe could sometimes look like yet another one of the world's modern breed of nationalist leaders, alongside Viktor Orban in Hungary, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Xi Jinping in China and Donald Trump in the U.S.*

*Abe came from a family of Japanese nationalist politicians, including a grandfather whom the U.S. accused of war crimes during World War II. Abe himself downplayed Japan's wartime atrocities and spoke of the importance of patriotism and "traditional values." Above all, he pushed his country to shed its post-1945 pacifism and become more militaristic.*

*Yet for all his nationalism, Abe — Japan's longest-serving prime minister, who remained a power broker [until his assassination last week](#) — was fundamentally different from Putin, Xi and most of the other new nationalists. They have set out to undermine democracy around the world and expand autocracy. Abe, by contrast, tried to use Japanese nationalism mostly in the service of strengthening a global alliance of democracies.*

*"Abe is often described as a nationalist," [David Frum wrote in The Atlantic](#). "He deserves to be remembered instead as one of the great internationalists of his era, the leading architect of collective security in the Indo-Pacific region."*

*Today's newsletter considers Abe's full legacy. It's a legacy with relevance far beyond Japan, including for the war in Ukraine and the larger struggle between*

*autocracies like Russia and China and democracies like the U.S., the European Union and Japan.*

***'We must change'***

*The clearest way to understand Abe's approach to international affairs is through his most prominent goal: to make Japan comfortable with using military force.*

*He fought for years to change the pacifist constitution that the U.S. imposed on Japan after World War II. He failed, but nonetheless made strides toward the larger goal. During his tenure, the country increased military spending, created a national security council and changed the law so that Japanese troops could fight alongside allies overseas.*

*None of these measures had seemed necessary in the late 20th century. The U.S. handled security on behalf of Japan and much of Western Europe while those countries recovered from wartime devastation. As the cliché put it, the U.S. was the world's policeman.*

*But many American voters and politicians [have tired of this role lately](#). It's expensive, and the U.S. economy isn't as dominant as it once was. Americans — in both political parties — have also questioned why their fellow citizens often seem to be the ones risking their lives in faraway countries. These reasons help explain why both Trump and President Biden favored withdrawal from Afghanistan and why Biden has vowed not to send Americans to fight in Ukraine.*

*A less assertive U.S. means that one of two scenarios is likely to replace the so-called Pax Americana of the late 20th century. Either authoritarian leaders will feel emboldened to become more aggressive, as Putin did in Ukraine and Xi has signaled he might in Taiwan. Or other parts of the democratic alliance — the E.U., Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and Canada, among others — will have to fill some of the vacuum.*

*Abe wanted to make the second scenario a reality, partly because of his concern about China's rising power and boldness. "Since the Obama administration, the American military no longer acts as the world's policeman," [Abe told The Economist this spring](#).*

*"I still believe America must take the lead," he added.*

*But, he said, "we must change our attitude of leaving all military matters to America. Japan must take responsibility for peace and stability and do our utmost by working together with America to achieve it."*



*Abe during a military review in 2018. Kazuhiro Nogi/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images*

*Russia's invasion of Ukraine helped him make this case. As Motoko Rich, *The Times's* Tokyo bureau chief, explained to me, Abe gave a recent interview to a Japanese publication noting that Germany was increasing its military spending, and he called on Japan to do likewise.*

*"No country fights alongside a nation that is not defending itself," he said.*

*His efforts at alliance-building extended to economic policy. He popularized the phrase "a free and open Indo-Pacific," and he forged ahead with a trans-Pacific trade pact — meant largely to counter China's rise — even after Trump withdrew the U.S. from it.*

*"Abe's legacy is a world better prepared to confront China," Josh Rogin [wrote](#) in *The Washington Post*. In *The Times*, Tobias Harris, a biographer of Abe, [wrote](#), "He saw his country as engaged in a fierce competition among nations and believed that a politician's duty, first and foremost, was to ensure the security and prosperity of his people."*

### ***His full legacy***

*To be sure, the uglier parts of Abe's nationalism damaged his efforts at alliance-building. His attempts to whitewash history — by changing school textbooks, for example, and downplaying Japan's wartime brutality — created frictions with allies like South Korea, whose citizens were among the victims.*

*"His personal vision for rewriting Japanese history, of a glorious past, created a real problem in East Asia which will linger," Alexis Dudden, a University of Connecticut historian, [told](#) *The New Yorker*.*

*"It also divided Japanese society even further over how to approach its own responsibility for wartime actions carried out in the name of the emperor."*

*Over all, though, Abe was a force for democratic internationalism. He recognized that the U.S. military dominance of the 20th century was unsustainable. A great question of the early 21st century is which other countries will assert themselves enough to shape the global order. Abe believed the world would be better off if Japan — democratic and prosperous — was a large part of the answer.*

*The alternative is probably a world with more authoritarianism and less respect for individual rights. “Japan alone cannot balance China’s military power, so Japan and America must cooperate to achieve a balance,” Abe said. “The U.S.-Japan alliance is vital for America too.”*