

BRIAN WOODALL

Japan in 2019

*Diplomatic Strains, Domestic Dilemmas,
and a New Imperial Era*

ABSTRACT

In 2019, Japanese Prime Minister Abe grappled with domestic dilemmas and diplomatic strains, highlighted by inflamed relations with South Korea. The economy continued to grow slowly, the depopulation bomb continued ticking, and demands for gender equality grew louder. The year also brought the enthronement of a new emperor and genesis of a new imperial era.

KEYWORDS: Abe, Japan-South Korea relations, imperial succession, depopulation

THE MAIN STORYLINE OF JAPAN IN 2019 was Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's ongoing struggles with domestic dilemmas while engaging in tit-for-tat diplomatic warfare with South Korean President Moon Jae-in. With Japan–ROK relations at their lowest ebb in decades and worries that a “Trump tremor” could appear out of nowhere to unsettle foreign relations, the ceremonies that crowned a new emperor and ushered in the Reiwa Era were a welcome distraction. While Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its coalition partner emerged from Upper House elections with a majority of seats, they failed to secure the two-thirds super-majority needed to amend Japan's pacifist constitution. With preparations for the 2020 Tokyo Olympiad proceeding apace, Mother Nature unleashed severe weather events that dictated a rethinking of some plans.

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DOMESTIC DILEMMAS

On November 19, Abe Shinzō became Japan's longest-serving prime minister. When the calendar ran out on 2019, Abe had held the premiership for 3,024 days and counting, surpassing Katsura Tarō's previous all-time mark of 2,883 days and the 2,797-day postwar record set by Satō Eisaku, Abe's uncle. The feat was made possible by the September 2017 rejiggering of the term limit of the LDP presidency to allow a third three-year term. Abe's supporters now mused about revisiting the party bylaws to allow a fourth presidential term, which potentially would keep their man in the prime minister's seat until September 2024. But Abe's prime ministerial longevity did not translate into public support for his cabinet, whose disapproval rating surpassed 40% following reports that faulty government labor statistics had led to the underpayment of worker's compensation and unemployment insurance benefits to millions of recipients.

In September, Abe moved to bolster support by reshuffling his cabinet. The most talked-about new face in the ministerial lineup was that of 38-year-old Environment Minister Koizumi Shinjirō, a media favorite and son of a former LDP prime minister. From Abe's perspective, strong popular support for the cabinet was essential to realize his dream of revising Japan's pacifist constitution. Yet the results of the Upper House election of July 21 pushed that dream further out of reach. When the ballots were counted, the LDP and Kōmeitō, its coalition partner, emerged in command of 141 seats, well shy of the 164 required for a two-thirds super-majority. Meanwhile, the revision-wary Constitutional Democratic Party gained eight seats, solidifying its status as the largest opposition party in the Diet. But even if the 16 seats won by the Japan Innovation Party were included in the pro-revision column, that was not enough for Japan's first-ever constitutional revision. Undaunted, Abe vowed to "move ahead with full-fledged discussions on the Constitution in the Diet."¹ But even he understood the extreme difficulty of securing two-thirds super-majorities in both Diet chambers as well as a simple majority in a popular referendum. That realization, along with voter apathy, explains why constitutional revision was placed behind foreign affairs and national security, economic policy, social reform, regional revitalization, and disaster response among the pillars in the LDP's campaign platform.

1. "PM Abe Vows 'Full-Scale' Constitutional Revision Debate on Visit to Father's Grave," *Mainichi Shinbun*, August 13, 2019.

The year brought forth the usual cornucopia of scandals and gaffes. In April the deputy minister of land, infrastructure, and transport was sacked for boasting of using his influence to ensure that a road was built linking Abe's electoral district with Finance Minister Aso Tarō's district. Shortly thereafter, the state minister for the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games was booted out for making disparaging remarks to the effect that the electoral future of an LDP candidate he was endorsing was more important than recovery efforts in Japan's disaster-impacted northeastern region. In October, the economy minister resigned following reports that assistants dispensed cantaloupes and crab (considered luxury food items) to constituents, as well as US\$ 185 in cash as a funeral condolence. Less than a week later, the justice minister stepped down amid accusations that he had re-gifted potatoes to constituents and that his wife, also an LDP MP, exceeded the spending limit in wages paid to sound-truck staff in her Upper House campaign.²

The LDP attempted to minimize the negative press by distributing an "anti-gaffe" handbook to its members. Among other things, the handbook urged MPs to speak in short sound bites rather than lengthy, comma-infested sentences that are prone to being cut and pasted out of context.³ The need for such a manual was highlighted in a Meiji University student's online article highlighting politicians' gender-insensitive gaffes. The article singled out 25 gaffes, 21 of which were attributed to LDP MPs. A noteworthy 2019 addition was a statement by the aforementioned Olympics and Paralympics minister that Japanese women need "to give birth to at least three children each."⁴ But the LDP did not seize the money-making opportunity to sell copies of the handbook to the opposition camp. Indeed, some anti-gaffe pointers might have benefitted a Japan Restoration Party MP who got himself expelled from the party and condemned in the Diet for suggesting that Japan might want to resume war with Russia to recover the disputed Northern Territories.

There were other corruption scandals. In March the president of the Japan Olympic Committee resigned after being implicated in the bribing of an African member of the International Olympic Committee to help bring the

2. Motoko Rich, "2 Cabinet Ministers Resigned in Japan. Their Downfall? Melons and Potatoes," *New York Times*, November 2, 2019.

3. "Japan's Ruling Party Distributes 'Anti-Gaffe Manual' after Blunders Lead to Resignations," *Mainichi Shinbun*, May 15, 2019.

4. "Article Listing Japan Politicians' Bizarre, Hurtful Comments on Gender an Online Hit," *Mainichi Shinbun*, July 16, 2019.

2020 Games to Tokyo. Late summer saw the parliamentary vice minister of labor sacked after reports that he peddled information on foreign workers to a temporary-staffing agency. And then there was the scandal involving the steeply discounted sale of public land to Moritomo Gakuen, a private academy with ties to Abe Akie, the prime minister's wife. In October prosecutors announced plans to pursue prison sentences for the former headmaster and his wife, while the Abes maintained their innocence. Finally, in November, a scandal erupted over accusations that Prime Minister Abe inappropriately used state funds to wow as many as 1,000 personal supporters invited to an annual cherry blossom viewing party in a Tokyo park. He also came under fire for allegedly violating campaign finance law to pay part of the cost of a pre-party dinner. Under this darkening cloud of suspicion, Abe reportedly abandoned his long-cherished dream of revising the constitution.⁵

Economy

Japan's economy continued to grow, albeit at a modest rate, in 2019. What might be dubbed the Abenomics Boom, which began in December 2012, continued to add to its record-setting postwar longevity in surpassing the 73-month Izanami Boom of the early 2000s. Even though the economy continued to add jobs, the annualized quarterly growth rate of GDP hovered just north of 1%. Undoubtedly some credit for the ongoing growth is owed to the monetary policy, infrastructure spending, and structural reform known as Abenomics. But actual growth has not matched government expectations, and the US–China trade war caused a slump in Japan's exports which could imperil continued prosperity. In addition, the diplomatic dispute with South Korea put a dent in a major source of tourism revenue.

A ray of good and bad news appeared on February 1, 2019 when an economic alliance between Japan and the European Union went into effect, creating a free trade area encompassing 30% of world GDP. Japanese consumers welcomed lower prices on EU-produced wine, pork, and dairy products, but the potential negative impact on domestic employment was cause for concern. Prime Minister Abe and Japanese leaders hoped to use multi-lateral agreements like the Japan–EU free trade agreement and the 11-country

5. "PM Abe Abandons Bid to Revise Constitution in 2020 Due to Deadlock over Scandals," *Mainichi Shinbun*, December 7, 2019.

Trans-Pacific Partnership as bargaining chips in bilateral trade negotiations with the United States.

The twice-delayed imposition of a 10% sales tax (two percentage points above the previous rate) raised concerns about its dampening effect on the economy. Everyone agreed that something needed to be done to generate revenue to pay for the costs of Japan's aging and shrinking population. But there was confusion about the difference between take-out food, which is still taxed at 8%, versus food consumed on the premises, which is to be taxed at the new rate. The new policy also aimed to induce cash-loving Japanese consumers to get used to using plastic money in advance of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. By November, it became clear that the tax hike, coupled with the US–China tariff spat and other factors, had reduced government revenue, necessitating the issuance of deficit-covering bonds for the first time in three years and increasing the world's worst debt-to-GDP ratio.

Society

Japan's depopulation bomb—the volatile combination of an aging, shrinking population and the world's lowest proportion of working-age people—continued ticking in 2019. The population figures continued to contract, as the projected death rate exceeded the projected birthrate by an expanding margin. Years of government efforts to encourage citizens to make more babies failed to produce results. With the world's longest-lived people and more elderly per capita than any other country, policymakers began admitting more foreign workers. In April, the government began granting visas to up to 345,000 foreigners to work for a maximum of five years in 14 sectors that include nursing care, farming, and construction. A major concern is how to assimilate such an influx of foreign residents into Japanese society, particularly since many of them will reside in rural areas where traditional values remain strong.

The plight of Japanese women, who continue to receive unequal treatment in employment and social situations, drew much attention. Although more women are in the workforce than ever before, they are far more likely than men to hold temporary positions with meager if any benefits. And Japan ranks at or near the bottom among the 20 largest economies (G20) when it comes to the presence of women in high-level corporate positions and national-level elective office. That Abe's "Womenomics" program had failed

to live up to promises was evident in the July Upper House elections, in which only 14.6% of LDP candidates were female. In other words, Abe's LDP impeded efforts to foster gender equity, despite a non-binding 2018 Gender Parity Law that urges parties to field equal numbers of female and male candidates.⁶

In 2019, policymakers and the courts confronted demands for expanded paternity benefits and opportunities for the disabled. Paternity-leave benefits are rare in both the private and public sectors, and only a fraction of the men accorded these benefits take advantage of them; and some of those who did have complained of harassment from employers. Beginning in 2020, the government plans to encourage male civil servants to take a month of paternity leave.⁷ This, it is hoped, will encourage working couples to have more children. While much remains to be done to ensure equal inclusion of the physically and mentally impaired, the election of two disabled candidates to the Upper House was encouraging.

The worldwide media coverage of the case of Carlos Ghosn, the deposed head of the world's biggest automobile partnership, which includes Nissan, Renault, and Mitsubishi, reflected badly on Japan's judicial system. After being arrested in November 2018 on charges of under-reporting income and misusing company assets—and with little outside contact during a 107-day confinement and re-arrest in April—Ghosn and his attorneys were denied access to computer files and paper records that Nissan and prosecutors claimed were too sensitive. The Ghosn case surfaced in discussions between Abe and French President Emmanuel Macron, who was determined to ensure that the controversy did not tank the partnership, even as all three automakers struggled to remain profitable in a competitive industry. At the end of December, in a dramatic “escape” from Japan, Ghosn skipped bail, by some accounts hiding in a large audio equipment case, and reportedly fled by private jet to Lebanon via Turkey.

The year 2019 witnessed the Heisei Era give way to the Reiwa Era. In departing from tradition, the inspiration for the name (roughly, Orderly Peace) came from the *Man'yō-shū*, an ancient Japanese poetry anthology, rather than Chinese literature. The succession itself was enacted in elaborate,

6. Mari Miura, “Japan’s Leader Wants to Empower Women. Just Not in His Party,” *New York Times*, July 26, 2019.

7. “Japan Gov’t to Urge Male Staff to Take More than 1-Month Childcare Leave,” *Mainichi Shinbun*, October 29, 2019.

arcane ceremonies that began in May and continued through November. Despite the stiff formality of the abdication and succession, the eyes of Japan were riveted on the spectacle, amid high hopes for a propitious Reiwa Era. That the ceremonies coincided with an extended Golden Week holiday only added to the nationwide gaiety. The only significant cause for gloom came with the realization that, unless the Imperial Household Law is changed to permit a female monarch, there is likely to be only one potential heir when Naruhito vacates the Chrysanthemum Throne.

DIPLOMATIC STRAINS

In June, Osaka provided the venue for the annual G20 summit meeting of state leaders and central bank governors. Convened under the dark cloud of the US–China trade war, the leaders’ declaration made no mention of a need to combat protectionism. But the summit did produce agreements to pursue the creation of international regimes to govern the digital economy and to reduce plastic waste in the seas, a problem for which Japan (the world’s number-two per capita producer of plastic waste) bears a significant burden of blame. While the Osaka event cast a generally positive light on Japan’s global contributions, international condemnation followed Japan’s decision to withdraw from the International Whaling Commission and resume commercial whaling. On July 1, whaling ships sailed from several ports in quest of a pelagic harvest in nearby waters.

Relations with Russia, China, and North Korea

Following Russian President Vladimir Putin’s proposal for an unconditional peace treaty at a September 2018 meeting with Abe, the two sides began exploring ways to resolve a territorial dispute that has blocked the path to a peace treaty formally ending the Second World War. Although Japanese nationalists demanded the return of all of the disputed islands in the archipelago between Hokkaido and Kamchatka, Abe and his diplomats floated the idea of securing the return of Shikotan and the Habomai group, and leaving Kunashiri and Etorofu in Russian hands. But Russian hardliners viewed any transfer of territory as an affront to their own nationalism.⁸ By late January

8. Andrew Higgins, “Putin Quashes Japanese Hopes of End to Island Dispute,” *New York Times*, January 22, 2019.

2019 it was clear that Putin would not accept the two-island swap, which essentially had been agreed on in the talks that preceded a 1956 joint Soviet–Japan declaration.

Yet a glimmer of hope appeared in an agreement reached between Abe and Putin on the sidelines of the Osaka G20 meeting. In October 2019, that agreement took shape in a pilot program that permits Japanese tourists to visit designated sites on the islets of Shikotan and the Habomai. However, the tourist visits were preceded by live-fire military drills on Kunashiri and provocative flights by Russian warplanes over Japanese territorial airspace.

While the ties between Tokyo and Moscow continued to resemble a Cold War ice structure, relations with Beijing warmed somewhat. The Osaka G20 meeting brought Xi Jinping to Japan on his first visit as China’s president, and the first by a Chinese head of government in nearly nine years. Abe and Xi agreed to cooperate in developing natural gas reserves in the area around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The summit meeting was preceded by the dispatch of six Japanese cabinet members to Beijing to discuss options for improving bilateral economic relations. All of this prompted Abe to declare that Sino–Japanese relations have “completely returned to a normal track.”⁹

But it did not bring an end to Chinese military muscle-flexing in and around Japanese territorial waters. Just before the kickoff of the G20 summit, the Chinese aircraft carrier *Liaoning* sailed through the Ryūkyū Islands, and the following month, Chinese Coast Guard ships were spotted in waters near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and off Japan’s northeastern coast. Japan’s Maritime Self-Defense Force reported that, during military drills in August, Chinese fighter aircraft had used Japanese destroyers as mock targets. Although Beijing denied the report, it resurrected memories of a similar incident in 2013.

Xi informed Abe that he had brought up Japan’s views regarding North Korea in his June meeting with Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un. It was not made public whether Xi broached the possibility of an Abe–Kim summit during his Pyongyang visit, although Xi must have been aware that Abe had proposed such a meeting to help thaw relations with North Korea. Indeed, bilateral ties had been in a state of deep freeze since 2004, when then-Prime

9. “Abe, Xi Vow to Boost Regular, Close Communication amid Thaw in Ties,” *Mainichi Shinbun*, June 28, 2019.

Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō made a second visit to Pyongyang after the release of five Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 1980s. Pyongyang admitted kidnapping 13 Japanese, but Tokyo put the number at 17. With murky claims about the fate of the unaccounted-for abductees, including the repatriation of false DNA for one supposedly deceased victim, the estrangement of Japan and North Korea continued.

Under Abe, Japan had been a steadfast partner in the US government's "maximum pressure" campaign to force Pyongyang to relinquish its nuclear arsenal. Throughout 2019, North Korea tested short-range land- and submarine-launched missiles, many of which landed in or around Japanese waters. In October a Japanese Coast Guard patrol ship collided with a North Korean boat—which proceeded to sink, although the 20-member crew was rescued—that was illegally fishing for squid in waters off Ishikawa Prefecture. Apparently, none of these provocations disquieted the mind of Donald Trump, who, after abruptly and unexpectedly executing a U-turn to embrace "Little Rocket Man" Kim in 2018, thrice met with the North Korean leader in 2019 in search of a denuclearization deal. Abe dutifully toned down the maximum-pressure rhetoric to fall in line with Trump's new position. Yet North Korean provocations continued. In response to Abe's reference to the late November test firing of two short-range projectiles as a "ballistic missile launch," Pyongyang threatened that Japan's prime minister "may see what a real ballistic missile is in the not distant future and under his nose."¹⁰

Relations with the United States

Abe continued to cultivate his friendship with the mercurial American president in the hope that it would reduce the likelihood of another "Trump tremor" to unsettle bilateral relations. During an April meeting in Washington, the two leaders played a round of golf and snacked on Melania Trump's birthday cake. In May, Abe arranged for Trump to present the trophy to the winner of the summer Grand Sumo tournament and to be the first foreign visitor received by Emperor Naruhito, whose wife, (née Owada) Masako, is a Harvard-educated ex-Foreign Affairs Ministry diplomat. Abe had already

10. "N. Korea Warns Abe May See 'Real Missile,'" *Yomiuri Shinbun*, November 30, 2019.

done a great deal to ingratiate himself with Trump, astutely heeding prompts from the White House to nominate its most famous current occupant for the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his efforts to defuse the North Korean nuclear crisis.

Yet, many Japanese wonder what Abe is getting in return for his genuflections. For instance, on arriving for the Osaka G20, Trump once again assailed the one-sidedness of the US–Japan mutual security treaty, complaining that Japan would not have to defend the US in the event of attack, whereas the US is duty-bound to defend Japan. Trump neglected to mention that the treaty was thrust upon a defeated Japan by American military occupiers, and that Tokyo’s host-country support makes possible the inexpensive forward-basing of American troops for a variety of missions, including the “War on Terror,” that have never included defending Japan from foreign aggression. Likewise, Abe has expanded Japan’s ability to contribute to collective self-defense despite the pacifist constitution, and dispatched Maritime Self-Defense Force ships to the Gulf of Hormuz in a show of support for the US-led coalition (although, to avoid angering Iran, the Japanese ships operated independently of those of the coalition). And yet the citizens of Okinawa (the prefecture hosting the greatest number of US soldiers on Japanese soil) are miffed at Abe’s insistence, despite protest rallies and a public referendum, on plowing ahead with the relocation of the Marine Corps Air Station Futenma to a less populated area there. In July, John Bolton, Trump’s national security adviser, passed along a request that Japan quintuple its annual outlay to support US armed forces stationed in Japan. A spokesman for the Abe government responded that Japan was providing the appropriate level of host country support.

On October 7, the US and Japan signed a bilateral agreement committing Tokyo to reduce or eliminate tariffs on an additional US\$ 7.2 billion of American agricultural products, including pork, beef, wine, cheese, various fruits, raisins, and nuts. Both sides claimed victory, although the only obvious concession won by the Japanese side was the exclusion of American rice from the list of products subject to tariff cuts or exclusions. Abe asserted that “because rice, which is important to our country, was exempted from tariff cuts, it is an outcome that protects our national interests.”¹¹ The Japanese

11. “Abe Promotes Merits of Japan-US Trade Pact, Vows Steps for Farmers,” *Mainichi Shinbun*, October 1, 2019.

side was also relieved to have avoided a threatened additional 25% US tariff on automobiles, although the existing 2.5% import tax would remain in effect. Significantly, the agreement did not contain language ruling out future US tariffs on Japanese automobiles.

Relations with South Korea

Japanese–South Korean relations sank to their lowest point in decades. Scarcely had 2019 begun than attorneys for South Korean plaintiffs were launching procedures to seize the assets of Japanese companies that had forced Koreans to work in mines and factories during the Second World War. Tokyo pushed back, fearing that the demands for compensation from exploited ex-colonial workers could mushroom into endless reparation demands. Tokyo argued that the issue of reparations had been settled in the 1965 normalization treaty, whereby Japan gave the ROK US\$ 500 billion in grants and loans to foster economic growth. Seoul fired back, arguing that the 1965 treaty was a government-to-government deal that did not apply to disputes between private citizens and the offending Japanese companies. With tensions running high, Abe and ROK President Moon Jae-in reluctantly shook hands, but did not speak to one another on the sidelines of the Osaka G20.

Bilateral relations continued to deteriorate as summer wore on. In July, the Moon administration followed through with the decision to close down a foundation created to dispense Japanese funds to Korean “comfort women” who had been forced or tricked into sexual servitude for the Japanese Imperial Army in the Second World War. The Abe administration retaliated by tightening controls on exports to South Korea of certain technology-related products with potential military application. The ROK side appealed for redress to the World Trade Organization, arguing that Japan’s action was an unfair tit-for-tat intended to inflict pain on South Korean companies that manufacture semiconductors and display screens. With South Korean citizens in the streets vocalizing anti-Japanese sentiments, flights carrying tourists from the ROK to once-popular Japanese vacation destinations had few passengers or were cancelled altogether. Eventually, South Koreans completely lost their taste for imported Japanese beer. Meanwhile, ROK military aircraft scrambled and fired warning shots at Chinese and Russian aircraft staging joint military exercises near the Liancourt Rocks (a.k.a. the

Takeshima/Dokdo Islands), which are claimed by both countries but occupied by South Korea. Tokyo protested Seoul's use of force over Japanese territory.

In late August, the Moon government threatened to pull out of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), a military intelligence sharing agreement with Japan and the United States. Seoul further displayed its displeasure by staging two days of military drills on the Takeshima/Dokdo Islands. Officials from Tokyo and Seoul began meeting in Guam and Geneva to curb the deterioration of bilateral relations. The Trump administration also got involved, albeit belatedly and perhaps not as intently as the situation warranted. After initially hoping Tokyo and Seoul would work things out on their own, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo asked both sides "to find a path forward," while Trump himself called for them to resolve their dispute.

But these efforts had no immediate effect. On August 27, the Abe government followed through with its threat to revoke Seoul's "white list" status among countries requiring minimal trade regulation, and the Moon government followed suit in tit-for-tat retribution. In September, Seoul asked the International Olympic Committee to ban Japan from flying the "rising sun" flag at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, comparing it to the Nazi swastika. Abe and Moon did not meet on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in September. Moon made it known that he would not attend Emperor Naruhito's enthronement, and that Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon would represent the ROK in his place. It was later reported that Lee delivered a letter from Moon to Abe. Meanwhile, a Japanese Defense Ministry white paper downgraded South Korea's status as a security partner, opting to list the ROK after Australia, India, and ASEAN owing to Seoul's "negative actions," while asserting Japan's sovereignty over the Takeshima/Dokdo Islands.¹² President Moon demonstrated his displeasure by authorizing some of the ROK's new F-15K fighter-bombers to stage a fly-over above the disputed islands.

Abe and Moon finally met in Bangkok in November. Both were there to attend a summit meeting of leaders of the ASEAN countries plus Japan, South Korea, and China. While their 11-minute face-to-face did not lead to

12. "Defense White Paper Demotes South Korea Due to Chilling Ties," *Yomiuri Shinbun*, September 27, 2019.

an immediate path to detoxify bilateral relations, at least the two were speaking to each other. With the GSOMIA set to expire later in the month, any improvement in relations, no matter how small, was welcome news. And on November 21, with the GSOMIA set to expire the following day, the South Korean government temporarily extended it. Shortly thereafter, the two sides agreed to hold a working-level dialog concerning export controls and to convene a late-December summit between Abe and Moon.

MOTHER NATURE

Once again, Mother Nature visited Japan with unusually severe weather events. The effects of a handful of typhoons were felt, including two direct hits on the capital region. In early September, Typhoon Faxai, one of the strongest weather events to ever strike the Kantō region around Tokyo, disrupted railway and air service, killed at least three people, and cut off power to nearly a million households. But Faxai paled in comparison to Typhoon Hagibis, which made landfall in October. After killing at least 89 people, leaving others missing, disrupting travel, cutting power to millions of citizens, and sending hundreds of thousands to evacuation centers, Hagibis was declared an “extraordinary disaster.” Preceding all this was a late-summer heat wave that, in one August week alone, killed 23 citizens and sent 13,000 others to the hospital. This led the International Olympic Committee to move the marathons and walking races planned for the 2020 Olympics away from sweltering Tokyo to milder Sapporo in Hokkaido. But not everyone was pleased with the committee’s decision; Tokyo’s governor, Koike Yuriko, sarcastically suggested that the Northern Territories might be a good place for the marathon. In December, the Abe government announced a US\$ 120 billion stimulus package to reinforce Japan’s damaged infrastructure in the wake of Typhoon Hagibis and to ameliorate the pain inflicted by the US–China tariff war and the downturn in trade and tourism with South Korea.

CONCLUSION

In 2019, Prime Minister Abe grappled with domestic dilemmas and diplomatic strains, highlighted by inflamed bilateral relations with South Korea. While Abe’s LDP and its allies emerged from Upper House elections with

a majority of seats, they failed to win the two-thirds super-majority needed to amend Japan's pacifist constitution. Despite Abe's friendship with Donald Trump, a new US–Japan bilateral trade agreement obligated Japan to open its agricultural markets to American farm products and left open the possibility of future tariffs on Japanese automobile exports. Much of the year was consumed in ceremonies to crown a new emperor and new imperial era, while Mother Nature delivered another round of severe weather events that necessitated a rethinking of some plans for the 2020 Tokyo Olympiad.