



Abe Shinzo on Japan's diplomacy during the seven years and eight months he was in office (Part III): direct talks that drew President Trump into international cooperation

On the fierce head-to-heads at G7 that test the character and ability of a leader, consolidating intricate discussions and leading debate towards agreement at G20, and a thorough account of the thrills of multilateral diplomacy associated with a long-term administration, as well as issues facing Japan, such as Futenma, the Revised Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act and COVID-19.

Tanaka Akihiko, President of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)

Tanaka Akihiko: For the third article in our series, I would like to start by asking about the G7 Summit. Including during your first administration, you attended eight G7 summits. How did you approach them?

Abe Shinzo: There are many multilateral summits but the G7 has a special feel. In addition to the G7, there are, for example, the G20, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), East Asia Summit (EAS), Nuclear Security Summit, and others, all attended by many national leaders. Because the leaders all make statements, the time and opportunity for statements is limited, so there's a tendency for things to begin and end just with people reading out their prepared statements in the time assigned to them. That's why they are sometimes jokingly called "speech competitions." And because of that, the real discussions often happen during arrangements between sherpas beforehand.

At the G7 on the other hand, the leaders of seven countries (eight countries until 2013) that share fundamental values spend several days exchanging frank opinions around a single table. Each person states what kind of personal background and political principles they have, what they consider to be important, and what they want to do. There is also a session for leaders only where sherpas are not present and sometimes fierce debates occur. So, while being a place for policy coordination among advanced democratic nations, the G7 is an arena that tests the character and ability of a leader. In that, it is completely different to other summits and comes with an anxiety and a thrill.



Tanaka Akihiko,
President of GRIPS

The G7 Ise-Shima Summit and "fireworks" related to fiscal stimulus

Tanaka: You served as the host of the 2016 G7 Ise-Shima Summit. Why did you choose Ise-Shima in Mie Prefecture as the venue?

Abe: Actually, it was also me who decided where the preceding G7 summit in Japan would be held, at Toyako in Hokkaido. That time, a main theme was the global environment, so I wanted to hold discussions in a beautiful Japanese natural environment. Unfortunately, at the time of the summit I had already resigned and Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo served as host [smiles wryly].

Of course, Ise Jingu was a big reason why we chose Ise-Shima for 2016. My idea was to invite national leaders to a place that represents Japan's ancient traditions and have them experience the Japanese people's reverent piety for things that exceed human intellect.

On the other hand, Ise-Shima is not a large city used to international meetings, so at first there were worries about its capacity to hold the event. The G7 is a gathering of national leaders and their staff, as well as media from around the world, and there are intricate logistical considerations associated with running the summit, such as not only security for the leaders, but also how to secure accommodation and traffic restrictions on the day itself. Luckily, Mie Governor Suzuki Eikei was very receptive and the capacity of the facilities turned out to pose no problem. So, we decided on Ise-Shima, although a little bit of concern remained as to the relatively long time of transfer of the leaders from the airports.



On May 26, 2020, G7 leaders visited Ise Jingu.
Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

Tanaka: Summit locations in other countries aren't always the most convenient, are they?

Abe: No, they are not. On the first day of the summit, after I had greeted the national leaders, I took them to Ise Jingu. Then, when we entered Ise Jingu, the weather—which had been drizzly up to then—got better, and when we lined up in front of the *torii* gate, sun broke through the clouds. I had an excited feeling and thought that the summit would be a success.

Tanaka: At the G7 Ise-Shima Summit, a Leaders Declaration, additional documentation, related documentation, and a huge number of other outcome documents were produced. The discussion must have been wide-ranging but were there any topics that made a particular impression?

Abe: At the G7/G8 summits that I attended after returning to government, a constant subject of debate was Russia. In another interview from this series (*Gaiko* Vol. 64, *Discuss Japan* No. 64) I spoke about how, at the G8 Summit 2013 in Lough Erne, there was a set-up of one versus seven (Russia versus the other seven nations) regarding the Syria issue. The following year in 2014, Russia left the G8 over the Ukraine issue and when the G7 Summit 2014 in Brussels was held, and even at the G7 Summit 2015 in Schloss Elmau in Germany, a main topic of discussion was how to deal with Russia. In that sense, it felt like even an absent Russia played a “leading part.”

During the 2016 G7 Ise-Shima Summit, Russia and the situation in Eurasia were ongoing points of discussion, but the key topic of debate was the G7's original theme of the world economy. It was just before the referendum in the UK over leaving the EU and elements of uncertainty affecting the world economy were apparent, such as global worries about Chinese overproduction of steel. Also, Japan was in the process of getting out of deflation, so I thought that policy coordination on a macro level was needed.

Tanaka: Were there some points of debate among the participating nations?

Abe: There were differences of opinion about fiscal stimulus. Japan argued that we should respond by using all policy measures, including fiscal policy, in order to avoid an economic crisis and to strengthen the world economy, but the UK and Germany were cautious regarding proactive fiscal stimulus. Following repeated discussion, the UK and Germany were not absolutely opposed to a reference to using all measures to deal with the matter, and we put together a Leaders Declaration along those lines.

Holding President Trump to a joint line at the G20

Tanaka: You also served as host for the G20 Osaka Summit in 2019. Before, you referred to “speech competitions”. I’m sure there were special difficulties associated with multilateral leaders’ summits.

Abe: Along with the 20 regular G20 nations, a number of countries take part on invitation, and international organizations are also involved, so it’s quite a big group of participants. Thirty-seven countries and international organizations took part in the G20 Osaka Summit. Because of that, inevitably the backstage sherpa discussions become the main event and ceremonial aspects tend to dominate the meetings involving leaders. Multiple bilateral discussions are also arranged to run in parallel with the meetings. But there are some situations that required leaders’ initiative and it’s an opportunity to meet the heads of both major nations and emerging nations all at once; so there’s great value in terms of both bilateral discussion and interaction between leaders.



The G20 Osaka Summit hosted by Japan was held on June 28 and 29, 2019.
Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

Tanaka: A wide range of things is discussed at the G20, but what topics did you consider important?

Abe: I think the important topics included innovation and the digital economy, high-quality infrastructure, global finance, climate change and ocean plastic waste. Regarding the digital economy, in particular we

advocated Free Flow with Trust (DFFT), which promotes free data flows and strengthens trust among consumers and businesses.

Together with President Trump, President Xi Jinping, President Putin and Chancellor Merkel in that small venue, we were able to forge a common framework. That was a significant first step in the rule-making in this area.

Ocean plastic waste was a difficult topic. This issue was also taken up at the G7 and discussed at the 2018 G7 Charlevoix Summit. Led by Canada and the EU, an Ocean Plastics Charter was drawn up, but neither Japan nor the US signed. We agree with the goal of reducing plastic waste but you might describe the contents of the charter as “anti-plastic” and it extended to limits on the use of plastic itself. I thought we had to cautiously consider the effect on the people’s lifestyles and economic activity. But I stated that we would address the issue again at the G20 summit hosted by Japan the following year. The results of that led to the Osaka Blue Ocean Vision, which aims for zero additional pollution from ocean plastic waste by 2050.

Tanaka: As you strove for international cooperation, how did you involve President Trump, who had slight interest in multilateral frameworks? Was it difficult?

Abe: I had built a relationship of trust with President Trump and in many respects he was cooperative on the drawing up of the Leaders’ Declaration. But the climate change issue was rough going. The Trump administration had declared it was leaving the Paris Agreement and I racked my brains how to fit that in the Leaders’ Declaration. We tried to write about the actions of the majority of countries (those that supported the Paris Agreement) and the actions of the US (which had left the agreement) as separate items, but the US firmly refused. On the other hand, there was an atmosphere around European countries that, even if the US opposed separate references and we couldn’t draft the text, we should shift the blame onto the US. But as the host nation, we couldn’t do that. Looking for some common ground, I made use of a break in the final session on the second day, which I was chairing, to speak directly with President Trump.

I thought the communiqué from the Environment Ministers’ Meeting held in Karuizawa immediately beforehand could be used as a precedent. By stating, “We note the reaffirmation of commitments made ... by those countries that chose ... to implement [the Paris Agreement],” it announced the message of the countries that support the Paris Agreement, separately from the US’s stance. I suggested using the same expression. Then, President Trump read it over, said “add this please,” and wrote “For those countries already in the Paris agreement” into the document. In effect, the US had accepted a written distinction, so I thought, “with this, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

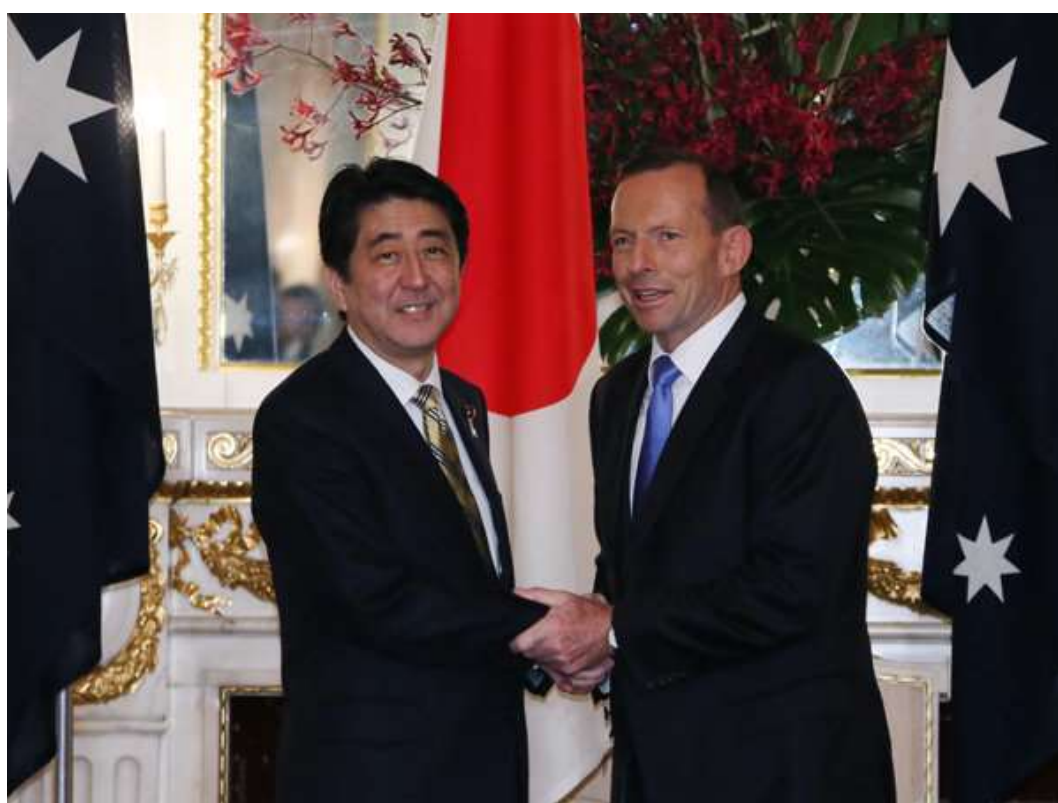
I needed to serve as chair so I quickly returned to my seat and passed the document to Senior Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Yamazaki Kazuyuki and left what came next up to him. He immediately got in contact with the US negotiating team and the US sherpa came to see the text that President Trump had written into the document. It seems the US sherpa could barely believe it: “Did the President really agree?” he said. After the sherpa had returned, now Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin came to check. Then, when he’d confirmed that “this hand-writing is definitely the President’s,” things suddenly got moving. In the end the document was slightly amended away from the President’s wording, but we did finish with separate references to the participation of the US and that of other countries. The EU side accepted it with surprise that the US had compromised thus far.

The persuasiveness of a Duterte speech

Tanaka: Both multilaterally and bilaterally, you formed many friendly links with leaders. You've already told us about President Obama, President Trump and President Putin, but are there any other leaders that made a particular impression on you.

Abe: Yes, there are many. But here I'd like to mention about Prime Minister Abbott of Australia, President Duterte of the Philippines, and Prime Minister May of the UK.

I spoke about this a little in the previous interview, but on a personal level I felt most trust towards Prime Minister Abbott. He strongly praised Japan's post-war role for a peaceful and stable Indo-Pacific Region. He thought that in future Japan should also exert leadership in security matters, and that to do so Japan and Australia should have an alliance-like close relationship.



Prime Minister Abe shaking hands with Tony Abbott, Prime Minister of Australia, at the Japan-Australia Summit Meeting on April 7, 2014
Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

This happened during the November 2014 East Asian Summit (EAS) in Myanmar. I was talking with the Sultan of Brunei, Hassanal Bolkiah, and Prime Minister Abbott when Chinese Premier Li Keqiang came over. After I had spoken with Premier Li, Prime Minister Abbott said to me—in front of Premier Li—“We have to learn from history, but we must not be bound by history.” Afterwards, he asked me, “How was my comment?” When I said, “Wonderful. You’re a peacemaker,” he was pleased. We continued to have a good relationship, including in the economic sphere by moving forward with a Japan-Australia Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA).

Tanaka: How did you find President Duterte?

Abe: He has a very strong personality, and in the sense of making an impression, he stood out more than anyone. On being inaugurated as president, one of his main policies was eradicating narcotics. But he was criticized by some in the international community for a crackdown on drug criminals so tough that people died.



Prime Minister Abe and Rodrigo R. Duterte, President of the Philippines, at the summit meeting held in Davao, the Philippines on January 13, 2017.

Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

I remember something from the 2016 EAS in Laos. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said that extra-judicial executions were taking place in this region, even though he didn't name the country. Then, in reaction to this implicit criticism from a human rights perspective, President Duterte took the stage and made a fierce counter-argument. He said that previously Christians and Muslims had lived in friendship on his home island of Mindanao, but that now it had turned into an island of hate. He said that drug criminals controlled the island and that the police and courts were powerless. Many children had been killed or turned into drug addicts. "What had the UN done then? Had even one person helped?" he asked. That's why he'd become the Mayor of Davao City and eradicated the criminals, he said. He used the words, "I massacred them," and I was shocked at that. His speech didn't stop there. He said that Spain and the US, who originally ruled the Philippines as a colony, massacred islanders. "What will you do about those human rights?" he continued.

Prime Minister Turnbull of Australia praised Duterte, saying, "He's really telling them. It's a memorable speech." And I thought the same. I think President Duterte was speaking from the heart. There was an intensity to him as he argued that, faced with a desperate situation where drug criminals were destroying the people, he was fighting criminals and producing results. What other method is there? he asked.

Later, I had the chance to visit his house on Mindanao, but it was an extremely modest house with nothing to suggest collecting wealth, it seemed. The crackdown using violent means was aimed at only eradicating crime rather than maintaining his own power, and public order did actually improve a lot. How did the people living there feel about that? Of course, human rights are important. But a situation doesn't improve just through nice-sounding words from a distance. Surely it's important to have that kind of perspective too?

Tanaka: President Duterte has been praised for his skill as an administrator ever since his time as Mayor of Davao City. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) was involved in the Mindanao Peace Process. Duterte understands Japan well and he probably has a very positive view of Japan, doesn't he?

Abe: He places great importance on the relationship with Japan. When you actually meet him, he's an extremely realistic leader. In the area of diplomacy, with China he maintains a relationship based on utility, but he is very wary of China's influence becoming too large. He said that Japan was a true friend and I think he probably does actually think that.

Tanaka: The last person you mentioned was Prime Minister May, and that's a little unexpected.



On August 31, 2017, Prime Minister Abe held a Japan-UK Summit Meeting with Theresa May, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, who was paying an official visit to Japan.
Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

Abe: With the UK already on the road to leaving the EU, she gave the impression of trying extremely hard to somehow maintain and improve the UK's presence. In particular, she said she'd like to strengthen Japan-UK relations and call that an Anglo-Japanese Alliance. I said that, historically speaking, the time of the

Anglo-Japanese Alliance was modern Japan's golden age. She agreed and forcefully stated that the UK would like to rebuild its presence in the Indo-Pacific region and that Japan will be a partner. She also promised to proceed with preparations for economic cooperation following the UK's exit from the EU, such as a Japan-UK Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA). She was someone who really conveyed how hard they were trying.

The stalled relocation of the Futenma base to Henoko

Tanaka: I'd also like to ask about individual policies. Firstly, the issue of relocating the Futenma air base to Henoko. A quarter of a century has passed since agreement during the Hashimoto Ryutaro Cabinet (1996–98) to return the Marine Corps Air Station Futenma to Japan, but somehow there's no progress. During the eight years of your time in power what were your thoughts on this issue?

Abe: The basic policy of the relocation to Henoko and its construction underway now was originally made during the Koizumi administration. I was involved in that policy-making as Chief Cabinet Secretary. After repeated consultations with both the US government and Okinawa Prefecture, there was no other option. Unfortunately, however, the Hatoyama administration spread “fantasies” that there were other possibilities to Henoko, causing the relationship both between the US and Japan, and with Okinawa, to become extremely confused. When US ambassador John. V. Roos finished his term, we shared a meal in a Japanese-style room in the Prime Minister's official residence and he said to me, “You know, Mr. Hatoyama sat where you are sitting now and told President Obama, ‘trust me.’” I felt for him.

Needless to say, by global standards the Futenma base is located in an extremely dangerous neighborhood. There are over 10,000 residences that require soundproofing. So it must be relocated as soon as possible. On the other hand, in terms of strategic importance a marine base in Okinawa is essential. With that in mind, the fact that Henoko is the only replacement location for Futenma has not changed.

Also, the thing I say at every opportunity is that the current functions of the Futenma base will not shift to Henoko as they are. Of the Futenma base's three functions, operation of all 15 aircraft used for airborne refueling will be relocated to Iwakuni base in Yamaguchi Prefecture, while acceptance of emergency landings will be moved to Kyushu. Only the operation of remaining Osprey and other things will move to Henoko, so in that respect the burden on Okinawa will become much lighter. It is a difficult construction project but I've been told that completion is possible; so, other than that, the most important thing is that politics doesn't shift about in confusion.

Tanaka: In 2019 the Revised Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act was established. There was already the Technical Intern Training Program and around 400,000 technical interns were staying in Japan, but you also created a residence status called “Specified Skilled” and indicated a new policy for accepting foreign workers into Japan. You replied to a question in the Diet with the words “it is not an immigration policy,” but aside from how to express it, there's no doubt it is a major policy shift. What were your aims in that?

Abe: Firstly, there is a background long-term trend of population decline in Japan. On top of that, over these last few decades there are many jobs that Japanese people have stopped doing, but which are important. In workplaces struggling with severe labor shortages, the reality is that these jobs, to an extent, are being taken

on by trainees and international students working part-time, while various “loopholes” have been created, including broker-like middle-men. In this situation, it is essential to have a system where we create a “Specified Skilled” status, openly welcome people with a certain level of technical skills, and exclude bad brokers.



“It is not an immigration policy,” Prime Minister Abe explained the revised Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act at the Diet on November 13, 2018 and at the press conference after the closing of the Diet on December 10, 2018.

Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

On the other hand, Japan is an island nation and not one with daily movements of people over its borders; so, I quite understand that people are uneasy about whether they can get on well alongside newly arrived foreigners in their communities or whether their own work might be taken away. When we look overseas too, immigrant-related problems are arising here and there.

We have to dispel that sort of unease. That’s why the Specified Skilled Worker (i) status is limited to 14 categories of work that have serious labor shortages, such as caregiving, construction, agriculture and dining. What’s more, there are fixed requirements for a minimum amount of technical intern training experience or to pass exams in Japanese and technical skills. Also, the maximum stay is limited to five years and accompaniment by family members is not possible.

Tanaka: Japanese society also needs to think about the most appropriate way to accept workers as it goes through a process of trial and error.

Abe: There's no obvious answer. At the stage of first considering the Revised Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, the Ministry of Justice thought that strict controls were necessary. That changed during debates inside and outside government. This goes for the debate in the Diet too, but in both the ruling party and opposition there are various opinions on accepting foreign workers. Some people say, "Let's not view them as labor, but accept them under more generous conditions as members of civil society." But other people's opinion is that "The lifestyles and employment of Japanese people will be thrown into confusion. It's disgraceful." But, looking directly at the reality facing Japan, we can't abruptly shut off the country. Right now due to COVID-19, there are restrictions on the movement of people, but someday they will start moving again. Meanwhile, I believe that it is quite possible to create a situation that will bring happiness both to people coming to Japan and those receiving them.

The novel coronavirus crisis

Tanaka: As we entered 2020, Japanese society was suddenly struck down by the novel coronavirus. It was a succession of difficult situations but how did you try to deal with those problems.

Abe: At first the disease was within China, specifically Wuhan, so initially we hoped that China would control infection domestically. Meanwhile, a pressing issue for the government was evacuation of Japanese nationals from Wuhan. It was quite a difficult operation, but the Chinese side understood what we were doing and we accomplished the mission to bring our citizens home faster than any other country. For the period after their return we got help from the Hotel Mikazuki in Chiba Prefecture as a place for them to stay in quarantine.

That was about the same time that the problem of infection on the *Diamond Princess* happened. There weren't any set international rules about who should take responsibility and deal with infection on a ship that was registered in the UK and operated by a US company. But the passengers included many Japanese people so Japan took it on. There was some confusion and 13 people died, but we received considerable cooperation from health workers, and bearing in mind the large number of elderly people, I think we managed to keep down the number of deaths and serious illness.

When it came to later spread, however, it was a battle against an invisible and unknown virus, and a series of trial and error. Of course, we did all we could but we had to make decisions one after another with limited information and time. Even now, there are many things about which I look back and wonder whether that was really the right decision. Various criticisms are leveled at the current Suga Yoshihide administration too, but I think it will make use of knowledge from this last year and work to balance infection control with the economy. But what I want to say is that, compared to other countries, Japan has kept the per capita of population number of deaths and serious illness down to quite a low level. People abroad have often told me, "Japan's response is a success." Concerning that, I think it's important to take a balanced view.

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Former Prime Minister of Japan

Born in 1954. Graduated from Seikei University. After working at Kobe Steel, Ltd., Abe Shinzo worked principally as a secretary to the Foreign Minister. As the candidate approved by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in the former first district of Yamaguchi Prefecture, he won a seat in the House of Representatives for the first time in 1993 and later held seats in the Diet for nine consecutive elections. During that time, he was named Chief Cabinet Secretary in the Diet and Secretary-General of the LDP, among other posts. He was Prime Minister (from 2006 to 2007 and 2012 to 2020) for a total of 3,188 days, 2,822 of them consecutively, both the longest in the history of Japan's constitutional politics.

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Tanaka graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Graduate School of Political Science in 1981 (with a Ph.D.). He has served as a professor at the University of Tokyo and as an Executive Director and Vice President of that institution. He was previously President of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) before taking up his current role in 2017. Since 2019 he has worked as the Editor-in-Chief of this publication. His published works include *Posuto kuraishisu no sekai* (The Post-Crisis World), *Ajia no naka no Nihon* (Japan in Asia: Post-Cold-War diplomacy) and *Atarashii chuusei* (The New Middle Ages: The World System in the 21st Century).
