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Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

# Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Accomplishments

*Having Worked with Him for 8 Long Years*

## **Abstract**

*On Tuesday, September 15, 2020, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) welcomed Dr. Tomohiko Taniguchi, Special Advisor to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Cabinet, Professor at Keio University's Graduate School of System Design and Management, and Distinguished Non-Resident Fellow at Sasakawa USA, to discuss the accomplishments of PM Abe, highlighting both his domestic and international political agenda achievements. As Prime Minister Abe's primary foreign policy speechwriter, first in 2007 and starting again in 2013, Dr. Taniguchi brought an insider's perspective from PM Abe's record-breaking tenure as the longest-sitting prime minister.*

*This talk was presented through Sasakawa USA's Policy Briefing Series and held virtually via Zoom. Attendees included distinguished guests from the Washington, D.C. policy community, academia, think tanks, and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation in Tokyo. Sasakawa USA's Chairman and President Dr. Satohiro Akimoto began the discussion by expressing his sincere gratitude for PM Abe, grateful for his long and meaningful premiership, in which he has been always gracious to Sasakawa USA, Sasakawa Tokyo, and the Nippon Foundation.*

## Introductory Remarks by Dr. Taniguchi

Dr. Taniguchi began his remarks on PM Abe's accomplishments by reminding the audience that on September 16, 2020, at approximately 12:40 p.m., PM Abe would end his term as Japan's longest sitting prime minister. Throughout this seven-year and eight-month-long period, Dr. Taniguchi served as PM Abe's primary foreign policy speechwriter, and he expressed his disappointment that PM Abe's term had to end so suddenly.

Dr. Taniguchi then recalled PM Abe's 2013 speech, entitled "Japan is Back," at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. as a pivotal point for Japan. Dr. Taniguchi stated that the speech's optimistic vision helped bring Japan out of the economic and political darkness that engulfed the country following the 2011 Tohoku earthquake, tsunami, and resulting nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant complex. More than anything else, Dr. Taniguchi argued that Japan needed "seeds of hope" to bounce back after the events of 2011, and PM Abe provided those through his messages of "hope, confidence, and self-efficacy."

For his discussion, Dr. Taniguchi stated that he would first address PM Abe's domestic economic policy before continuing with his remarks on PM Abe's foreign policy, noting that a robust economy was a precondition for PM Abe's foreign policy goals.

## PM Abe's Domestic Economic Policy

Dr. Taniguchi began his discussion on PM Abe's domestic economic policy by laying out a "report card" of PM Abe's successes. Under PM Abe, Japan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has grown by \$460 billion, corporate pretax profit has grown by \$400 billion, private non-residential investment has grown by \$154 billion, and tax revenue has grown by \$154 billion. With this growth, Japan's national budget alone would rank 17<sup>th</sup> in world GDP rankings if treated as a single country. However, Dr. Taniguchi added that 73% of this seemingly big budget is dedicated to entitlement costs, subsidies for local municipal governments, and the payback of Japanese bond obligations. He noted that while some critics recommended that Japan invest more in its military capacities, research capabilities, and public education, Dr. Taniguchi stated that it is imperative for Japan's economy to grow overall for these improvements to happen.

According to Dr. Taniguchi, the Abe administration did achieve the economic growth necessary to address these issues. Due to Japan's growth and

accompanying spike in tax revenue, PM Abe has been able to incrementally increase the budget of the Japanese Coast Guard (JCG), Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), public education, and other important institutions in Japan. Furthermore, Dr. Taniguchi argued that benefits could be seen beyond just economic growth. According to a study that has been ongoing since 1963, 74.7% of Japanese people surveyed in 2018 responded that they were content with life, a record high. Furthermore, the percentage of those who responded with discontent with life represented a historic low of 24.3%. Lastly, Dr. Taniguchi highlighted that, before COVID-19, both job-seeking college graduates and job-seeking high school graduates had high rates of job placement, with both topping 98%. Therefore, he remarked that even younger Japanese people had support for PM Abe and his economic policies.

Dr. Taniguchi also emphasized PM Abe's "Womenomics" policy as a signature achievement in the country's pursuit of gender equality. When PM Abe assumed office, Dr. Taniguchi stated that many in Japan questioned whether or not he was a social progressive, due to his progressive Womenomics policy. However, Dr. Taniguchi noted that while PM Abe is from a traditional background, he knows that for Japan to overcome the ongoing issue of an aging population, the government of Japan must encourage broad participation in the job market. While the "glass ceiling" remains lower in Japan than other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations, Dr. Taniguchi argued that the Womenomics policy led to meaningful improvements. In 2017, 74% of Japanese women ages 25 to 64 participated in the labor force, compared to only 70.9% of American women in the same age bracket, marking the first time Japan has ever surpassed the U.S. in terms of women's workforce participation. Overall, Dr. Taniguchi stated that PM Abe's Womenomics policies essentially boosted labor input to the Japanese economy.

Lastly, Dr. Taniguchi identified the Japanese welfare system as one area of unfinished business for PM Abe. Japanese welfare provision and spending totals ¥120 trillion, with 60% of this figure covered by employees and employers. The remaining 40% is covered by taxpayer money, and the percentage of payment has been shifting towards taxpayers more and more every year. Dr. Taniguchi stated that PM Abe took on this issue by raising the consumption tax to 10%, pledging that the increased revenue flow would be used more on childbearing generations, high school students, and preschoolers. This focus on the younger generation was aimed to ease the cost of childbearing and education as Japan's population continues to age. With PM Abe's retirement, Dr. Taniguchi said that it now falls to PM Yoshihide Suga to continue these reforms.

## PM Abe's Foreign Policy

Dr. Taniguchi then turned to address PM Abe's successes in foreign policy during his tenure as prime minister, noting that PM Abe prioritized domestic economic growth to pursue a foreign policy that would be respected and recognized throughout Asia. This prioritization was a result of the economic and foreign policy downturn Japan experienced after 2011 and 2012. By focusing on strengthening the economy first, PM Abe was able to raise confidence in Japan amongst the investment community in Asia. Furthermore, Dr. Taniguchi noted that with Japan's resurgent economic strength, PM Abe was able to earn the attention of the rest of the world regarding Japan's foreign policy.

First, Dr. Taniguchi discussed the importance of the Quad, an informal security grouping between Japan, the U.S., India, and Australia, to PM Abe's foreign policy objectives. Working with partners and allies was central to PM Abe's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" vision, first outlined in his "Confluence of the Two Seas" speech given to the Parliament of India in 2007. Multilateralism also drove PM Abe's international trade strategy, as seen in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with Australia. Finally, Dr. Taniguchi singled out PM Abe's appearance before a joint session of the U.S. Congress as a major milestone for his vision of a Japan fully engaged with its allies in the Indo-Pacific.

Next, Dr. Taniguchi discussed the second success of PM Abe's foreign policy: the continued growth of cooperation between Japan and the European Union (EU) on shared international interests. Dr. Taniguchi recalled flying to Brussels last year with PM Abe to construct the EU-Japan EPA and the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) alongside EU leaders. Dr. Taniguchi reflected on the importance of these agreements, noting that the EU-Japan EPA is likely the biggest EPA in terms of total coverage of goods and services ever forged between industrial democratic economies. In addition, the EU-Japan SPA reflected PM Abe's desire for democratic governments to set international norms and laws for the century to come, with both Japan and Europe as major figures in this initiative

Beginning to conclude his remarks, Dr. Taniguchi stated that PM Abe was unique among world leaders in that he had excellent relationships with both former U.S. president Barack Obama and current U.S. President Donald Trump. Dr. Taniguchi added that PM Abe and President Trump shared a call near the end of August, shortly after PM Abe announced his intent to resign. While the call was somber, it demonstrated the special relationship between President Trump and PM Abe.

Dr. Taniguchi stressed that maintaining the best possible rapport with the U.S. president is the first, second, and third most important priority for the Prime Minister of Japan, and PM Abe excelled at this task. Looking towards the future of Japan's foreign policy, Dr. Taniguchi concluded his remarks by stating that one can only hope that newly-elected PM Suga will match PM Abe's success in building a good relationship with the next U.S. President, whether it is Donald Trump or Joe Biden.

## Moderated Q&A with Attendees

Following Dr. Taniguchi's discussion, Dr. Akimoto opened the Q&A by asking the first question. While he recognized that PM Abe was resigning from public service, Dr. Akimoto noted that PM Suga has stated that he may possibly seek guidance from PM Abe while working to continue his mission. Therefore, Dr. Akimoto asked Dr. Taniguchi to speak more on the possible roles that PM Abe may play after his resignation. Dr. Taniguchi stated that as PM Abe is nearing sixty-six years old and dealing with health issues, the first and foremost priority for PM Abe is to recover and take care of his health. Dr. Taniguchi remarked that PM Abe's poor health was clear during a recent private dinner they had together, but he affirmed that PM Abe will remain a center of gravity for Japanese foreign policy, and it is unlikely that foreign dignitaries will visit Japan without visiting PM Abe.

Next, Ambassador Melanne Verveer, Director of the Institute for Women, Peace, and Security at Georgetown University, asked a question regarding PM Abe's Womenomics policy. She noted that PM Abe was a visionary in understanding and enhancing women's economic participation in Japan. However, she also noted that Japanese women disproportionately fill part-time or temporary jobs. She then asked Dr. Taniguchi whether more could have been done differently to close the gap in Japan between women's and men's employment rates. Dr. Taniguchi agreed with Amb. Verveer that the gap in employment still persists, and he then clarified that PM Abe's Womenomics was just the beginning of a long-term undertaking. Womenomics was mostly undertaken by the Japanese private sector, with the Japanese government giving incentive packages to encourage women's employment. Looking forward, Dr. Taniguchi stated that PM Suga will have to decide if the current incentive package for businesses is sufficient to narrow this gap. Lastly, Dr. Taniguchi stated that since PM Suga is a "self-proclaimed problem buster," he hopes that the Suga administration will work efficiently to break down barriers for the development of Womenomics.

The next question came from Dr. Thomas Cynkin, Director of Development and External Affairs at the Bush School of Government and Public

Service. Dr. Cynkin asked Dr. Taniguchi for his thoughts on the prospects for a U.S.-Japan bilateral free trade agreement under the new prime minister. First, Dr. Taniguchi stated that a trade agreement was already discussed and signed between President Trump and PM Abe. However, Dr. Taniguchi added that there are positive signs for further discussion on free trade. On this note, he remarked that Japan in 2020 is substantially different from the Japan of the late 1990s. Today, Japan is an accidental torchbearer of liberal values, including free trade. As mentioned by Dr. Taniguchi already, Japan pushed the TPP agreement forward and followed it up with two EU trade agreements. Dr. Taniguchi also expressed his expectation that the United Kingdom would join TPP in the future. Concluding his remarks on Dr. Cynkin's question, Dr. Taniguchi noted that Japan is currently much more willing to forge economic partnerships with industrialized countries, including the U.S.

The Q&A then turned to address Dr. Taniguchi's own experience as PM Abe's primary foreign policy speechwriter. Dr. Sunil Chacko, Board Director and Opinion-Editorial Contributor at the Sunday Guardian, asked Dr. Taniguchi to shed light on how PM Abe's speech in 2007 to the Parliament of India was constructed, what input Dr. Taniguchi and other advisors had on it, and how he helped articulate PM Abe's foreign policy strategies. In response, Dr. Taniguchi discussed the context of PM Abe's 2007 speech. At that time, there was not much interest in Japan regarding forging closer relations with India, so it took PM Abe's foresight to recognize the potential of Japanese economic and strategic interests in India. As for his own role, Dr. Taniguchi stated that he understood the good relationship between PM Abe and then Indian PM Manmohan Singh, as well as the spiritual connections between Japan and India, referencing the similarities between Hinduism and Buddhism. Lastly, he added that while he wrote PM Abe's 2007 speech, it represented PM Abe's ideas first and foremost and required his oratorical skill to make it a success.

Next, Dr. Akimoto asked a question regarding PM Abe's political challenges. Over the past year, PM Abe's approval rating has slipped, but it rose soon after he expressed his intention to step down. Dr. Taniguchi first responded by explaining that polls in Japan are usually conducted on weekends among older populations. Moreover, he added that PM Abe did his best to ignore public opinion polls, citing his drop in approval ratings near the creation of Japan's National Security Council and national security legislation. Dr. Taniguchi pondered that if PM Abe would have been healthier today, he probably would have dissolved parliament and called another election to bolster his political capital and pursue his goal of revising the Japanese constitution. Concluding his remarks on PM Abe's approval ratings, Dr. Taniguchi stated that even *The Asahi Shimbun*, a news outlet often critical of the Abe administration, had posted a poll

where almost 70% of Japanese people responded positively to PM Abe. Following this, Dr. Akimoto asked if PM Abe's approval rating means that PM Suga will take advantage of it to call general elections, but Dr. Taniguchi responded that COVID-19 makes calling for general elections more difficult.

Next, Mr. Bharat Joshi, Director of Associated Container Terminals Limited, asked whether the Japan-India relationship will continue to improve under PM Suga, or will the Abe-Modi partnership stand as the high mark? Moreover, he asked how Japan's leadership change will impact both the region and the India-Japan partnership. Dr. Taniguchi responded by stating that PM Abe and PM Modi's friendship is unique and irreplaceable. However, while he does think that the Abe-Modi era represented the golden era of the Japan-India relationship, he also expects that India will become even more important for Japan as the Western Indian Ocean grows as a hub of major power competition. Both trade through the Indian ocean and natural resources along Africa's eastern coast represent strategic interests to Japan, so Dr. Taniguchi recommended that Japan and India continue pragmatic cooperation on many fronts, including rulemaking and safe government of maritime domains and trade connections.

On the topic of regional relationships, Mr. Danny Hakim, Chairman at Budo for Peace, asked Dr. Taniguchi to share his thoughts on PM Suga's role in promoting peace in the Middle East. Dr. Taniguchi stated that PM Suga is facing a learning curve on the Middle East, but he is surrounded by well-educated and experienced officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries. Dr. Taniguchi also cited the important role of Japanese non-governmental organizations (NGO) in this space. Many organizations leverage cultural exchange between Japan and Middle Eastern countries as a means to greater mutual understanding, so PM Suga has the opportunity to take advantage of these assets to promote peace in the Middle East.

The final question in the Q&A came from Dr. Akimoto. He asked Dr. Taniguchi to explain PM Abe's approach to Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping and how PM Abe tried to achieve goals with each country. First, Dr. Taniguchi responded to Xi Jinping and PM Abe's relationship and goals. For Japan, PM Abe only went to China to exchange relations after PM Abe had cemented Japan ties with other nations, including the rest of the Quad. Dr. Taniguchi remarked that Beijing has continuously challenged Japanese territorial claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands but President Xi has not commented on PM Abe's goals of revising Japan's constitution or upgrading the country's military capabilities. Dr. Taniguchi theorized that President Xi understood that PM Abe succeeded in demonstrating Japan's connectivity to like-minded democratic nations. Therefore, for China, it was not an opportune time to publicly criticize Japan.

Looking ahead, Dr. Taniguchi stated that since COVID-19 canceled President Xi's planned visit to Japan, what PM Suga does regarding China is going to garner much attention from around the world. Next, Dr. Taniguchi spoke to PM Abe's relationship with President Putin. First, Dr. Taniguchi acknowledged that the Northern Territories dispute between Russia and Japan is an emotional issue for many. Furthermore, he also recognized the growing importance of the waters around the Northern Territories as Arctic shipping routes become more commercially viable, suggesting that this issue will become another area for great power rivalry. Therefore, he recommended that Japan build a stronger position in those areas. Finally, he noted that PM Abe was disappointed that no progress had been made on signing the Japan-Russia peace treaty despite years of his personal commitment to the issue.

## Final Remarks by Dr. Taniguchi

Dr. Akimoto concluded the webinar by asking Dr. Taniguchi to give his final remarks, requesting that Dr. Taniguchi discuss the most memorable moment he had with PM Abe during his close, professional, and personal association with the former prime minister. First, Dr. Taniguchi expressed how fulfilling his time spent with PM Abe has been. While it had been taxing, Dr. Taniguchi always knew that PM Abe was committed to lifting Japan's place higher in the world. With his gratitude expressed, Dr. Taniguchi offered PM Abe's address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress as his most memorable moment. From that speech, where PM Abe stated that the U.S.-Japan alliance must be an alliance of hope, Dr. Taniguchi knew that U.S.-Japan relations had taken a new direction. No longer was the U.S.-Japan alliance about Cold War geopolitics. Nor did it lack direction as it did in the aftermath of the Cold War. Instead, Dr. Taniguchi concluded that PM Abe's address to Congress shifted the narrative of the U.S.-Japan alliance from one looking backward to one looking forward, and that, for Dr. Taniguchi, that was especially rewarding for him.

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*Sasakawa USA is grateful to Dr. Taniguchi, Q&A participants, and attendees for the thoughtful discussion during the webinar.*

*The views summarized herein are entirely the work of Sasakawa USA and do not represent the official positions of any of the speakers.*

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