

Assessment of Abe Era and the Road Ahead

Speaker: Dr. Srabani Roy Choudhury,

Professor in Japanese Studies, Centre for East Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University; Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi

Chair: Amb. Deepa Gopalan Wadhwa,

Former Ambassador of India to Japan; Member, Governing Council, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi; Chairperson, India-Japan Friendship Forum

Date: 9 October 2020

Venue: Zoom Webinar, ICS Delhi

The seminar was centred around an analysis of the Abe era, and the need to look at Abe's terms through a report card. The Speaker stated that his terms needed to be looked at from a political and economic angle, and that the future was what now needed to be focused on. Starting off on a personal note, Amb. Wadhwa elaborated on the background of her first interaction with the Speaker in Japan.

From there, the Speaker started her talk by focusing on the political angle of Abe's Prime Ministership. She said that Abe's biggest contribution was that he was Japan's longest serving PM, and gave Japan a lot of stability, as opposed to the speed with which previous leaders had entered and left power. She elaborated on how Abe had continually tried to get more executive power in place, and that it would serve to make Suga's outing much easier. According to the Speaker, Abe ensured that the ministerial shackles of bureaucracy would be unshackled in some small way, which she believed would make it easier for Suga to launch more policy initiatives – which had proven to be difficult for Abe to do. She also talked about the National Security Council and the amendment of the National Security Law, which made sure that officials could ask for information directly from ministries and assess conditions in threatening situations both domestically and internationally. Before, Japan's biggest challenge was that the PMO had to negotiate with many different ministries, leading to difficulties in decision making, which was displayed in 2011. It streamlined the gathering of information and allowed for a merging of aspects of Foreign Policy and Security policy, something that needed to be put on record as an achievement on the domestic front.

Moving on, the Speaker then talked about Abe's peace and security legislations, which allowed Japan to provide protection to the US and its allies in the spirit of collective security. As a pacifist country, Abe tried to move Japan beyond its restrictions in the constitution and give more power to the Self-Defence Force (SDF). Through legislation, the SDF can now participate in UN peacekeeping activities and go past UN mandates as well. However, Abe's efforts to include the role of the SDF in the constitution failed, due in part to the COVID pandemic and his own poor health. Unfortunately, however, while he tried to gain more power for the executive, the pandemic showed that the national government didn't have the proper emergency powers, with city governors having to take the lead. The Speaker believes that Japan needs to reinvent how to go forth with respect to the structure of the state, as COVID brought to the forefront the gaps in smooth operation of the system.

From here, the Speaker then went on to the economic aspects of Abe's terms. She started with how he came into power behind a campaign of 'Abenomics', which was considered to be a monetary easing policy to attract corporates to come back to Japan and allow for foreign investments and ownerships

in Japan. However, by 2019 it was certain that the goals of this policy would be hard to meet. According to the Speaker, it was supposed to give leadership to structural changes in industry. A big positive of it was 'Womenomics', where the Speaker believes that Abe did a good job, as he increased the number of working women in the corporate labour force by around 70%. However, he failed in terms of gender equality, where all estimates showed that industry still leaned towards inequality over equality.

With this, the Speaker focused on Abe's efforts to revitalise the regions and move people away from big cities. According to her, this started off well, looking at public works schemes and resilience against natural disasters, with the scheme being well met by Municipal Corporations as they allowed for more infrastructure building and beautifying the countryside. She also mentioned agriculture and defence, with the former being wisely done with the necessities of the TPP but missing the mark in achieving calorie-based food sufficiency. According to the Speaker, the export policy for easing of arms trade aimed to establish Japan as an exporter of arms technology, leading to cooperation in defence sectors, which did not work out as well as hoped by Abe. She believes that Suga will need to understand how to help companies to work in the defence consortium and work within the framework of this industry.

In terms of foreign policy, the Speaker mentioned that as he was such a long-serving PM, he outlasted the other G7 leaders, and hence his stature in meetings was exceptional, also due to him being a pragmatic and savvy negotiator. When USA walked out of the TPP, Abe's tenaciousness united smaller countries into comprehensive and progressive agreements for TPP. According to the Speaker, the legacy he left behind let Japan look beyond seeking the USA's blessings for everything, especially Japanese cooperation with ASEAN and the 'new Asia'.

Within the Asian periphery, Abe's policies were poorer, especially with his relations with North and South Korea, as well as with influence on Trump. However, despite political differences with China, he managed to move somewhat forward in economic cooperation. With India, the interest of strategic engagement became a goal for both countries, with the Acquisition and Cross Servicing agreement, and the arms trade policy being particularly important, along with joint efforts on the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor.

The Speaker concluded her talk by discussing the future for Japan and the Suga government. According to her, his biggest challenge is to remain PM after 2021. She mentioned that he has strong challengers, even within the Liberal Democratic Party, resulting in him having to negotiate a firm footing with respect to political leadership within party, which may scuttle hopes for strong policy decisions. She also mentioned that he needs to move the Japanese economy beyond stagnation. This was important as the domestic tourism engagement backfired as people believed COVID spread more due to this. She also believes that Suga also needs to gain trust of corporate sectors to get them back into action. Japan is now opening up and allowing people to quarantine at home and moving back towards getting economic activities back into place. However, as Japan is an export-based economy, its economy cannot recover until world economy also recovers. Finally, the Speaker ended by saying that given India's economic size, and if India can recreate its consumer base, Japanese investment into India may renew. However, according to her, for this to happen, India needed to focus on digitalising infrastructure and investing in technology like 5G, like Japan has.

The discussion that followed discussed firstly, whether Suga would continue to seek normalisation of relations with Russia, which was one of Abe's unfinished tasks. According to the Speaker, there was no reason why Suga wouldn't want to move towards this and sorting out territorial issues, and that engaging with them would be in his agenda early on. However, she believed that the US elections

would make him wait and watch before he can make bigger foreign policy decisions. Secondly, the Speaker was asked if she expected Suga to have a long stint as PM like Abe, or whether Japan would revert to quick successions of power again. For the Speaker, compared to Suga, Abe had certain natural advantages, such as his family legacy. However, Suga, in the Speaker's opinion, was a self-made, competent man, and if while she believes that it was too soon to comment on that right now, if he survived the next election, it would be a definite possibility. Finally, the Speaker was asked about how Japan's relationship with China would evolve down the line. According to the Speaker, the China relationship was getting more difficult to assess, as China's aggressive posturing during Covid made it difficult to gauge how the relationship would progress. She believes, however, that despite what happens politically, some economic ties will remain. For her, with the decoupling push in Japan, and the Quad's attempts to move away from China-based supply chain, you would still need to have some level of engagement. However, China's posturing, such as in the Senkaku issue, has created a situation where Japan is worried about how China engages, and would result in a much rockier relationship for the next couple of years, amidst some level of economic engagement as well. However, she believes that if this process goes smoothly, there might be some assertiveness on the part of Japan politically in its relations with China.

This report was prepared by Aadil Sud, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

Disclaimer: This report is a summary produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the Speaker and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies