

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER W. HUGHES

The Outlook for the Abe Doctrine after Japan's Election

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When Japan went to the polls for a lower house election on October 22, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sought and received affirmation for his defense policy and stance on North Korea. In this Q&A, Christopher W. Hughes (University of Warwick) explains how the Abe administration is shifting Japan's grand strategy. He argues that, contrary to being a continuation of the postwar Yoshida doctrine, the emerging Abe doctrine seeks to establish Japan's status as a "first-tier" nation and a fully fledged alliance partner of the United States.

Dr. Hughes is the author of the chapter "Japan's Grand Strategic Shift: From the Yoshida Doctrine to an Abe Doctrine?" in Strategic Asia 2017–18: Power, Ideas, and Military Strategy in the Asia-Pacific (November 2017).

In your chapter for this year's *Strategic Asia* volume, you examine the shift in Japan's grand strategy from the Yoshida doctrine to an Abe doctrine. What are the key features of the emerging Abe doctrine, and how does it challenge the status quo?

Shinzo Abe's supporters in Japan and abroad would like to portray the Abe doctrine as just an extension or evolution of the Yoshida doctrine so as to offer reassurance over the fundamental continuity of security policy. However, the Abe doctrine is really designed to overturn and supplant the Yoshida doctrine. It entertains a deep dissatisfaction with the Yoshida doctrine as being essentially the postwar foreign and security policy of a defeated power.

Abe's objective is to restore Japan as a "first-tier" nation domestically and internationally. Domestically, his goal is to revise the constitution as well as the "masochistic" views of history accepted as part of the postwar settlement that have suppressed Japan's national identity. On the international front, Abe is discarding systematically the key tenets of the Yoshida doctrine. Japan is now becoming a far more capable military power, in contrast with the past prioritization of economic means to ensure security. The Abe doctrine seeks

to move Japan beyond simple alignment or loose alliance with the United States, accompanied by intense hedging, toward becoming a fully fledged alliance partner. Priorities include integrating Japan Self-Defense Force and U.S. military capabilities, being prepared to stand on the front line in deterring regional adversaries, and even moving toward fighting alongside the United States through collective self-defense. Moreover, Abe is now prepared to actively balance rather than engage China and to try to construct a countervailing coalition with states on China's periphery.

I think Shigeru Yoshida—the ultimate practitioner of *realpolitik*—would be turning in his grave to see Japan locking itself into a relationship characterized by deep alliance dependency (especially with a potentially declining superpower), the erosion of hedging options, and ideologically led confrontation with its neighbors.

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What are the implications of last weekend’s snap election, in which Abe’s ruling coalition won a landslide victory, for Japanese security policy? What will Abe’s priorities be over the next few months?

The election victory—by which the coalition of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komeito retained a two-thirds supermajority in the lower house—confirms and likely accelerates the dominance of the Abe doctrine. Abe argued during the campaign that this coalition is the only political force able to respond to North Korea’s provocations, and his administration may be emboldened to further beef up cooperation with the United States on missile defense and to stretch the 2015 security legislation into enabling more activities resembling collective self-defense in support of U.S. moves to deter the North. Abe’s administration may even consider independent strike capabilities to reinforce alliance deterrence. Abe will also likely attempt over the next couple of years to achieve his ultimate ideological goal of formal constitutional revision. Even if involving initially cautious revisions, this process will start to free up Japan’s use of military power and (most importantly for the LDP revisionists) wipe away the stain of postwar national humiliations.

You write in your chapter that the transition in Japan’s grand strategy to an Abe doctrine is not yet complete, partially due to concerns about the implications for the U.S.-Japan alliance. How might this strategic shift influence, and be influenced by, the alliance?

Abe is seeking a much stronger U.S.-Japan alliance, and this is the currently dominant trajectory of Japan’s foreign and security policy. However, Japan’s other considered traditions of security policy discussed in the chapter—pacifism, multilateralism, and Gaullism (the latter being a tendency of Abe’s thinking)—still linger among the policy elites and public to some extent. The

deepening of the U.S.-Japan alliance and the associated alliance dilemmas of entrapment and abandonment are capable of triggering a backlash in Japan to revisit these options and slow integration of the alliance.

One of your policy recommendations is that the United States should continue to reassure Tokyo of its security commitments. With Trump visiting Abe in Tokyo on November 5, what would be the signs that the administration is successfully accomplishing that goal?

After initial doubts about how the “America first” approach would play out with the United States’ East Asian allies, Abe appears to have moved with some alacrity to strike up a working relationship with the Trump administration and to continue to strengthen the alliance. Japan will be looking for the United States to repeat its assurances on the deterrence of North Korea, the solidity of the extended nuclear umbrella, and the U.S.-Japan security treaty as encompassing the defense of the Senkaku Islands. But above all Japan will be looking for consistency and predictability in Trump’s stance. Lack of perceived commitment will spell risks of abandonment. Too much threat and bluster and the absence of a strategic approach (a more likely scenario) could also spell risks of abandonment and compel Japan to reappraise its options. ♦

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