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Analysis

Shingo Yamagami's time in Canberra draws to a close but the Tokyo pick isn't finished yet



By [Sarah Basford Canales](#)

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Japanese ambassador to Australia Shingo Yamagami. Picture by Karleen Minney

Time is running out for Tokyo's "breath of fresh air" in Canberra.

Shingo Yamagami, the first-time ambassador and former "spymaster", tells a 500-strong audience of Canberra's who's who at his lush Yarralumla residence it might be his last address at an Emperor's Birthday event.





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He begins to croon a Frank Sinatra classic.

"Regrets, I had a few, but then again, too few to mention," he sings.

Smiling on from the front row is a former prime minister, a current deputy prime minister, trade minister and opposition leader.

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It's a busy sitting week on the hill. Swathes of legislation and policies are swirling while bureaucrats and senators are caught up in gruelling, 14-hour estimates hearings.



📷 Former prime minister Scott Morrison, left, and leader of the opposition Peter Dutton at the Emperor's Birthday event held at the Japanese Ambassador's residence. Other notable figures sit behind them. Picture by James Croucher

But it's nearly 7pm now and this event, which clashes with lower house speaker Milton Dick's press gallery drinks, is a top-ticket item.

Somewhere deeper into the crowd is Tony Abbott, who has also forged close ties with the ambassador, making the trip from Sydney.

The heads of intelligence agencies, central agencies and the military are there too.

At some point over Mr Yamagami's two years in Canberra, he's taken a picture with all of them and posted it to his social media sites.

It's a diplomat's job. And one he's particularly good at, a number of Canberra's defence and national security experts say.

So, why are there rustlings the popular ambassador is being recalled to Tokyo ahead of schedule?



Mr Yamagami's style of diplomacy is a well-traversed topic in certain circles.

Arriving in late 2020, the [Japanese ambassador quickly made a splash](#) on the social scene, regularly hosting high-profile guests for dinner and making media headlines.

It's raised the eyebrows of some former diplomats and expert commentators who've suggested his sometimes outspoken style breaks long-held diplomatic conventions.

But Mr Yamagami sharply dismisses his critics.

Great honour & pleasure to welcome Scott Morrison, former PM of AU to EBR. Good luck for your JP trip this week. Glad to introduce you to Mr SAKUNO Yoshinori, @the__doq CEO, a self-made & successful PR consultant. Indeed our AUJP partnership transcends professions & generations.
pic.twitter.com/SZDCKfjdZ6

— Ambassador YAMAGAMI Shingo (@YamagamiShingo) February 15, 2023

"Diplomats have to go out. Diplomats have to mingle with our Aussie friends," he tells *The Canberra Times*.

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You can do your job, either by email or on online conferences. That's not what I'm doing."

The inner-south streets of Canberra may appear as sleepy as they've always been but behind closed doors, conversations are buzzing.

As the Indo-Pacific region becomes increasingly contested, Canberra has become an important pitstop for travelling dignitaries.

And with the change of government in Australia [has come a change in rhetoric from the Chinese leadership abroad](#).

In Canberra, it was reflected by a rare media event earlier this year with Chinese ambassador Xiao Qian.

On the morning of Mr Xiao's press gathering, Mr Yamagami sent out a warning through the media - remain "vigilant" about China's words given they had yet to be matched by actions.

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📷 Japanese ambassador Shingo Yamagami sits down with The Canberra Times to discuss his short but impactful stint in Canberra. Pictures by Karleen Minney

The reminder was a bold diplomatic move, which [promptly drew ire from his Chinese counterpart](#).

Taking questions from media later that day, Mr Xiao launched into a tirade against Mr Yamagami's words, accusing him of "not doing his job", in the otherwise measured address.

The [former spymaster later hit back against China's spray through a series of media interviews](#), saying he thought his counterpart's comments were "irresponsible" and "bemusing".

Some describe Mr Yamagami's actions, which dominated the headlines and overshadowed the Chinese embassy's event, [as a "masterstroke"](#).

Others, [like John Menadue](#), the former ambassador to Japan under the Fraser government and Allan Behm, Australia Institute's security affairs director, are less convinced.



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Mr Behm describes Mr Yamagami's brush with another member of the diplomatic corps as being "poor form".

"Japan is usually very good at [diplomacy] and the idea that Shingo would use Canberra to pick a fight is, to me, a bit unusual," he says.

But Mr Yamagami outright rejects the charges against him, adding his job here is to present Japanese views and perspectives.

My best wishes to His Majesty the Emperor Naruhito & the people of Japan on the Emperor's birthday today.

Australia's relationship with Japan is closer and more important than ever.

I look forward to seeing my counterpart, and friend, Hayashi Yoshimasa at the next opportunity.

— Senator Penny Wong (@SenatorWong) February 23, 2023

"I think my explanation is very, very simple. I think those days of diplomats hiding in that cloak of anonymity, engaging in backroom dealing is long gone," he says, showing a hint of frustration at his detractors.

"We are living in the new era of public diplomacy.



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"We don't get shy about representing our perspective. I regard it as the right, not only the right but the duty, of ambassadors to do so.

"Otherwise, what's the point of ambassadors being here, just drinking champagne, engaging in wishy-washy talk? No way. We call that a waste of taxpayers' money."

It's not just the criticisms from certain talking heads, however.

There have been reports suggesting Mr Yamagami's handling of the embassy is behind his slightly earlier than expected recall to Tokyo.

Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reportedly launched two inspections last year into what's been happening within the Empire Circuit embassy, according to [the Australian Financial Review](#).

Canberra no longer a 'retirement post' for Tokyo

One of Mr Yamagami's first friends in Canberra was former Defence Department deputy secretary Professor Paul Dibb.

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The Japanese ambassador made special mention of Dr Dibb at a medal ceremony earlier this year, noting he and his wife were the first to invite him over for dinner when he first landed in Canberra.

Dr Dibb is a strong defender of Mr Yamagami's approach, describing him as an "assiduous" worker who hasn't wasted time playing golf and a "breath of fresh air".

The esteemed foreign relations expert says there are countless reasons why Japan is looking at its relationship with Australia more seriously than ever before.

With both Russia and China at its doorstep, Dr Dibb believes Japan is looking to strengthen its alliances with like-minded democracies.



📷 Japanese Ambassador Shingo Yamagami speaking at the Emperor's Birthday event held at his residence. Picture by James Croucher



presence in his relatively short stint is an example of that, he says.

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And he also believes Mr Yamagami isn't the controversial maverick he's been made out to be.

"He's been one of the most active and outspoken ambassadors from Japan in my experience, and that reflects the different situation Japan is now in," he says.

"When you get somebody of that status and rank, you can rest assured, no matter how outspoken or not they might be, including about China, that has the approval of Tokyo.

"That's the way diplomacy works. Diplomats don't say things that don't have official cover."

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute's deputy defence director Dr Alex Bristow, who was among the audience at the embassy's Emperor's Birthday event, agrees Mr Yamagami's arrival coincides with an important time for Japan-Australia relations.

The [two countries both sit on the Quad](#), alongside the US and India, and leaders are expected to converge in Sydney later this year for



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The formation of the strategic security dialogue in 2007, and later revival in 2017, was led by [the man in Tokyo who handpicked Mr Yamagami for the posting](#) - the late [former prime minister Shinzo Abe](#).

"I think Japan, in reality, is becoming the second-most important security partner for Australia behind the US," Dr Bristow says.

"In fact, it's probably already there."





Dr Dibb agrees too, echoing his central point too – Australia and Japan are already "an alliance in all but name".

Mr Yamagami, a savvy operator with the media, offers insight into Tokyo's plans.

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Japanese ambassadors in Canberra never have issues with access to government but Mr Yamagami suggests he brings a youthful exuberance those before him didn't.

"For the first time in 20 years, the Japanese government decided to send a young chap like me," he says, chuckling.

"Young by the Japanese standards, not your standards.

"But for the past 20 years, this post as ambassador in Canberra has been regarded as a retirement post.

"There are only two kinds of ambassadors here, ambassadors who are working hard and ambassadors who are hardly working.

"I aspire to belong to the former."



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Shingo or not: Tokyo doesn't 'abandon friends'

Delivering his third Emperor's Birthday address in February, Mr Yamagami makes "bittersweet" mention it will likely be his last.

Japanese ambassadors are typically posted for shorter periods of two-to-three years but the comments surprise many who've come to enjoy his witty quips and comedic speeches.

The audience is filled with politicians from both major parties but optics suggest it leans more to Liberal Party and the Nationals.

Tony Smith, Zed Seselja, Warren Entsch, Dan Tehan, David Gillespie, Susan McDonald and Andrew Wallace are some of the faces watching on the crowd from beyond the seated rows.



📷 Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles, former prime minister Scott Morrison and Opposition Leader Peter Dutton at the Emperor's Birthday event held at the Japanese Ambassador's residence. Picture by James Croucher

Critics have particularly noted his close ties to one side of politics, with many former and current Coalition members featuring in his posts.

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Mr Behm says his tough – or "Hawkish" – stance on issues relating to China means he's very popular in Canberra's national security crowds.



because his preferred company is the conservative side of Australian politics," Mr Behm says.

But Mr Yamagami says this isn't unusual in Japan – he doesn't discard people who lose power.

He acknowledges it's usually a challenging time for diplomats when there's a change of government, but Japan's interests in Australia are above political ideologies.

It's a relationship meant to go the distance.

"I have no political inclination. My door is open to anybody and when I came here, it was a time of Coalition government," he says.

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"We don't abandon friends ... once you are out of power, you're out of picture? That's not Japanese style.

"While we are eager to cultivate ties with new people and the new people in the new government, at the same time, we do continue to nurture our ties with old friends. That's the Japanese way of conducting diplomacy."



With Mr Yamagami's time in the well-manicured Yarralumla residence drawing to a close, pundits are wondering what's next.

Japan's Foreign Affairs Ministry has not revealed the details of the inspections into Mr Yamagami's time at the embassy.

He delivers a strong "yes" when answering whether he's only ever acted with Tokyo's encouragement.

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Regardless of the inspections' outcomes, it won't be the end of his mission, he says.

"Whether in Canberra or back in Tokyo, my strong determination is [that] I will continue to engage myself with Japan's relationship with Australia," Mr Yamagami says.

And just as told hundreds of Canberra's most well-connected earlier this month, he'll do it his way.



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