

The Emperor Strikes Back: Japan's Monarch Takes On Imperialist Abe

Raising the issue of his abdication, the emperor undermines the neo-imperial designs of the prime minister. But the battle between the palace and the PM has just begun.

TOKYO — When the Emperor speaks, Japan listens and so does the world. Monday at 3:00 p.m. local time a speech by [Emperor Akihito](#) was televised on a date that commemorated no anniversary or major tragedy, as most of his addresses do. Instead it pertained to the very Imperial System itself.

The Emperor, who is 82, [discussed](#) his health, his position as a symbol of the state under Japan's modern constitution, the hardship of his duties, his love for the people of Japan—and made clear his desire to abdicate the throne in his lifetime in a way that would cause the least amount of turmoil.

He used the word, “the people” (*kokumin*) frequently, speaking to the nation in a fatherly, thoughtful tone and asking for understanding.

The Emperor's speech, in its quiet way, was the opening salvo in a battle for the future of modern Japan, a nation he sees as [“based on peace and democracy as important values to be upheld.”](#)

Some of it had been telegraphed before, preparing the public for what's to come. There had been hints in the press dating back years, then last month Japanese public broadcaster NHK caused a sensation by reporting that the emperor might want to abdicate the throne before he dies—something that hasn't happened in Japan for more than 200 years and, indeed, something the current constitution doesn't appear to allow.



Japan's Emperor Hints At Wanting To Abdicate ... But He Can't

Monday's speech left little doubt his desire and intent is to step down, if such a thing can be arranged, but more importantly it marks the prelude to what may be an epic battle between the emperor's successor, Crown Prince Naruhito, and the man some critics call the Clown Prince—Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, leader of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

Media reports in Japan already are calling the consideration of abdication the current emperor's [final act of resistance](#) against the prime minister, a bid to halt the return to Japan's aggressive pre-war attitudes and policies.

There was, to be sure, a certain weariness in [the emperor's 11-minute prerecorded speech](#) and one can understand why—he remembers the war and its aftermath first hand.

He began his remarks with the acknowledgement that 70 years had passed since the end of the war, and that he was now past 80.

The carefully woven speech was centered on his concerns for his own physical limitations and their repercussions. He reflected on the difficulty of living up to the standards of what is expected of the Symbolic Emperor (no longer considered divine, as his forebears were) and the responsibility to do what is best for his people as well as his family.

"I ascended to the throne approximately 28 years ago," said Akihito, "and during these years, I have spent my days together with the people of Japan, sharing many of the joys as well as the sorrows that have happened in our country. I have considered that the first and foremost duty of the Emperor is to pray for peace and the happiness of all the people. At the same time, I also believe that in some cases it is essential to stand by the people, listen to their voices, and be close to them in their thoughts."

"When the Emperor has ill health and his condition becomes serious, I am concerned that, as we have seen in the past, society comes to a standstill and people's lives are impacted in various ways," said Akihito. "It occurs to me from time to time to wonder whether it is possible to prevent such a situation."

He then touches upon Japan's Imperial history, obliquely indicating that, historically, emperors did abdicate and that he hopes the people will understand his wishes.

Akihito ended the speech by reiterating that he does not have powers to influence the constitution (which his Japanese listeners knew would be required were he to abdicate), but that he sincerely wishes for the people's understanding.

He used the phrase “symbol of the state” six times. It was a pointed reference to the dark time in Japan’s history where the emperor was not a symbol but the divine ruler of Imperial Japan. Under the pre-war constitution Japan waged wars of conquest in China, Korea and Southeast Asia, eventually fighting, and losing, the Second World War as a country devastated by the ferocious firebombings of Tokyo and other cities, and the U.S. atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Prime Minister Abe wants to revive that pre-war constitution, and Abe, who understood the emperor’s message perfectly well, did not like it.

Abe read a short prepared speech to the press after the video was aired. He seemed irritated as he noted that the emperor had addressed “the people”—as if this direct appeal to the masses was the equivalent of going over his head.

“We must seriously think about the public duties and burdens of the Emperor and what we can do about it,” Abe stated. There was no pledge to change the laws or make abdication easy.

In recent years, the emperor’s speeches and those of Crown Prince Naruhito—who will most likely succeed the current emperor, perhaps even while his father is still alive—have been studied for their sentiments on the importance of pacifism and the post-war constitution. They have remembered honestly Japan’s crimes during the war, and voiced subtle opposition to the renewed militarism of the current administration.

In some respects, Abe was in trouble even before the emperor struck back. The prime minister’s signature policies on the economy have not done well. The International Monetary Fund has pronounced “Abenomics” [a failure](#). But politically, he should be happy. After the recent [Upper House elections](#), he gained enough supporters in both houses last month to have a shot at his long cherished dream of altering Japan’s constitution.

The NHK report last month of the emperor’s possible abdication plans, coming just days after the elections, was seen as a move to throw cold water on Abe’s evident ardor for old Imperial glories.

Not surprisingly, after the NHK scoop Abe’s people at first vehemently denied reports that the emperor wished to retire. According to Japanese reporters covering the administration, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga angrily scolded NHK reporters for having the audacity to broadcast the news without letting him know in advance, and a witch hunt

supposedly was launched within the Imperial Household Agency to find out where the leak came from.

Today's speech confirmed that the leak was correct—and it may have come from very high up in the Imperial Household. Certainly it cleared the way for the Emperor to give his unusual address today.

This is a pivotal moment in Japanese history, and for the emperor there must be a grim sense of déjà vu. Since Prime Minister Abe took office in 2012, Japan's World Press Freedom ranking has declined to 72; down from 11 in 2010.

The state secrecy bills which make it a potential crime even to ask persistent questions, were passed into laws amid huge protests.

Japan's remilitarization is steadily underway. The weapons industry has been revived; the country is shipping arms.

The State Security Laws will enable Japan to wage war overseas for the first time since the war ended. And if the ruling coalition somehow fails to alter the pacifist constitution, it will push to pass an emergency powers act, which will give the Prime Minister power to rewrite the laws during a time of crisis—[something straight out of the Nazi playbook](#). (Some members of Abe's cabinet have a well-known admiration for Hitler's political stratagems.)

In post-war Japan, the emperor has been constitutionally defined as the “symbol of the State and of the unity of the people, deriving his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power” and he has “no powers related to government.”

The Emperor and his wife, Empress Michiko, have reigned more than 27 years as quiet symbols of a pacifist nation, living voices reminding the Japanese people of the horrific past that the country endured and that Imperial Japan imposed on others.

In light of the current administration's revisionist inclinations, many observers have picked up on a significant shift in the tone and content of the Emperors' public statements. This year alone, he has referred several times to wartime experiences and “the need to study and learn from this war.”

Prime Minister Abe and his political allies have long [derided Japan's constitution](#) as a humiliation imposed upon the Japanese people by the United States occupation government, impinging on “basic human rights.”

Abe's grandfather, Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, was Japan's minister of munitions during the war. Kishi was also arrested as a war criminal but never prosecuted and became a founder of the Liberal Democratic Party. Abe, now leading the same political party, said in 2014, “My party has been advocating amending our constitution since its founding almost 60 year ago.”

Contrast that to [the remarkably liberal and pacifist remarks made by the emperor](#) on his birthday in 2013:

“After the war, Japan was occupied by the Allied forces and, based on peace and democracy as values to be upheld, established the Constitution of Japan, undertook various reforms and built the foundation of Japan that we know today. I have profound gratitude for the efforts made by the Japanese people at the time, who helped reconstruct and improve the country devastated by the war. I also feel that we must not forget the help extended to us in those days by Americans with an understanding of Japan and Japanese culture.”

The remarks were a far cry from the rallying cry of “shake off the post-war regime” that Japan's neocons love to chant.

It is not only the emperor who has been vocal about the current administration's current misguided reverence for the Imperial Family. The number of times Prince Naruhito has referred to the Japanese Constitution in his annual birthday press conferences has gone up significantly since 2012. He has also spoken of the necessity to [correctly pass down history to future generations](#) seemingly a jab at Abe's constant denial or minimization of Japan's wartime crimes.

Even the Empress Michiko, always beside her husband physically and ideologically, when asked on her birthday in 2014 about her thoughts on upcoming 70th anniversary of the war, pointed out the grave responsibility of [Japan's war criminals](#).

It was something that the Japanese popular press attempted to ignore. *Litera*, a Japanese news and research site, suggested this was in direct response to Abe sending an official message of condolence, as the leader of the LDP, to the memorial services honoring the [Class A war criminals](#) that year.

Abe and many in the LDP are known as staunch worshippers and supporters of the Yasukuni Shrine where Japan's convicted war criminals such as Hideki Tojo are currently memorialized. Abe's visit to the shrine and the problems surrounding it were taken up in the 2015 US government report, *Japan-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress* ([PDF](#)).

The Imperial Family, even during the previous emperor's reign came to an end, stopped paying their respects after fourteen convicted war criminals were enshrined in 1978. Neither the current emperor nor the crown prince has visited Yasukuni since.

On the other hand, in recent years, the Royal Couple have visited the sites where Japanese soldiers died overseas, [expressing their condolences also to the foreign nationals killed in the war](#).

There is a delicious irony in the strained relationship between the Imperial Family and the Prime Minister.

Abe is also a special advisor to the political branch of [Nippon Kaigi, an emperor-worshipping Shinto cult](#) and the majority of his cabinet are also members of the group, which wields considerable influence.

Historically, the Emperor is the highest authority of the [Shinto](#) religion. He and his family are said to be the direct descendants of the sun-goddess. They are believed to have a direct pipeline to the deities and serve as ministers of heavenly affairs. The current Emperor, who is the ostensible object of Nippon Kaigi worship, often is a thorn in Abe's side.

Even in Monday's speech, Emperor Akihito pointed out that he was a state symbol under Japan's constitution, not a leader. On the 70th anniversary of the end of the war, Abe had planned a glorious revisionist address, the *Abe Danwa*(discourse) where the vocabulary traditionally featured by his predecessors—"colonial rule," "invasion," "remorse," "apology"—would be omitted for the first time. However, in the end Abe had to defer to his elder.

A senior LDP member told The Daily Beast, "Abe was anxiously obsessing over the probable content of the emperor's address since he could not present something that does not align with it. In the end, he had to capitulate, keep the old wording, and made a mealy-mouthed insincere apology."

Positions on Japan's past and present militarization are not the only things the emperor and Abe seem to disagree on.

Historian Hideya Kawanishi, an expert on Japan's Imperial system, assistant professor at Kobe College and author of *Symbolic Emperor System in Post War Japan*, views the abdication as part of the emperor's tactics to bring the conversation back to the issue of the validity of female emperors.

The Crown Prince has a daughter but his wife, former Ministry of Foreign Affairs bureaucrat, Princess Masako, has "failed" to bear a son.

Kawanishi thinks that the emperor, by revealing plans to abdicate, has found a way to address the Abe administration, which has been reluctant to discuss the possibility of having a female emperor. The opposition to a female emperor is not surprising coming from a political party that appears to push forward a women centric agenda—"womenomics"—but has achieved little and is known to be, in fact, [outlandishly sexist](#).

Even Abe's appointees to cabinet positions who are female, share a traditional view of the role of women in Japanese society and are surprisingly anti-feminist.

Kawanishi also points to other issues the Imperial Family faces. The Emperor and Empress are beloved figures and are warmly welcomed wherever they go, another interesting contrast to [the jeers Abe seems to attract](#).

However, the crown prince, by comparison with the emperor, does not have the same authority or popularity. In addition the long-term depression of Naruhito's wife, which has prevented her from carrying out her official duties, has been a sore spot for the couple and drawn criticism from conservatives.

Kawanishi suggests, "The emperor seeks to facilitate a smooth transition while he is alive rather than the ordeal taking place after his own passing. He spoke at length on the duties and stress that would befall the family after his own death, the mourning duties along with the transition of the duties of the Emperor, and his wish to relieve them of the burden as much as possible. He expressed his doubts about achieving a steady continuation of the royal lineage in the present system, and asked the people for understanding, something extremely rare."

Because the Emperor's living abdication isn't covered under the current constitution, does that mean there has to be a de facto revision of the founding document, like the Security Act? Some legal scholars believe that simply revising the Imperial Household Law could solve the problem but no one is sure.

Simply raising the question may slow down Abe and Liberal Democratic Party's attempt to replace the current constitution with their [proposed new constitution](#), which some scholars says could seriously damage freedom of speech and democracy in Japan.

Kawanishi says that if the constitution is revised as a result of the emperor's personal wishes, that would automatically be a breach of the constitution whose foundation lies in the separation of imperial and political power. But it is clear that the Abe administration is going to have to address the abdication issue. It will take time, and the emperor—can't wait forever.

The Emperor is no longer a young deity. He has had two surgical procedures since 2003, [reportedly for his heart, and for prostate cancer](#). According to an opinion poll conducted by the *Yomiuri* newspaper, over 84 percent of Japanese believe that the Imperial System should be changed so that the emperor will be allowed to step down. The will of the people is clear.

The emperor's abdication and the consequences will cast a shadow on the LDP's revisionist parade. One of the most terrifying thoughts for the Abe administration after today's speech must be about what will happen after the crown has been passed. Imagine what the retired Emperor would say once he steps off the Chrysanthemum Throne....

"Everything the Emperor says is correct," said the acting head of Nippon Kaigi, Tadae Takubo, in a press conference last month.

This seemingly benign statement puts Abe and his cabinet in a difficult position. If they really wish a return to the Emperor as the center of the government, and believe his words are sacred—they will have to obey them. They will have to let him retire and respect his wishes for a pacifist Japan, and a constitution that guarantees basic human rights and renounces war.

It may be a bitter pill to swallow, but such would be the word of a god. Even a retired one.