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Backgrounder: Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's US Visit

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe just arrived in Boston for the first leg of a historic trip that will bring him to Washington DC for a state visit and, on Wednesday, the first-ever address by a Japanese prime minister to a joint session of Congress. From there he will move to California to wrap up his week in the United States.

During his trip, media attention is likely to focus on *three pressing issues* in US-Japan relations:

- **Getting agreement on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)**—While 12 countries are negotiating to create the largest free trade area in the world, the United States and Japan are at the very core. Japan joined late but has made up time by negotiating to lift protections on domestic agriculture, medical supplies, and autos. Discussions between President Obama and Abe may provide the final push to get to an agreement.
- **Coming to grips with war history**—August marks the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, and the question of whether Japan has apologized enough for its wartime conduct and made sufficient amends to so-called “comfort women” continues to impede Japan’s relations with China and Korea, and increasingly with the United States. Abe has repeated past apologies and will issue a much-awaited statement on war history in August that will set the tone for regional relations, but his speech to Congress will be scrutinized to see how far he is willing to go in apologizing for wartime conduct, and he is likely to encounter protests from Korean-American groups and veterans.
- **Further strengthening the US-Japan alliance**—For the first time in the postwar era, Japan feels that its core national security interests are threatened as China gains regional influence and tensions rise around disputed territories. Japan is now reexamining its self-imposed constitutional restrictions on defense, and the United States and Japan are seeking ways for their militaries to cooperate more effectively. A new round of “2+2 meetings” between the foreign and defense ministers from both countries will be held during Abe’s visit and updated defense cooperation guidelines should be released, but Japan is struggling to make good on an 18-year-old promise to relocate the main US Marine base in Okinawa, with no solution in sight.

These issues arise as four fundamental shifts are playing out in US-Japan relations, changes that provide the context for Prime Minister Abe’s visit:

US-Japan people-to-people ties seem stronger than ever before. [Recent polls](#) show that roughly 70% of Americans and Japanese think favorably of one another—a vast improvement from two decades earlier. This was evidenced by the American response to Japan’s 2011 tsunami—a [JCIE report](#) finds that Americans donated nearly three-quarters of a billion dollars to help with the disaster, a stunning amount.

Japan has struggled over the past 25 years to find strong political leadership and its prime minister has changed more in this period than the leader of any other OECD country. Prime Minister Abe seems to have broken this pattern. He has managed to stay in office for almost two and a half years and is on track to become one of the longest-serving premiers in the postwar era. However, the [institutional factors](#) that make it hard for Japanese prime ministers to lead still hold sway, and so his strong leadership may be more of an aberration than the start of a new pattern.

Asia's regional order is undergoing a fundamental shift [as China rises; Korea, Indonesia, and others nations continue to grow](#); and Japan's relative power declines. While the United States continues its rebalance to Asia, Japan finds it increasingly important to [strengthen the American commitment to the US-Japan alliance](#), a reversal from earlier eras when it was Japan that was wary of being dragged into commitments by the United States.

Japan and the United States are looking for ways to work together in an increasingly globalizing world, tackling issues that countries can no longer deal with adequately on their own. In 2014, they launched the [US-Japan Development Dialogue](#), and there are [many other areas ripe for deeper US-Japan cooperation](#) in a multilateral context—global health and communicable disease (e.g., Ebola), [humanitarian assistance and disaster relief](#), environmental issues, and so on.

For additional commentary on Prime Minister Abe's US visit:

- ["Shinzo Abe's Chance to Recast Asian Security"](#)
Gerald Curtis, *Wall Street Journal*, April 9, 2015
One of America's preeminent analysts of Japanese politics (and JCIE/USA board member) explains how Japan's security policy has shifted under Abe and calls for him to come to grips with Japan's war history in his speech to Congress.
- ["'Human touch' key to U.S.-Japan ties: Lessons from Tom Foley and other key figures"](#)
Jim Gannon, *Asahi Shimbun (AJW Forum)*
JCIE/USA's executive director reflects on how three recently deceased figures advanced US-Japan relations and what lessons they offer as Abe heads to the United States.

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