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Who Is Yoshihide Suga? An ‘Unlikely’ Leader, ‘Uncle Reiwa’ and the ‘Self-Made Man’ Resonating with the Person on the Street

By Lim Tai Wei

Yoshihide Suga is Japan’s new prime minister. Unlike many of his colleagues who are potential prime ministerial candidates and scions of former cabinet ministers, prime ministers and parliamentarians, the 71-year-old son of a strawberry farmer is branded as an “unlikely leader” by the international media.

His former boss, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s father, was former foreign minister and grandfather of a former prime minister; Shinjiro Koizumi the environment minister is the son of former Prime Minister Koizumi; Taro Kono, the defence minister, is son of the Speaker of the House Yohei Kono; and Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso’s mother is the daughter of iconic post-war Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, all of whom are destined for political offices.

In contrast, Suga gave up the family business of farming and became an odd-job labourer, a cardboard factory worker, security guard and low-paying newsroom assistant, and did manual work in the now-closed Tsukiji fish market to save money for university studies. Such humble roots however allow him to empathise with the Japanese working class who are affected by the economic fallout from the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic and the global economic slowdown arising from the US-China trade tensions. His profile is an ideal fit for connecting with individuals who are struggling in the current trying global economic circumstances.

EAI COMMENTARY

When Suga made up his mind to become a politician in Japan's highly competitive liberal democratic political system, the international media reported that he visited a few hundred residences a day (tens of thousands in total) in his district in Yokohama to canvas for votes, quickly wearing out several pairs of shoes in the process. Thus, whether in terms of family background, upbringing, formative years or career choices, Suga edged his way up the political hierarchy.

He is a self-made man, with no princeling connections, no aristocratic air and no political dynasties; Suga is just a no-frills affable uncle who is affectionately known to youngsters as 'Uncle Reiwa' for the internationally circulated photo of him holding up the calligraphic words of Emperor Naruhito's new reign. His understatedness and inscrutability may give him a broader appeal amongst the Japanese public than Abe who was a comparatively stronger leader and a lightning rod for attacks by the opposition and the press.

Critics nicknamed him as an "Abe substitute" but, in the context of Japanese political-social culture, this is not really an issue, given that Japanese leaders are not expected to be illiberal strongmen, abrasive alpha leaders, prima donna visionaries or undemocratic autocrats. Rather, the ideal Japanese leader aggregates the interests of all stakeholders, mediates between different political factions and interest groups, and responds to the political-social interests of Japanese mainstream society.

In this sense, Suga is a consensus-builder. His tenure as the chief cabinet secretary gives him a holistic view of Japanese politics, its political elites and machinery. In fact, he has already obtained crucial consensus from political factions within his party, securing factional support from the biggest and most powerful 98-member Hosoda faction within his party (of which Abe is a member) and from the 54-member king-making Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Taro Aso faction.

The two factions have conservative elements that have long-term relationships with big businesses, agricultural lobby and networks in Washington, Japan's most important longstanding geopolitical ally. Suga is also endorsed by the 47-member Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Secretary General Toshihiro Nikai faction, often perceived as pro-China or old China hands. Nikai is Abe's special envoy to China who has held extensive meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping and participated in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) forums, the Chinese president's most important foreign policy initiative. The endorsements by the conservative factions and the old China hands faction facilitate Suga's navigation through the stormy waters of US-China tensions.

By securing the support of power-broking factions and their respective access to foreign powers, Suga gets the job subtly done without fanfare and self-promotion (thus his media-given nickname of a 'problem-solver'). He is a quiet results-oriented leader with a low-profile, behind-the-scenes negotiating style, who has been referred to as 'veteran shadow power' in the international press.

Only those less versed in the ways of Japanese politics will consider this profile a weakness. Japanese culture dislikes knee-jerk reactions and prefers incremental changes to adapt to external shocks (in this case, the pandemic and China-US tensions known as *gaiatsu* in Japanese). The solid support he has from party factions will give Suga the weight and heft to chart continuity and coherence in foreign policies.

FUTURE POLICY DIRECTIONS ON CHINA, KOREA AND THE UNITED STATES

On the day of Suga's confirmation as the prime minister of Japan on 16 September 2020, both Japanese and Chinese media outfits expected stable Sino-Japanese ties to continue. The mass media on both sides also expected continuity in Japanese policies towards China from the Abe era. They reflected the views of their respective governments. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin issued China's congratulatory message to the new LDP leader and prime minister, indicating the Chinese government's willingness to work with Suga in the combat against COVID-19 and improve bilateral relations. If and when Suga consolidates his power in Japan, the Chinese Foreign Ministry is keen to restart talks on President Xi Jinping's first state visit to Tokyo.

Intellectuals in the field of international relations believe that Suga is by nature cautious, given his domestic orientation in politics and lower levels of involvement in foreign policy, making only two overseas trips when he was the Japanese government's number one spokesperson. His former boss Abe, by comparison, made 81 overseas trips in less than eight years as prime minister. Tapping into Abe's experiences of dealing with foreign leaders, Suga has mentioned that he would continue to consult his former boss Abe on foreign policy issues while relying on his foreign minister for inputs.

Some observers also mentioned that Suga used to restrain his former boss Abe from swerving too much to foreign policy issues and alienating domestic bread-and-butter issues which are more important to the voters. He is hence likely to be conservative in any foreign policy initiatives. His foremost attention is on navigating Japan through the ongoing pandemic and its global economic impact. China will be crucial to any economic recovery for Japan. Some in the business community will lobby for moderate foreign policies towards China.

China will be crucial for Japan's travel and tourism industries to recover from the aftermath of the pandemic, but the lessons from the pandemic has taught Japan, South Korea and other major manufacturing powers the importance of avoiding an overreliance on entrenched supply chains especially for strategic industries. Japan and South Korea are hence likely to continue to diversify to Southeast Asia and India while valuing trade and economic ties with China.

Chinese reactions to incoming Suga contrasted sharply with South Korean reactions that are cautious of an Abe loyalist taking power. Due to left-leaning South Korea President Moon Jae-in's accent on wartime issues, bilateral ties between South Korea and Japan have plunged to an all-time low. However, Suga is eager to work with Japan's Northeast Asian neighbours. The best opportunity for putting this forward is in the trilateral summit 2020 between China, Japan and South Korea. Within the domestic Japanese political circle, Suga has won acclaim for disaster relief and management. The scholarly community in Tokyo's policymaking circles believe that he may export such expertise and Japanese technologies to other countries in East Asia.

Other Northeast Asian players are also sending their congratulatory messages to Suga with Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen congratulating Suga in her capacity as leader of the Democratic Progressive Party.

Feelers to test out possible communications between Pyongyang and Suga's administration have also been sent. Suga has publicly vowed to continue working on the Japanese abductee issue (*rachi mondai*) with Pyongyang. It is an opportune time for Japan to reach out to Pyongyang given North Korean Supreme Leader General Secretary Kim Jong-Un's somewhat mysterious lack of media profile in recent times leading to speculations about his health,

EAI COMMENTARY

delegation of some powers to his sister Kim Yo-jong, now regarded widely as No. 2 in North Korea, and stalled talks with the United States.

Pyongyang's relationship with Seoul has also cooled off (particularly with the explosion of the border liaison office at Kaesong apparently at the orders of his sister) while South Korean President Moon is also battling domestic conservative critics on his rapprochement policies with North Korea. In the past, Pyongyang appeared to appreciate Tokyo's unique position in reading US intentions. This is an important potential incentive for Pyongyang to outreach to Tokyo. The ball is in Pyongyang's court as former Prime Minister Abe was open to talks with the leadership of North Korea. By communicating with Tokyo, Pyongyang can establish one more channel to reach the United States, probably a very powerful one since Japan is the main US ally in the Pacific.

Japan's bilateral relations with the other Pacific superpower, the United States, will also remain unchanged in terms of the ironclad US-Japan alliance. Suga is not an unfamiliar face in Washington, with Vice President Mike Pence paying him a visit in 2019 during Suga's trip to Washington DC. Suga is likely to pay heed to the voices in his cabinet on US foreign policy directions. The current Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi will have to manage China's growing military power and its challenge to the United States, including in the area of the South China Sea. Similarly, the English-speaking Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi is well-versed in the ways of the Washington DC.

While Japan is keen to avoid any armed battles or conflicts in the South China Sea, like all US allies and security partners, it has to prepare for contingencies and unexpected shocks to regional security. Under Abe, Japan had built personal rapport with US President Donald Trump who considers Abe a personal friend.

The outcome of US elections matters much to Japan. A Trump victory may likely result in the intensification of decoupling with China and the building of a Cold War-type of alliance that will bind South Korea and Japan closer to the United States' transactional diplomacy. A Biden victory is likely to bring about more multilateral consultation with US allies in the Pacific and Western Europe for more subtle but robust alignment against America's foes.

Like all other countries caught between the United States' and China's struggles for supremacy in the region, Japan under Suga is likely to band closer to other middle powers like Australia, Indonesia and India, a process that had already started under Abe. This is probably the best bet for middle powers against being tossed around helplessly by two powerful hegemonic superpowers in the midst of a fast-emerging New Cold War.

Some tough critics who view Suga as an Abe-synchopant also fail to understand Japanese affinity for policy continuity; Suga is well-known as a policy enforcer and a loyal (*chusei*) LDP member, a supremely important Japanese value. Abe's policies, though critiqued in Japan's pluralistic and competitive liberal democratic system with an active opposition and a probing press that does its job, have put Japan in an advantageous position to manage infection numbers, manage comparatively low death rates and avoid a steep economic decline compared to its peers at the moment.

Those who call Suga a 'caretaker' prime minister fail to understand that the Japanese political system is underpinned by a highly effective and prestigious bureaucracy that enjoys wide political legitimacy with the people and keeps things chugging along, regardless of prime ministerial changes. Suga therefore can concentrate on forging social, economic and political

EAI COMMENTARY

consensus amongst the Japanese people, institutions and organisations, and on political-social mobilisation of Japanese resources to combat the current ongoing pandemic.

Suga has mentioned that he will continue with Abenomics. Revitalising local regional economies within the pro-growth mantra of Abenomics is expected to be Suga's priority while fiscal reforms are likely to come next after revitalisation has taken off. The revitalisation call has resonated with the powerful big business lobby group and with the mainstream Japanese business sector. Domestic economic recovery instead of foreign policy is Suga's forte, given that he has been a key implementer of Abenomics since 2013.

Suga is a hard worker who wakes up at 5 am every morning, works till 6.45 pm (apparently likes to eat soba noodles for lunch that can be quickly slurped up within minutes) and holds up to three dinner business meetings per night as part of his punishing schedule. Despite being a workaholic like his former boss Abe, Suga keeps up with a tip-top exercise regime with his daily 40-minute walk and 100 push-ups (Suga was the deputy leader of the karate team in his school days). He is also careful not to consume excessively in his multiple nightly dinners!

Such healthy habits are important because Japanese prime ministers are expected to work hard for their country. The healthy regime is needed to ensure that Suga can endure the punishing schedule of a Japanese prime minister. His former boss Abe worked continuously for 147 days, taking his only day off for medical check-ups. The schedule was so harsh that even the leader of the opposition Democratic Party for the People Yuichiro Tamaki sympathetically hoped that Abe can have some rest and recover.

Suga's schedule is not expected to be lighter than Abe's. Good health is needed for steering Japan through the ongoing pandemic and other challenging issues. The tough job ahead however may be less challenging than the persuasion needed for his wife Mariko to accept the role of the First Lady. Like Suga, she keeps a low profile and very rarely emerges in public spotlight. Japan is in good hands to steer the country through the difficult period of an ongoing pandemic, the economic problems it has stirred up and the rapidly worsening US-China trade tensions.

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