

JAPAN IN 2017: SUCCESSES AND SCANDALS

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Executive Summary

1. Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzo survived two personal scandals and ended 2017 strongly with a landslide victory in the October Lower House Election and a rebound in the mass popularity of his administration by December 2017.
2. A menacing North Korea and a fragmented political opposition give many Japanese voters good reasons to keep the Liberal Democratic Party in power despite their misgivings about Abe's alleged scandals.
3. Abe also saw off the challenge of populist Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko's new Kibo no To (Party of Hope) at the October polls. The Democratic Party, the then number one opposition party, fragmented just before that election. Abe, for all his scandals, is not facing any serious political challenges outside and within his party.
4. Abe is poised to become the longest serving prime minister in Japan's constitutional history. He will seek a political legacy and a new identity for the nation by revising the pacifist constitution imposed by the US Occupation.
5. The Abe administration's plan for long-range cruise missiles which can offensively strike at North Korean missile bases will be a fundamental shift in Tokyo's "defence only" posture and remaking Japan into a "normal state" less encumbered by constitutional restriction.
6. Bolstered by his Lower House electoral victory, Abe declared that he will seek constitutional revision, a prerequisite for Japan's "rebirth" as a nation by the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.
7. While Abe and his allies have secured a two-thirds majority in both the Lower and Upper Houses necessary for revising the constitution, it is uncertain whether Abe will succeed at the final hurdle of a national referendum because public opinion is split down the middle.

8. The ruling LDP is also divided on constitutional revision. While most LDP members of parliament believe that constitutional revision is desirable, they do not necessarily agree on whether an additional clause on the Self-Defence Force's constitutionality is sufficient without amending Article 9 (famous no-war clause of the constitution) or to rid Article 9 altogether.
9. Notwithstanding domestic political and corporate woes, Japan chalked up a number of notable successes in foreign affairs: reinforcing the US-Japan alliance, promoting its Indo-Pacific concept, mending ties with China, leading the Trans-Pacific Partnership without the United States and clinching a mega trade deal with the European Union.
10. China and Japan are now helmed by strong and powerful top leaders who have reinforced their political bases following the Chinese Communist Party's 19th Party Congress for China and the October Lower House Election for Japan. Presumably, both Xi and Abe have a freer hand to rein in the nationalist elements within their countries and broker deals and compromises.