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## **How Has Japan's Domestic Political Mood Swayed Its Foreign and National Security Policy?**

Building on the Premise of Japan as an Adaptive State

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## Introduction: Japan as an adaptive state

There are two, one might say entirely opposite, approaches to analyzing the relationship between Japan's domestic politics and its foreign and national security. One is to focus on the successive political leaders and cabinets and trace what kinds of political principles have been advocated and what kinds of policies have been constructed by each of these leaders and cabinets over the years. If this is the *deductive* approach, the alternative is the *inductive* approach. The inductive approach entails first identifying what kinds of external foreign and national security developments have impacted upon Japan and exploring how these have affected the internal political mood and public opinion and the expectations upon the government as to how it should respond. It then addresses how these reactions and expectations have in turn guided the foreign and security policies of each of the cabinets.

Here I adopt the latter of the two approaches. As opposed to a state that creates its policies in line with a predetermined strategy direction, Japan is more what can be described as an "adaptive state"—one that takes the blows from external forces and creates and implements policy in the process of adapting to those impacts.

A former high-level US government official, who had overseen the long-term strategy of the US armed forces

for many years, observed to me that by looking back over Japan's history since the Meiji Restoration, one can see that Japan determines its course in response to major impacts from outside, rather than acting in accordance with a defined strategy.

This observation is correct, and for Japan such an approach is by no means a negative trait. Japan relies on imports for most of its energy and is barely self-sufficient in terms of food production. It is also an island nation surrounded by non-friendly, nuclear-capable countries such as China, Russia, and North Korea. That is, from a geopolitical perspective, Japan is extremely vulnerable and located in a highly unpredictable region. With these conditions to work with, it would be neither reasonable nor advisable for Japan to establish and seek to follow a predetermined long-term strategy. Only the US and a very limited number of other superpowers can afford such a luxury.

The external environment around Japan involves such a great number of unforeseeable variables. Japan's strategic DNA, as it were, is that of an adaptive state that sustains its prosperity and stability in the face of whatever blows it may sustain from external forces by responding flexibly and maintaining the versatility to absorb the shock of such impacts. Since the 17th century, the steps that this DNA has guided Japan to take have both generated great success and pushed the nation to the brink of destruction.

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The Edo Shogunate, which governed a unified Japan for a great many years, pursued a consistent national policy of isolation from 1639 to 1853. Japan closed its borders to preserve its independence when the European powers began seeking to expand their colonies into Asia. Yet when it was confronted with strong demands from the US and other powers to open its borders, Japan made a 180-degree turn. In 1868, the Meiji government, which had been born from the fall of the Edo Shogunate, switched Japan's course to accept the opening of its borders, quickly adopt western civilization, and successfully modernize the country.

Japan subsequently formed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance with Britain and, in 1905, secured a narrow victory in the Russo-Japanese War. Entering an alliance with Britain was also a strategic adaption to ensure survival in the face of Russia's southern advance. However, with the power vacuum that arose within China upon the fall of the Qing dynasty in the early 20th century, it was Japan's turn to set out on the road to becoming an empire. This journey ultimately led Japan to declare war upon Britain and the US in 1941 and suffer a devastating defeat. In the 1950s, Japan began another abrupt change of course. Japan reconciled and formed an alliance with the US, placing the violence and animosity of the Second World War behind them. This relationship with the US subsequently grew in strength and continues today.

Observing these major developments over the years—national isolation, opening to the world and adopting Western civilization, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, becoming an enemy of Britain and the US in the Second World War, and later forming an alliance with the US—Japan's foreign affairs strategy appears utterly disjointed. In reality that is not the case. Japan's approach has been to adapt to the changes in its external environment and adopt what it considers the most appropriate foreign and national security policy for each situation.

Building on the premise of Japan as an adaptive state, this article analyzes how public opinion and the domestic political mood have impacted upon foreign and national security strategy. We highlight and examine four periods in time since 2010 in which external developments have exerted significant influence on Japan.

The first is Russia's invasion of Ukraine, from late February 2022 to the present. Secondly, we then take a step back in time to 2010, when tensions between Japan and China regarding the Senkaku Islands grew into a highly volatile crisis. Thirdly, we turn to the shifts in Japan's security environment between 2012 and 2016. In 2013, President Obama declared that the US should no longer be "the world's policeman." China subsequently began establishing a military stronghold in the South China Sea, and Russia's President Putin forcefully annexed the

Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine. The fourth period to address is the Trump Administration from 2017 to 2021. Japan too found itself in an extremely critical position following the entry into office of President Trump—a leader who perceived the Japan-US Alliance as a liability rather than an asset.

### **February 24, 2022 to the present: Russia's invasion of Ukraine sends shockwaves through Japanese public opinion**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 exerted an extremely large impact upon Japanese public opinion and domestic politics. While Japan was geographically somewhat removed, this conflict in Europe was perhaps the greatest shock it received since the Second World War. This was, after all, the first time since the Second World War that a major power, with a huge nuclear arsenal, had suddenly launched a full-scale invasion of a neighboring country.

The Kishida administration, acting in union with the other G7 members, has imposed a succession of strict economic sanctions, which it continues to uphold at present. Japan has frozen the assets of Russia's central bank and businesses, and placed limitations upon the export and import of key items. More significantly, Japan has also placed President

Putin, Foreign Minister Lavrov and other such figures under sanctions. Japan has effectively committed to not pursuing diplomacy with Russia as long as President Putin remains in power.

The Japanese public quickly expressed strong support for these measures. In an opinion poll by the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (conducted April 22–24, 2022), the economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the Kishida administration were supported by almost 90% of respondents—namely, 44% deeming the existing sanctions appropriate, and 42% calling for stricter sanctions to be imposed. The percentage of those who support taking in refugees from Ukraine is also as high as 90%. This is an inconceivably high level of support given Japan's typically extreme caution when it comes to accepting immigrants and refugees. A high-ranking Japanese government official has reflected that it has been the overwhelmingly strong support from the Japanese public that has allowed the government to act at such an unprecedented speed to take in Ukrainian refugees. The support for sanctions against Russia has also remained strong in the face of rising energy prices and other widespread economic effects of Russian sanctions.

The Japanese public's strong reaction to the invasion of Ukraine is not solely due to anger or resilience toward Russia. According to an observation from a member of the Japanese national security authorities, there is an

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increasing sense of impending crisis that allowing Russia's reckless violence to go unchecked will prompt China to grow more aggressive and adopt a hard line in the Taiwan Strait and other regions. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has expressed strong concern that Russia's actions in Ukraine may "infect" China, repeatedly warning that "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow." Japanese voters share this growing apprehension.

This public opinion has prompted changes in Japan's domestic politics and is also gradually exerting a marked impact on foreign policy. To come directly to the point, the increasing number of voters with growing concern for Japan's security has led to much greater support for the conservative parties that advocate strengthening Japan's defense capabilities and its alliance with the US.

This tide of opinion became clear with the House of Councillors election on July 10, 2022. The election saw a strong victory for the incumbent Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which won 63 seats, single-handedly securing the majority of the seats up for reelection. In its campaign pledge, the LDP had committed to raising defense spending, specifically to at least 2% of GDP. Achieving this goal would entail drastically strengthening Japan's defense capability within five years. The LDP also set out a principle to ensure greater deterrence by allowing the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to possess what it referred to at the time as the "capability to strike enemy bases."

Aside from the LDP's successes, there were also considerable gains in the House of Councillors election for the Japan Innovation Party, an opposition party supportive of strengthening Japan's self-defense capability and revising the constitution. Liberal parties that oppose such steps or adopt a cautious approach to these topics, such as the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan and the Japanese Communist Party, did, on the other hand, suffer losses. The conservative parties therefore increased their influence within the House of Councillors, placing them in the position to exert a considerable impact on foreign policy.

A joint study by the *Asahi Shimbun* and a research group led by Masaki Taniguchi at the University of Tokyo indicated that after the House of Councillors election, 73% of members of the House of Councillors supported strengthening Japan's defense capability, a drastic rise from 47% following the previous election in 2019. Likewise, the percentage of members of the House of Councillors who supported revision to the constitution—which does not currently specify Japan's right to possess Self-Defense Forces—rose to 62%. The majority of these respondents wished the revisions to ensure not only that the constitution specify Japan's right to possess SDF, but also revisions to introduce a state-of-emergency clause, which is also as yet not covered in the constitution.

Japan's National Diet is composed of two

houses: the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors. It is the House of Representatives that holds superiority to approve treaties. The Kishida (LDP) administration also secured victory in the House of Representatives election in October 2021. This meant that, like the House of Councillors, the House of Representatives also has a strong component of conservative members who support the strengthening of Japan's self-defense capability and the Japan-US Alliance.

The rising power of the Chinese military and the nuclear armament of North Korea have prompted increasing concern among Japan's public and political circles regarding the deteriorating national security environment around Japan. Russia's invasion of Ukraine exacerbated such anxiety, which is expected to prompt the acceleration of efforts to develop policy to strengthen Japan's defense capability and alliance with the US.

As part of such efforts, in December 2022 the cabinet passed the largest enhancement to its defense capability since the Second World War. The defense budget is to be doubled, in terms of percentage of GDP, between FY 2023 and FY 2027, from the current level of approximately 1%, to around 2% by 2027. It also approved a strategy to properly equip the SDF with "counterstrike capability"—such as medium- and long-range cruise missiles—for the first time.

This will in turn prompt a shift in the division of roles in the Japan-US Alliance. The SDF have typically been devoted to the role of the protective shield, while relying on the US armed forces for the offensive capabilities of the spear. This division of roles is however likely to change to ensure that the SDF are to some extent responsible for counterstrikes. Public opinion polls by major media outlets generally suggest that most people support such policy decisions. This is a reflection of how Russia's invasion and the increasing tensions in the Taiwan Strait are changing Japan's sense of national security.

### **2010–2012: The beginnings of protracted confrontation between Japan and China**

We have looked at Japan's internal trend toward movements to strengthen the Japan-US Alliance. However, this current did not always flow in the same direction. Japan did at one point attempt a different route, which ended in disaster. The severe trauma served as a lesson for Japan's public and political leaders which has led to the current course. To examine that disaster, we return to developments in Japan in 2009.

On August 30, 2009, the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), seized the reins of government from the LDP following a landslide victory in the House of Representatives election. DPJ party

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leader Yukio Hatoyama became prime minister in what was Japan's first change in government in around 15 years. The DPJ counts labor unions as one of its support bases, and adopts a more liberal stance than the LDP. The DPJ had therefore campaigned on the pledge that it would seek a close and equal relationship with the US. It had advocated revising the US-Japan Status of Forces Agreement—and its special treatment for US armed forces in Japan—and downsizing US bases in Okinawa.

Put briefly, Hatoyama's approach was to pursue reconciliation with China while reducing Japan's reliance upon the alliance with the US. This was based on the fantasy that Japan could maintain friendly relations with China through dialogue, without heavily relying on the US armed forces as a deterrent. In the late 1990s, Hatoyama had advocated a vision for a national security relationship with the US by which Japan would be fully equipped with a missile defense network and therefore able to ensure its own safety without US troops permanently stationed in Japan. Having neglected how effective the US forces were as a deterrent, Hatoyama's approach neither worked in practice nor garnered public support. Relations between Japan and the US cooled considerably under Prime Minister Hatoyama as a result of the issues surrounding the US military bases in Okinawa. A political funding scandal delivered the additional blow that ultimately saw the Hatoyama administration forced to resign after just

over eight months.

Naoto Kan—who succeeded Hatoyama as prime minister and inherited an uneasy relationship with the US—was confronted with a highly severe crisis between Japan and China in September 2010. The crisis was sparked by an incident near the Senkaku Islands on September 7, 2010, in which a Chinese trawler, which had been ordered to leave the area, rammed Japan Coast Guard (JCG) patrol boats. The JCG arrested the trawler's skipper and detained the crew.

The Senkaku Islands are under the administration of Japan, which effectively controls the islands as its territory. However, China also asserts its territorial rights to the islands, making the area a flashpoint for conflict between Japan and China. China responded to the incident by fiercely protesting that the Senkaku Islands are China's inherent territory, and adopting exceptionally forceful measures, such as canceling ministerial-level meetings, detaining Japanese nationals, and halting exports of rare earth minerals to Japan. With violent anti-Japanese demonstrations taking place across China and Japanese-owned supermarkets and other such targets vandalized, Japan's relationship with China turned cold.

While at first glance this crisis with China could appear to have arisen from the Senkaku Islands issue, its main cause was Japan's deteriorating relationship with the US. China, having seen through



the cracks in the Japan-US Alliance that had begun to form during the Hatoyama administration, adopted a hard line toward Japan as it sought to use the trawler collision incident as a chance to increase the pressure in the Senkaku Islands issue. China seized the opportunity to begin regularly sending public and fishing vessels to the Senkaku Islands' territorial waters.

This crisis damaged the Japanese public's view of China substantially. An opinion poll of Japan and China conducted in late October 2010 by the Japanese *Yomiuri Shimbun* and the Chinese weekly *Oriental Outlook* (*Liaowang Dongfang Zhoukan*, published by China's Xinhua Publishing) showed that as many as 79% of Japanese respondents identified China as a country that posed a military threat, almost as high a percentage as the 81% who perceived such a threat from North Korea (respondents were able to select multiple responses). On the other hand, when it came to countries that respondents believed important to Japan, the US was selected by 60% of respondents, a considerably higher percentage than the 27% who selected China. Likewise, as many as 75% of respondents felt that the Japan-US Security Treaty is instrumental in the peace and stability of the region. Japanese support for the Japan-US Security Treaty seemed to grow with the rising tension with China in the Senkaku Islands.

The DPJ administration also saw another crisis that deepened the

fissure between Japan and China. It began with the Japanese government's nationalization of the Senkaku Islands on September 11, 2012 under the cabinet of Yoshihiko Noda, who had succeeded Naoto Kan as prime minister. The Japanese government had been managing the islands under lease from the landowner. However, in April 2012, Tokyo governor and renowned right-winger Shintaro Ishihara unveiled and set in motion a plan to buy the islands from the owner. Apprehensive that this could provoke China, the Noda Cabinet preempted Ishihara by nationalizing the islands. China vigorously opposed this development and anti-Japanese demonstrations blew up across China once again. Japanese-owned supermarkets and factories were set on fire. With China sending large numbers of public vessels into the Senkaku Islands area, it was even speculated that a conflict between Japan and China could develop.

The Japanese public became ever more opposed to and mistrusting of China. An opinion poll by the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* in late September 2012 indicates that 66% supported the nationalization of the Senkaku Islands. Regarding the issues that had arisen following the nationalization of the Senkaku Islands—Chinese public vessels repeatedly intruding upon the islands' territorial waters and anti-Japanese demonstrations becoming widespread in China—as many as 56% of respondents felt that the Japanese government should adopt a strong attitude toward China, a significantly



greater percentage than the 37% who felt that improving relations between Japan and China should be a priority.

The DPJ government was ultimately defeated in the House of Representatives election in December 2012, and the LDP retrieved power after an absence of three years and three months. The DPJ was not only relegated to the opposition, but also tasted a historically crushing defeat that even brought the party close to losing its position as Japan's second party.

It was the Japanese public's rising concern toward China that facilitated the LDP's return to government. The LDP, under party leader Shinzo Abe, were able to return to government because the public had grown convinced that returning the conservative LDP to government was necessary in order to protect Japan's national security, as it would restore the Japan-US Alliance and in turn repair the power balance between Japan and China. In December 2012, Abe made a triumphant return as prime minister and began his journey to becoming the longest to hold office.

### **2012–2017: The US renounces its role as the world's policeman**

In 2013, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who had guided the conservative LDP to retrieve power from the liberal DPJ, set to work restoring Japan's alliance

with the US. He began by strengthening the makeup of the JCG and the SDF, as a means of correcting the balance of power in Japan's relations with China, in which China held the upper hand.

In FY 2013 budget, Prime Minister Abe raised the funds allocated to defense—which up until then had been continuously decreased—for the first time in 11 years. He also put a temporary stop to the existing plans for the National Defense Program Guidelines and the Medium-Term Defense Program, which determine the armament and personnel capacity of the SDF. He decided to completely overhaul these plans in light of the military situations in China and North Korea. During Shinzo Abe's time in office, the defense budget rose consistently, from around 4.6 trillion yen in FY 2012 (original budget), to 5.4 trillion yen in FY 2022. Including the funds appropriated in the supplementary budget, Japan's defense spending exceeded 6 trillion yen.

In addition to this, Prime Minister Abe set to work enhancing the JCG. He significantly increased its budget and proceeded with the adoption of large patrol vessels, the latest model jets, and drones to strengthen security around the Senkaku Islands. The fleet of JCG large patrol vessels was increased to 70 vessels by the fall of 2021. While the fleet still amounted to only half of that of China, the Abe administration's efforts to bolster the resources available ensured that Japan was just about equipped to

conduct 24-hour surveillance of the Senkaku Islands.

Having witnessed the failures of the DPJ government, Japan's voters strongly supported the Abe administration's policy approach from the outset. This was reflected in the results of the July 2013 House of Councillors election. The LDP secured the majority in both the lower and upper houses with a landslide victory for the Komeito, which made up the coalition cabinet with the LDP.

Meanwhile, however, the environment outside of Japan was becoming ever more challenging. Weary from the prolonged conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US had clearly become inward looking. The development that particularly provoked Abe's concern was the US officially abandoning its role as "the world's policeman."

In January 2012, the Obama administration's new national defense strategy abandoned the two-war planning construct that had secured the capability for the US military to fight two large-scale conflicts simultaneously. This was followed in September that year by President Obama further stating in an address on the Syria conflict that the US "should not be the world's policeman." Abe consequently became apprehensive that in pursuing a diplomatic and national security policy that so completely relied upon the US, Japan could be endangering the continued existence of their alliance.

Just as Japan was facing such concerns, it was blindsided by a development in the South China Sea in early 2014. China reclaimed seven reefs and began constructing a military position in the South China Sea. By May of the following year, the construction had expanded to an area of around 8 km<sup>2</sup>. An airstrip, radar, and other facilities for military aircraft were subsequently also installed, creating what is essentially a Chinese military base. Estimates from a US think tank and other experts indicate that around a quarter of internationally traded goods transit through the South China Sea. Almost all crude oil imported by Japan from the Middle East travels via the South China Sea. The Abe administration has made clear its concerns regarding China's construction of a military base on many occasions. In coordinated efforts with the US and European countries, Japan has also raised the issue at forums such as the G7 and East Asia Summit meetings.

It was the US response that further amplified Japan's concerns. While verbally opposing China's actions, the Obama administration did not adopt practical measures to prevent the construction of the base. Although the US regularly dispatching warships within 12 nautical miles of the base as a means of keeping China in check, when this provoked China's anger, it even reduced the frequency of such expeditions. Seemingly seeing through the Obama administration's response, China accelerated military expansion in the East

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and South China Seas. On top of this, North Korea similarly continued missile launches and nuclear tests as it sped up its nuclear missile development.

In July 2014, Prime Minister Abe responded to these developments by embarking on a decision that radically changed Japan's national security policy. For the first time since the Second World War, he changed the interpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution to enable Japan to exercise its right of collective self-defense. The right of collective self-defense enables Japan to retaliate with military force should one of its allies or friendly nations be under attack, even if Japan itself is not directly under attack. Previous cabinets had all adopted the interpretation that the constitution permitted Japan to possess the right of collective self-defense, but not to exercise it. Such an interpretation meant that if the US—even, for instance, a US warship patrolling near Japan—were to be attacked by a third country, Japan would not be allowed to fight alongside US forces, unless Japan itself had been attacked.

In July 2014 the Abe cabinet sought to change this by making the bold move of passing a decision that approved a reinterpretation of the constitution. Noting that changes in Japan's national security environment mean that even uses of military force against a foreign country could actually threaten Japan's survival, the reinterpretation allowed that in the event of an armed attack that

is against a country that has a close relationship with Japan and places Japan's existence at threat, Japan may invoke its right of collective self-defense and join the counterstrike. The Abe administration further sought to ensure that this reinterpretation of the Constitution would be reflected in the running of the SDF by addressing the particulars in a package of national security bills that it submitted to the Diet in the spring of 2015 and pushed through to enactment.

The decision to approve exercising the right of collective self-defense was a major turning point in Japan's postwar national security policy and was accompanied by significant domestic political risks. It naturally shook Japan's political circles. The major opposition parties were fiercely opposed on the grounds that the Abe cabinet had destroyed Japan's principle of exclusively defensive security policy and was set on making Japan a country capable of waging war. Yukio Edano, Secretary-General of the main opposition party, the DPJ, was emphatic that the legislation flew in the face of constitutionalism and was the worst to be proposed since the Second World War. He even argued that in seeking the enactment of such bills, the Abe cabinet had lost its sense of reason and was careering out of control. Fraught with confrontation, the Diet's deliberations on the bill were unprecedentedly long, stretching over 100 hours in the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors, respectively. The Abe cabinet was, however, ultimately

able to steamroll the objections from the opposition and ensure that the bills were approved and enacted by the Diet in September 2015.

The Japanese public, while supportive of strengthening of the alliance with the US, was divided on whether exercising the right of collective self-defense should be approved. This was largely due to fears that Japan would become embroiled in a war. Mass protests and demonstrations opposing the bills were held across Japan while the Diet's deliberations were taking place. An opinion poll by the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* in September 2015, directly after the laws were enacted, shows that a mere 28% of respondents supported exercising the right of collective self-defense, while those opposed accounted for 53%.

This caused a drop in the Abe cabinet's approval rating. Previously at 50% in May 2015, it declined sharply to 40% directly after the enactment of the national security legislation.

A former aide to Prime Minister Abe has stated that he made the decision to approve exercising the collective right of self-defense despite being fully aware of the public backlash that would result. He was emboldened by his fear that allowing the SDF to sit by idly while US forces were under attack in the vicinity of Japan would lead to the US armed forces no longer being able to pursue involvement in Asia and to the breakdown of the alliance with the US.

While Abe did face a backlash on this occasion, his approval rating recovered gradually. The recovery was the direct product of the effects of his economic stimulus measures known as Abenomics and other such financial policy. It is also important to recognize that the public gradually came to agree that ensuring the ability to exercise the right of collective self-defense was a step that Japan inevitably had to take if it wished to maintain an alliance with the US. Prime Minister Abe secured a resounding victory the following year in the July 2016 election of the House of Councillors. Along with the Komeito, with which the LDP formed a coalition cabinet, his government won over two-thirds of the seats. This was followed by an overwhelming victory in the October 2017 House of Representatives elections, with the LDP securing, as expected, over two-thirds of the seats.

In the meantime, the Abe cabinet had made another significant achievement in internal affairs. In December 2013, it established Japan's National Security Council (NSC), a body bringing together the prime minister and key cabinet members to serve as a form of control tower for guiding diplomatic and security policy. The National Security Secretariat (NSS) was also set up in January 2014 to support the operation of the NSC. The NSS is a selection of talented experts from the foreign and defense ministries, the National Police Agency and the SDF.

The forming of the NSC and NSS greatly

improved Japan's policy decision making. Firstly, they helped to overcome the damaging silo mentality that pervades government bodies, in this case the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, the National Police Agency, and the ministries and agencies involved in finance. Typically, when an incident or crisis occurred, policy decisions had been slow to come about, due to the considerable time required for the different ministries and agencies to coordinate with each other. By serving as a central command center, the NSC and NSS enabled policy decision making to proceed very smoothly. Secondly, the establishment of these organizations allowed for progress in the sharing of intelligence within the government. The Japanese government bodies involved in intelligence include the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which gathers information on diplomacy, the Ministry of Defense, which gathers intelligence from military attachés and transmitted information, the Cabinet Office, which operates reconnaissance satellites, and the National Police Agency, which is responsible for information on peace and order. The poor sharing of information—because each agency had tended to keep key information close to its chest—has been significantly rectified since the establishment of the NSS.

## 2017–2021: The Trump administration unsettles Japan

In November 2017, a new shockwave struck Japan. Donald Trump, a less than keen supporter of the US alliance with Japan, won the US presidential election. While campaigning, Trump had continuously voiced criticism of the Japan-US Alliance. He had, for instance, stated his belief that it would be unfair for Japan to do nothing should the US come under attack. On the subject of the US forces in Japan, he had also argued that Japan should bear all costs for US forces stationed in Japan. Until then, no US president had criticized the Japan-US Alliance so frankly. In return for the US committing to Japan's defense, Japan provides the US forces with military bases, as well as shouldering a considerable amount of the costs of stationing such troops in Japan. It was widely understood that while the US may be a little dissatisfied with the alliance, it recognized that the benefits of maintaining it were greater.

The Japanese public was greatly concerned. In an opinion poll by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* shortly after Trump's inauguration in late January 2017, as many as 70% responded that concern was their primary feeling regarding the future of Japan-US relations, while only 4% were primarily hopeful. At the same time, support for the Japan-US Alliance was deeply rooted, such that 60% responded that the government should maintain policies that prioritize the

alliance, significantly more than the 34% who responded that the alliance should be revised.

Such concern spread throughout not only the Japanese public but also the Abe cabinet and the government. Abe felt increasingly on edge, concerned that a misstep in dealings with President Trump could actually result in the collapse of the alliance with the US. Prime Minister Abe had 14 meetings with President Trump during his term. Japanese government insiders report that Trump consistently complained about the unfairness of the Japan-US Alliance at almost every one of those meetings.

President Trump's dissatisfaction with the alliance covered two key points. Firstly, he criticized Japan for not fulfilling its responsibility to ensure its own self-defense and instead free riding on the US. On one occasion, following a relentless onslaught from Trump on this point, Prime Minister Abe strongly retorted by reminding Trump that he had pushed through national security legislation (that allowed Japan to exercise its right of collective self-defense) despite it causing him a considerable drop in his approval ratings.

President Trump's second point of dissatisfaction was the financial costs of the alliance. Not content that Japan bear only the costs of the US forces stationed in Japan, Trump demanded that Japan and its other Asia-Pacific allies

also cover the costs of any US military force pursued in the region. When the North Korea crisis heightened in 2017, President Trump pushed Prime Minister Abe to take a greater role in protecting the area, on the grounds of the vast expense for the US to dispatch three aircraft carriers to the Korean Peninsula area.

Abe recognized that Trump's views were not to be dismissed as off the wall, but did more or less reflect the opinion of much of the US public. An opinion poll published by the US' Eurasia Group in November 2019 suggested that as many as 57.6% of the US public felt that the US should reduce its armed forces stationed in Asia.

According to several government and LDP insiders, at internal meetings Abe voiced the following concerns about the prospects for the alliance with the US:

- North Korea's nuclear armament and China's enhancement to its military have significantly increased the costs and dangers to the US in providing defense to Japan.
- The Japan-US Alliance will become a less effective deterrent unless Japan contributes more to reflect the increased costs and risks of its defense.
- If Japan neglects efforts to strengthen its defense capability, US voters will, sooner or later, become dissatisfied

with bearing the obligation to defend Japan.

The awareness of these dangers prompted the Abe administration to set out to expand partnerships with other friendly countries, in addition to strengthening the alliance with the US. In August 2016, it unveiled the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, a vision to cooperate with countries in the region stretching from the Pacific across the Indian Ocean that share values such as the rule of law. The idea was to complement the linear alliance between Japan and the US with a broad network of national security cooperation with friendly countries other than the US.

Abe called upon and encouraged not only the US but also Australia, India and Southeast Asian countries to cooperate and give their approval. In particular, Japan joined with the US, Australia and India to develop a four-country framework, known as the Quad, for pursuing greater cooperation. In July 2017, Abe visited NATO Headquarters in Brussels and appealed to Europe to work with Japan on strategy for the Indo-Pacific. France and other European Union (EU) member countries subsequently developed their own Indo-Pacific strategies and FOIP became a keyword in the strategies of the key powers.

Such proactive policies toward diplomacy and national security worked to Prime Minister Abe's advantage in domestic politics as well. The Abe

administration led the LDP at both the House of Representatives election in 2017 and the House of Councillors election in 2019 and secured victories in both, continuing to hold power for over seven and a half years, until September 2020. When his two periods in office—the first from 2006 to 2007 and the second from 2012 to 2020—are combined, Shinzo Abe served as prime minister for a total of 3,188 nonconsecutive days, the highest total in the history of Japan's constitutional government. Abe's second period in power totaled 2,822 days straight, making him the longest-serving prime minister in Japan's history.

### Conclusion

We have retraced Japan's foreign and national security policy over the years and explored how it relates to its domestic politics. As touched on at the beginning of this article, Japan is geopolitically vulnerable, given its location surrounded by China, Russia, and North Korea, and its lack of resources. Japan must therefore devise and implement foreign policy in the process of adapting to the changes in its external environment. This distinctive approach was thrown into relief as we looked back over the developments from the Hatoyama (DPJ) administration to the Kishida administration.

Japan's voters also instinctively understand Japan's geopolitical vulnerability. This has allowed a particularly growing



tendency among voters in recent years to expect leaders to adopt courses that steadily adapt to external changes, as opposed to radical approaches to diplomatic and national security policy.

Two governments disengaged themselves from such voter expectations—one, the Hatoyama administration, ended in failure, while the other, the Abe administration, was highly successful. What separates the two is the presence—or lack—of realism about the international environment and Japan's national strength. Hatoyama's approach to diplomacy and national security was that Japan could coexist with China through dialogue and cooperation, even if it decreased its reliance on the US. This was rooted in liberal ideals but did not work in practice.

In contrast, Abe pursued policies based on out-and-out realism. He understood that coexisting with China would require stabilizing the power balance by strengthening the alliance with the US, and he acted accordingly. Prioritizing Japan's union with the US, Abe managed to keep his own right-winged political beliefs and historical views relatively downplayed and in check. Out of consideration for not only Japan's neighbors but also the US and European countries, he ultimately limited his official visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, which enshrines a number of Japan's Class-A war criminals, to just one occasion. In August 2015, the 70-year anniversary of the end of the Second World War, he published

a statement expressing his profound grief and sincere condolences regarding Japan's actions in the war.

Japanese voters supported Prime Minister Abe's domestic and diplomatic and national security policy and its prioritization of realism. Prime Minister Kishida, who served as foreign minister in the Abe administration for a number of years, has also carried on Abe's course. Given the increasingly challenging conditions around Japan presented by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's military expansion and North Korea's nuclear armament, Japanese public opinion is unlikely to shift in the future.

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