



JAPAN'S SECURITY POLICY IN THE "ABE ERA": RADICAL TRANSFORMATION OR EVOLUTIONARY SHIFT?

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Widely considered Japan's most powerful prime minister in decades, Shinzo Abe has responded to a changing security environment in the Asia-Pacific—including an increasingly powerful and assertive China and a growing North Korean nuclear threat—by pursuing ambitious and controversial reforms. These have been aimed at strengthening executive control over foreign policy decision-making and bolstering deterrence through an expansion of the Japan Self-Defense Forces' roles, missions, and capabilities within and beyond the U.S.-Japan alliance. Those reforms that his administration has achieved have invited claims that Abe is taking Japan on a radical path away from its postwar "pacifism." However, a systematic analysis of both change and continuity during the Abe administration reveals that many of these reforms build on longer-term evolutionary trends that predate Abe and have attracted support from moderates within and outside his conservative Liberal Democratic Party. Just as importantly, several core pillars of Japan's remarkably self-restrained defense posture remain in place, while Abe has pulled back from some of the more ambitious reforms he has championed in the past. Both points have important implications for Japan's strategic trajectory, international relations in East Asia, and the U.S.-Japan alliance. Barring major external or domestic political structural change, Japan's evolutionary reform trajectory is likely to continue. Yet the failure, so far, of Abe's government to achieve its long-coveted, most ambitious reforms also indicates the persistent headwinds future prime ministers can expect to face.

As prime minister I intend to demonstrate my resolution to defend fully people's lives, our territory, and our beautiful ocean. Right now, at this very moment, the Japan Coast Guard and members of the Self-Defense Forces are defending Japan's seas and skies off the coast of the Senkaku Islands. The security of Japan is not someone else's problem; it is a crisis that exists right there and now.¹

—Shinzo Abe

With these words, part of the opening statement at his inaugural press conference after the December 2012 landslide election victory that returned him and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-Komeito ruling coalition to power, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made clear that national security reforms would be a top priority for his administration. In the more than five years since, Abe has exercised decisive and pragmatic leadership. From a significant loosening of a decades-old ban on arms exports to a landmark Cabinet decision allowing Japan the limited exercise of collective self-defense, the Abe administration's shifts on security policy have captured global attention.² They have also prompted domestic and international controversy. Internal institutional reforms that are less conspicuous but no less significant, especially the establishment of Japan's first National Security Council, have transformed the country's decision-making on security policy.

Given the Abe government's concrete achievements, the prime minister's reputation as an ideological nationalist, and his repeatedly expressed desire for more ambitious changes, there is a robust debate about whether Abe — Japan's longest-serving prime minister since 1972 — has “radically” transformed Japan's security policy and spurred a fundamentally new trajectory for it, as some leading scholars contend.³ Beyond important

policy shifts directed by the Abe administration, experts have also judged the institutional reforms “the most ambitious reorganization of Japan's foreign and security policy apparatus since the end of World War II.”⁴ For others, Abe's significant impact on policy suggests that scholars should pay much greater attention to the personal attributes and agency of individual leaders as a variable.⁵ Wherever one stands in the debate about the particular significance of his achievements, it is clear that Abe, now in his sixth year in office, is one of Japan's most consequential postwar prime ministers.

With major geopolitical and economic shifts underway in the increasingly prosperous yet potentially volatile Asia-Pacific, a sober and comprehensive assessment of change and continuity in the Abe era, as well as its significance for Japan's long-term strategic trajectory, is crucial. Since at least the mid-1960s, Japan's advanced economy and technological strengths have granted it a unique status as the region's “could-be” military great power. Yet baked into its post-1945 resurgence is the “pacifist” Article 9 of its U.S.-drafted occupation-era Constitution. This article, which has never been amended, says that Japan “forever renounce[s] war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes,” and pledges that “land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained.”⁶ Although the practical policy implications of Article 9 have shifted significantly over 70 years of intense political contestation and in response to perceived changes in Japan's external threat environment, significant self-imposed constraints remain on what Japan's Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), established in 1954, can and cannot do — especially concerning use of lethal force — and what capabilities it can and cannot procure.⁷ In what one influential foreign policy voice once called Japan's “grand experiment,” since 1945 the country has unilaterally eschewed

1 Shusho Kantei, *Abe naikaku sori daijin shunin kisha kaiken [Prime Minister Abe's inaugural press conference]*, Dec. 26, 2012. http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/96_abe/statement/2012/1226kaiken.html.

2 For an overview of the former, see Heigo Sato, “From the ‘Three Principles of Arms Exports’ to the ‘Three Principles of Defense Equipment Transfer,’” *AJISS-Commentary*, no. 197, May 14, 2014, <http://www.iips.org/en/publications/data/AJISS-Commentary197.pdf>. For the latter, see Adam P. Liff, “Policy by Other Means: ‘Collective Self-Defense’ and the Politics of Japan's Postwar Constitutional (Re-)Interpretations,” *Asia Policy* 24 (2017): 139–172, http://nbr.org/publications/asia_policy/free/ap24/AsiaPolicy24_Liff_July2017.pdf.

3 Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan's Foreign and Security Policy under the “Abe Doctrine”: New Dynamism or New Dead End?* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015); Christopher W. Hughes, “Japan's Strategic Trajectory and Collective Self-Defense: Essential Continuity or Radical Shift?” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 43, no. 1 (2017): 93–126, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/646942>.

4 Eric Heginbotham and Richard Samuels, “Will Tokyo's Arms Exports Help or Hurt U.S. Interests in Asia?” *Cipher Brief*, July 14, 2017, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/will-tokyos-arms-exports-help-or-hurt-u-s-interests-in-asia>.

5 Giulio Pugliese, “Kantei Diplomacy? Japan's Hybrid Leadership in Foreign and Security Policy,” *Pacific Review* 30, no. 2 (2017): 152–168, 153, doi.10.1080/09512748.2016.1201131.

6 The Constitution of Japan, Nov. 3, 1946, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html

7 Liff, “Policy by Other Means.”



“military power politics,” robust offensive capabilities, an indigenous nuclear deterrent, and a regional or global security role commensurate with its potential.⁸ While gradually developing its robust self-defense forces, for security Tokyo has depended significantly on extended deterrence provided by Washington — its only formal treaty ally. Japan’s security trajectory, therefore, has direct implications for the United States and its own posture in Asia. The U.S. Navy’s largest forward-deployed fleet and 50,000 personnel from across the U.S. military are based in Japan.

In light of Japan’s relatively passive postwar defense posture, a “radical,” or fundamental, transformation of the sort some allege is already underway would have significant potential to transform international relations across the Asia-Pacific, especially if other regional players — including the United States — adjust their own postures in response. The region’s geopolitical terrain is already shifting. It includes an increasingly powerful and assertive China that the Trump administration’s *National Security Strategy* explicitly calls “revisionist”; a nuclear-armed North Korea on the cusp of fielding a credible intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that H.R. McMaster, the national security adviser who departed the Trump administration this spring, referred to as “the most destabilizing development[...] in the post-World War II period”⁹ and deepening concerns about the long-term U.S. commitment to regional primacy, alliances, and the rules-based liberal international order upon which Japan has staked its security. This environment presents an opportune moment to assess the significance of the national security reforms Abe’s

administration has enacted since 2012.

This article builds on earlier studies debating the extent and pace of the “normalization” of Japan’s defense posture since the end of the Cold War.¹⁰ It focuses on developments since Abe’s return to the prime minister’s office in 2012 and soberly engages the following core questions: With more than five years of hindsight and a landmark package of security legislation in effect since 2016, how transformative are the Abe government’s reforms in the area of national security? In light of what Japan’s leaders define as an increasingly “severe” regional security environment, how much has actually changed, and where are there continuities? How has Abe’s government been able to pursue its ambitious security agenda while avoiding

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the domestic political backlash that threatened previous prime ministers? After all, trying to do too much too quickly played a major role in the collapse of Abe’s first administration, from 2006 to 2007.

This article is divided into three sections aimed at answering the three aforementioned questions, which, in turn, will help answer a more fundamental question: whether the Abe government represents a major turning point in the trajectory of postwar Japan.¹¹ The first section focuses on change. It identifies and assesses the significance of major

8 Kei Wakaizumi, “Japan’s Role in a New World Order,” *Foreign Affairs* 51, no. 2 (1973), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1973-01-01/japans-role-new-world-order>.

9 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; Uri Friedman, “The World According to H.R. McMaster,” *Atlantic*, Jan. 9, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/hr-mcmaster-trump-north-korea/549341/>.

10 Influential studies include Thomas U. Berger, “Alliance Politics and Japan’s Postwar Culture of Antimilitarism,” in *The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Michael J. Green and Patrick M. Cronin (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1999), 190–207; Michael J. Green, *Japan’s Reluctant Realism: Foreign Policy Challenges in an Era of Uncertain Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Jennifer M. Lind, “Pacifism or Passing the Buck?: Testing Theories of Japanese Security Policy,” *International Security* 29, no. 1 (2004): 92–121, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137548?seq=1> - page_scan_tab_contents; Richard J. Samuels, *Securing Japan: Tokyo’s Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Andrew Oros, *Normalizing Japan: Politics, Identity, and the Evolution of Security Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008). More recently, see Michael J. Green, *Japan is Back: Unbundling Abe’s Grand Strategy* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, December 2013); Sheila A. Smith, *Japan’s New Politics and the U.S.-Japan Alliance* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, July 2014); Adam P. Liff, “Japan’s Defense Policy: Abe the Evolutionary,” *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (May 2015): 79–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1064711>; Hughes, *Japan’s Foreign and Security Policy*; Andrew Oros, *Japan’s Security Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

11 This question captured the major theme of a February 2018 conference on “Japan under the Abe Government” held at Stanford University’s Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, at which an earlier version of this manuscript was presented.



reforms relevant to national security since 2012 in two areas: policy and domestic institutions. Although the former typically attracts most of the attention, the two are inextricably linked. Constraints imposed by domestic institutions have, for generations, impeded postwar prime ministers from seeking more transformative policy shifts. The second section focuses on continuity. It baselines Abe-era reform efforts in the trends that were present before he returned to office, and highlights persistent pillars of Japan's security posture, several of which the Abe administration has tried, but thus far failed, to overturn. Acknowledging such oft-overlooked "dogs that didn't bark" is crucial for a balanced understanding of Japan's strategic trajectory, and to avoid overstating the pace and scale of the shifts that are underway, as well as the extent to which they are attributable specifically to Abe. To better understand how Abe's government has succeeded where previous administrations (including his own a decade ago) have failed, this study's third section aims to develop a nuanced explanation of the complex external and domestic factors at play. The interaction of these factors has effectively opened political space for the Abe government to go further and faster than its predecessors, yet it has also compelled it to significantly moderate or, in some

cases, abandon key reform objectives. That said, this article's conclusion identifies several policy areas where regional vicissitudes render major shifts more likely than ever before, though by no means inevitable.

This study finds that national security reforms under Abe, in the aggregate, constitute a significant and historic shift for Japan, but also are a pragmatic and evolutionary response to Japan's changing security environment. Important features of this reform program include the centralization of national security decision-making in the executive, the rationalization of force structure and posture to more effectively confront perceived threats, a "doubling-down" on the U.S.-Japan alliance coupled with an effort to expand Japan's role within it, and the gradual deepening of Japan's security ties with third parties.

Though Abe's government has achieved several of its coveted reforms, several other findings have significant implications for Japan's trajectory in a post-Abe era. First, nearly six years into his second term, the story of security reforms since 2012 is hardly "all about Abe." Most of the recent national security shifts build on longer-term trends that predate Abe and attracted support from moderates within and outside his own party. This strongly suggests that idiosyncratic factors such as the

conservative Abe's widely cited "ideology" and "nationalism" are acting, at most, as second-order drivers. Although Abe's decisive leadership has been significant, his agenda also seems to have benefited from his being in the right place at the right time. Second, fundamental and longstanding — though often overlooked — constraints on Japan's defense posture remain in place. On issues such as Article 9 revision, the ambitious agenda of Abe and his allies has been tempered by remarkably strong normative and domestic political headwinds. In short, barring major external or domestic political structural change, backsliding is unlikely and the current incremental reform trajectory is therefore likely to persist. Yet the failure of Abe's government so far to achieve long-desired, ambitious reforms to central pillars of Japan's security posture also demonstrates the persistent headwinds future prime ministers will continue to face.

Identifying Change: Japan's Security Shift Under Abe

A controversial figure to many in and outside Japan, Abe returned as prime minister in 2012 as one of his generation's most experienced political leaders and foreign policy experts. The grandson of Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi (1957-1960), one of Japan's most consequential postwar leaders concerning security policy, Abe began his political career in the 1980s as secretary to his father, then-Foreign Minister Shintaro Abe. Immediately before becoming prime minister the first time, Abe the younger served as deputy (2001-2003) and then chief Cabinet secretary (2005-2006) during the administration of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who held the office from 2001 to 2006. Abe's time in Koizumi's Cabinet was significantly shaped by Japan's struggle to respond to growing U.S. calls for the JSDF to do more in a post-9/11 context, both within and outside an alliance framework. Abe emerged as one of Koizumi's key advisers on security affairs and as Koizumi's anointed successor. During his first term as prime minister, from 2006 to 2007, Abe unabashedly championed ambitious national security reforms — in particular, revising the Article 9 "peace clause" of Japan's Constitution or, short of that, reinterpreting it to overturn a self-imposed ban on collective self-defense; establishing a "Japanese-style national security council" (*Nihon-ban* NSC);

and elevating Japan's Defense Agency to ministry-level status. His first administration, however, was ephemeral, collapsing after only 365 days. Abe left office in 2007 having achieved only the last of those three goals.

Five years later, voters rejected the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) after a rare three-year experiment with the LDP in the opposition, and Abe returned as prime minister. As his inaugural press conference in December 2012 makes clear — especially in the context of rapidly worsening tensions with China over contested islands in the East China Sea — Abe considered the ruling coalition's landslide victory a mandate to pursue his ambitious agenda. Yet, perhaps due to lessons learned during his first experience as prime minister, his government's national security reform effort so far appears much more pragmatic and incremental than ideological or radical. Indeed, it has repeatedly dialed back its ambitions when confronted with strong political resistance. The longevity, stability, and moderating effect of key advisers — especially chief Cabinet secretary Yoshihide Suga, who has held the position longer than anyone else in Japan's history — also appear integral. Nevertheless, the Abe government has achieved significant national security reforms.

National Security Policy Shifts

A major push by the Abe government to transform Japan's security policy and the roles and missions of its defense forces culminated in the passage of ambitious "peace and security legislation" in 2015 that formally took effect in March 2016. The legislation included revisions to 10 existing laws as well as a new International Peace Support bill.¹² Among other things, it provided the legal foundation for the controversial 2014 Cabinet decision to reinterpret the Article 9 "peace clause" to allow Japan to exercise the right of collective self-defense under specific conditions, as well as a major revision of the *Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation* in 2015.¹³ The legislation, key aspects of which had been in the works for years, effectively accelerated the post-Cold War trend of incremental expansion of the scope of the JSDF's missions in response to Japan's changing regional and global security environment. The primary aims of the legislation were to bolster deterrence to avoid armed conflict, especially through strengthening

12 For the official overview, see "Outline of the Legislation for Peace and Security," *Defense of Japan 2017*, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/pdf/2017/DOJ2017_2-3-2_web.pdf.

13 The *Guidelines* provide a general outline of the scope of and respective responsibilities for operational coordination between the allies. They have been revised in 2015, 1997, and 1978. Full texts are available here: http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/anpo/.



the U.S.-Japan alliance; to protect Japanese nationals; and to better contribute to international peace and stability under “proactive pacifism” (*sekkyokuteki heiwashugi*).¹⁴ More specifically, the landmark security legislation had implications for three categories of JSDF operations:¹⁵

“Use of Force” (*buryoku koshi*)

The security legislation moderately expanded the conditions under which Japan’s government may opt to employ the JSDF in response to an armed attack against a third country “that is in a close relationship with Japan,” or for “limited” collective self-defense. Before this expansion, it was considered unconstitutional for the JSDF to use force unless responding to a direct armed attack on Japan itself. Although this change is significant, especially for the U.S.-Japan alliance, Japan’s right of collective self-defense may be exercised only under three relatively strict, globally unique conditions. Most importantly, the armed attack against a third party must itself pose a “threat to [Japan’s] survival” (*kuni no sonritsu*). As Japan’s 2017 defense white paper states, “exercise of the right of collective self-defense is not permitted for [...] turning back an attack made against a foreign country.”¹⁶ In other words, despite the Abe Cabinet’s reinterpretation of Article 9 in 2014, the expanded circumstances under which Japan may exercise the right of collective self-defense, which is afforded to all sovereign states under international law, remain limited on constitutional grounds.¹⁷ Notwithstanding these constraints, and regardless of whether this right is ever exercised, the legislation significantly expanded opportunities for the JSDF to participate in bilateral and multilateral planning, training, and exercises. This is intended to enhance both deterrence and readiness, especially of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

Peace Support Activities

Recognizing that conflicts beyond areas surrounding Japan may have an “important influence

on Japan’s peace and security,” the 2015 legislation also expanded the government’s ability to deploy the JSDF overseas in what it calls international peace support activities, albeit primarily in noncombat roles, such as ship inspections, search-and-rescue operations, and logistical support for U.S. forces. For example, since late 2017, Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces ships have deployed near the Korean

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Peninsula to forestall attempts by North Korea to bypass international sanctions.¹⁸ This support cannot be provided in combat zones, however, and must be temporarily suspended in the event that fighting breaks out. The legislation also allows for limited use of weapons in certain situations in which JSDF personnel, or others under their supervision, come under attack. Important limitations persist in these cases, too. For example, personnel are expected to evacuate if the area becomes a combat zone.¹⁹

Peacetime Activities

The 2015 security legislation also enables the JSDF to engage in “asset protection” missions, or to use weapons to protect foreign (presumably, mainly U.S.) military forces involved in peacetime activities that contribute to Japan’s defense, such as bilateral/multilateral exercises or intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations. The first such maritime escort mission occurred in May 2017, and the first aerial escort (of a U.S. B-1 strategic bomber)

14 Atsuhiko Fujishige, “New Japan Self-Defense Force Missions under the ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’ Policy: Significance of the 2015 Legislation for Peace and Security,” Japan Chair Platform, Center for International and Strategic Studies, July 21, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-japan-self-defense-force-missions-under-%E2%80%9Cproactive-contribution-peace%E2%80%9D-policy>.

15 The following breakdown is adapted from Satoru Mori, “The New Security Legislation and Japanese Public Reaction,” *Tokyo Foundation*, Dec. 2, 2015, <http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/articles/2015/security-legislation-and-public-reaction>.

16 “Outline of the Legislation for Peace and Security.”

17 The practical implications of this reinterpretation are heavily contested, and even Abe’s own rhetoric on the issue at times appears contradictory. For a sample of the debate, see Michael J. Green and Jeffrey W. Hornung, “Ten Myths About Japan’s Collective Self-Defense Change,” *Diplomat*, Jul. 10, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/07/ten-myths-about-japans-collective-self-defense-change/>; Hughes, “Japan’s Strategic Trajectory and Collective Self-defense”; Liff, “Policy by Other Means.”

18 “In new role, MSDF patrolling waters around Korea to foil oil smuggling,” *Japan Times*, Jan. 13, 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/01/13/national/previiously-undisclosed-role-self-defense-force-ships-watching-north-korea-smuggling-sea/>.

19 Mori, “The New Security Legislation and Japanese Public Reaction.”

followed that November.²⁰ The legislation also enables the use of weapons in U.N. peacekeeping operations as well as in the rescue of Japanese nationals overseas under certain conditions, including with the consent of the state in which the operation takes place.²¹ As with limited collective self-defense, significant restrictions unique to Japan persist. Nevertheless, these expanded authorities have created opportunities for expanded training, exercises, and contingency planning, thereby enhancing readiness and deterrence within and outside an alliance context.²²

Overall, the major components of the Abe government's security policies are captured in Japan's first-ever *National Security Strategy*, released in December 2013.²³ Three major pillars of the strategy are "strengthening and expanding Japan's capabilities and roles," "strengthening the Japan-U.S. Alliance," and actively promoting security cooperation with third countries in the Asia-Pacific and beyond,²⁴ each of which is intended to be mutually reinforcing. A brief overview of how these pillars manifest in terms of specific policies follows:

Strengthening Territorial Defense

The long-term trend of Japan's evolving national security posture — which has accelerated under Abe — has been the gradual reconfiguration of JSDF force structure and posture to strengthen deterrence, improve situational awareness, bolster missile defense, and develop more expeditionary response capabilities. At the same time, the JSDF has sought to improve coordination and interoperability across its ground, maritime, and air services, and its ability to flexibly respond to an array of traditional security threats as well as novel challenges in the "gray zone" — contingencies

that are neither a pure peacetime nor a traditional armed attack situation²⁵ — and in the realms of cyber and space.

Shifting Southwest

Since major diplomatic crises between Tokyo and Beijing in September 2010 and 2012, and as a significant expansion of the scope and frequency of China's military and paramilitary activities in the East China Sea and western Pacific Ocean presents new and complex challenges, Japanese defense planners have come to see Japan's remote southwestern islands, including the Senkaku Islands, which are claimed by China as the Diaoyu Islands, as more strategically significant yet also as increasingly vulnerable.²⁶ This operational challenge has prompted moving away from a Cold War-era defense orientation that emphasized a potential Soviet invasion through Hokkaido and toward China-centric challenges to the southwest. Building off landmark changes in the 2010 *National Defense Program Guidelines* released under the Democratic Party of Japan,²⁷ the Abe government's first — and so far, only — *National Defense Program Guidelines*, issued in 2013, calls for the JSDF to function as a "Dynamic Joint Defense Force" and to significantly improve its capability to deter and, if necessary, to respond effectively to "an attack on remote islands."²⁸ It has sought to bolster deterrence by improving intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance as well as implementing shifts to force structure and posture of the JSDF and the Japan Coast Guard to strengthen their ability to respond with speed and flexibility.²⁹

In response to a surge in Chinese military and paramilitary operations near Japanese territory, a major focus of the Abe government's reorientation has been the incremental militarization of

20 "Analysis: Low-risk mission aimed at inuring public to SDF's new role," *Asahi Shimbun*, May 2, 2017, https://article.wn.com/view-lemonde/2017/05/02/ANALYSIS_Lowrisk_mission_aimed_at_inuring_public_to_SDF_s_ne/-/related_news; "Japan-U.S. joint operations increase amid regional uncertainty," *Yomiuri Shimbun*, March 30, 2018, <http://www.standard.net/World/2018/03/30/Japan-US-joint-defense-operations-increase-amid-regional-uncertainty>.

21 Mori, "The New Security Legislation and Japanese Public Reaction."

22 Japan Ministry of Defense, *Guidelines*.

23 Naikaku Kanbo, *Kokka anzen hoshō senryaku ni tsuite [About the National Security Strategy]*, Dec. 17, 2013. <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryu/131217anzenhoshou/nss-j.pdf>.

24 Japan Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2014*, 133–38, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/2014.html.

25 Japan Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2017*, 63, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/2017.html.

26 To minimize confusion, this chapter follows U.S. Board of Geographic Names convention and refers to the contested islands as the Senkakus.

27 Japan Ministry of Defense, *National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2011 and beyond*, Dec. 17, 2010, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/d_policy/pdf/guidelinesFY2011.pdf (English translation is provisional).

28 Japan Ministry of Defense, *National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2014 and beyond*, Dec. 17, 2013, http://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2014/pdf/20131217_e2.pdf (English translation is provisional).

29 For an overview of these operations and Japan's response, see Adam P. Liff, "China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations in the East China Sea and Japan's Response," in *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, ed. Ryan D. Martinson and Andrew S. Erickson (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, Forthcoming, 2018).

Japan's remote southwestern islands, including installing radar sites and anti-ship and surface-to-air missile units; procuring rapidly deployable capabilities closer to major western JSDF bases; significantly bolstering intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; doubling the number of F-15s stationed in Okinawa, the major southwestern hub for JSDF and U.S. forces in Japan; and, in the most distinct break with past practice, establishing Japan's first amphibious forces since 1945. Japan's new 2,100-strong Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, which was formally stood up in Nagasaki in April 2018, has trained to retake remote islands occupied by foreign forces. Its establishment coincided with a major restructuring of Japan's Ground Self-Defense Forces, including the creation of a Ground Component Command tasked with controlling ground forces across Japan and bolstering their ability to deploy rapidly in various contingencies, including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.³⁰ Finally, and consistent with the 2013 *National Security Strategy's* call to "enhance the capabilities of the law enforcement agencies responsible for territorial patrol activities and reinforce its maritime surveillance capabilities,"³¹ the Abe government has prioritized expanding the situational awareness, presence operations, and rapid-response capabilities of the front-line Coast Guard. In particular, it has built and deployed new ships to the Coast Guard's regional headquarters in Okinawa to enable 24/7 patrols of the Senkakus, including establishing a dedicated 12-vessel Senkakus Territorial Waters Guard based in Ishigaki.³²

Spaces to Watch

An update of Japan's *National Defense Program Guidelines*, expected later this year, may herald important additional changes. The same goes for the Mid-Term Defense Program, which was also last revised in 2013. In response to a perceived

worsening of the North Korean threat in 2017, the Abe administration recently green-lighted the purchase of two Aegis Ashore batteries.³³ Other prominent and more controversial capabilities that Japan is reportedly considering include long-range cruise missiles and the remodeling of *Izumo*-class destroyers so that F-35Bs — not just helicopters — can land on their decks. Japan's fiscal 2018 budget reportedly includes expenditures related to the introduction of some longer-range joint-strike missiles.³⁴ Although technically constitutional based on a 1950s government interpretation of Article 9, a long-range strike missile capable of hitting "enemy bases" in North Korea would be unprecedented.³⁵ So would landing U.S. F-35Bs on Japan's large "helicopter-carrying destroyers."³⁶ Depending on how this hypothetical policy shift is implemented, it could effectively turn *Izumo*-class destroyers into strike carriers — potentially an "offensive" (*kogekigata*) platform prohibited under a decades-old official interpretation of Article 9. It is important to emphasize, however, that these potential shifts are only under consideration. Previous governments have considered similar capabilities but ultimately decided not to pursue them.

The U.S.-Japan Alliance

Despite widespread assertions that Abe is pursuing a "nationalist" agenda, the second of three core features of his government's national security strategy has been to reinforce Japan's alliance with Washington, forged in the postwar occupation, as a foundational pillar of national security and the "cornerstone" of regional peace and stability. While bolstering U.S.-Japan defense ties is a long-term trend that predates Abe, it has accelerated since 2012. Indeed, Japan's latest defense white paper, published in 2017, devotes more than 50 pages to the topic of "strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance."³⁷ Recent steps include establishing new

30 "GSDF to undergo biggest realignment since founding," *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Mar. 23, 2018, <http://www.standard.net/World/2018/03/23/Japan-s-ground-defense-force-to-undergo-biggest-realignment-since-founding>.

31 Cabinet Secretariat, *National Security Strategy*, December 2013, 16, <http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>.

32 Katsuji Iwao, "Genchi rupo 11.11 Senkaku Kinpaku Kaijo Hoancho 'Ishigaki Hoanbu' wa ima" ["Frontline Report 11/11: Senkaku Strains, JCG's 'Ishigaki Security Division' Now"], FACTA, January 2017, <https://facta.co.jp/article/201701028.html>.

33 "Japan to expand ballistic missile defense with ground-based Aegis batteries," *Reuters*, Dec. 18, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-japan-aegis/japan-to-expand-ballistic-missile-defense-with-ground-based-aegis-batteries-idUSKBN1ED051>.

34 "Having long-range missiles a matter of deterrence," *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Mar. 31, 2018.

35 James L. Schoff and David Song, *Five Things to Know About Japan's Possible Acquisition of Strike Capability* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Aug. 14, 2017), <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/08/14/five-things-to-know-about-japan-s-possible-acquisition-of-strike-capability-pub-72710>.

36 "Goeikan 'Izumo', Kuboka he zenshin [Izumo Destroyer, Progressing Toward an Aircraft Carrier]," *Jiji*, Apr. 27, 2018, <https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=2018042701534&g=pol>.

37 Japan Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2017*, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/2017.html.

institutional linkages, making political and legal commitments to support one another in a wider array of contingencies, and significantly expanding joint training and exercises.

As captured in the 2015 *Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation*, recent institutional changes have strengthened bilateral planning, decision-making, intelligence-sharing, and flexible crisis response across a range of traditional and nontraditional scenarios (including the space and cyber domains) in peacetime, during a gray-zone contingency, or in the event of an armed attack. Less heralded but highly significant for allied coordination are the upgraded Bilateral Planning Mechanism and the new standing Alliance Coordination Mechanism, the latter of which enables frequent, real-time communication among civilian and uniformed alliance managers.³⁸ In 2014, as Chinese military and paramilitary operations in the East China Sea were surging and Beijing appeared to be probing U.S. commitments, President Barack Obama reaffirmed the alliance's applicability to an armed attack situation over the Senkakus. President Donald Trump reaffirmed this commitment in 2017. Key Japanese developments include the aforementioned expansion of authorities under the 2015 security legislation enabling the JSDF to come to the aid of foreign (especially U.S.) forces under attack, albeit conditionally, and to engage in a wider array of training and exercises. In 2017, the first major Abe-Trump alliance joint statement included a U.S. "commitment to the security of Japan through the full range of capabilities, including U.S. nuclear forces."³⁹

Finally, the changes in the alliance over the past six years have occurred in the context of a continuing broader U.S. strategic commitment, across several administrations, to the Asia-Pacific, captured most conspicuously in the widely-cited

Obama administration's rhetoric of a "rebalance" of U.S. military forces to the region.⁴⁰ A series of U.S. administrations have deployed America's most capable military assets to the Asia-Pacific and to bases in Japan in particular. For example, the first overseas deployment of F-35s was to southwestern Japan in 2017. The United States has also expanded bilateral and trilateral training and exercises involving Japan, exported some of its most advanced platforms to Japan, and continues

[R]ecent institutional changes have strengthened bilateral planning, decision-making, intelligence-sharing, and flexible crisis response across a range of traditional and nontraditional scenarios.

to work closely with Japan on advanced technical cooperation such as missile defense. In addition to new JSDF peacetime maritime and air escort missions, the 2015 security legislation facilitated a significant expansion of U.S.-Japan joint exercises. They increased from 19 in 2015 to 62 in 2017.⁴¹

Bolstering Ties with Third Parties

A third focus of national security strategy under Abe has been to build on the outreach of previous administrations and significantly expand Japan's security ties with countries other than the United States, albeit with a clear focus on U.S. security partners in the region — such as Australia, the Philippines, India, and Vietnam — as well as further abroad, e.g., the United Kingdom and France.⁴² In addition to complementing U.S.-led efforts to incrementally consolidate a "web"

38 Japan Ministry of Defense, *Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation*, Apr. 27, 2015, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/anpo/pdf/shishin_20150427e.pdf. For a critical overview of alliance institutions, see Jeffrey W. Hornung, *Managing the U.S.-Japan Alliance: An Examination of Structural Linkages in the Security Relationship* (Washington, D.C.: SPF USA, 2017), <https://spfusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Managing-the-U.S.-Japan-Alliance.pdf>.

39 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee," Aug. 17, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/08/273504.htm>.

40 The basic contours of the strategy and emphasis on alliances as central to regional peace and stability, however, date back at least to the Clinton administration's "engage-and-balance" posture vis-à-vis China. Michael J. Green, *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 526.

41 "Japan-U.S. joint operations increase amid regional uncertainty," *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Mar. 30, 2018, <http://www.standard.net/World/2018/03/30/Japan-US-joint-defense-operations-increase-amid-regional-uncertainty>.

42 For a non-exhaustive list of recent agreements beyond the United States, see Reference 46 "Situations Concerning the Conclusion of Agreements" in Japan Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2017*.

of mutually beneficial security ties among like-minded Asia-Pacific countries, Abe's initiative also demonstrates Japan's increasingly "proactive" contribution to regional security, creates opportunities for cooperation on priorities such as defense technology, and helps to emphasize Japan's support for a rules-based regional order at a moment when the United States and its allies are increasingly concerned about the challenges posed by Beijing. Especially with regard to China's policies toward territorial disputes, the Abe administration appears to see all maritime nations as having a fundamental shared interest in standing up to coercion from Beijing.⁴³

As Abe emphasized in a widely cited 2013 address,

Japan must work even more closely with the U.S., Korea, Australia and other like-minded democracies throughout the region. A rules-promoter, a commons' guardian, and an effective ally and partner to the U.S. and other democracies, are all roles that Japan MUST fulfill.⁴⁴

The Abe administration has since continued to promote deeper Japanese and U.S. security ties with Australia, with which Japan's links have expanded significantly over the past two decades, India, and member nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), several of which also have territorial disputes with Beijing.⁴⁵ Last year also brought a major revival of Abe's 2007 call for a "free and open Indo-Pacific" — an initiative inspired at least in part by concerns about China's trajectory. Although the Trump administration appears to have signed on to this initiative, its concrete policy implications are as yet unclear.⁴⁶

In this spirit, the 2015 *Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation* emphasize "cooperation with regional and other partners, as well as international organizations," and "the global nature of the U.S.-Japan alliance."⁴⁷ Additional manifestations of Japan's more proactive international security cooperation include enabling JSDF personnel involved in U.N. peacekeeping operations to use small arms to defend peacekeepers from other countries and to jointly protect base camps,⁴⁸ as well as expanding partner capacity building and defense technology transfers, especially with Southeast Asian nations. One example is Japan's first-ever proposal for an ASEAN-wide defense framework.⁴⁹ Japan's recent deployment as part of a U.N. peacekeeping operation to South Sudan marked the first time the JSDF was allowed to provide small arms ammunition transfers to foreign peacekeepers and exercise new protection authorities.⁵⁰ Most recently, U.S. allies Australia and Canada have announced that they will deploy from U.S. bases in Japan in support of military activities that aim to catch evaders of sanctions imposed on North Korea.⁵¹ Visiting forces agreements and expanded bilateral exercises with other countries, such as Australia and the United Kingdom, are also reportedly under consideration and would constitute a major development.⁵²

Also notable is the Abe government's move in 2014 to significantly loosen a decades-old ban on arms exports. This shift, though it has yet to bear much concrete fruit, opened up significant space for high-end defense technology cooperation with, and exports to, U.S. allies and partners. Japan's *National Security Strategy* identifies defense equipment and technology cooperation as a means to strengthen indigenous defense capabilities,

43 Green, *Japan Is Back*.

44 Shinzo Abe, "Japan Is Back," policy speech at Center for Strategic and International Studies, Feb. 22, 2013, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/attachments/130222_speech_abe.pdf.

45 Michael Heazle and Yuki Tatsumi, "Explaining Australia-Japan Security Cooperation and Its Prospects: The Interests that Bind?" *Pacific Review* 31, no. 1 (2018): 38–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2017.1310750>.

46 Yuki Tatsumi, "Is Japan Ready for the Quad?" *War on the Rocks*, Jan. 9, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/japan-ready-quad-opportunities-challenges-tokyo-changing-indo-pacific/>.

47 Japan Ministry of Defense, *Guidelines*.

48 "GSDF to join PKO exercise of first time under new security law," *Asahi Shimbun*, June 30, 2017, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201706300037.html>.

49 Japan Ministry of Defense, "Vientiane Vision: Japan's Defense Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN," November 2016, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/exc/vientianevision/. For an overview of recent developments, see Catharin Dalpino, "Japan-Southeast Asia Relations: Both Push and Pull: Japan Steps Up in Southeast Asia," *Comparative Connections* 19, no. 1 (May 2017): 123–130, <http://cc.csis.org/2017/05/push-pull-japan-steps-southeast-asia/>.

50 Michael Bosack, "What Did Japan Learn in South Sudan?" *Diplomat*, June 10, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/what-did-japan-learn-in-south-sudan/>.

51 "Australia, Canada to join surveillance on N. Korea sanctions evaders," *Mainichi Japan*, Apr. 28, 2018, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20180428/p2g/00m/0in/064000c>.

52 Grant Wyeth, "Will Australia and Japan Finally Conclude a Visiting Forces Agreement?" *Diplomat*, Jan. 2, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/will-australia-and-japan-finally-conclude-a-visiting-forces-agreement/>.



in particular by reinvigorating Japan's struggling defense industrial base, as well as strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance.⁵³ High-profile results include an (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to sell Japanese submarine technology to Australia. Tokyo has also signed defense technology cooperation agreements with various countries beyond the United States, including Britain and France.

Institutional Reforms: Strengthening Political Leadership of Decision-Making

The unifying theme of the Abe government's national security-relevant institutional reforms has been a concerted effort to consolidate executive (Cabinet-level) and prime ministerial control over foreign policy and national security decision-making. This focus is consistent with a general decades-old trend — also accelerated under Abe — of expanding prime ministerial power.⁵⁴ The goals for consolidating national security decision-making have been twofold: first, to ameliorate perceived institutional weaknesses, especially with regard to interagency coordination, strategic planning, and crisis management; and, second, to improve the government's ability to expeditiously and flexibly cope with the increasingly complex security environment, which many in Japan view as uncertain — and worsening.⁵⁵ Since 2012, Abe and the prime minister's office have played a more direct role in foreign policy decision-making than any previous administration.⁵⁶

Establishment of Japan's National Security Council

The single most significant reform to national security-relevant institutions since 2012 has been the establishment of Japan's first National Security Council (NSC) in December 2013.⁵⁷ Announcing his

plans that February, Abe said that the NSC “control tower” would be “centered on the prime minister” and tasked with “flexible and regular discussions of diplomatic and security affairs from a strategic perspective.” Its purpose would be to provide “an environment for rapid responses based on strong political leadership.”⁵⁸

Creation of the NSC was part of a much longer-term effort by previous prime ministers to more directly shape national security policy, in particular by strengthening the prime minister's office and Cabinet relative to Japan's bureaucracy, improving interagency coordination, and more directly involving JSDF officers in security policy

Creation of the NSC was part of a much longer-term effort by previous prime ministers to more directly shape national security policy.

discussions.⁵⁹ It also flows from an expansion of Japan's conception of “national security” to encompass issues related to space, cyber, and the financial system as well as terrorism, nuclear counterproliferation, and gray-zone challenges. Accordingly, Abe has frequently convened the NSC to deliberate national security issues, broadly defined, and to make decisions. The council has also facilitated interagency coordination on matters of diplomacy, security, economics, and crisis management.⁶⁰

The NSC's most important feature is its “four-minister meeting,” which brings together the prime minister, chief Cabinet secretary, minister of foreign affairs, and minister of defense for regular discussions of long- and short-term security

53 Taisuke Hirose, “Japan's New Arms Export Principles: Strengthening U.S.-Japan Relations,” Japan Chair Platform, Center for International and Strategic Studies, Oct. 14, 2014, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/141014_Hirose_NewArmsExportPrinciples_JapanPlatform.pdf.

54 Harukata Takenaka, “Expansion of the Power of the Japanese Prime Minister and the Transformation of the Japanese Political System,” Working Paper, 2018.

55 Adam P. Liff and Andrew S. Erickson, “From Management Crisis to Crisis Management? Japan's Post-2012 Institutional Reforms and Sino-Japanese Crisis Instability,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 5 (2017): 604–638, doi:10.1080/01402390.2017.1293530.

56 For a recent general overview of this trend drawing on English- and Japanese-language studies, see Aurelia George Mulgan, *The Abe Administration and the Rise of the Prime Ministerial Executive* (New York: Routledge, 2017), ch. 3.

57 For a focused English-language analysis of the form, function, and significance of Japan's NSC, see Adam P. Liff, “Japan's National Security Council: Policy Coordination and Political Power,” *Japanese Studies* (Forthcoming).

58 Shusho Kantei, *Kokka anzen hosho kaigi no sosetsu ni kansuru yushikisha kaigi [Meeting of Experts Concerning NSC Establishment]*, Feb. 15, 2013, http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/96_abe/actions/201302/15ka_yusiki.html.

59 On related points, see Yasuhiro Matsuda and Hideki Hosono, “Nihon: Anzen Hosho Kaigi to Naikaku Kanbo [Japan: Security Council and Cabinet Secretariat],” in *NSC Kokka Anzen Hosho Kaigi*, ed. Yasuhiro Matsuda (Tokyo: Sairyusha, 2009), 279–281.

60 Ken Kotani, “Nihon-ban Kokka Anzen Hosho Kaigi (NSC) no kinoteki tokucho [Japan-style National Security Council (NSC) and its Functional Features],” *Kokusai Anzen Hosho*, March 2015, 61–75, 61–62.

concerns. Unlike its institutional predecessors (e.g., the 1986 Security Council), Japan's NSC was set up to serve as an advisory committee and as a de facto decision-making body.⁶¹ Having convened on a roughly weekly basis over its first four years — far outpacing that of any other postwar security institution — the council appears to be proving its mettle as a venue for regular and frequent top-level political deliberations on, and centralized leadership of, Japan's national security affairs.⁶²

To support the NSC the Abe government created a National Security Secretariat in January 2014. Headed by a secretary-general and housed within the Cabinet secretariat, its staff averages 70 to 80 personnel. Most are civil servants seconded from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense, including some uniformed JSDF personnel. Each individual is assigned to one of six teams — three with functional and three with regional focuses. The secretary-general — widely considered Japan's de facto national security adviser — sometimes functions as Abe's personal emissary to foreign leaders.⁶³

Over the past four years, the secretariat has taken the lead on interagency coordination for major national security documents, most prominently, Japan's comprehensive *National Security Strategy*. Replacing the *Basic Defense Policy*, written in 1957, and reflecting the NSC's more expansive conceptualization of national security affairs, the *National Security Strategy* runs the gamut from territorial defense to international energy and cyberspace matters. The strategy's existence and content reflect the "politics-led, top-down" whole-of-government approach that motivated the creation of the NSC. So, too, does the secretariat's function as a nexus within the Cabinet for consolidating the policies of Japan's manifold agencies into a comprehensive national strategy.⁶⁴

After nearly five years, Japan's NSC appears to have achieved a handful of key objectives. It has done much to address long-standing issues in Japan's policy decision-making through advancing

centralization, political leadership, and whole-of-government approaches to national security. For these reasons, it is already considered one of the most significant security-relevant institutional reforms in Japan's postwar history.⁶⁵

Politicization of Bureaucratic Posts Relevant to National Security

A second defining feature of the Abe government's effort to consolidate political control of national security decision-making — one that has received less attention outside Japan — is its more assertive political review of bureaucratic personnel decisions and its willingness to intervene.⁶⁶ This effort is part of a broader push reflected in the establishment in 2014 of the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs. The bureau, which subjects high-level administrative positions (e.g., deputy vice-minister and higher) to review by the chief Cabinet secretary and prime minister, has been domestically controversial.⁶⁷ Yasuo Fukuda, a former prime minister from Abe's party, lambasted the bureau's politicization of administrative appointments as tantamount to the "ruination of the state" (*kokka no hametsu*), even calling it the Abe Cabinet's "greatest failure."⁶⁸

Even before establishing the bureau, however, Abe had demonstrated a willingness to take a proactive role in bureaucratic appointments. Although such decisions are a matter of course in the United States and many other countries, in Japan, critics see the growing politicization of government appointments as violating well-established norms. Some of the concerns include fears of a "spoils system" or policy inconsistency, especially in light of what some refer to as the "revolving door" prime ministership — Japan had six prime ministers between 2006 and 2012. On the other hand, advocates of the Bureau of Personnel Affairs contend that ministerial control of personnel appointments has historically exacerbated pervasive bureaucratic "turf consciousness" (*nawabari no ishiki*), which in turn has incentivized powerful bureaucrats to prioritize

61 Masafumi Kaneko, "Iyoiyo shido Nihon-ban NSC [Finally...Japan-style NSC Activates]," *PHP Kenkyujo*, 2013, <https://thinktank.php.co.jp/kaeruchikara/939/>.

62 Liff, "Japan's National Security Council."

63 Liff, "Japan's National Security Council."

64 Kotani, "Japan-style National Security Council (NSC)," 61, 70–72; Matsuda and Saitō, "What's the Ideal for Japan's NSC?" 57.

65 Heginbotham and Samuels, "Tokyo's Arms Exports"; Liff, "Japan's National Security Council."

66 For a focused study on related issues, see Pugliese, "Kantei Diplomacy?"

67 "Naikaku jinjikyoku, 5gatsu ni secchi [Cabinet Personnel Bureau to be established in May]," *Nikkei Shimbun*, Apr. 11, 2014, https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXNASFS11002_R10C14A4MM0000/; "Japan's powerful government personnel body blamed amid cronyism scandals," *Japan Times*, Mar. 24, 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/03/24/national/japans-powerful-government-personnel-body-blamed-amid-cronyism-scandals/>.

68 "Kanryo ga kantei no kaoiro mite shigoto; Fukuda moto shusho Abe seiken hihan [Bureaucrats taking cues from Kantei, former PM Fukuda criticizes Abe administration]," *Tokyo Shimbun*, Aug. 3, 2017, <http://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/politics/list/201708/CK2017080302000136.html>.

ministerial interests over the “national interest.” In short, advocates see the bureau and the NSC as necessary countermeasures to these perceived weaknesses.⁶⁹

When it comes to national security appointments specifically, the Abe government has tapped individuals whose views and experiences appear compatible with its policy objectives. During Abe’s first administration, he opted for a more indirect approach.⁷⁰ Since 2012, however, his government has been more hands-on. In 2013, the Abe administration appointed an active-duty Coast Guard officer as commandant — the first time this had ever happened. Previous commandants had been career bureaucrats with the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism.⁷¹ Not coincidentally, the officer had operational experience in the waters surrounding the contested Senkaku Islands — the object of a long-running territorial dispute with Beijing that had worsened significantly by the time Abe returned to office in December 2012.⁷²

Perhaps Abe’s most controversial and security-policy-significant intervention was his late-2013 appointment of a new director-general of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau — the powerful body of legal experts that effectively determines the official interpretation of Japan’s Constitution. Abe’s decision came as he was seeking the bureau’s blessing for the Cabinet’s effort to effectively “reinterpret” Article 9 to make constitutional what the bureau had for decades deemed unconstitutional: the exercise of Japan’s right of collective self-defense under international law.⁷³ Sidestepping the norm that outgoing directors-general of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau be replaced by their deputies, Abe appointed an outsider: the former head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’s International Legal Affairs Bureau. Reportedly, this official shared Abe’s view that the Cabinet had the authority to fulfill the prime minister’s desire to render collective self-defense constitutional.⁷⁴ The appointment was widely criticized by opposition parties and constitutional

scholars as an affront to past precedent and on constitutional grounds.⁷⁵

Plus ça Change...? Abe’s Incrementalism Amid Persistent Constraints

Although the Abe government’s security policy and institutional reforms constitute significant shifts, it is important to also acknowledge the foundational security principles and policies that have remained unchanged, to avoid conflating Abe’s rhetoric and his stated (or imputed) desires with *actual policy changes*, and to assess with appropriate measure the significance of specific policy shifts. Far from constituting a radical shift, even in the instances of major and significant reforms undertaken since 2012, in most cases the Abe government’s successes build on longer-term efforts that predate his administration. That these shifts have, in key instances, attracted suprapartisan support — as reflected in associated developments during the leadership of the DPJ, from 2009 to 2012 — and have not fomented a major popular backlash at the ballot box suggests mainstream, if at times grudging, popular support. In the aggregate, these findings carry important implications for Japan’s likely trajectory after Abe leaves office.

Policy: More Status Quo than Revisionist

When evaluating the cumulative significance of Abe-era national security revisions through a lens of continuity, rather than change, the durability of decades-old, fundamental pillars of Japan’s security posture emerges as strongly as the evolutionary nature of the post-2012 changes. Especially when considered against the backdrop of the transformative changes reshaping Japan’s regional security environment, the persistence of Japan’s self-imposed constraints on the development and employment of military power

69 "Seijika shudo de kanryo no jinji wo ugokasu 'naikaku jinjikyoku' tte nani? [What is this cabinet personnel bureau (enabling) politicians' leadership of bureaucratic personnel affairs?]," *Page*, Apr. 16, 2014, <https://thepage.jp/detail/20140416-00000004-wordleaf>.

70 For some examples from the 2006–2007 period, see Pugliese, "Kantei Diplomacy?" esp. 158–160.

71 "Kaijo Hoanchokan ni hatsu no genba shushin [First-ever JCG commandant from the front lines]," *Nikkei Shimbun*, Jul. 18, 2013.

72 Yuji Sato, "The Japan Coast Guard protects the Senkaku Islands to the last," *Discuss Japan* 35, Oct. 18, 2016, <http://www.japanpolicyforum.jp/archives/diplomacy/pt20161018235004.html>.

73 Though the U.N. Charter has afforded all sovereign states this right since the 1950s, the Cabinet Legislation Bureau had previously interpreted Article 9 to allow the exercise of individual self-defense only, stipulating that although Japan had the *right* under international law to exercise collective self-defense, doing so would be unconstitutional.

74 "Abe's Legal Aide on Defense Reform Steps down due to Ill Health," *Kyodo*, May 16, 2014.

75 For an overview of Article 9's evolving interpretation over time, including this particular development specific to the 2014 reinterpretation, see Liff, "Policy by Other Means."

is striking. Appreciating these external factors and internal limits is essential to understanding Japan's strategic trajectory, as well as the prospects for major change moving forward. On key issues where Abe's government has sought major changes and faced domestic political resistance, it has either moderated its ambitions significantly, such as introducing globally unique limitations on exercising collective self-defense, or abandoned them, as was the case with collective security. When it comes to fundamental mainstays of Japan's national security — such as the centrality of the U.S.-Japan alliance or Japan's non-nuclear principles — continuity is the defining feature of government policy. Absent more fundamental changes to these core pillars, the idea that the Abe era thus far represents a radical inflection point in Japan's postwar security trajectory loses significant credibility.

First, and most essentially, Article 9's original text remains untouched. Despite repeated declarations since 2012 that amending Article 9 is his government's "historic task," Abe has not only failed to achieve revisions, but by 2017 had dialed back his stated ambitions to such a degree that he was prominently criticized within his own Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) for abandoning past LDP positions.⁷⁶ The Abe government's plan, announced in May 2017, aims to leave Article 9's existing clauses untouched and proposes adding a new clause that states merely that the "existence" of the JSDF is constitutional.⁷⁷ Since the JSDF has existed for 64 years, and an overwhelming majority of the Japanese public already believes it is constitutional, one is hard-pressed to conceive of a less ambitious revision. Furthermore, though to many contemporary observers the first revision of Japan's 1947 Constitution seems more likely than ever before, public opinion remains, at best, ambivalent.⁷⁸ Faced with various domestic political headwinds — including the reemergence of festering, though unrelated, scandals in spring 2018 — it is unclear whether Abe's government will be able to achieve even the modest addition it proposed last year.

Article 9 is the linchpin of Japan's national security policy, and without a more ambitious revision of its first and/or second clauses, other core aspects of national security policy are far less likely to be radically changed. The persistence of Article 9 in its current form is both a symptom and cause of Japan's continued reluctance to employ JSDF personnel overseas, especially in operations that may require the use of lethal force. Since 1954, no JSDF personnel have died in combat. Even after six years of Abe's leadership and changes, globally unique conditions remain on the use of force outside an unambiguous armed attack on Japan, and "exclusive defense" (*senshu boei*) remains Japan's "fundamental policy."⁷⁹ To be sure, the Cabinet's 2014 reinterpretation of Japan's Constitution to enable the "limited" exercise of collective self-defense represents a historic policy shift. But even under the new interpretation, the Abe government agreed to impose three strict conditions bounding the circumstances under which Japan could actually exercise its collective self-defense right under international law. Most significantly, the armed attack suffered by the other state must itself pose an existential threat to *Japan* (*kuni no sonritsu*). What's more, in the debate leading up to the Cabinet's decision, Abe abandoned his hand-picked advisory panel's recommendation to enable the JSDF to use force in U.N. Security Council-authorized collective security operations (such as the 1991 Persian Gulf War).⁸⁰

Although new and historically significant legal authorities came into effect in 2016, severe restrictions remain on allowing JSDF personnel to use weapons in peacetime, and there is significant political reluctance to do so.⁸¹ In the historic deployment as part of the U.N. peacekeeping operation to South Sudan, Abe's government withdrew the JSDF once the security situation deteriorated, presumably to avoid casualties abroad. The JSDF were withdrawn, then, without actually utilizing the new authority to "rush to rescue" (*kaketsuke-keigo*) — or using lethal (small-arms) force to come to the aid of other nations'

76 Reiji Yoshida, "Former defense chief courts controversy by questioning Abe plan to revise Constitution," *Japan Times*, May 24, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/05/24/national/politics-diplomacy/former-defense-chief-courts-controversy-questioning-abe-plan-revise-constitution/>.

77 "'9jo ni Jieitai Meiki' 'Kaiken 20nen shiko mezasu' [Article 9 JSDF existence 'Aiming for Constitutional Revision in 2020]," *Mainichi Shimbun*, May 3, 2017, <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20170504/k00/00m/010/077000c>.

78 "Kenpo kaisei, sansei 51%...Jieitai 'goken' 76% [51% agree with constitutional revision...76% believe JSDF constitutional]," *Yomiuri Online*, Apr. 30, 2018, <http://sp.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/20180429-OYT1T50099.html>.

79 Japan Ministry of Defense, *Guidelines*.

80 Liff, "Japan's Defense Policy," 86–87.

81 "Gov't Outlines SDF's Use of Weapons in Helping Foreign Troops under Attack," *Mainichi*, Apr. 15, 2015.

personnel.⁸² Article 9's second clause has particular significance for Japan's force development options. A Cold War-era self-imposed ban on the JSDF's acquisition of "offensive" (*kogekigata*) platforms of the sort that major military powers such as the United States, China, and Russia procure as a matter of course (aircraft carriers, ICBMs, strategic bombers) has been sustained based on a judgment that these platforms would constitute "war potential" and exceed the "minimum necessary" for self-defense.

Another fundamental pillar of Japan's national security posture — the centrality of the U.S.-Japan alliance — not only remains in place but the Abe government has doubled down upon it. Relative to declarations from leaders in the 1970s, especially Yasuhiro Nakasone, who would become prime minister in the 1980s and who famously referred to the alliance earlier in his career as a "semi-permanent necessity" (*haneikyuteki ni hitsuyo*) and called for autonomous defense (*jishu boei*),⁸³ calls for marginally more independent capabilities are hardly radical or even unique to Abe. In fact, they are generally supported in Washington. Even so, the 2015 revision of the *Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation* stipulates that the allies' basic respective obligations under the 1960 security treaty remain unchanged. Detering and, if necessary, responding to "an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan" remains the alliance's primary mandate.⁸⁴ Japan is still under no treaty obligation to support the U.S. militarily. This of course does not necessarily mean that it would not. And the 2015 security legislation does enable, based on a political judgment, significant expansion of JSDF logistical support for U.S. operations, involvement in bilateral planning and exercises, and use of weapons in various peacetime contingencies. The aforementioned and now explicitly authorized "asset protection" mission reflected in the 2015 legislation expands the circumstances under which Japan can use weapons to defend a U.S. vessel

under attack or that of other friendly nations if two conditions are met: that it is peacetime, and that the vessel is engaged in activities contributing to Japan's defense. Even so, the JSDF can use weapons only to the extent necessary to repel the attack or to create an opportunity for retreat.⁸⁵

As a practical matter, Japan's defense spending is not rapidly increasing and remains a major hurdle to any ambitious expansion of JSDF capabilities, roles, or missions. Despite widespread media hype about the Abe government's "record high" defense budgets since 2013, in nominal yen terms, Japan's 2018 defense budget is roughly commensurate with its 1997 spending. By comparison, during the intervening two decades, China's official defense budget surged from one-quarter of Japan's spending to four times the size of Japan's defense budget. Regardless of Abe and other political leaders' stated ambitions, without significant increases in defense funding, more fundamental changes to JSDF force structure or employment will be difficult. One recent study suggested that at least 40 percent of the defense priorities delineated in the Abe government's 2018 budget request are underfunded.⁸⁶ The loosening of a long-standing ban on arms exports, which, in part, was intended to allow greater "bang for the buck" through economies of scale, has yet to attract any purchases of major platforms.⁸⁷

Other longtime, self-imposed constraints have remained more or less in place. Perhaps most salient, in light of recent developments on the Korean Peninsula, is that Japan continues to rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella. The Abe government has repeatedly said that Japan's long-standing "three non-nuclear principles" (*hikaku san gensoku*) — non-possession, non-production, and non-introduction of nuclear weapons into Japanese territory — remain the country's "fundamental policy."⁸⁸ To be sure, in technical terms, Japan has long hedged against fears of U.S. abandonment and, in recent years, discussion has been more open about the possible need to move beyond

82 Yuki Tatsumi, "Japan Self-Defense Force Withdraws From South Sudan," *Diplomat*, Mar. 13, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/japan-self-defense-force-withdraws-from-south-sudan/>.

83 Diet testimony cited in Samuels, *Securing Japan*, 7.

84 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Japan-U.S. Security Treaty," Jan. 19, 1960, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html>.

85 Liff, "Policy by Other Means," esp. 170.

86 "Nearly half of Japan's defense priorities underfunded," *Nikkei Asian Review*, Jan. 6, 2018, https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/Policy-Politics/Nearly-half-of-Japan-s-defense-priorities-underfunded?n_cid=NARAN012.

87 Michael Hadlow and Crystal Pryor, "Japan's Defense Exports: Three Years Sitting on a Stone," SPF USA Forum 12, Mar. 26, 2018, <https://spfusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Crystal-Pryor-Japans-Defense-Exports-FINAL-1.pdf>.

88 Japan Ministry of Defense, *Guidelines*.

these principles.⁸⁹ But these debates are hardly unprecedented. Prime ministers since the 1950s have held that “defensive” nuclear weapons would be constitutional.⁹⁰ Japan’s policies in this regard have not changed.

This list, while not exhaustive, demonstrates that, despite important policy shifts initiated by the Abe administration since 2012, central pillars of Japanese security policy basically remain in place. Although significant in practical terms and historic in a national context, the Abe government’s alterations to Japan’s defense posture — up to and including *limited* collective self-defense — are best understood as evolutionary steps in response to a rapidly changing strategic environment. Despite Japan’s potentially volatile region, there is, as of yet, no clear evidence that the public would support more radical changes to Japan’s fundamental security principles, such as revising Article 9’s first or second clause to enable the abandonment of “exclusive defense” (*senshu boei*), much less pursuing autonomous military power outside a U.S.-Japan alliance framework, significantly ramping up defense spending, or acquiring nuclear weapons.

Institutional Reforms: Evolutionary and Mainstream

As discussed earlier, another major focus of national security reforms under Abe has been institutional; specifically, consolidating policy decision-making in the Cabinet, and the prime minister’s office in particular. Yet this trend also has a long legacy that predates Abe and is not unique to the LDP.⁹¹ Previous long-serving LDP prime ministers have been proactive champions of administrative reforms, including Nakasone, who was prime minister from 1982 to 1987, Ryutaro Hashimoto, who held the office from 1996 to 1998,

and Koizumi, who led from 2001 to 2006. Abe has built on the legacy of these and other predecessors, including former DPJ prime ministers.⁹² Most prominently, the bills to establish the National Security Council (NSC) and the Bureau of Personnel Affairs received significant support from the DPJ.⁹³

The founding of Japan’s NSC was an outgrowth

Placed in historical context, Abe-era institutional reforms appear far less outside the mainstream than much of the contemporary discourse would indicate.

of a reform movement dating at least to the 1970s. That movement accelerated significantly after the September 11, 2001, attacks as Japan was called on to adopt a more proactive role in international security affairs and as its regional security environment grew more complicated. In 1986, Nakasone had established a “Security Council” (now defunct) with similar objectives to those that motivated the establishment of the NSC in 2013. Subsequent administrations reformed it incrementally.⁹⁴ Koizumi’s post-9/11 efforts, in which Abe played a central role as deputy and later chief Cabinet secretary, were of particular significance in centralizing foreign policy decision-making.⁹⁵ After additional reforms during the leadership of the DPJ, the March 2011 “triple disaster” (the strongest earthquake in Japan’s history triggered the tsunami that led to the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant disaster) and other crises revealed the deficiencies of existing crisis management and other national security-relevant institutions. In 2013, Abe, the ruling coalition, and the DPJ joined forces to establish the NSC.⁹⁶

89 On the former, see Richard J. Samuels and James L. Schoff, “Japan’s Nuclear Hedge: Beyond ‘Allergy’ and Breakout,” in *Strategic Asia 2013-2014: Asia in the Second Nuclear Age*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis, Abraham M. Denmark, and Travis Tanner (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2013), 233–264. For a widely cited recent call to discuss Japan’s nuclear options by a former ambassador to Washington, see Ryozo Kato, “What’s at stake in allowing Japan a nuclear arsenal?” *Japan Forward*, Feb. 15, 2018, <https://japan-forward.com/ambassador-kato-whats-at-stake-in-allowing-japan-a-nuclear-arsenal/>.

90 For example, see Samuels and Schoff, “Japan’s Nuclear Hedge,” 237.

91 For a recent analysis incorporating a review of a much larger English- and Japanese-language literature, see Mulgan, *The Abe Administration*; Tomohito Shinoda, *Koizumi Diplomacy: Japan’s Kantei Approach to Foreign and Defense Affairs* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

92 Mulgan, *The Abe Administration*.

93 “Cabinet Personnel Bureau to be established in May,” *Nikkei Shimbun*; “Nihon-ban NSC Raishu Hassoku [Japan-style NSC to Launch Next Week],” *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Nov. 27, 2013.

94 Liff, “Japan’s National Security Council.”

95 Shinoda, “Koizumi Diplomacy.”

96 Liff, “Japan’s National Security Council.” On vote total, see “Nihon-ban NSC Raishu Hassoku,” *Yomiuri Shimbun*.

Note also that with several high-profile exceptions mentioned earlier, most of Abe's appointments related to national security have been relatively conventional. Although Article 68 of the Japanese Constitution requires only a majority of Cabinet ministers to be members of the Diet, all of Abe's Cabinet-level national security appointments have been LDP politicians. Both foreign ministers in his second administration are generally considered to be more moderate than he is. Meanwhile, Abe's chief foreign policy adviser, the National Security Secretariat secretary-general, is a retired Ministry of Foreign Affairs career diplomat.

Although Abe's most controversial intervention in bureaucratic personnel decisions, the appointment of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau director-general in 2013, was unprecedented, this Cabinet position has not historically been immune to political pressure. As Richard Samuels notes in a seminal 2004 study, powerful prime ministers in the past had pressured the bureau to achieve desired ends in national security policy. Most significantly, in the 1950s the bureau was pressured to declare that the establishment of the JSDF and, later, the possession of nuclear weapons would be constitutional, as long as they were for purposes of "self-defense." In the 1980s, it judged arms exports to the United States constitutional. Nor has political frustration with the bureau been rooted strictly in the LDP. Since the end of the Cold War, influential politicians, including at least three who later became presidents of the erstwhile leading-opposition DPJ — Ichiro Ozawa, Naoto Kan, and Yoshihiko Noda — have criticized what they saw as overreach by the bureau. As Japan struggled to figure out its international role after 9/11, a LDP Diet member went so far as to introduce a bill in 2003 to disband the bureau. In Diet testimony, one of his colleagues told then-Prime Minister Koizumi, also a member of the LDP, "When interpretations of a bureaucratic agency of the government dominate the legislative process on such an issue as national security, it is a violation of the separation of powers among the three branches of government." Perhaps most telling in the context of this study is the fact that, during his leadership campaign in 2002, Noda, a member of the DPJ who would later be Abe's immediate predecessor as prime minister in 2011-2012, reportedly advocated for collective self-defense *and* pledged to appoint a sympathetic director-general of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau. Noda's predecessor as prime minister, Kan, a fellow member of the DPJ who led

from 2010 to 2011, had previously argued that "the fact that the CLB serves as the highest interpretive authority on the Constitution is itself a violation of the Constitution."⁹⁷

Abe's government has implemented major changes and flouted some norms concerning political influence over the bureaucracy. In particular, Abe was the first to decisively assert his will so conspicuously over bureaucrats of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau. But the sentiment that inspired him was neither unique to him nor limited to his party. Placed in historical context, Abe-era institutional reforms appear far less outside the mainstream than much of the contemporary discourse would indicate. This suggests that Abe may not be as exceptional as is often assumed — a finding with significant implications for the era that follows his administration.

Accounting for Change ... and Continuity: Japan's Shifting Strategic and Political Context

To properly assess the significance of security shifts under the Abe administration and their longer-term implications for Japan's trajectory, they must be considered in their international and domestic contexts. Failure to do so risks excessive, or unwarranted, attribution of causality to specific individuals, like Abe, or to idiosyncratic factors, such as ideology. The available evidence suggests that any explanation of developments in the Abe era requires a nuanced assessment of the complex factors at play. A perceived worsening of Japan's external security environment has created political space for incremental rationalization of security policy shifts and decision-making to confront these challenges, even as long-standing, if contested and weakening, normative and domestic factors continue to provide powerful incentives for ambitious leaders to moderate their policy goals.

Japan's Increasingly "Severe" External Security Environment

Abe's return to power in late 2012 occurred as major changes were developing in Japan's regional security environment, creating a strategic context distinctly different from his first stint in office. Then, from 2006 to 2007, he failed to achieve most of his proposed national security reforms. More recently, of particular salience from

97 Richard J. Samuels, "Politics, Security Policy, and Japan's Cabinet Legislation Bureau: Who Elected These Guys, Anyway?" *Japan Policy Research Institute*, Working Paper, March 2004, <http://www.jpri.org/publications/workingpapers/wp99.html>.

Tokyo's perspective have been the worsening threat from a nuclear-armed North Korea, China's rapidly expanding military capabilities and newly provocative rhetoric and policies in the East China Sea, the growing prominence of qualitatively novel security challenges, including in the "gray zone" and cyber and space domains, and developments affecting alliance politics.

North Korea

From Japan's perspective, over the past five years North Korea's nuclear and missile programs have evolved from longer-term security concerns to clear and present dangers. To some observers, most notably Abe himself, the despotic, internationally isolated regime of Kim Jong Un poses a threat that is unprecedented in Japan's postwar history.⁹⁸ Since 2011, Pyongyang has conducted four nuclear tests, the most recent of which had an estimated yield of more than 100 kilotons (by comparison, the Hiroshima bomb in 1945 was roughly 15 kilotons). The previous North Korean regime sparked global alarm when it tested missiles in 1998, 2006, and 2009, but the Kim Jong Un regime has tested missiles at a rate that dwarfs that of its predecessor: 19 in 2014, 15 in 2015, 24 in 2016, and 20 in 2017.⁹⁹ North Korean missiles have also become qualitatively more advanced and more mobile (making them easier to hide and more difficult to destroy). They are also longer-ranged, and capable of delivering larger — potentially nuclear — payloads. In 2017 alone, Pyongyang conducted its first thermonuclear test, provocatively launched missiles *over Japanese territory* and into Japan's exclusive economic zone, and tested two intercontinental ballistic missiles it claimed could hit anywhere in the world, including Washington, D.C. North Korea also made specific threats against Japanese and U.S. bases. In January 2018, Abe summarized his take on the implications by saying "the security environment surrounding Japan is its most severe since World War II."¹⁰⁰

China

Over the past decade, the degree to which Japanese elites and the public see China as a national security concern has increased significantly. At

the time of Abe's first term, from 2006 to 2007, few outside national security circles paid much attention to Beijing's quiet development of the world's most robust arsenal of conventionally-tipped ballistic missiles, or to various other "anti-access/area-denial" capabilities aimed at deterring U.S. intervention in a regional conflict. Fewer still paid attention to China's vast sovereignty claims in the South and East China Seas — including of five islands administered by Japan. Furthermore, until a political crisis with Beijing over the contested islands in 2010, the concept of "gray-zone situations" was not a major concern of most Japanese strategists.¹⁰¹

Times have changed, and concerns about the security challenge posed by China are now mainstream and less abstract. In particular, those concerns deepened among the Japanese elite and broader public from 2009 to 2012, when Abe and his party, the LDP, were part of the opposition. Coupled with China's symbolic replacement of Japan in 2010 as the world's second-largest national economy, years of double-digit defense spending increases provided easily digestible evidence that the military balance of power was shifting. The day Abe's first administration collapsed in 2007, Beijing's official defense budget — widely considered to underreport actual military spending — was 356 billion yuan (about \$45 billion), roughly the same as Japan's. By 2017, it was more than one trillion yuan (or \$151 billion) — nearly quadruple Japan's. Beyond Beijing's long-standing nuclear arsenal, of particular concern to Japanese strategists is China's world-leading arsenal of advanced, conventionally-tipped ballistic missiles, which are capable of hitting Japanese territory, including U.S. bases on Japan, as well as its increasingly modernized air force, navy, and marines, all of which dwarf Japan's in quantitative terms and are, in some cases, already superior qualitatively.

Beyond these broad trends, Beijing's coercive rhetoric and policies following major political contretemps in 2010 and 2012 over the contested Senkakus presented to many Japanese observers a concrete and high-profile China-specific contingency scenario that would pose a direct potential threat to Japanese territory. Since September 2012 — just three months before Abe returned to office — Beijing's employment

98 Shusho Kantei, "Abe Naikaku Sori Daijin nento kisha kaiken [Prime Minister Abe's New Year Address]," Jan. 4, 2018, https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/98_abe/statement/2018/0104kaiken.html.

99 "The CNS North Korea Missile Test Database," *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, Nov. 30, 2017, <http://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/cns-north-korea-missile-test-database/>.

100 Shusho Kantei, "Abe Naikaku Sori Daijin nento kisha kaiken."

101 A search for keywords "gray-zone" and "Senkaku" in the online database of the Japanese edition of *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Japan's most widely circulated newspaper, returned no results for the 1997–2009 period. The first usage occurred in 2010, with a peak of 48 occurrences in 2014.



of military and parnaval forces (especially its Coast Guard) to coercively challenge Japan's effective administrative control of the islands has transformed the operational environment, introducing a major source of uncertainty and risk, and creating circumstances to facilitate a potential *fait accompli*.¹⁰² In response, Japan nearly tripled the frequency with which it scrambled fighters against approaching Chinese planes between 2012 and 2017, reaching an all-time annual high of 851 by April 2017.¹⁰³ In the "gray zone," between late 2012 and December 2017 Chinese government vessels entered the Senkakus' territorial waters more than 600 times to assert Beijing's sovereignty claim.¹⁰⁴

the importance of adopting a harder line against China.¹⁰⁷

Changing Military Technology and the Growing Prominence of Cyber and Space

Technological transformations have also shaped Japanese leaders' perceptions of the regional security environment since Abe's first administration. In particular, the proliferation of extremely fast ballistic and cruise missiles in Northeast Asia and the growing prominence of new security domains — space and cyber, in particular — have fundamentally changed the nature of and speed at which a security contingency could manifest and a political decision would need to be made about how to respond, as well as the national security interests that are potentially at risk. Meanwhile, China's demonstrated willingness to use paramilitary forces to assert its territorial claims has introduced other novel deterrence challenges in the "gray zone." Although public discourse often overlooks these key trends in favor of more conspicuous

Times have changed, and concerns about the security challenge posed by China are now mainstream and less abstract.

metrics, such as the construction of aircraft carriers or defense budgets, these changing aspects of the regional security environment are a major driver of reforms to Japan's security policies and institutions, most of which were designed for far more conventional military threats during the Cold War.

For these reasons and others, such as concerns about Chinese military activities elsewhere in the East China Sea and Western Pacific, Japan's 2017 defense white paper devotes 34 pages to commentary on concerns about China, including Beijing's "attempts to change the status quo by coercion."¹⁰⁵

In short, during Abe's time out of office and since his return in 2012, the nature and scope of the perceived challenge that China poses to Japan's national security has transformed in highly visible ways.¹⁰⁶ A wide array of political leaders, not just Abe, have called for countermeasures. Indeed, major shifts were adopted by the DPJ while Abe's party was out of power from 2009 to 2012, and in the September 2012 LDP presidential election that Abe won, all five candidates campaigned on

Alliance Politics

The United States, Japan's sole treaty ally, has played an important role in shaping Japan's recent security reforms: First, for decades, Washington has called for Japan to adopt a more proactive security posture. This long-term trend found global impetus after 9/11. More recently, however, rapid changes to the security environment in East

102 Liff, "China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations in the East China Sea and Japan's Response."

103 Joint Staff Press Release, "Heisei 28nendo no kinkyu hasshin jisshi jyokyo ni tsuite [About Circumstances Concerning Emergency Scrambles in 2016]," Japan Ministry of Defense, Apr. 13, 2017, 3, http://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press2017/press_pdf/p20170413_01.pdf.

104 "Senkaku Shoto Shuhen Kaiiki ni okeru Chugoku kosen to no doko to Wagakuni no Taisho [Activities of Chinese government vessels in the waters surrounding the Senkakus and Japan's Response]," Japan Coast Guard, <http://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/mission/senkaku/senkaku.html>.

105 Japan Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2017*.

106 For an overview of Japan's complex policy concerns about China, see Sheila A. Smith, *Intimate Rivals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

107 "LDP Candidates Take Tough Line against China," *Kyodo News*, Sept. 18, 2012.



Asia have caused U.S. policymakers to return their focus to ways Japan can “do more,” not in terms of global operations (such as in Iraq and Afghanistan) but in the Asia-Pacific. Second, the emergence of qualitatively new threats combined with the relative decline in U.S. power have deepened long-standing Japanese insecurities. Although this trend significantly predates 2016, the Trump administration’s saber-rattling toward Pyongyang and its rhetorical ambivalence regarding U.S. global security commitments, coupled with North Korea’s rapidly advancing nuclear and missile capabilities, have exacerbated the uncertainties. Pyongyang’s apparent ability to threaten Los Angeles or Washington, D.C. with a nuclear-armed missile in particular has raised concerns about “decoupling” and the possible undermining of U.S. extended deterrence.¹⁰⁸

One important consequence of this changing strategic environment can be seen in the tension inherent in Japan’s “alliance dilemma”:¹⁰⁹ between Japan’s long-standing concerns about possible entrapment in U.S.-led wars if it gets too close and its fears that Washington may abandon its ally if it does not. In recent years, anxiety has shifted even further toward the latter. This concern about

abandonment, in turn, has incentivized Tokyo to signal its commitment to a more “balanced” alliance (collective self-defense; asset protection) and to support U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy more broadly. The Abe administration supported key components of the erstwhile Obama-era “rebalance to Asia” such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and has proactively expanded ties with U.S. security partners in the Asia-Pacific and beyond. It has also championed the concept of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” Thus, Japan’s strategic alignment decisions appear to be aimed at pulling the United States closer while Tokyo diversifies economic and security ties with other U.S. allies and partners. This stands in stark contrast to several other states in the region — the Philippines under the Duterte administration, for example — that appear to be hedging between China and the United States. After a brief flirtation with a more “independent diplomacy” by the short-lived administration of Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama from 2009 to 2010,¹¹⁰ the foreign policies of Abe and his immediate predecessors manifest little ambivalence at either the popular or elite levels concerning which way Japan should align itself strategically.¹¹¹

108 Mira Rapp-Hooper, “Decoupling Is Back in Asia,” *War on the Rocks*, Sept. 7, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/decoupling-is-back-in-asia-a-1960s-playbook-wont-solve-these-problems/>.

109 Glenn H. Snyder, “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (July 1984): 461–95, doi.10.2307/2010183.

110 Leif-Eric Easley, Tetsuo Kotani, and Aki Mori, “Electing a New Japanese Security Policy? Examining Foreign Policy Visions Within the Democratic Party of Japan,” *Asia Policy* 9 (2010): 45–66, <http://www.nbr.org/publications/element.aspx?id=394>.

111 Adam P. Liff, “Hedging to Balance: The Paradox of Japan’s China Strategy in the Abe Era,” Working Paper, 2018.



The Domestic Politics of National Security

In light of this rapidly changing strategic environment, an emerging elite near-consensus among moderates and conservatives on the necessity of some reforms and greater public permissiveness regarding key security issues have created domestic political space for the Abe government to pursue its agenda. Nevertheless, widespread domestic political sensitivities concerning military affairs,¹¹² combined with the deceptive limits of Abe and his party's political mandate, also counsel pragmatic and significant restraint. The interaction of these domestic forces helps explain why Abe has achieved more than his predecessors yet still fallen short of his most ambitious objectives.

Deepening Pragmatism

A major trend of post-Cold War Japanese national security politics has been the replacement of the ideological, pacifist left as the major anti-LDP political force with a moderate, pragmatic center-left. Even before Abe returned in 2012, a basic consensus on the need for some national security reforms was coalescing among mainstream parties, whereas decades before there was much less support: Japan's domestic institutions and policies were not up to the challenge of its increasingly complicated security environment. Accordingly, though they disagree on many specifics, and while resistance exists even within the LDP to some of the more ambitious efforts at change, in recent years support has grown across the political spectrum for incrementally rationalizing Japan's institutions and force structure and posture in response to a changing threat environment, strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance, and expanding security ties with other U.S. security partners. For example, between the end of the Cold War and the Koizumi administration, Japan's Diet passed more than a dozen pieces of security-related legislation, significantly expanding the JSDF's roles and missions as well as Japan's ability to participate in international security affairs. Since 2012, the intermittent "salami slicing" has accelerated.¹¹³

The institutional and policy legacy of the left-of-center DPJ's years in power from 2009 to 2012

provides compelling evidence that political support for many of these reforms not only predates Abe but is not exclusive to his conservative party. For example, it was the Noda administration, from 2011 to 2012, that initiated the review process that ultimately resulted in the landmark 2015 *Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation* revision and that significantly loosened the 1976 "arms export ban" before the Abe government's more conspicuous policy shift later. The DPJ had also been discussing establishing an institution like the NSC — something called for by the DPJ's 2010 *National Defense Program Guidelines*. That 2010 document was also responsible for changing Japan's basic defense orientation toward active deterrence and a highly mobile "dynamic defense force" able to expeditiously counter a threat anywhere in the country — including its remote southwestern islands — both shifts that the Abe government has built upon. It also mainstreamed the concept of gray-zone contingencies in Japan's security lexicon, especially concerning a possible conflict in the East China Sea.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, the NSC — widely associated with Abe and considered his administration's most significant post-2012 institutional reform — was actually part of a supra-partisan reform movement aimed at bolstering political leadership over the bureaucracy. After its landslide defeat in 2012, the DPJ even reportedly shared a draft NSC proposal with Abe, cooperated in compiling the bill that established the council in 2013, and voted in support of it (the legislation passed the Diet 213-18).¹¹⁵

Despite general support for certain incremental changes, since 2012 Japan's domestic politics have been in disarray, with potentially significant implications for future reform efforts. On politically incendiary issues such as Article 9, major fault lines still exist between Abe and the opposition parties, and, though less appreciated, within the ruling coalition itself. Most recently, opposition party alignments have also been quite volatile, further clouding the waters. The erstwhile leading opposition left-of-center DPJ dissolved into smaller parties in 2016, a landmark event that has prompted a series of realignments across the opposition, with the dust yet to fully settle. On security affairs, key former members of the successor Democratic Party (which itself dissolved in May 2018) align

112 For seminal discussions of related normative factors, see Thomas U. Berger, "From Sword to Chrysanthemum: Japan's Culture of Anti-Militarism," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (1993): 119–50, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/447066>; Oros, *Normalizing Japan*.

113 Generally associated with the seminal scholarship of Richard Samuels, Samuels himself credits Leonard Schoppa for introducing him to the "salami slicing" metaphor and notes its usage elsewhere. Samuels, *Securing Japan*, 226, endnotes 3–4.

114 Liff, "Japan's Defense Policy," 81–83.

115 Sunohara, *Nihon-ban NSC*, 124–30; "Nihon-ban NSC Raishu Hassoku," *Yomiuri Shimbun*.



more closely with the conservative LDP than with the nascent, more liberal offshoot Constitutional Democratic Party.

Regardless of how opposition parties ultimately realign, however, significant backsliding on security reforms seems unlikely. The stark ideological “left-right” divide on security policy that defined Cold War-era national security politics is dying. Even the 2014 surge in voters who supported the left-

Despite this more permissive environment, however, public concerns about external security hardly give the Abe government a blank check.

wing Communist Party — which some pointed to as a resurgence of the ideological, pacifist left — appears to have been largely an artifact of formerly *right-wing* voters signaling opposition to the big two mainstream parties, not a backlash against Abe’s security agenda per se.¹¹⁶

Public Opinion

The precipitous collapse of Abe’s first administration in 2007 indicates the risks of Cabinet instability and excessive prime-ministerial ambition in a country where pacifist and anti-militarist sentiments, however amorphous, remain strong.¹¹⁷ Yet the Japanese public’s views on security affairs — long a “third rail” of postwar politics — have moderated significantly over time, still more so in light of regional security developments. This has created a more permissive political environment for Abe’s agenda than was available a decade ago. Most remarkably, despite widely reported public protests and controversy, the backlash against the security reforms his administration has achieved so far has been ephemeral. Although the

controversial July 2015 security legislation caused a major dip in his Cabinet’s support rating, within four months it was net positive again and remained so until unrelated political scandals emerged two years later.¹¹⁸

Meanwhile, especially since 2012, public opinion data suggest four important trends related to national security: widespread identification of China and North Korea as “critical” or “important” threats to Japan’s “vital interests,” exceptional affinity toward America and confidence in U.S. economic and military strength, persistent and deepening antagonism and threat perceptions regarding China (the obvious alternative alignment partner), and increasing certainty that the U.S.-Japan alliance and the JSDF are the best ways to ensure Japan’s security. Generally speaking, Abe’s moves have been more or less consistent with these trends.¹¹⁹ There was a striking drop in Japanese public confidence in the U.S. president after the 2016 election, but there is as of yet no clear indication it is translating into a major reduction of confidence in, or support for, the bilateral alliance.¹²⁰

Despite this more permissive environment, however, public concerns about external security hardly give the Abe government a blank check. On high-salience issues where public opinion is more ambivalent or actively opposed — e.g., a fundamental revision of Article 9’s first two clauses or enabling the JSDF to use force in a scenario that does not constitute a clear threat to Japan — Abe appears to have significantly dialed back. Had the 2015 security legislation reflected what had been reported in months prior as Abe’s original ambitions concerning collective self-defense or collective security, public backlash probably would have been much more severe. The Abe government’s ability to read the political winds appears to have significantly improved since 2007. Rhetoric or personal ambitions aside, the defining feature of his administration’s national security policy agenda since 2012 appears to be pragmatic incrementalism.

116 Ko Maeda, “Explaining the Surges and Declines of the Japanese Communist Party,” *Asian Survey* 57, no. 4 (2017), doi:10.1525/as.2017.57.4.665.

117 For example, in a 2015 Gallup poll, only 11 percent of Japanese respondents expressed a willingness to fight for their country — dead last (the average among the 64 countries surveyed was 61 percent). “WIN/Gallup International’s global survey shows three in five willing to fight for their country,” *Gallup International*, 2015, <http://gallup-international.bg/en/Publications/2015/220-WIN-Gallup-International%E2%80%99s-global-survey-shows-three-in-five-willing-to-fight-for-their-country>.

118 See aggregated poll data at “Japan Political Pulse,” *Sasakawa USA*, <https://spfusa.org/category/japan-political-pulse/>.

119 Poll data cited in Liff, “Hedging to Balance.”

120 A summer 2017 poll showed confidence in the U.S. president to “do the right thing in world affairs” declining from 78 percent to 24 percent after Trump’s election, “U.S. Image Suffers as Publics Around World Question Trump’s Leadership,” *Pew Research Center*, June 26, 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/06/26/u-s-image-suffers-as-publics-around-world-question-trumps-leadership/>.



Domestic Political Headwinds and the Paradox of Abe's Electoral "Success"

Based on the most conspicuous metrics cited by many observers — Diet seat totals and Cabinet support rates — the LDP-Komeito ruling coalition's five consecutive national election victories since 2012 appear to have given Abe's government a sizable mandate. Meanwhile, the enervation and fractiousness of the opposition, coupled with widespread public frustration after the three-year experiment without the LDP in power from 2009 to 2012, would suggest the elimination of an otherwise potentially potent political constraint. Yet the reality is different: The LDP's Diet strength masks significant domestic political weakness, which itself belies the widespread and simplistic narrative of Abe and the LDP as "all-powerful" (*Abe ikkyo*).

Paradoxically, the ruling coalition's electoral success does not evince majority public support for the Abe administration, much less its national security agenda. In recent elections, the LDP has benefited significantly from historically low

election. Turnout fell a further seven points in the 2014 general election.¹²¹ Meanwhile, between 1992 and 2012 voters who preferred the LDP over other parties shrank from a majority of the public to less than 20 percent. Voters with no party affiliation now make up the majority of the electorate.¹²² And a recent public opinion poll showed that among those who support the Abe Cabinet, the primary reason is a lack of alternatives.¹²³ In short, while election results have granted Abe and the LDP robust backing among members of the Diet, other factors caution against making swift policy changes — especially on traditionally sensitive matters.

Despite the LDP's dominance of contemporary Japanese politics in terms of Diet seats, a significant minority of its Lower House candidates depend on Komeito, the LDP's junior coalition partner, to get elected — a detail not widely appreciated outside Japanese journalistic and academic circles. It is no coincidence that the LDP and Komeito have cooperated in every national election since 1999 and ruled together in coalition whenever in power. Mutual stand-down agreements in single-member electoral districts are a vital source of both

parties' electoral success — and they inject a powerful codependence into the relationship. Given Komeito's largely lay-Buddhist, pacifistic base, LDP ambitions on national security are constrained by a junior coalition partner that, despite its relatively small size, can exercise a virtual veto power.¹²⁴ As Komeito brags to its supporters, this effectively makes it, though a much smaller

party, a kind of "opposition within the ruling coalition" and a powerful internal "brake" on the Abe administration's ambitions in the security domain.¹²⁵

Although it is often overlooked outside Japan, Komeito's role restraining the LDP's security

Security reforms in the Abe era are in large part a reaction to objectively identifiable, rapid changes to Japan's external security environment.

voting participation across all age groups and apparent widespread public disillusionment with the options. Turnout in the "landslide" election in 2012 that enabled Abe's return as prime minister was the lowest of the postwar period (59 percent) — a more than ten-point drop from the 2009

121 Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, "Kokusei senkyo no tohyoritsu no suii ni tsuite (Heisei 28nen 9gatsu) [Changes in national election voter turnout]," September 2016, http://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000255919.pdf; Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, "Kokusei senkyo no nendaibetsu tohyoritsu no suii ni tsuite (Heisei 28nen 9gatsu) [Changes in national election voter turnout by age group]," September 2016, http://www.soumu.go.jp/senkyo/senkyo_s/news/sonota/nendaibetu/index.html.

122 Aiji Tanaka, "Japan's Independent Voters, Yesterday and Today," *Nippon*, Aug. 16, 2012, <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/a01104/>.

123 "NHK poll: Cabinet support rate at 46%," *NHK*, Jan. 9, 2017, https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20180109_32/.

124 In the 2014 election, the LDP may have lost as many as a quarter of the single-member districts it won. Adam P. Liff and Ko Maeda, "Explaining a Durable Coalition of Strange Bedfellows: Evidence from Japan," Working Paper, 2018.

125 Quote comes from Levi McLaughlin, Axel Klein, and Steven R. Reed, "The Power of Japan's Religious Party," *Wilson Center*, Dec. 4, 2014, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/the-power-japans-religious-party>.

agenda is not new. This could be seen when Koizumi pursued a more ambitious global security agenda immediately after 9/11.¹²⁶ In the Abe era, Komeito helped water down the Abe Cabinet's 2014 resolution formally "reinterpreting" Article 9. In particular, it pressured the administration to impose the three aforementioned conditions on the exercise of collective self-defense, and to abandon a push to enable collective security operations. The Abe government's May 2017 proposal for a revision of Article 9, which would leave its existing clauses untouched and add a new clause asserting the constitutionality of the JSDF's existence, surprised many commentators for its lack of ambition. Even within the LDP, Abe was criticized for abandoning the party's far more transformative 2012 revision proposal. In stark contrast, his 2017 proposal was based not on the longtime position of his party but, rather, on a proposal tabled a decade earlier by Komeito, which has long opposed changing Article 9's existing clauses. These two high-profile, behind-the-scenes concessions to Komeito indicate the smaller party's influence not only because Abe has said multiple times that enabling collective self-defense and revising Article 9 rank among his administration's highest priorities but also because they constitute core goals written into the LDP's founding charter 63 years ago. The implication seems clear: Barring the fracturing of the ruling coalition or some kind of major structural change, the LDP's electoral dependence on Komeito is likely to continue to hamstring Abe and future LDP leaders in the security domain.¹²⁷

Although the external security environment and Abe and his allies' ambitions are undoubtedly major drivers of Japan's evolving security posture, it is important to recognize the role that Komeito and other domestic political obstacles play as constraints on the administration's agenda. It is also crucial for evaluating the prospects for major change in the years to come. With a transition to a new imperial reign in 2019 and the 2020 Tokyo Olympics just around the corner, the deck may be stacked against Abe achieving the more fundamental reforms he and his party have long sought — even if he is reelected in the September 2018 LDP presidential election.¹²⁸

Conclusion: The Evolution Continues

Where one comes down in the debate about change versus continuity in Japan's post-2012 security trajectory depends greatly on research design and definition of key terms, such as "radical" or "revolutionary." Narrowly focusing on perceived (or imputed) policy shifts — especially without factoring in their precise content, causes, strategic context, and historical precedents — while overlooking significant continuities risks exaggerating the pace and scale of change, as well as the centrality of idiosyncratic factors such as a particular leader or ideology. A "radical" shift or a national security "revolution" in Japan would entail fundamental, transformative changes to the core pillars of its post-Cold War security policy. So far, at least, there is limited unambiguous evidence of this.

What emerges from a more balanced, historically-baselined assessment of change *and* continuity over the past half-decade is a frustratingly nuanced picture: Abe is simultaneously the most consequential prime minister in decades in terms of national security reforms, yet one whose individual significance and degree of success in achieving his ambitions is often overstated. A defining feature of Abe's approach during his second stint as prime minister has been a kind of evolutionary pragmatism. Abe has been remarkably decisive at crucial moments yet also cautious — pulling back when confronted with significant domestic political resistance.

Security reforms in the Abe era are in large part a reaction to objectively identifiable, rapid changes to Japan's external security environment. Baselined appropriately, those reforms embody a series of important shifts that build on a longer-term trajectory that precedes Abe's time as prime minister, including the DPJ era. Key achievements of this reform effort include an increasingly powerful Cabinet and prime minister's office to strengthen political control of foreign policy decision-making, the rationalization of force structure and posture to more effectively confront perceived threats, a doubling-down on the U.S.-Japan alliance, a central pillar of Japan's security, and the gradual expansion of Japan's security ties with third parties. These reforms facilitate an increase in the independent development and

126 J. Patrick Boyd and Richard J. Samuels, *Nine Lives? The Politics of Constitutional Reform in Japan* (Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2005), esp. 27–61.

127 Liff and Maeda, "Explaining a Durable Coalition of Strange Bedfellows."

128 Tobias Harris, "Scandal Raises Doubts About Abe's Ability to Win a Third Term," *Japan Political Pulse*, Mar. 16, 2018, <https://spfusa.org/category/japan-political-pulse/>.

implementation of a comprehensive national strategy and create space for Japan to adopt a more active role in regional and global security, within and beyond an alliance context. As for the practical implications of arguably the most significant shift — the 2014 reinterpretation of Article 9 to allow for “limited” collective self-defense — much remains hypothetical. How Japan will respond in the event of an armed attack against an ally will inevitably hinge on the nature of the contingency and specific domestic and international political circumstances at the time.¹²⁹ At a minimum, the reinterpretation significantly expands the allies’ ability to plan bilaterally and exercise and train together in peacetime.

Analytically, the empirical record thus far suggests another important takeaway: the importance of differentiating between Abe the individual and Abe the prime minister. To be sure, some of the content and speed of recent reforms appears attributable to Abe’s past experience, personal ambition, and decisiveness, as well as the exceptional stability of his Cabinets over the past six years. Whereas Japan’s “leadership deficit” and the frequent turnover of Cabinets before 2012 has been a near-constant point of contemporary political analysis,¹³⁰ the combination of assertiveness and pragmatism on display since 2012 suggests that Abe and his allies learned from political missteps during his first administration.¹³¹ This may be one reason Abe appointed a “stabilizer,” Yoshihide Suga, as his first, and so far only, chief Cabinet secretary.¹³²

The “Abe era” is in its sixth year. As of this writing, a decline in public support due to several festering scandals unrelated to national security has raised questions about whether Abe will be able to continue as prime minister beyond a scheduled LDP presidential election in September 2018. Regardless, this study’s findings suggest potentially significant implications for Japan’s strategic trajectory *after* Abe. On the one hand, significant changes, reflected in robust new institutions (e.g., the NSC and its supporting 70-80 strong National Security Secretariat), laws, and policies, are already in place and are unlikely to be reversed. Many of these attracted supra-partisan

support while domestic political backlash against key reforms, such as the controversial security legislation, has not translated into a major popular swing toward an opposition party that would seek to undo them. Barring transformative external or domestic political structural changes, backsliding is unlikely and the current trajectory of evolutionary reform is likely to persist.

On the other hand, the fact that Abe’s government has not achieved more fundamental reforms despite his clear personal ambition for more radical changes, a security environment seen by the administration and public as increasingly severe, relatively high Cabinet support ratings for most of the past six years, and five major national election victories for the ruling coalition evinces the persistent political headwinds even very ambitious future prime ministers will continue to face. Particularly salient are the facts that the LDP continues to cooperate electorally and rule in coalition with Komeito, that Article 9’s first two clauses remain untouched, and that transformative increases to Japan’s defense budget appear unlikely.

Including the years since 2012, the post-Cold War trajectory of Japan’s security posture seems best characterized not as a shift from “pacifism” to “militarism” — two deeply problematic terms permeating the discourse — but as an evolution from a fairly passive, isolationist Japan toward one that seeks to be more “proactive,” yet remains subject to self-imposed constraints. In 2018, Japan remains a remarkable outlier among major powers, especially in terms of restrictions on military force development and employment. Widespread claims of assertive “nationalism” and even alleged “militarism” in Japan’s foreign policy under Abe — ill-defined memes remarkably widespread within and outside Japan (especially in China and Korea) — create a lot of heat and very little light.¹³³

The first six years of national security reforms under the Abe administration hardly constitute a radical revolution. Yet past is not necessarily prologue. Japanese leaders’ assessments of the regional strategic environment will continue to be a fundamental variable in shaping national security debates. In particular, over the past 18 months

129 For an argument that the 2014 reinterpretation entails a “genuinely radical trajectory” for Japan, see Hughes, “Japan’s Strategic Trajectory and Collective Self-Defense.”


130 Aurelia George Mulgan, “Japan’s Political Leadership Deficit,” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 2 (2000): 183–202, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713649327>; see also Ryo Sahashi and James Gannon, eds., *Looking for Leadership: The Dilemma of Political Leadership in Japan* (New York: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2015).

131 Mulgan, *The Abe Administration*, ch. 3.

132 On Suga, see Izuru Makihara, “Abe’s Enforcer: Suga Yoshihide’s Stabilizing Influence on the Cabinet,” *Nippon*, Sept. 25, 2014, <https://www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00135/>.

133 For a critical engagement of associated claims, see Jennifer Lind and Chikako Kawakatsu Ueki, “Is Japanese Nationalism on the Rise?” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association in Atlanta, March 2016.



North Korea's testing of ICBMs it claims are capable of reaching Washington, and various aspects of Trump's "America First" foreign policy, have raised anxieties in Japan and emerged as factors with the potential to disrupt Japan's foreign policy status quo.¹³⁴ These factors, coupled with the risk of a contingency on the Korean Peninsula, heighten the ever-present possibility of more fundamental shifts to Japan's security trajectory in the years ahead. 

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134 Alastair Gale, "Japan's Abe to Meet Trump, With North Korea Testing Their Ties," *Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 15, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/japans-abe-to-meet-trump-with-north-korea-testing-their-ties-1523790006>.