**Nakasone's great achievements as a pragmatist**

Former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone was a leader who advocated “settling all postwar issues in politics” and ran his administration in a top-down, presidential style of decision making while in office from 1982 to 1987. He was also a pragmatist who, as prime minister, shelved his long-time push for amending Japan’s postwar Constitution. Nakasone may have gained an image as a hawk by working to beef up Japan’s alliance with the United States and to increase defense spending. But he pursued a balanced diplomacy that also emphasized better relations with China and South Korea. Today’s politicians still have a lot to learn from this giant, who died last Friday at the age of 101.

Nakasone is often compared with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. They both championed revising the Constitution, and Abe similarly called for a departure from Japan’s “postwar regime.” Nakasone spent five years in office — he was given an extra year as Liberal Democratic Party president after serving the two-year term twice, the maximum at that time, for leading the party to a landslide victory in the dual elections of lower and upper chambers of the Diet in 1986. Abe, who led the party to big wins in all six nationwide Diet races since 2012, is now serving his third three-year term as LDP chief and recently became Japan’s longest-serving prime minister.

But Nakasone’s political footing was entirely different from that of Abe, who is unrivaled in the LDP and faces a weak and fragmented opposition camp. When the LDP’s factional politics was in full bloom, Nakasone, leader of a small factional group, was on shaky political ground in the party even as he took the government’s helm.

Nakasone overcame his weak position within the party by launching a series of advisory panels comprising members from the private sector to set the direction on key policy agenda, such as privatization of the debt-ridden Japanese National Railways along with the Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Public Corp. and Japan Tobacco and Salt Public Corp. His pursuit of “brain politics” was criticized for bypassing the party and the Diet. But his direct appeal to public opinion through discussions at these panels on the need for administrative reforms helped him overcome resistance of vested interests in the LDP and the bureaucracy. In a way, he pioneered the top-down style of LDP leaders in subsequent generations, including Abe, in which the prime minister and his office take control of the policy-making process.

He was also the first Japanese leader in postwar history to gain recognition on the global stage. Nakasone built a close personal rapport with U.S. President Ronald Reagan as he pursued a closer defense alliance with the U.S. His proactive remarks and behavior at international conferences such as the Group of Seven summit raised Japan’s diplomatic profile.

His pursuit of a closer alliance with the U.S., lifting the “1 percent of gross national product” cap on Japan’s defense spending, and the statement he made in a 1983 interview with the U.S. media that he would beef up defense of the nation as an “unsinkable carrier” against Soviet bomber jets, may have left the impression that Nakasone was a hawk. But he also explored better relations with South Korea — to which he paid the first official visit as Japan’s prime minister — and China. He is noted as a rare prime minister who maintained favorable relations with the U.S., China and South Korea. Nakasone became the first prime minister since World War II to pay an “official” visit to the war-linked Yasukuni Shrine on Aug. 15, 1985. But upon strong protests from China and South Korea, he managed to prevent a worsening of ties with Japan’s East Asian neighbors by not paying a visit the following year.

He is said to have been critical of former Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida’s pursuit of a lightly- armed and economy-focused Japan in the postwar years. He entered politics by calling for ending Japan’s dependence on the U.S. and amending the Constitution. But when he took office, he declared that he would not put a constitutional amendment on his political agenda, and followed the LDP-led governments’ emphasis on relations with the U.S. Toward the end of his tenure, he pursued the introduction of a sales tax, but gave up after facing stiff resistance from opposition parties. When tasked with naming his successor as LDP chief in 1987, he appointed Noboru Takeshita, who was well-versed in tax reforms and in negotiations with the opposition camp, and Takeshita introduced the consumption tax in 1989.

In his path to power, Nakasone was often mocked as an opportunist because he did not hesitate to change, shelve or back down from his views and positions. That may have been inevitable for his survival in the power struggle within the LDP, but that also reflected his flexibility as a pragmatist. His approach to politics should be long remembered along with his great achievements.