16 *Japan's Defense Reforms under Abe*

Assessing Institutional and Policy Change

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16.1 Introduction

Immediately after the 2012 election that returned him to power, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe identified national security as one of his top priorities.[1] Over the past seven years, and with Japan confronting what its 2019 defense white paper identifies as a "security situation surrounding Japan [that] has become increasingly severe at extremely high speeds,"[2] Abe has exercised active and pragmatic leadership in pushing through significant institutional and policy reforms. Japan's longest-ever serving prime minister, Abe has established himself in the area of defense as one of its most consequential postwar leaders.

With Prime Minister Abe having just announced his planned resignation as this chapter went to press (August 28, 2020), the Abe administration's place in the history books assured for its longevity, and his administration having identified as major concerns for Japan's national security "changes in the balance of power," "uncertainty over the existing order," and the existing paradigm of [Japan's] national security being fundamentally changed" by emerging threats in new domains,[3] it is a particularly appropriate time to take stock and assess the significance of the Abe government's defense reforms heretofore. In keeping with this volume's unifying theme – an inquiry into whether the Abe government represents a "major turning point" in the trajectory of postwar Japan – this chapter asks the following specific questions. How significant have the Abe government's defense reforms been? How much, and what, has changed since December 2012; and what continuities exist? Where major reforms have been achieved, how has Abe's government been able to pursue its ambitious security agenda while avoiding the domestic political backlash that has frustrated his predecessors? In other words, what are the enabling and constraining

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factors shaping the context in which Abe and his LDP allies pursue their ambitious national security reform agenda today?

This chapter argues that defense reforms under Abe thus far already constitute, in aggregate, a practically significant shift for Japan – albeit one whose size and allegedly transformative nature is easily exaggerated. Institutionally, the Abe era has witnessed significant further centralization of national security policy decision-making in the executive – especially through the creation of Japan's first-ever National Security Council and Secretariat. In terms of defense policy, in response to Japan's evolving threat environment the Abe government has accelerated major changes to the force structure and posture of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (JSDF); doubled down on Japan's long-standing emphasis on its alliance with the United States as the "cornerstone" of both Japan's territorial defense and regional peace and stability, while also expanding Japan's contributions to it; and pursued more extensive defense links with third countries within and beyond East Asia.

On the question of whether Abe's time in office marks a "major turning point" for Japan's defense posture, much remains up for debate. Of particular importance is a key caveat emerging from this chapter's analysis: contrary to widespread and often uncritical assertions of Abe as a "nationalist" ideologue, when (1) baselined in Japan's defense reform trajectory already underway before his return to the *Kantei* and (2) assessed in the context of Japan's rapidly changing regional security environment, the Abe government's reform agenda is best understood as a pragmatic and evolutionary response that to significant degree constitutes a continuation (and acceleration) of longer-term trends. Also important, yet often overlooked: key long-standing pillars of Japan's remarkably self-restrained defense policy remain in place. Finally, regardless of Abe and his LDP's particular ambitions in the national security domain, at key moments they have significantly dialed back in response to various domestic political signals from within and outside the ruling coalition – including on signature policy issues that constitute long-standing party priorities, such as collective self-defense, major defense budget increases, and Article 9 reinterpretation/revision.

Though the defense reforms the Abe government has achieved thus far are undoubtedly significant, this study also suggests at least two major implications for thinking about a post-Abe era. First, because many major reforms achieved under Abe build on longer-term trends

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and have attracted support from within and outside the conservative wing of Abe's "right-of-center" LDP – including more liberal LDP members, Komeito (the LDP's "pacifistic" junior coalition partner), and moderates from the (now defunct) "left-of-center" Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) – much of the contemporary discourse appears to exaggerate both the particular significance of Abe as an individual and his ideology as a driving force in his approach to national security. This, in turn, suggests that evolutionary defense reforms in response to Japan's changing security environment are likely to continue, even after Abe is no longer in office. Second, several long-standing domestic constraints on Japan's defense policy, which have frustrated generations of conservative LDP leaders (Abe included) coveting a more radical transformation of Japan's defense posture, appear likely to persist. Especially salient examples are Japan's dire fiscal climate (exacerbated by an aging and shrinking population), which severely limits defense spending increases, and continued domestic political resistance to formal revision of the existing clauses of Japan's never-amended 1947 Constitution's "pacifist" Article 9.[4]

16.2 Japan's Changing Defense Posture under Abe

Beginning with Abe's inaugural press conference immediately following the December 2012 election that returned him to power, it was clear he came into office with an ambitious national security agenda – both in terms of institutional reforms and actual defense policy.[5]

16.2.1 Defense Policy-Relevant Institutions

Although it is defense *policy* that typically attracts newspaper headlines, the *institutional* context in which security threats are analyzed, new policy initiatives are formulated and implemented (or frustrated), and crises are managed also has a very important role to play in shaping outcomes. It therefore deserves significant attention in any analysis of Japan's defense reforms under Abe.

Consistent with a longer-term trend predating 2012, the Abe government's institutional reforms have focused on accelerating centralization of foreign policy decision-making in the executive branch (cabinet) and the Prime Minister's Office (*Kantei*). They have been remarkable successful. Indeed, Abe and the *Kantei* have arguably had

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more direct influence over foreign policy decision-making than any previous administration.[6] Key objectives of this push for greater control have been: (1) to improve strategic planning, interagency coordination, and crisis management; and (2) to enhance the speed and flexibility with which leaders can react to rapidly changing (worsening) and increasingly complicated strategic environment surrounding Japan. Two institution-related developments since 2012 are particularly noteworthy.

First, and most importantly, in December 2013 the Abe government stood up Japan's first-ever National Security Council (NSC) and National Security Secretariat (NSS).[7] As Abe himself stated earlier that year, the purpose of the NSC was to serve as a "control tower" that was "centered on the prime minister" and responsible for "flexible and regular discussions of diplomatic and security affairs from a strategic perspective." Acknowledging the need for Japan to not only engage in long-term strategic planning but also be able to react and ensure interagency coordination in a potentially fast-moving national security crisis, Abe also called for "an environment for rapid responses based on strong political leadership."[8] Accordingly, the NSC's core feature is a regular meeting convening key national security principals – i.e., the prime minister, chief cabinet secretary, minister of foreign affairs, and minister of defense – for discussions of long- and short-term security concerns. Since 2014, the NSC has met far more frequently than any predecessor institution and has been supported by a robust, new NSS. The NSS is headed by a secretary-general (Japan's de facto "national security adviser") and staffed primarily by roughly seventy to eighty civil servants seconded from various ministries, the JSDF, the National Police Agency, etc.[9] Inter alia, the NSS helps to consolidate the policies of Japan's various agencies into a comprehensive national strategy and to draft major national security-related documents.[10] Originally composed of six core teams (coordination, strategic planning, intelligence, and three regional affairs teams), in spring 2020 the administration added a new "economic security" unit tasked with reviewing economics-related national security topics (e.g., investments, telecommunications, cybersecurity) and staffed with roughly twenty experts from relevant agencies.[11]

Though undoubtedly a breakthrough development, the NSC's establishment during the Abe government's first year was also the natural culmination of a decades-long – and supra-partisan – reform effort to

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bolster political leadership over Japan's bureaucracy, to transcend stove-piping across the bureaucracy through enhanced interagency coordination, and to more directly involve the JSDF in defense-related consultations. Importantly, its establishment received support from opposition parties and was driven by various factors, in particular a recognition across Japan's government and political class of (1) the shortcomings of past institutions; (2) the likelihood that twenty-first-century crises would be extremely fast-moving and thus require rapid response and internal coordination; and (3) that the very meaning of "national security" had expanded in such a way – e.g., to include not only traditional defense and emerging domains of cyberspace, space, and the electromagnetic spectrum but also terrorism, so-called gray zone challenges, and economic and financial issues – as to require far more effective and rapid sharing of expertise, interagency coordination, and whole-of-government responses.[12]

A second, less-heralded development under Abe, which also contributed to centralization of national security decision-making in the executive, is more active political involvement in bureaucratic personnel decisions.[13] Perhaps most famously, the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs, established in 2014, reviews appointments to high-level administrative posts.[14] In the area of defense, even prior to the Bureau's establishment the Abe government had already begun to directly elevate favored personnel. Examples include the first-ever appointments of an active-duty officer, rather than a career bureaucrat, as Japan Coast Guard (JCG) commandant and a new director-general of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau (CLB) originating from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (rather than simply elevating the CLB's deputy director-general) – both in 2013.[15] The timing of each appeared to be motivated by the Abe government's concerns related to defense policy. The new JCG commandant had operational experience in the East China Sea – judged to be important in light of the JCG's role on the front lines of Japan's territorial dispute with China (which had taken a major turn for the worse just before Abe returned to power in late 2012).[16] With regard to the CLB, the outside appointment came in the run-up to the Abe cabinet's effective assertion of a favored "reinterpretation" of Article 9 to allow Japan to exercise its (UN Charter-sanctioned) right to collective self-defense – something the CLB had for decades deemed unconstitutional – albeit with important caveats (see next section).[17]

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16.2.2 Defense Policy Shifts

New institutions, especially the NSC, NSS, and 2013 national security strategy, transformed the context in which the Abe government subsequently pursued its ambitious slate of defense policy reforms. Of particular salience is the 2015 passage of "peace and security legislation," which consisted of revisions to ten existing laws as well as a new International Peace Support bill.[18] Inter alia, this package of legislation gave the legal foundation for a major revision of the *Guidelines for Japan–US Defense Cooperation* in 2015 and the Abe government's aforementioned constitutional reinterpretation to enable Japan to exercise the right of collective self-defense "under limited conditions." Major components of this package of security legislation had been under debate for years. Their net effect was to broaden the scope of JSDF roles and missions to bolster deterrence and to expand the circumstances under which it could play a role in regional and global security – within and beyond the US–Japan alliance – and outside a strict "armed attack on Japan" scenario. As with many developments during the Abe era, it was framed as enabling Japan to expand its "proactive contributions to peace"[19]

Though a full review of the massive legislation package is beyond the scope of this chapter, it basically affected three kinds of JSDF operations:[20] First, and related to collective self-defense, it expanded the circumstances in which the JSDF can act in response to an armed attack against a third country "that is in a close relationship with Japan." This expansion, however, came with three fairly strict conditions unique to Japan and absent from the UN Charter itself, such as that the armed attack against a third party to which Japan could (theoretically) respond must itself pose a "threat to [Japan's] survival" (*kuni no sonritsu*)."[21] Whether or not this newly asserted, if limited, right to exercise collective self-defense is ever acted upon, it has created new opportunities for defense planning, training, and exercises with the militaries of the United States and other friendly countries. Second, the security legislation enables JSDF overseas deployments in international peace support activities, though, importantly, mainly in non-combat roles – e.g., logistical support for US armed forces, search-and-rescue operations, and ship inspections.[22] This, too, comes with conditions unique to Japan, such as that support must be suspended if the area becomes a combat zone. Similarly, though JSDF personnel are

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newly empowered to use weapons in certain situations to defend themselves or others under their supervision in the event of attack, they are expected to evacuate if combat breaks out.[23] Finally, the legislation enables JSDF to use weapons to protect foreign military forces if those forces are involved in peacetime activities contributing to Japan's defense – e.g., military exercises or ISR operations. For example, under these new authorities the JSDF conducted its first-ever maritime escort (of a US Navy supply ship) and aerial escort (of a US B-1 bomber) of US military forces in 2017.[24] In certain circumstances, it can also use weapons in UN peacekeeping operations or to rescue Japanese nationals overseas.[25] In short, though the legislation has enabled practically significant policy changes, important restrictions unique to Japan still exist on many of the new authorities. Both should be acknowledged to ensure a nuanced understanding of the legislation's impact. Furthermore, something being made legal does not necessarily mean it will ever actually be exercised. The latter will be a political decision.

Beyond the 2015 security legislation itself, the major pillars of the Abe government's defense reforms are reflected in Japan's first-ever *National Security Strategy* (2013), subsequent annual defense white papers, and its two paired national defense program guidelines (NDPG) and Medium-Term Defense Programs (MTDPs) – released in 2013 and 2018.[26] The remainder of this section summarizes notable aspects of three of these mutually reinforcing core pillars: Japan's efforts to bolster its indigenous defense capabilities; to strengthen its alliance with the United States; and to deepen defense links with third countries (most of whom, not coincidentally, are also close allies or security partners of Washington).

16.2.2.1 Pillar 1: Bolstering Japan's Defense Capabilities

Since long before Abe's return to power, Japan's evolving defense posture had refocused toward procuring more advanced capabilities and rationalizing JSDF force structure and posture to confront a rapidly changing regional security environment. Key goals have been to enhance situational awareness, strengthen missile defense, and develop more expeditionary capabilities. Confronted with novel challenges, successive administrations have also attempted to improve "joint-ness" (e.g., coordination and interoperability across the JSDF's ground, maritime, and air services), to enhance

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Japan's ability to respond not only to an armed attack but also to an array of contingencies that are neither a pure peacetime nor a "war" scenario (i.e., contingencies occurring in the so-called "gray zone"), and to strengthen capabilities in both traditional and emerging domains (especially cyberspace, space, and the electromagnetic spectrum). That said, the Abe government's impact has been significant, especially due to its exceptional stability and longevity – in contrast, the average tenure of the six previous prime ministers was only one year – and Abe's personal commitment to championing reforms.

A particularly notable focus of the Abe government's efforts to bolster territorial defense has been a relative prioritization of a possible contingency with China over or near Japan's remote southwestern islands, especially the contested Senkaku Islands (also claimed by China as the Diaoyu Islands). This focus is a response to China's rapid military (especially naval) buildup and its expanded military and paramilitary activities in the East China Sea and western Pacific Ocean – especially since fall 2012 (see Section 16.4). Building off the DPJ-era (2010) NDPG,[27] the Abe government's 2013 NDPG called for a "Dynamic Joint Defense Force" focused on improving the JSDF's ability to respond to "an attack on remote islands."[28] Japan has since sought to strengthen deterrence through improving intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance as well as implementing shifts to force structure and posture not only to the JSDF but also to the law enforcement-focused JCG, which serves on the front lines near the Senkakus. Regarding JCG, a priority has been strengthening its ability to be present in the waters nearby 24/7 and to bolster its capabilities through major budget and personnel increases, expanding and upgrading facilities from Okinawa on down, and procuring new, purpose-built vessels (e.g., a new twelve-vessel *Senkakus Territorial Waters Guard*).[29] In defending remote islands, the most recent (2018) NDPG emphasizes developing stand-off, amphibious, and transport capabilities; sustained presence; and missile and hyper-velocity gliding projectile units, inter alia.[30] Additional, measures already implemented include deploying new radar and missiles; developing more expeditionary capabilities (most notably a postwar first: an Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade); significantly bolstering intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; basing a new fleet of F-15s in Okinawa; and

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creating a Ground Component Command tasked with controlling ground forces across Japan and bolstering their flexibility to deploy rapidly in various contingencies.[31]

More generally, recent and noteworthy developments in the latest (2018) NDPG include a new emphasis on "cross-domain operations" (*ryoki odan sakusen*) and associated calls for new "cyberspace units and electromagnetic operation units" and a new "space domain mission unit," inter alia. the NDPG also notes decisions to bolster ballistic missile defense, including purchasing Aegis Ashore land-based systems, to procure much longer-range "stand-off" missiles, and to research hyper-velocity gliding projectile units.[32] (In June 2020, Japan's defense minister announced the apparent cancellation of Aegis Ashore, but as this chapter went to press there remains considerable confusion about what will ultimately happen.[33]) Investments in the most advanced platforms include a significantly increased order of F-35 joint strike fighters that, if carried out, will make Japan the largest non-US buyer and will see Japan acquire its first-ever short–take off and vertical landing (STOVL) fighters (F-35Bs).[34] Japan already stood up its first F-35A squadron in March 2019.[35]

The apparent decision in 2018 to modify *Izumo*-class helicopter destroyer decks to support STOVL fighters, coupled with the announced F-35B purchase, could potentially lead to Japan fielding its first (de facto) very light carriers since 1945. But the ships' small size (even fully loaded, *Izumo*-class are roughly one-quarter the size of US *Nimitz*- or *Ford*-class aircraft carriers and can only conceivably embark a handful of jets) and number (Japan has only two), coupled with various aspects of existing plans and government statements, suggest Japan is not on the verge of developing carrier strike groups. F-35s may primarily operate from land (e.g., short runways on remote islands) and not be permanently embarked on MSDF ships.

Nevertheless, depending on whether and how things play out in the coming years, some of these capabilities (long-range strike missiles, F-35Bs) could potentially constitute what some argue is a de facto acquisition of "offensive" (*kogekigata*) platforms seemingly prohibited under a decades-old official interpretation of Article 9. (Likely anticipating related concerns, in the section on introducing STOVL aircraft the MTDP explicitly notes, "There will be no change in the existing Government opinion concerning equipment that cannot be possessed under the Constitution."[36]) As with manifold effective and literal

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reinterpretations of Japan's never-revised Constitution since 1947, however, the government may end up presenting these effective policy changes as consistent with the long-standing official interpretation allowing Japan to possess capabilities "minimally necessary for self-defense" based on a judgment that Japan's rapidly changing threat environment necessitates more flexible deterrence and response options.[37] In short, this is something to keep an eye on.

16.2.2.2 Pillar 2: Alliance with the United States

Ongoing efforts to strengthen Japan's alliance with the United States are a constant of the past several decades, yet this movement has significantly accelerated since 2012. As a testament to the alliance being a key priority of Abe-era recent defense reforms, Japan's 2017 defense white paper devoted an entire chapter (fifty-one pages) to "strengthening of the Japan–US alliance."[38] Together with the security legislation, the *Guidelines for Japan–US Defense Cooperation*, which provides a general outline of the scope of and respective responsibilities for operational coordination between the allies and was also revised in 2015, is most significant.[39] Beyond such bilateral pronouncements, direct consultations between US and Japanese counterparts in designing their respective defense strategies has also increased, and their substance is closely aligned.[40]

Key recent alliance-related developments include new and/or newly explicit commitments of support for each other in particular security contingencies; a major expansion of bilateral (and multilateral) training, exercises, and planning across 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; and new institutional links and dialogues. Examples of the first category include the first-ever US presidential statement on the mutual security treaty's applicability to an armed attack against Japan over the contested Senkakus (2014), Japan's aforementioned new commitments (reflected in the 2015 security legislation and 2015 Guidelines) to defend US forces under an expanded set of circumstances, and a 2019 joint statement affirming "that a cyber attack could, in certain circumstances, constitute an armed attack for the purposes of Article V of the US–Japan Security Treaty."[41] Examples of the second category include expanded bilateral training and exercises, both in number and scope. For example, bilateral exercises more than tripled between

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2015 and 2017.[42] New focus has been placed on collaboration in cross-domain operations (including cyber, space, and the electromagnetic spectrum) and new operational contexts (e.g., bilateral anti-ship combat drills).[43] Meanwhile, in 2017 Japan conducted its first-ever peacetime maritime and air escorts of US military platforms, based on new authorities under the 2015 security legislation. Finally, examples of the third category include the upgraded Bilateral Planning Mechanism and the new standing Alliance Coordination Mechanism, which facilitates frequent, real-time communication among alliance managers and, importantly, is "always on," and plans for the first-ever intergovernmental dialogue on economic security.[44] All these developments are backed up by several successive US administrations' commitments to the Asia/Indo-Pacific region as a priority theatre. This commitment is reflected in official rhetoric and the deployment and sale of America's most advanced military assets to Japan (e.g., F-35s, Aegis Ashore).

16.2.2.3 Pillar 3: Deepening Defense Links with Third Parties

A third pillar of the Abe government's national security strategy has been expanded defense links to countries beyond the United States, especially close US regional allies such as Australia and the Philippines, regional partners such as India and Vietnam, and even US NATO allies.[45] Japans' efforts to diversify security ties are largely done together with and/or in consultation with Washington. Indeed, the 2015 *Guidelines* emphasize "cooperation with regional and other partners, as well as international organizations," and "the global nature of the US–Japan alliance."[46] For example, during a May 2019 summit, "President Trump and Prime Minister Abe highlighted the need for an increasingly networked structure of alliances and partnerships, anchored by the US–Japan Alliance, to counter challenges to the United States' and Japan's shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific region" and "noted that the US–Japan Alliance is both a model and a platform for binding those allies and partners closer together to uphold the rules-based order in the region."[47]

Japan's security cooperation with third parties can be divided into two general categories: (1) multilateral initiatives centered on the US–Japan alliance; and (2) initiatives with no formal US involvement. For a nonexhaustive list of examples of the former, the 2019 US–Japan joint statement identifies the US–Japan Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, trilateral summits and joint exercises with India, and greater

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cooperation with the United Kingdom and France.[48] Regarding the latter, Japan's bilateral security cooperation with Australia is arguably most robust and has received significant attention.[49] Yet recent years have also seen a major proliferation of new bilateral and multilateral initiatives with additional partners. In 2016 Japan tabled its first-ever (2016) proposal for an ASEAN-wide defense framework, which was updated in 2019.[50] The JSDF now trains, or has concrete plans to train, bilaterally with its counterparts in the UK, Canada, Australia, and India.[51] Most famously, perhaps, the Abe government has revived his 2007 call for countries to cooperate in ensuring a "free and open Indo-Pacific" – an initiative inspired at least in part by concerns about China, and to which the United States later signed on.[52]

Finally, the Abe government's further loosening of a 1970s-era ban on arms exports has made possible more advanced defense technology cooperation with, and exports to, third parties – most likely US allies and partners. The government has highlighted defense technology cooperation as a way not only to improve Japan's defense but also to assist its defense industry and strengthen ties with other countries.[53] Though it has not finalized any large-scale development contracts yet, since 2013 the Abe government has signed new defense equipment and technology transfer agreements with the United Kingdom, Australia, France, India, Germany, the Philippines, Italy, and Malaysia.[54]

16.3 Institutional and Policy Continuities

Although institutional and policy shifts since 2012 are significant in any practical sense, to appropriately assess the big-picture significance of "the Abe era" it is equally important to recognize that (1) the Abe government has (at least so far) failed to achieve major goals coveted by Abe and generations of other LDP leaders (e.g., constitutional revision; truly transformative defense spending increases); (2) key foundational pillars of Japan's postwar defense policy remain in place; (3) important "successes" of the past seven years have in key instances ended up significantly watered down from what was originally intended; and/or (4) they generally build on a reform agenda that predates Abe's return to power. In other words, a balanced understanding of Japan's defense reforms under Abe – as well as the prospects for future institutional or policy shifts after Abe's tenure – necessitates an examination not only of what has changed but also what has not. Failure to examine

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the latter risks exaggerating the pace and scale of reforms achieved heretofore. And specific to this volume's unifying theme, it risks significantly overstating the extent to which the Abe era constitutes a "major turning point" in the history of postwar Japan.

16.3.1 Institutional Continuities

The major theme of institutional reforms to national security–relevant institutions under Abe has been the consolidation of policy decision-making in the cabinet and the Prime Minister's Office in particular. Yet, it is important to stress that centralization of decision-making in the executive branch is a decades-old trend that not only significantly predates Abe but is also not an ambition unique to the LDP.[55] Specific to the institutions of greatest interest to this study, it is worth noting that Japan's NSC was the culmination of a reform effort dating back two generations (to the 1970s) and which had accelerated significantly in the wake of major crises after 2001 (e.g., 9/11; 3/11). Additionally, similar institutional reforms had been pursued – to various degrees – by Abe's LDP and DPJ predecessors. And in 2013, Abe, the ruling coalition, and the DPJ joined forces to establish the NSC.[56] In fact, the bills to establish both the NSC and the Bureau of Personnel Affairs received significant support from the DPJ.[57]

Abe's intervention in key bureaucratic appointments after 2012 (e.g., directly appointing a CLB director-general) suggests a significant, and very public, break from past practice. But even in this (arguably) most extreme case of political intervention, it is worth noting that the sentiments that led to his decision are hardly unique to Abe. In fact, given the unchanging constant that is Japan's never-revised Article 9, behind some of the most radical defense policy shifts of the postwar period (e.g., the JSDF's establishment in 1954; enabling arms exports to the United States in the 1980s) was a forward-leaning, conservative prime minister pressuring the CLB to adjust its effective interpretation. More recently, three former DPJ presidents are on record criticizing what they saw as overreach by the CLB during earlier stages of their careers. For example, while running for the DPJ party presidency in 2002 Abe's immediate predecessor as prime minister (Yoshiko Noda, 2011–2012) reportedly not only called for collective self-defense to be judged constitutional but also stated he would appoint a sympathetic CLB director-general to

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get it done.[58] It is also worth noting that most of Abe's national security-relevant appointments have been rather conventional, including his national security advisors and cabinet ministers – who are generally considered to be more moderate than he is when it comes to national security affairs (e.g., Taro Kono, who has served as both foreign and defense minister).

16.3.2 Policy Continuities

As noted, there is no question that the Abe government has achieved some practically significant defense policy reforms. Yet when, in pursuit of a more complete picture, one examines the empirical record since 2012 for evidence of *continuity* in Japan's defense policy, the persistence of core pillars is striking. Continuity is even more remarkable when one factors in the objectively measurable transformation (read: worsening) of Japan's security environment that has occurred in the interim – a fact about which there is overwhelming consensus among elites and the general public. Four major pillars – fundamental change to any one of which would potentially indicate a more radical shift in Japan's defense posture – are of particular note: Article 9; defense spending under 1 percent of GDP; the USA–Japan alliance at the center of Japan's national security strategy; and Japan's eschewal of an indigenous nuclear deterrent (despite being surrounded by nuclear-armed China, Russia, and North Korea).

First, despite Abe's numerous assertions since 2012 that constitutional revision is a top priority of his government, his various revision efforts the past seven years have failed. As of this writing, Article 9 remains untouched. Even if the 2017 amendment proposal Abe put forward as prime minister, which would simply add a new clause asserting that the JSDF's "existence" is constitutional, ultimately passes the Diet and a public referendum – hardly a foregone conclusion – it is not clear what the practical significance for Japan's defense policy would be. Importantly, this proposal represents a significant "walk back" from far more ambitious revision proposals put forward by generations of LDP politicians, including an official party-wide proposal in 2012, all of which had called for revision to Article 9's existing two clauses.[59] Furthermore, both the government and the vast majority of the public already agree the JSDF is constitutional. Even so, public opinion remains, at best, ambivalent about even adding this new third clause.[60] Regardless, barring a more

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ambitious revision of Article 9's first and/or second clauses, truly radical changes to Japan's defense policy seem unlikely.

Indeed, in various scenarios ranging from "collective self-defense" to the use of small arms in UN peacekeeping operations, despite post-2012 reforms major conditions unique to Japan on the use of force/weapons in a combat zone and/or outside an unambiguous armed attack on Japan remain significant. For example, even a deployment to support a UN PKO in South Sudan in which JSDF personnel were, under strict conditions, newly authorized to use weapons proved controversial. Furthermore, after the violence in the area worsened, the Abe government ended the mission without the JSDF ever using those authorities. Anticipating controversy if JSDF personnel were actually placed in a situation where they needed to use their weapons, to reassure the public Abe had gone so far as to pledge to resign if *any* JSDF personnel were killed.[61] To date, no JSDF personnel member has ever died in combat. An "exclusively defense-oriented policy" remains central to Japan's "basic defense policy."[62]

Second, though the official ban on spending more than 1 percent of GDP on defense was formally lifted in 1987, a de facto 1 percent ceiling is still basically in effect. In any practical sense, without more practically significant increases to Japan's defense budget, a fundamental transformation of JSDF capabilities and/or its effective mission set – especially any significant power projection – that some allege is already underway seems unlikely. To be sure, Abe has pushed through budget increases since 2012 that are meaningful and which global media annually hype as "record-breaking" (which is technically true). However, these increases are small. Spending remains below 1 percent of GDP. In fact, despite recent "record-breaking" budget increases, in nominal yen terms Japan's 2019 defense budget marked only a 4 percent increase relative to its 1997 budget (but an 8 percent increase over 2012).[63] As an indication of its cautious approach, the Abe government effectively ignored calls from within Abe's own LDP for the government to consider a truly transformative budget increase (a ~100 percent increase to NATO members' current pledge level of 2 percent of GDP) in the 2018 MTDP.[64] In the end, the actual MTDP announced plans for *average* defense budgets between FY 2019 and FY 2023 of roughly 5.1 trillion yen per year (for comparison, Japan's 2019 defense budget is 5.01 trillion yen) – hardly a radical departure from past spending levels.[65]

A third pillar of Japan's postwar defense policy is the centrality of the US–Japan alliance and the basic "division of labor" within it. Both

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remain in place and, despite some practically significant adjustments that enable Japan's prime minister to significantly expand JSDF support for its ally (e.g., limited collective self-defense; asset protection, etc.), the core bargain has not yet fundamentally changed. Indeed, the 2015 *Guidelines* reassert that "an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan" remains the security treaty's primary focus.[66] Relatedly Japan continues to rely on the US nuclear umbrella, a position that has not changed under Abe and that is reflected rhetorically in the Abe government's reassertion of Japan's long-standing "three non-nuclear principles" as the country's "fundamental policy."[67] That all said, discussion of Japan acquiring more robust "strike" capabilities is increasingly mainstream, and the apparent cancellation of Aegis Ashore in June 2020 has prompted a surge in discussion of this possibility. If some of the proposals under discussion turn into concrete procurement decisions and policy changes, a significant shift could be in store for the alliance. Nevertheless, as of summer 2020 it is not clear what Japan will actually do.[68] This is another important space to watch.

In sum, despite recent reforms under Abe, it is also important to recognize that several fundamental pillars of Japan's defense policy remain firmly in place. Looking forward, there is no clear evidence that the public – to say nothing of Komeito, the LDP's junior coalition partner (see Section 16.4.2) – would sanction truly radical changes to or elimination of these pillars, such as eliminating or rewriting Article 9 to enable a clear break from "exclusive defense" (*senshu boei*), pursuing autonomous defense capabilities outside an alliance framework, doubling defense spending, or acquiring an indigenous nuclear deterrent. The future is of course unknowable. The point to emphasize here is only that such transformative changes to these pillars have not happened, despite Abe and his allies having a strong grip on the *Kantei* and clear majorities in the Diet for over seven years. This reality is often overlooked as the discourse focuses disproportionately on rhetoric and ambition over actual policy, and change over continuity.

16.4 Key Factors Shaping the Abe Government's Defense Reform Agenda

The analysis heretofore has argued that (1) the Abe government has achieved major reforms to institutions and defense policy since

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December 2012 but also that (2) any discussion of whether it constitutes a "major turning point" in Japan's postwar defense policy must also acknowledge what has *not* changed, as well as baseline the current reform trajectory in trends already observable *before* Abe's return to power – both outside and within Japan. Whereas the previous two sections focused primarily on measuring outcomes, this section examines the international and domestic political context that has shaped them. First, it highlights key external drivers of defense reforms and several reasons why the Abe government has been able to pursue a more ambitious security agenda than its predecessors' without confronting a major sustained domestic political backlash. Second, it identifies several factors that have caused the Abe government to either abandon or significantly moderate key coveted reforms. These variables are likely to continue to shape Japan's defense reform trajectory for the foreseeable future, including in a post-Abe era.

16.4.1 External Factors

Seen from Tokyo, the past decade has witnessed a profound transformation of Japan's regional security environment. Changing threat perceptions manifest in elite discourse and public opinion, as well as authoritative national security documents. For example, Japan's 2018 NDPG notes about the "dramatically changing security environment":

> "At present, [the] security environment surrounding Japan is changing at extremely high speeds. Changes in the balance of power in the international arena are accelerating and becoming more complex, and uncertainty over the existing order is increasing. In addition, rapid expansion in the use of new domains, which are space, cyberspace and electromagnetic spectrum[, are] poised to fundamentally change the existing paradigm of national security, which has prioritized responses in traditional, physical domains, which are land, sea and air."[69]

Variables of particular relevance since 2012 have been China's rapidly expanding military capabilities and assertive and coercive policies vis-à-vis its neighbors – including Japan – in support of its vast and controversial sovereignty claims in the South and East China Seas; North Korea's rapidly advancing nuclear and missile programs; the rapid emergence of transformative military technologies and qualitatively new security challenges, including in the "gray zone" (the ambiguous space between peacetime and war); and alliance politics.[70]

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Over the past decade, concerns in Tokyo about a rapidly changing balance of power and specific security challenges posed by China have gone mainstream. Most conspicuously, in the time between Abe's first administration (2006–2007) and today, Beijing's official defense budget – widely considered to underreport actual military spending – has increased from being roughly commensurate with Japan's to nearly four times as large (in 2019, $178 billion vs. $48 billion).[71] Even setting aside long-standing concerns (e.g., Beijing's sizable nuclear arsenal), recent years have witnessed the People's Liberation Army's rapid modernization across the board. Its Rocket Force now fields the world's largest arsenal of conventionally tipped ballistic missiles – many of which range Japan's territory and US military bases throughout the greater region. China also now possesses the world's largest navy in terms of the number of ships, and its growth and modernization are extremely fast. For example, China *launched* more submarines, warships, amphibious vessels, and auxiliaries between 2014 and 2018 than are currently serving in India's or Britain's entire navy.[72] Furthermore, and especially since 2012, not only does Japan's government and public generally see China's military and paramilitary operations to assert its claim to the Senkakus as a concrete threat to Japan's territorial sovereignty and challenge to the Japanese central government's administration of the islands, but China's reliance primarily on paramilitary Coast Guard – rather than military – forces in the East China Sea presents a novel and complex deterrence challenge (and potential fait accompli scenario) in the "gray zone."[73] In short, the nature and severity of Japan's perceived security challenge vis-à-vis China – a country with a population ten times and an economy already three times the size of Japan's – has transforming in highly visible ways the past decade.

As it concerns North Korea, seen from Tokyo the combination of the despotic Kim dynasty and its rapidly advancing nuclear and missile capabilities present a clear and present danger to Japan's security.[74] Over the past decade, North Korea has conducted four nuclear tests, and since the Abe government's formation in December 2012 it has rapidly accelerated its missile testing – six tests in 2013, nineteen in 2014, fifteen in 2015, twenty-four in 2016, twenty-one in 2017, twenty-two in 2019, and nine so far (as of August) in 2020.[75] Meanwhile, these missiles are becoming more accurate, longer-ranged, and both faster and easier to hide (and thus more difficult to destroy). In 2017, North Korea launched missiles over Japan's territory and into its exclusive economic

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zone, tested an alleged thermonuclear weapon, and test-fired two intercontinental ballistic missiles it credibly claimed could range Washington, DC. In January 2018, Abe summarized his take-away: "the security environment surrounding Japan is its most severe since World War II."[76] (Some former Trump administration officials agree.[77])

Meanwhile, beyond China's rapidly advancing military capabilities and North Korea's expanding arsenal of advanced missiles and nuclear weapons, rapid changes in military technology represent a third, more general driver of Japan's defense reforms, including institutionally. Changing technologies shape judgments about the need for rapid crisis response capabilities, interagency cooperation, and centralized decision-making, inter alia. They also clarify the exigency of developing new defense capabilities in emerging domains, a point captured in Japan's 2018 NDPG and its call for Japan to develop a "multi-domain defense force" (*tajigen sogo boeiryoku*).[78] Of particular concern are the proliferation of extremely fast Chinese and North Korean ballistic and cruise missiles, emerging hypersonic technologies, and the growing prominence of warfare in space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum.

Finally, Japan's ally the United States has also been an important driver of defense reforms, both directly and indirectly. The volume of US calls for Japan to adopt a more proactive security posture and to expand its contributions within the alliance and to regional and global security has increased significantly over the past two decades, and especially as the regional security environment has worsened since 2012. On the other hand, the rapidly changing balance of power and nature of Japan's threat environment has deepened insecurity about the US ability and/or willingness to come to Japan's defense in a major national security crisis. (In both cases, the basic concerns are by no means new but have arguably been exacerbated by Trump administration rhetoric and policies toward allies.) Nevertheless, and despite occasional claims that these insecurities are causing Japan to rethink its strategic alignment toward Washington relative to Beijing, neither official rhetoric or policy nor public opinion suggest widespread ambivalence concerning the fundamental importance and centrality of Japan's alliance with the United States to Japan's national security.[79]

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16.4.2 Internal Factors

While Japan's changing external security environment has been a major driver of the Abe government's defense reforms, it is not a sufficient condition. Furthermore, any "ideological" factor – such as the alleged "nationalist" agenda so often attributed, often uncritically, to Abe and the LDP in public discourse – cannot by itself come close to explaining changes the past seven years. After all, both Abe's and the LDP's transparent desire for Japan to have a more robust national defense capability are well documented and decades-old constants in Japan's political life (e.g., even the LDP's 1955 founding charter called for constitutional revision and collective security[80]). So what else has changed to allow the current Abe government to push reforms significantly further than its LDP predecessors – including during Abe's first stint as prime minister (2006–2007)? Beyond the external factors identified in the previous section, several domestic political developments, coupled with Abe and his allies' pragmatic willingness to moderate their policy ambitions in the face of political pushback, have played a major role. Though none of these factors are inherently unique to the current Abe-era period, in key instances their relevance has become more pronounced since 2012.

Two enabling domestic political factors in particular have created a far more permissive environment for Abe's ambitious reform agenda than that faced by his predecessors. First, public aversion to military affairs in nominally "pacifist" Japan has moderated significantly in response to generational change and deepening recognition of Japan's changing security environment. In a manner that implies at least basic overlap with the Abe government, the public generally views North Korea and China as threats to Japan's "vital interests"; feels both little affinity and a sense of threat vis-à-vis Beijing (in stark contrast to widespread affinity toward the United States); and identifies a robust JSDF *and* a close alliance with Washington as essential for Japan's national security.[81] Accordingly, moderate defense reforms in pursuit of those basic goals have not generated sustained domestic political backlash. For example, the most controversial defense reform carried out since Abe's return to power was the passage of the "peace and security" legislation in summer 2015. Unsurprisingly, it caused massive protests, and the cabinet's disapproval rating increased significantly. Yet what happened next is also

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quite telling. Even in this extreme case of security legislation that provoked the largest anti-government protests since the 1960s the popular backlash proved fleeting. Within only a few months, the Abe cabinet's support rating was back above water – where it remained for many months after, later falling only in response to unrelated political scandals.[82] More importantly, whatever popular discontent existed about the legislation or other recent defense reforms, it did not translate into a major decline in support for the LDP or ruling coalition at the next election. In the first lower house election after the legislation passed – October 2017 – the ruling coalition lost a few seats, but it still won a two-thirds super-majority.

A second major enabling factor for Abe's defense reform agenda is the replacement of the ideological, (literally) pacifist left that defined the left–right political divide throughout much the Cold War with a moderate, pragmatic center-left. This also reflects a longer-term trend. Furthermore, many of the individuals who constitute the left-of-center since 2012 have actual experience governing during the three-year DPJ-era immediately preceding Abe's return to power (2009–2012). This matters because, though often differing on the policy details, elite support for bolstering Japan's defense capabilities, strengthening the US–Japan alliance, and expanding security ties with third parties basically exists across most of the political spectrum. Accordingly, the volume of elite opposition to key Abe-era defense reforms has moderated significantly. In fact, in important instances Abe government reforms have effectively built on reform initiatives pursued by the DPJ while it was in power and/or which subsequently received support from the DPJ even after it was back in the opposition. Examples of the former include the major revision of the *Guidelines for Japan–US Defense Cooperation*, the loosening of the 1976 "arms export ban," and the shift in force posture southwest and new emphasis on "gray zone" challenges in the East China Sea. Each was initiated under the DPJ. The most important example of the latter is the NSC's establishment, which reflected in significant part a supra-partisan reform movement aimed at expanding politicians' influence over Japan's powerful bureaucracies and a desire to bolster crisis management capabilities following a series of major national crises (e.g., 3/11). The DPJ reportedly shared a draft proposal with the new Abe government, helped create the 2013 NSC establishment bill, and voted in support of it.[83]

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Because of Japan's rapidly changing strategic environment, a resulting shift in public opinion, generational change, and basic agreement among political elites of various party stripes on the necessity of at least some significant reforms, the Abe government has had more domestic political room to maneuver than its predecessors. Nevertheless, and though repeated national election victories and an opposition in considerable disarray since the DPJ's landslide defeat in 2012 may suggest there are few checks on Abe and his LDP, several less conspicuous factors have also frustrated the Abe government's ambitions. In key instances, it has significantly watered down, or in some cases effectively abandoned, more ambitious defense reform objectives.

On high-salience policy issues where there is clear opposition, or at least ambivalence, to Abe/LDP positions – e.g., rewriting Article 9's existing text or rendering constitutional "use of force" (*buryoku koshi*) in an armed attack scenario even if Japan itself does not face a clear threat – Abe appears to have significantly dialed back his ambitions. For example, had the actual 2014 Cabinet Decision "reinterpreting" Article 9 or the 2015 security legislation that provided its legal foundation contained language regarding collective self-defense or collective security reflective of earlier LDP proposals, it is reasonable to expect that the domestic political and popular backlash would have been much more forceful. To avoid this, what the Abe government actually produced was significantly watered down.[84]

On the one hand, the Abe government's pragmatic moderation suggests a responsiveness to public opinion and ability to read the political winds. But also likely at play is a recognition of the LDP's remarkable vulnerability and weak mandate, contrary to what its Diet seat totals and cabinet support rates would suggest. Especially important are (1) the LDP's potentially fleeting support among the general public and (2) the fact that it rules in coalition with a political party (Komeito) whose core supporters generally oppose major components of the LDP's defense reform agenda.

One underappreciated paradox of post-2012 Japanese politics is that the ruling coalition's string of national election victories and the LDP's single-party majorities do not actually indicate widespread popularity, much less a stable base of political support. This is especially true as it concerns popular support for more domestically controversial elements of Abe and the LDP's national security agenda (e.g., Article 9 revision). Three trends in particular suggest public support for the LDP after 2012 may be soft. First, lower house elections during the current "Abe era" have

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attracted the lowest-ever voter turnout in history and mark declines of 10 (2012), 17 (2014), and 16 (2017) percentage points, respectively, relative to the last "pre-Abe era" election (2009).[85] Second, voters with no party affiliation make up the majority of the electorate.[86] Third, public opinion surveys demonstrate that, among those who support the Abe cabinet, a major reason is simply the lack of alternatives.[87] These circumstances suggest that if the government steps on a high-salience political landmine (e.g., gutting Article 9) that mobilizes voters who have been staying home recently and/or causes a critical mass of floating voters to support another party, the LDP might find itself in the wilderness again.

Also powerfully influencing the Abe government's moderation of its defense reform agenda is the fact that (1) the LDP rules in coalition with a political party whose primary support base is a lay-Buddhist movement (*Soka Gakkai*); and (2) the LDP's performance in national elections depends significantly on close cooperation with Komeito (especially mutual stand-down agreements in single-member districts).[88] The LDP's relative dependence on the supporters of its junior coalition partner gives Komeito leverage within the coalition disproportionate to its number of Diet seats, especially on issues highly salient to its pacifistic support base. Why does this matter for defense policy? For starters, without Komeito electoral support, the LDP would probably not have had a single-party majority when the Diet passed the controversial security legislation in 2015. Moreover, as it concerns Article 9, LDP concessions to Komeito in intra-coalition negotiations deboned both the Abe cabinet's 2014 "reinterpretation" to enable exercise of collective self-defense and the Abe government's official 2017 proposal for revising it. The former resulted in the aforementioned three strict conditions unique to Japan, while the latter caused Abe to propose a revision that originally came from Komeito itself and which represents a fundamental departure from the LDP's long-standing position that Article 9's two existing clauses must be revised.[89] Since 2012, as well as before,[90] Komeito has repeatedly frustrated forward-leaning LDP prime ministers' ambitious defense reform agendas. Unless an unexpected political realignment occurs, it will likely continue to do so.

In sum, external factors and Abe and his allies' long-held ambitions – whether ideological and/or pragmatic responses to a changing security environment – are undoubtedly major drivers of Japan's defense reforms since 2012. Yet domestic political variables matter greatly in shaping the actual outcomes these past seven years. On the one hand,

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shifting public opinion and elite preferences have reduced the vehemence and sustainability of any domestic political backlash against moderate – as opposed to radical – reforms linked directly to specific perceived external threats. On the other hand, several domestic factors – especially LDP vulnerability in national elections and Komeito's influence – have caused Abe and his government to pragmatically, yet significantly, dial back their ambitions.

16.5 Conclusion

At his inaugural press conference in December 2012, Abe stated his determination "to defend fully people's lives, our territory, and our beautiful ocean" and asserted that Japan's national security "is not someone else's problem."[91] Over the past seven-plus years Japan's regional security environment has arguably grown more foreboding. In the interim, Abe and his government have pursued an ambitious and practically significant defense reform agenda intended to enable Japan to more effectively deter and, if necessary, defend against perceived security threats. Key accomplishments include: bolstering executive control over national security decision-making; strengthening deterrence through a rationalization and expansion of the JSDF's roles, missions, and capabilities; boosting cooperation with Japan's US ally; and expanding defense links with like-minded third parties within and beyond the Asia-Pacific.

Though much commentary during the "Abe era" has asserted that Abe's allegedly "nationalist" agenda is a driving force, or even that he has taken Japan on a radical trajectory away from its postwar "pacifism," a systematic analysis of both change *and* continuity over the past seven years suggests that the defining feature of his government's defense reform accomplishments is a kind of evolutionary pragmatism. Narrowly focusing on perceived (or imputed) policy shifts while overlooking the persistence of several core pillars of Japan's remarkably self-restrained defense posture, the extent to which the Abe government's achievements build on efforts initiated by his predecessors, or the rapid changes to Japan's security environment, easily leads to hyperbolic claims about the pace and scale of change or the impact of idiosyncratic factors such as ideology or Abe himself. As further evidence of this evolutionary pragmatism, the empirical record reveals significant instances of Abe moderating his reform ambitions in response to, or in anticipation of, domestic political pushback – including on foundational

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LDP priorities dating back to its founding sixty-five years ago (e.g., Article 9; collective self-defense).

What comes next? Just as this chapter is going to press (August 29, 2020), Abe has abruptly announced his planned resignation over health concerns.[92] Regardless, barring major and unexpected external or domestic political structural changes, this chapter's analysis suggests that Japan's evolutionary defense reform trajectory is likely to continue even in a post-Abe era. Reforms put in place since 2012 are unlikely to be reversed. Rather, a further incremental loosening of long-standing constraints seems likely, especially given inauspicious geopolitical trend lines.

Though Japan's defense reforms the past decade have been practically significant and are likely to continue, another important takeaway emerges from this chapter's analysis. That despite nearly eight years in power Abe's government has failed to achieve more radical changes long coveted by him and his party (e.g., elimination/revision of Article 9's original clauses; truly transformative increases to defense spending; rendering "full" collective self-defense constitutional) suggests that – barring a major crisis in the region (or within the USA–Japan alliance) – future reform-minded prime ministers will continue to face powerful domestic political headwinds. After all, Abe's ambitions were no secret and, superficially at least, throughout most of his tenure the stars appeared aligned for a more significant transformation: the LDP and its ruling coalition cruised to significant victories in every national election (including single-party majorities for the LDP for several years); cabinets were exceptionally stable and enjoyed relatively robust public support; and public opinion showed widespread recognition of Japan's worsening security environment. Nevertheless, as Abe noted mournfully during the August 2020 press conference at which he announced his planned resignation, popular resistance to perhaps his most coveted objective – revision of Japan's never-revised constitution – proved insurmountable.[93]

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