

ARGUMENT

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Abe's Nationalism Is His Most Toxic Legacy

U.S. elites were happy to overlook the late Japanese prime minister's historical revisionism.

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JULY 14, 2022, 1:00 PM

Suppose the Nazi leader Hermann Göring had a grandson who was “emotionally attached to ‘conservatism’” because people around him “used to point to [his] grandfather as a ... ‘war criminal’” and he “felt strong repulsion.” The younger Göring entered politics and promptly joined a group of lawmakers who issued a report finding that in World War II, Nazi Germany did not wage a war of aggression; that the Wehrmacht was protecting Europe from communism; that Nazi Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia shouldn't be called an “invasion” because the Sudetenland was historically German; and that the viewpoint to the contrary is a “masochistic” view of history that made it impossible for Germans to feel proud of their country.

Imagine the younger Göring went on to become the chancellor of Germany, pass laws that grant the government with sweeping surveillance power, and hound critical journalists, making the country fall 56 places in the World Press Freedom Index in less than a decade. He would send flowers to Waffen SS memorials each year and claim the Holocaust was greatly exaggerated, arguing the Jewish people volunteered to work in the labor camps: “The fact is, there is no evidence to prove there was coercion.”

In a retrospective about Göring's politician grandson, would anyone consider him a defender of freedom and democracy? Yet in the wake of Shinzo Abe's death last week, that was the general assessment of the former prime minister of Japan, particularly in U.S. foreign-policy circles. Former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, for example, praised Abe as “a champion of democracy” and promoter of women's rights. Even when his historical revisionism has been mentioned, it's been relegated to a secondary issue—or even lauded.

Undoubtedly, Abe was a globally important, history-making figure. He was Japan's longest-serving prime minister and gave a new direction to a country that had been economically adrift since the mid-1990s. The shocking manner of his death—assassinated by a former Japanese sailor wielding a homemade shotgun—also invited kind words.

Yet even before Abe died, his rank historical revisionism was routinely glossed over or treated in a way quite differently from blood-and-soil nationalism elsewhere. Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are constantly referred to as examples of democratic backsliding. Even a near-miss like the French presidential candidate Éric Zemmour generates negative global headlines. The greatest international crisis now is Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which was motivated in large part by Russian President Vladimir Putin's imperial fantasies of restoring his country to its past glory.

Japan is a greater international presence than Hungary or Turkey. Unlike Zemmour, Abe repeatedly won elections. And while Abe did not directly assault Japanese democracy and does not deserve to be placed in the same league as Putin (or Orbán or Erdoğan or Zemmour, for that matter) his nationalist historical revisionism was hardly a secret.

Abe was a grandson of Nobusuke Kishi, a key architect of Imperial Japan's puppet state in Manchuria and a Class A war criminal suspect (and, later, one of the most important postwar prime ministers of Japan). Abe recalled being "emotionally attached" to conservatism because he felt that his grandfather did not deserve to be considered a criminal. As a junior lawmaker, he made his name by attacking Japan's history textbooks that he deemed "defeatist." As a prime minister, he engaged in soft authoritarianism while drawing international condemnation for visiting (and later sending offerings to) the controversial Yasukuni Shrine—which honors Japanese war dead, including convicted war criminals—and denying such Imperial Japanese atrocities as the sexual enslavement of women in occupied countries and the Nanjing Massacre.

Yet in the Anglophonic retrospectives of Abe's life, these facts are marginalized. If they are discussed at all, they are treated as a momentary lapse of judgment in an otherwise commendable career, marked by a solid economic policy and greater inclusion of women in the labor force. Alternatively, the toxicity of Abe's historical revisionism is watered down, either rebranded as a

generalized desire for a stronger Japan or a response to the rise of illiberal China.

But Abe's words and deeds resist such attempts to explain away the centrality of his desire to return Japan to (in his view) the halcyon days before 1945, before the humiliating loss in World War II, and before Japan was stripped of the ability to enslave and colonize like other world powers through the Peace Constitution. The most rigorous accounts of Abe's life make it plain that his political *raison d'être* was the restoration of Japan to its former glory; all else was but a means to this end.

Abe's English-language biographer Tobias Harris noted that, as a young politician, Abe lacked "interest and knowledge in economic and financial affairs," which made him slow to develop a legislative record—a defect that he compensated for first with historically revisionist politics and later with a diligent study in the time between his first and second premierships that eventually resulted in what was termed "Abenomics." Abe did not promote inclusion of women in the labor force because he was a believer in gender equality. He did so because he thought it was necessary to build a strong nation that maximizes its human resources.

Abe's historical revisionism undermined Japan's response to the rise of illiberal China. Japan could have honestly confronted Imperial Japan's dark legacy to forge a stronger bond with fellow democracies in its region, just as Germany did by recognizing its Nazi past to ultimately found the European Union alongside its former World War II adversaries. Instead, Abe's actions repeatedly showed his priorities; when faced with a choice between revisionism and the Japanese economy, or standing against China, or women's rights, or any one of his supposed virtues, he always chose revisionism—driving wedges between Japan and other neighborhood democracies, such as South Korea, in the process.

Abe was praised for being "one of the great internationalists of his era" and a defender of democracy. But he could not be bothered to build bridges with Japan's nearest democratic neighbor if the cost of doing so was to admit that Imperial Japan was wrong to invade and colonize Korea. Abe received accolades from standing up for free trade, except when he wanted to defend Imperial Japan's use of slave labor during World War II, over which he launched a reckless trade war aimed at kneecapping South Korea's

semiconductor industry, a critical link in the global supply chain. The supposed promoter of women's rights could not be bothered with the rights of the hundreds of thousands of women who were kidnapped into sex slavery at the Imperial Japanese Army's rape stations.

While there are notable exceptions, the general inability of U.S. commentary on Abe's legacy to reckon with these facts raises several concerns. In the Cold War against the Soviet Union, one of the most shameful U.S. policies was its unrelenting support of right-wing authoritarians around the world, choosing the expediency of standing up for "our bastards" over a truly value-based foreign policy that prized freedom, democracy, and human rights. The temptation to look away from Abe's motives comes in part from the same troubling choice of expediency over values. It may be true that the free world needs a strong Japan to counter China. But as discussed above, whitewashing Imperial Japan only serves to undermine that goal.

As the historian Alexis Dudden astutely noted, Abe's attitude toward the United States was paradoxical: Even as he worked to align Japan more closely with the United States on a practical level, his ultimate goal was anti-American, as it involves removing the constraints that the United States placed on Japan at the end of World War II.

Abe was a formidable statesman precisely because he could operate within that paradox. By skillfully managing the relationship with U.S. leaders, saying the right words before the international press while saying other things before his domestic audience, and knowing not to overplay his ambition, he could cultivate the dynamic that made the U.S. leaders look away from his reactionary agenda—a dynamic that is still in operation even after his death.

Without Abe, how much longer can Japan stay within that paradox? Galvanized by his death, his Liberal Democratic Party scored a landslide victory in Japan's upper house election last weekend, securing the supermajority required to revise the Peace Constitution—a lifelong project of Abe's. If that happens, the United States is unlikely to oppose the move, as it will find it expedient to have a militarily unrestrained Japan to counter China.

But Abe will not be there to lead a Japan that can once again wage war. Instead, the task will fall to a coterie of right-wing politicians who are as ultranationalist as he was but with less patience or discretion, such as Sanae Takaichi, who

came in third in the election that produced the current prime minister, Fumio Kishida. The American statesman Henry Kissinger famously said the United States has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests. At some point, with the newly gained autonomy to pursue their own agenda, Japan's leaders may well think the same.

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