

Japan's National Security Council: filling the whole of government?

MAYUMI FUKUSHIMA AND RICHARD J. SAMUELS*

The creation of the National Security Council (NSC) in 2013 was the centrepiece of the most ambitious reorganization of Japan's foreign and security policy apparatus since the end of the Pacific War in 1945. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe aimed to create a 'Strategic Headquarters' to better coordinate Japanese grand strategy across a fissiparous bureaucracy and political class. Thus, it was also the latest in a decades-long series of 'administrative reforms'—efforts by successive prime ministers to assert political control of Japan's powerful but internally riven civil service. Although it is too soon to be certain that this new 'whole of government' approach will succeed, the formation of the NSC is a potential watershed in Japanese strategic policy-making. The improved crisis management, upgraded intelligence and centralized security policy-making that Japanese leaders hope to achieve through the NSC are indispensable if Japan is ever to resolve the inherent tension between its desire to enhance alliance management and its desire to reduce dependence on the United States. We caution, however, that in the event of weakened trust between future prime ministers and senior NSC officials, the initial successes we examine here may not be sustainable and bureaucratic infighting among powerful ministries could reignite, undercutting the new unit's authority.

Background

In June 1954, as part of the re-establishment of the Japanese military under the novel banner of a Self-Defence Force (SDF) and the creation of a Defence Agency, formal authority for national security decision-making was assigned to a National Defence Council (NDC; Kokubo Kaigi) supported by a secretariat temporarily placed in the Prime Minister's Cabinet Office (Sorifu).¹ This new organ comprised five cabinet ministers and had nominal responsibility for devel-

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¹ For fuller accounts, see Yasuaki Chijiwa, 'Historical transition of the security organs subordinate to the cabinet and the Japanese version of National Security Council', *National Institute for Defence Studies News*, no. 170, Nov. 2012; and *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kiko* [The evolving cabinet security organizations in Japan] (Tokyo: Hara Shobo, 2015), pp. 32–83.

oping a 'basic policy' for national defence, national defence programme outlines, policies regarding defence industrial mobilization, and other matters. Born in the shadow of Japan's defeat in the Pacific War and US occupation, however, it was riven with problems from the beginning. Debates over civilian control of the military and the advisability of using the defence-industrial base to power postwar economic reconstruction distracted the NDC from its main tasks.² Meanwhile, Japan's Cold War alignment with the United States was accompanied by subordination to Washington's priorities, a relationship that rendered NDC policy deliberations virtually unnecessary.³

Helping to craft—and to benefit from—a version of war responsibility that placed blame on the military rather than on the Emperor, postwar Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida adopted the overt goal of 'return[ing] Japan to its place in international society'.⁴ His tacit national security strategy, designed to avoid rapid remilitarization by deflecting US demands for contributions to the alliance while stimulating economic growth within a very favourable world trading system, would later come to be known as the 'Yoshida Doctrine' and lasted for decades. The central insight of the doctrine was that access to the enormous US market and advanced technology, combined with a low defence burden and cheap imported energy, would facilitate unprecedented prosperity. To the extent that security was a central concern, it was conceived 'comprehensively' (*sogo anzen hoshō*) to prioritize economic growth and pacify the left.

Indeed, as late as 1984, Kiichi Miyazawa—a former aide to Yoshida, senior figure in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and future prime minister—and Masataka Kosaka, the scholar who coined the label 'Yoshida Doctrine', assumed China would continue to act benevolently towards its neighbours and argued there was no need for Japan to become a military power. Even if Beijing were to shift course, they asserted, it was unlikely to threaten Japan's security. They also predicted that the USSR and the United States would respect one another's spheres of influence, and that the Europeans would help maintain peaceful coexistence.⁵ So, several years after China's decision to pursue rapid growth and several years before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Japan's mainstream view remained as it had been throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s: Tokyo need not contribute militarily to regional or global security. Rather, as a great economic power (*keizai taikoku*), it could and should pursue non-military 'peace contribution diplomacy', including foreign aid, active support for global arms reduction, backing for the UN, and cooperation with Asian neighbours while retaining dependence on Washington for military security.

² See Richard J. Samuels, *'Rich nation, strong army': national security and the technological transformation of Japan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 173–7; Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku*, pp. 48–58.

³ This was by Washington's design. See Victor D. Cha, *Powerplay: the origins of the American alliance system in Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). See also Mayumi Fukushima, *Exploitative friendship: how asymmetric alliance partners manipulate one another* (Cambridge, MA: Department of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, forthcoming).

⁴ Kosaka Masataka, *Saisho Yoshida Shigeru* [Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru] (Tokyo: Chuo Soshō, 1968), p. 47.

⁵ Miyazawa Kiichi and Kosaka Masataka, *Utsukushii Nihon e no chosēn* [The challenge to create a beautiful Japan] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 1984).

Subordination to Washington also muted interest in developing Japan's postwar intelligence community. During the occupation—and even after Japan regained sovereignty—its intelligence function was derivative, underdeveloped and narrowly aimed at domestic enemies and foreign firms. Resentment of Japan's subservience to its US partner—what one intelligence journalist has called a persistent 'master-servant relationship' (*shuju kankei*)—was one problem.⁶ But it was only one problem, and may even have been the least significant. Japan's intelligence units were small, non-comprehensive, uncoordinated, underfunded and, owing to lingering political sensitivities (especially regarding the use of spies: human intelligence or HUMINT), unnecessarily baroque. The main players were soldiers in the former Imperial Japanese Army, diplomats in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), crime fighters in the National Police Agency (NPA) which controlled the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office (CIRO), economists in the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, and lawyers in the Justice Ministry's Public Security Intelligence Agency (PSIA). All operated in a highly politicized environment of mutual distrust with limited central authority and even more limited public support.

In 1952, as General Matthew Ridgway prepared to return Japan to the Japanese, he insisted that the occupation had pursued 'a policy of forthright integrity, subordinating the acquisition of intelligence within Japan to the establishment of harmonious working relations with the embryo Japanese military forces'.⁷ The general was preoccupied by the threat of 'communist elements' who would seek to use 'carryovers' from occupation intervention as propaganda, signalling US intentions to continue controlling Japan. And, in fact, Washington's lingering influence combined with what the Japanese have frequently referred to as 'the evils of bureaucratic sectionalism' (*tatewari gyosei no heigai*) to forge a jurisdictionally riven and underperforming intelligence community that was largely irrelevant to Japan's national security decision-making.⁸ These problems reflected the larger domain in which Japan's intelligence community was nested: a 'reactive', 'reluctant', ineffective and derivative foreign and security policy establishment which did not support independent and robust intelligence activities to inform policy-makers who practised 'karaoke diplomacy' and punched below their weight in world affairs.⁹

During the Cold War, and for many years afterwards, there were many efforts to reform national security decision-making. Two of the most prominent were

⁶ Kuroi Buntaro, 'Warudowaido interijensu' [Worldwide intelligence], *Gunji Kenkyu*, Nov. 2005, p. 236.

⁷ Letter from Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, General Matthew B. Ridgway, to CIA Director, General Walter B. Smith, 14 April 1952, declassified Top Secret document CIA-RDP80B01676R004000130052-9, Archives of the MacArthur Memorial, Norfolk, VA.

⁸ See the accounts of former senior intelligence officers in Kuroi Buntaro, 'Jieitai joho butai no tanjo to ayumi' [The birth and development of the Self-Defence Force intelligence unit], *Gunji Kenkyu*, May 2009, pp. 222, 225; and Hirajo Hiromichi, *Nichibei himitsu joho kikan: 'Kage no guntai' Musashi kikancho no kokuhaku* [The secret US-Japan intelligence organization: confessions of the commander of the shadow army unit 'Musashi'] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2010), pp. 192, 198.

⁹ See Kent Calder, 'Japanese foreign economic policy formation: explaining the reactive state', *World Politics* 40: 4, July 1988, pp. 517-41; Michael Green, *Reluctant realism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Purnendra Jain (with T. Inoguchi), 'From *karaoke* to *kabuki* democracy: Japanese politics today', in T. Inoguchi and P. Jain, eds, *Japanese politics today* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

undertaken by Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone. In June 1985, after a series of high-profile counter-intelligence failures including the revelation of extensive Soviet spying and several false starts in organizational reform, Nakasone submitted to the Diet a so-called 'Spy Prevention Act' (*Kokka Himitsu ni Kakaru Supai Koi to no Boshi ni Kansuru Horitsu An*). But the opposition parties refused to discuss the bill in the Diet, and it was opposed by moderates even within his own LDP. After eight months of vigorous street demonstrations, the bill was withdrawn.

The following year, in July 1986, Nakasone succeeded in establishing the Security Council of Japan (SCJ; *Anzen Hosho Kaigi*). The SCJ—which included seven cabinet ministers—replaced the NDC and assumed additional nominal responsibilities for management of emergencies—excluding economic crises and natural disasters—which it bore for the next quarter-century and more. Most agree, however, that its actual role was reduced to ensuring civilian control, just like the NDC. Indeed, it met very rarely—fewer than nine times per year for less than ten minutes each time.¹⁰ Moreover, as its secretariat's staff was seconded for short periods from other national security-related ministries and agencies and had no interest in undermining their home ministries' power, the SCJ failed to contribute to an effective and streamlined 'whole of government' decision-making process.

Precipitants of change

Meanwhile, Japan's strategic environment was changing rapidly. As one observer has explained, after the Cold War Japanese leaders knew that they had 'to face up to the country's dependency on American-generated intelligence as well as the weaknesses in its own internal processes for collection, assessment, and distribution of intelligence for strategic policy decision-making and for national crisis management'.¹¹ As the Cold War receded in memory and relevance, several things happened to make serious reform possible. The first was that Japanese elites and the Japanese public slowly, but clearly, came to understand the national security threats they faced and to appreciate the importance of independently collected and protected intelligence. Whereas there had been virtually no public reaction in 1993 to North Korea's Nodong missile launch, the Taepodong test five years later prompted uproar.¹² Since Washington was at the time heavily invested in its 'Agreed Framework' with North Korea and was downplaying threats from that source, the incident also drove home to Japan's security experts the high costs of dependence.¹³

Second, and ironically, Japan's US ally—the continuing source of much of its most detailed intelligence—began to press openly for reform of the Japanese

¹⁰ Author's interview with Professor Kotani Ken, Tokyo, 15 Dec. 2015. See also Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku*, pp. 99–105.

¹¹ Robert D'A. Henderson, 'Reforming Japanese intelligence', *Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 10: 2, 1997, p. 227.

¹² *Shokun*, 1 Dec. 1998.

¹³ Sunohara Tsuyoshi, *Tanjo kokusan supai eisei: dokuji johomo to nichibei domei* [The birth of domestically manufactured spy satellites: independent intelligence network and the US–Japan alliance] (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shimbunsha, 2005), pp. 32–6.

security apparatus, at least as regards cooperation between Tokyo and Washington. A hortatory report by Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye in 2000 compared US–Japan intelligence-sharing unfavourably to US–NATO practices and argued that ‘a strategic vision of intelligence cooperation with Japan is long overdue . . . The time has come to bring our intelligence cooperation out of the closet.’¹⁴

Such urging from the US side, in the wake of the Taepodong launch, amounted to pushing on an open door. Reformers, including a former Chief Cabinet Secretary and intelligence insider, Masaharu Gotoda, and the Defence Agency Vice-Minister Seiki Nishihiro, had recognized the need to create a more robust, effective and independent security and intelligence system in the early 1980s, and their persistent efforts culminated in the creation of a Defence Intelligence Headquarters in January 1997.¹⁵ In September that year, when the United States and Japan updated their defence cooperation guidelines, it became clear that US forces in Japan would no longer play a primary role in repelling military attacks against Japanese territory. Japan’s SDF would now have primary responsibility for conducting operations to counter enemy troops.¹⁶ To make that work, the Hashimoto administration issued a report in December that called for creation of a cabinet secretariat with political appointees who would staff ‘a powerful planning and coordinating body that shall provide direct assistance and support to the Prime Minister . . . [including] planning and drafting of basic policies for the national administration, the cabinet’s basic strategy . . . [and] supreme and ultimate coordination within the government’.¹⁷ Intelligence and policy functions would be separated—a cardinal rule for effective intelligence—and the political leadership of each would be strengthened.¹⁸ Persistent bureaucratic competition and weak political leadership rendered these changes insufficient, however. Smooth, silo-free and autonomous Japanese security policy decision-making remained elusive.

Meanwhile, that open door came off its hinges when, one sunny early autumn morning in 2001, the world changed once again. September 11 was not the first time that non-state actors had terrorized mass publics and upended the security communities dedicated to defending them. In the 1970s, Italy had struggled with the Red Brigades and Germany with the Baader Meinhof Gang. Japan had its own experiences with its Red Army Faction (Sekigunha) in the 1970s and a sarin subway attack by the Aum Shinrikyo religious cult in 1995. But Al-Qaeda’s highly visible and massively destructive successes in New York and Washington had an unprecedented global impact. Now analysts spoke of ‘non-state actors’ as the orphaned offspring of the Cold War, inheritors of the mantle of ‘greatest global

¹⁴ Richard L. Armitage et al., *The United States and Japan: advancing toward a mature partnership* (Washington DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2000), pp. 4–5.

¹⁵ See Akio Kasai, ‘National intelligence in Japan: myth and reality’, in Jin-Hyun Kim and Chung-in Moon, eds, *Post-Cold War, democratization, and national intelligence: a comparative perspective* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1996).

¹⁶ For evolutions of the Guidelines for Japan–US Defence Cooperation since 1978, see the Ministry of Defence’s website: http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/anpo/index.html. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 11 April 2018.)

¹⁷ See Government of Japan, *Final report of the Administrative Reform Council*, 3 Dec. 1997, <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/gyokaku/report-final/>.

¹⁸ Government of Japan, *Final report*, ch. 2.

threat'. When the United States attacked the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Koizumi government in Tokyo acted swiftly—albeit in a limited way—to support the war. Koizumi's strong leadership during a bona fide security crisis was a demonstration that the Japanese decision-making system could change for the better.

It would need to. After 9/11 several terrorist acts were launched at Japanese targets by non-state actors. In April 2004, three Japanese NGO volunteers were kidnapped by Saraya-al-Mujahideen in Iraq. Six months later, a 25-year-old Japanese tourist who had ignored advice not to travel to Iraq was abducted and beheaded by the Islamist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In October 2007, a Yokohama National University student was kidnapped—and then released—in Iran. But the severity of the threat took on special meaning in Japan in January 2013, when ten Japanese workers were kidnapped and murdered at their workplace, a Japanese-owned natural gas plant in Algeria. Washington immediately dispatched a medical team in a C-130 that transported nine released hostages to German hospitals. The British likewise deployed a team of Foreign Office and MI6 agents. Norway brought in its army's special forces medical team as the crisis was still unfolding. But it took Japanese officials four days to arrive at the In Amenas oilfield where the hostages were held.¹⁹ Moreover, Japan's senior political leaders reportedly struggled to ensure that information—from Washington and private businesses—was shared among themselves promptly.²⁰ While such anecdotes are not ideal as evidence of intelligence success and failure, it was clear that the government lacked the capability to anticipate and respond effectively to foreign crises on its own.²¹ The crisis of 2013, taking place just days after Abe became prime minister for the second time, precipitated a renewed effort to reconstruct Japan's foreign and security policy infrastructure.

Finally, and perhaps most menacingly of all, the US military had lost exclusive control of the air and sea near the Chinese coast, a portentous geostrategic shift.²² China was now an acknowledged threat to Japanese security. In 2005, Japan's GDP was roughly twice that of China. By 2013, China's GDP had grown to more than twice that of Japan. Differential economic growth rates impinged directly on Japanese security. In step with economic expansion, Chinese military budgets grew between 2003 and 2013 to some US\$114 billion. Japan's defence budget, in contrast, contracted during this same period and by 2013 was less than half the size of China's.²³ These developments prompted Yoshifumi Hibako, former chief of staff of the Ground Self-Defence Forces, to observe that 'the security environment surrounding Japan now is worse than it was during the Cold War'.²⁴

¹⁹ See press reports in *Mainichi Shimbun*, 21 Jan. 2013; *Asahi Shimbun*, 22 Jan. 2013; *Jiji Press*, 17 Jan. 2013; *Tout sur l'Algérie*, 4 Feb. 2013.

²⁰ *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 28 Nov. 2013.

²¹ See Government of Japan, *Zai arujeria hojin ni taisuru tero jiken no taio ni kansuru kensho iinkai kensho hokokusho* [Report from the review committee on responses by the Japanese government to the terrorist incident against Japanese citizens in Algeria] (Tokyo, 28 Feb. 2013), pp. 5–8. See also press reports in *Mainichi Shimbun*, 21 Jan. 2013; *Asahi Shimbun*, 22 Jan. 2013; *Jiji Press*, 17 Jan. 2013.

²² Eric Heginbotham et al., *The US–China military scorecard: forces, geography, and the evolving balance of power 1996–2017* (Stanford, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015).

²³ Data are from the SIPRI Military Expenditure database: <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

²⁴ *Washington Post*, 15 Feb. 2014.

As the balance of power shifted perceptibly—and in the wake of several highly visible US intelligence failures (including 9/11 itself, and the Iraq WMD fiasco)—Japan, along with many other US allies, began to question whether the United States would (or even could) really sustain its Cold War dominance. This concern was rendered even more acute by Tokyo's own crisis management lapses abroad and failures in disaster relief at home. It seemed clear to many that the time had come to reconstruct Tokyo's security policy-making and intelligence infrastructure. Their answer was the creation of a National Security Council in the cabinet.

Establishing the NSC

Prime Minister Abe had been working on this initiative for years with trusted allies in the LDP and the bureaucracy. The leading champion for intelligence reform was the senior LDP figure and Foreign Minister, Nobutaka Machimura,²⁵ while the lower-profile champion of broader NSC and security policy-making reform was Shotaro Yachi of the foreign ministry, who would become the first secretary-general of Japan's National Security Secretariat (NSS) under the new NSC system. Both had participated energetically in a cascade of commissions and policy studies and had contributed to the drafting of new legislation and formal plans for the nascent NSC.

Machimura began to promote reform of the intelligence community immediately after 9/11 in 2001, while chair of the LDP's general council. In 2005, when he was foreign minister, he assembled a group of distinguished strategic thinkers outside the government to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Japan's intelligence capabilities with an eye to how MOFA's intelligence bureau might better contribute to foreign policy-making. The group's report of September 2005, *Toward the strengthening of external intelligence capabilities*, called on MOFA to train intelligence analysts, generate HUMINT expertise and overhaul its rules on information protection.²⁶ Concurrently, Machimura led an LDP policy research committee which issued a report in June 2006, in the wake of Japanese hostage incidents in Iraq and the suicide of a compromised Japanese consular official in Shanghai, that illuminated the weaknesses in Japan's intelligence community. Its 'proposal on the strengthening of national intelligence capabilities' (*kokka no joho kino kyoka ni kansuru teigen*) called for regular ministerial intelligence meetings at which intelligence requests would be issued and estimates would be presented. To that end, it also called for elevation of the status of Japan's senior intelligence official, the CIRO director, so that he could attend these meetings, to facilitate intelligence-sharing across ministries that have always jealously guarded the information they collect and analyse.

The LDP study also recommended the establishment of a new organization of professional HUMINT officers under the jurisdiction of the CIRO director.

²⁵ Machimura died in June 2015.

²⁶ The report in Japanese is available at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website at http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/17/pdfs/rls_0913a.pdf.

To facilitate this, the report called for a government-wide security clearance system as well as more stringent classification rules. Finally—and remarkably for a conservative group—Machimura's LDP study group called for the creation of a Diet Intelligence Committee to conduct oversight of the intelligence community. Once Machimura became chief cabinet secretary in 2007—but only after protracted internal bickering among ministries and their allied politicians and multiple subsequent official reports—these reforms, apart from those regarding HUMINT, were implemented to his overall satisfaction.²⁷

Yachi, Japan's top professional diplomat during the first Abe administration in 2006–2007 and one of a small number of bureaucrats who enjoyed Abe's full confidence, worked with senior political leaders on the larger issue—creation of the NSC.²⁸ This was an issue about which Abe cared deeply. During the July 2006 North Korean missile crisis, when Abe was Prime Minister Koizumi's chief cabinet secretary, he was in near-daily contact with the US National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley—an experience that made him keenly aware of the need for a parallel Japanese organization to support national security decision-making.²⁹ In particular, Abe became convinced that only centralized political leadership could take the reins out of the hands of bureaucrats.³⁰

But centralizing political leadership of Japan's national security policy-making proved no small task. In late 2006, Prime Minister Abe asked Yuriko Koike, his special adviser on national security, to serve as deputy chair of the Council on the Strengthening of Cabinet Capabilities for National Security Decision Making (Kokka Anzen Hoshō ni Kansuru Kantei Kino Kyōka Kaigi), a body charged with generating a plan for creating an NSC that he would chair. Koike subsequently visited Washington to meet Hadley—to the consternation of Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki, who then took pains to remind Hadley on the phone that he, not Koike, was Hadley's Japanese counterpart.³¹ Such seemingly minor political struggles provided elbow room for bureaucrats determined to protect their prerogatives, which they did with some success.³² The Abe–Koike Council concluded in its February 2007 report that an NSC would 'be the prime minister's advisory organ just like the current Security Council of Japan and will not change jurisdictions of relevant ministries such as MOFA and the Ministry of Defence (MOD)'.³³ The bureaucrats' victory seemed assured when Abe suddenly resigned in September 2007 and political leadership for national security policy reform lost momentum. His successor, Yasuo Fukuda, withdrew the relevant draft legislation altogether.³⁴

²⁷ Author's interview, 4 July 2014; *Sankei Shimbun*, 6 March 2015.

²⁸ *Sankei Shimbun*, 23 Jan. 2007.

²⁹ *Sankei Shimbun*, 28 Aug. 2006.

³⁰ Sunohara Tsuyoshi, *Nihonban NSC to wa nanika* [What is the Japanese NSC?] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 2014), pp. 47–57.

³¹ Sunohara, *Nihonban NSC*, p. 133. See also *Sankei Shimbun*, 21 Dec. 2006; *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 23 Nov. 2006.

³² Sunohara, *Nihonban NSC*, pp. 112–13.

³³ Kokka Anzen Hoshō ni Kansuru Kantei Kino Kyōka Kaigi [Council on the Strengthening of Cabinet Capabilities for National Security Decision Making], *Report*, 27 Feb. 2007, p. 7.

³⁴ Sunohara, *Nihonban NSC*, p. 115. See also *Sankei Shimbun*, 3 June 2008.

But—perhaps to Fukuda's surprise—it appeared that enhancing political leadership and creating a Japanese NSC had broad support across partisan divisions. The 2009 electoral manifesto of the chief opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), famously targeted bureaucrats, sought to reduce US dominance of Japanese policy and promised to create a National Strategy Bureau (Kokka Senryaku Kyoku). Immediately after the DPJ's historic victory in August, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama established a National Strategy Office (NSO; Kokka Senryaku Shitsu) modelled on Britain's Policy Unit, which recruits staff widely from both inside and outside the government.³⁵ But the NSO suffered from a lack of organizational *esprit* and drifted without clear direction from the inexperienced DPJ leadership.³⁶ Hatoyama's successor, Naoto Kan (also of the DPJ), attempted to upgrade the NSO to something resembling what Abe had been pursuing in 2007, hoping it could inject effective discipline into national security decision-making.³⁷ For example, the Kan administration's 2010 National Defence Programme Guidelines stated that 'the Government will establish a body in the Prime Minister's Office which will be responsible for national security policy coordination among relevant ministers and for providing advice to the Prime Minister'. It also called for 'strengthening the information security system that extends across ministries and agencies so as to facilitate information sharing among them'.³⁸

However, the DPJ's defeat in the 2010 elections to the upper house and its crisis management problems after the triple disaster of March 2011 in north-eastern Japan made it difficult for Kan to expedite deliberations regarding what was suddenly a less urgent matter.³⁹ The task was handed down to a DPJ working team on intelligence and the NSC (*interijensu NSC wākingu chīmu*) led by Seiji Maehara, chairman of the Policy Research Council, and Motohiro Ono, a parliamentary vice-minister of defence, which continued work on designing a Japanese NSC in relative obscurity.⁴⁰ While the victory of the Abe-led LDP in the lower house election of December 2012 revived momentum for a Japanese NSC, the DPJ's three-year effort to strengthen security policy decision-making and to centralize it under political leadership paved the way for Abe to move NSC legislation quickly through the Diet.

Indeed, immediately on his return to power in December 2012, Abe called on Yachi, by then in the private sector, to help him resurrect his plans for establishing the NSC.⁴¹ He appointed Yachi to both the Council on Security and Defence Capabilities (Anzen Hoshō to Boeiriyoku ni Kansuru Kondankai) and the Advisory Council on the Establishment of a National Security Council (Kokka Anzenhoshō

³⁵ Sunohara, *Nihonban NSC*, pp. 117–19.

³⁶ *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 25 Aug. 2010.

³⁷ *Sankei Shimbun*, 29 Aug. 2010.

³⁸ Government of Japan, *National Defence Program Guidelines for FY2011 and beyond*, approved by the Security Council and the cabinet on 17 Dec. 2010, p. 6.

³⁹ For more on Kan's travails, see Richard J. Samuels, *3.11: disaster and change in Japan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Naoto Kan, *My nuclear nightmare: leading Japan through the Fukushima disaster to a nuclear-free future* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

⁴⁰ *Sankei Shimbun*, 29 Feb. 2012.

⁴¹ *Sankei Shimbun*, 27 Dec. 2012.

Kaigi no Sosetsu ni Kansuru Yushikisha Kaigi).⁴² These councils studied the US and British models of national security policy decision-making and developed a hybrid model in which a US-style NSC would be supported by a British-style NSS staffed predominantly by secondees from relevant ministries and placed within the cabinet secretariat.

As prime minister, Abe repeatedly underlined the importance of creating a 'control tower' (*shireito*) to improve Japanese foreign and security policy-making by reinforcing the political leadership of the prime minister's office. Reflecting in 2015 on his nearly decade-long effort to create the NSC, Abe acknowledged in the Diet that the government had had persistent difficulty coordinating and communicating intelligence analyses: 'Until now, the various intelligence units have not been coordinated centrally in the service of a jointly shared policy decision.'⁴³ This is why, after considerable study and debate, a formal cabinet decision in June 2013 called for an NSC that would implement an 'All Japan' policy process to maximize communication of intelligence to policy-makers on the topics they requested, and minimize debilitating competition across ministries. The intelligence function would be enlarged, but it would be more clearly in service of the policy function. As one government document envisioned it, 'policy and intelligence have to be independent of one another and separated under Cabinet leadership that collateralizes [*tanpo suru*]' both.⁴⁴ A top priority in the creation of the NSC was to 'strengthen the connection between intelligence and policy functions'.⁴⁵ 'Cabinet Intelligence Officer' positions (*naikaku joho bunsekikan*) created in CIRO in 2008 would further strengthen 'all-source analysis' capabilities, and new guidelines were issued to improve intelligence collection, analysis and communication.

Designs for the new system evolved through iterative deliberative councils and their reports, until final legislation was passed by the Diet in December 2013. The result was three layers of ministerial meetings. The first and by far the most important among the three, a twice monthly four-minister meeting, is attended by the prime minister (in the chair), the minister of foreign affairs, the minister of defence and the chief cabinet secretary. It is tasked with discussing and deciding a fundamental medium- and long-term direction for a broad range of foreign and defence policies—a new responsibility that neither the NDC nor the SCJ had assumed. The second layer is a nine-minister meeting attended by the same four ministers plus five more, who deliberate on the basic principles of national defence and other issues previously under the SCJ's jurisdiction.⁴⁶ And the third is an emergency situations ministerial meeting, which brings together the prime minister, the chief cabinet secretary and any number of relevant ministries selected

⁴² *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 9 Feb. 2013.

⁴³ *Kokkai kaigiroku* [Diet records], House of Councillors Budget Committee, Session 189, no. 4, 5 Feb. 2015.

⁴⁴ *Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi no Sosetsu ni kansuru Yushikisha Kaigi* [National Security Council of Japan], 'Wagakuni no joho kino ni tsuite' [Regarding Japan's intelligence functions], *Daisankai Kaigo Setsumei Shiryo* [Handouts for the third meeting], 29 March 2013, p. 4.

⁴⁵ *Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi no Sosetsu ni kansuru Yushikisha Kaigi*, ed., 'Wagakuni no joho kino ni tsuite', p. 5.

⁴⁶ See Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku*, pp. 18–19. The other five ministries represented in the nine-minister meetings are those of internal affairs; finance; economy, trade and industry; land infrastructure, transport and tourism; and the Public Safety Commission.

by the prime minister on a case-by-case basis according to the nature of the crisis. While handling emergency situations was also part of the SCJ's responsibilities, one noteworthy innovation is that the new NSC now allows senior military officers to participate in emergency situations meetings at the invitation of the prime minister.⁴⁷

Since the creation of the NSC was clearly prompted by the perceived threat from China, Beijing reacted predictably.⁴⁸ The *China Daily* declared that the NSC was a step along the path towards 'strengthening Japanese military capabilities', and reported Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei's reminder that 'for historical reasons, all Asian countries pay great attention to Japan's military and security moves' and his exhortation to Tokyo that it 'respect the security concerns of neighbouring countries in East Asia'.⁴⁹ Experts discussing the NSC in the Chinese Communist Party daily, *Renmin Ribao*, argued (without any hint of irony) that creation of the NSC was an attempt by Prime Minister Abe 'to monopolize leadership'. One suggested that this signalled the rise of Japan's 'extreme right'; another expressed concern regarding the possibility that Abe might try to 'establish a 'dictatorship' with a 'strong army'.⁵⁰

The NSC in operation

In sharp contrast to the SCJ, its predecessor, the NSC has met very frequently. In its first three years, it was convened more than 121 times—92 four-minister meetings and 29 nine-minister meetings.⁵¹ These meetings have legitimized the new structure by infusing the security policy process with both consistency and relevance—and, because they are chaired by the prime minister, with authority as well. Whereas the SCJ had been regarded as a 'rubber stamp', NSC meetings have examined some of Japan's most immediately pressing policy issues, starting with China's unilateral declaration of its Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), maritime security in the East China Sea, North Korean missile and nuclear testing, and Russian behaviour in Ukraine.

NSC meetings are supported by the NSS, the new gatekeeping inter-agency unit responsible for collecting and assessing intelligence from across the government on topics assigned by the NSC and then for presenting policy options to the political leadership. The NSS is led by a secretary-general, who reports directly to the prime minister, two deputy secretaries-general (concurrently assistant chief cabinet secretaries) and three cabinet councillors. When the NSS was inaugurated,

⁴⁷ Hiroshi Nakanishi, 'Reorienting Japan? Security transformation under the second Abe cabinet', *Asian Perspectives* 39: 3, 2015, pp. 405–422, at p. 406.

⁴⁸ *Kyodo's* headline was not subtle: 'Japan launches US style NSC with eyes on China'. See *Kyodo World Service*, 4 Dec. 2013. Note too that PM Abe told a Diet session that the Council would address the disparities in Chinese and Japanese military capabilities in its first session. See *Fiji Press*, 4 Dec. 2013.

⁴⁹ *Xinhua*, 4 Dec. 2013.

⁵⁰ *Renmin Ribao* (overseas edition) online, 28 Nov. 2013, <http://english.people.com.cn/90786/8469725.html>.

⁵¹ For dates and topics for previous NSC meetings, see Government of Japan, *Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi kaisai jokyo* [The National Security Council previous meetings], <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/anzenhoshoyoukaigi/kaisai.html>.

these councillors were recruited from MOFA, MOD and the Air Self-Defence Force. Six policy units/teams were organized to supervise policy coordination and planning, including one unit for overall management, three regional teams, one for strategic planning and one for communication with the intelligence community.⁵² The entire operation is remarkably trim by US or British standards. None of these units has more than 19 professionals, and most have fewer than ten. Security policy experience became the *sine qua non* for recruitment. So, despite a history of repeated—albeit unsuccessful—efforts stretching back to the early 1950s to include as political appointees security experts from outside the government, there would be no room for Japanese equivalents of Robert McNamara, Henry Kissinger or Zbigniew Brzezinski. Its rank-and-file positions are filled by career officials from the existing ministries and agencies, principally from MOD, MOFA and the NPA.⁵³

The NSC's architects were determined to mitigate the problem of siloed jurisdictions by all possible means. To this end, the NSS was given express and formal authority to gather intelligence once kept within protected ministerial channels for the prime minister.⁵⁴ Putting the best face on this past and potential problem, Prime Minister Abe testified to the House of Councillors in February 2015 that the new unit would stimulate creation of a 'wide network' of intelligence officials who would operate in an environment of trust, with confidence in the security of the information they would share. He expressed his confidence that the analyses of each of the component agencies would be shared with, consolidated through, and coordinated in the new NSS.⁵⁵ In a system famous for jurisdictional competition—and in a domain in which secrecy is paramount—establishing this level of mutual trust and a norm of cooperation is a far from trivial challenge. MOFA has to come to accept a policy role for MOD, and both will have to find more productive ways to engage with the NPA—and vice versa. Meanwhile, some organization charts continue to show direct lines between ministries and the senior political leadership, suggesting that each of Japan's subministerial intelligence units—within the NPA, MOFA, MOD, etc.—may still enjoy direct reporting lines to top cabinet officials which may enable them to circumvent the NSS.⁵⁶

The relationship between CIRO, whose director has always been an NPA secondee recognized as director of cabinet intelligence, and the new NSS, which has assumed many of CIRO's collection and analysis functions, is another potential locus of bureaucratic infighting. Under the new arrangement, the NSS is

⁵² The first regional team covers ASEAN, Australia, Europe, India and North America; the second is responsible for north-east Asia and Russia; and the third focuses on Africa, Central and South America, and the Middle East. The NSS consists of about 70 staff members, about 30 from MOD, about 20 from MOFA and some from other agencies including the Cabinet Office, NPA, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), Ministry of Finance (MOF) and others. See PHP Institute, ed., *Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi: hyōka to teigen* [National Security Council: evaluation and proposal] (Tokyo, 26 Nov. 2015), p. 33.

⁵³ *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 4 Feb. 2014; *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 26 Feb. 2014.

⁵⁴ Partial Amendment of the Act for the Establishment of the Security Council of Japan, last revised 30 Sept. 2015, art. 6.

⁵⁵ *Kokkai kaigiroku* [Diet records], House of Councillors Budget Committee, Session 189, no. 4, 5 Feb. 2015, p. 37.

⁵⁶ *Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi no Sosetsu ni kansuru Yushikisha Kaigi*, ed., 'Wagakuni no joho kino ni tsuite', p. 2.

responsible for the flow of information between the political leadership and the intelligence community. It relays NSC requests to CIRO and other members of the intelligence community, and integrates CIRO reports with information from other agencies and ministries.⁵⁷ Yet CIRO and NSS are placed alongside each other in the cabinet secretariat's organizational chart and CIRO maintains formal responsibility for collecting intelligence and conducting all-source analysis, reporting directly to the political leadership if necessary.⁵⁸ This invites additional confusion that is compounded by reports that NSS staff members, instead of relying on CIRO and other intelligence organizations, such as MOFA's Intelligence and Analysis Service, actively cultivate foreign intelligence sources themselves.⁵⁹ In fact, it was NSS, not CIRO, that received intelligence reports directly from the United States regarding North Korea's alleged cyber attack on Sony Pictures Entertainment in November 2014.⁶⁰

While the situation may improve over time as more government officials move to work for the NSS and then return to their home ministries, some of the problems associated with bureaucratic turf battles and unclear channels of communication between politicians and bureaucrats may persist. Given the legacy of mistrust across units, it may be difficult for the NSS, where MOFA officials are among the dominant groups in management positions, to place full confidence in intelligence reports from CIRO, which has been dominated by the NPA.⁶¹ In fact, it is the NSS intelligence section that is handling day-to-day communication to convey policy-makers' intelligence requests and provide NSS feedback on reports from intelligence organizations.⁶² The way this section is staffed—with personnel seconded from the MOD, MOFA, NPA and PSIA—suggests there exist plenty of opportunities to bypass CIRO. In practice, according to one senior government official, most information, including military intelligence, is reported to the NSS through each ministry's policy bureaux.⁶³ Only in rare cases, where intelligence reports include extremely sensitive information such as unmasked intelligence sources or data undermining current policy that no ministry has an incentive to report, might the heads of intelligence organizations bypass the NSS and report directly to the political leadership.⁶⁴ Should this occur frequently—or should other independent 'pipelines' be activated—the system will be undermined, especially when, as is likely, the reports contradict one another.

⁵⁷ *Kokkai kaigi-roku* [Diet records], House of Councillors, Special Committee on the National Security, Session 185, no. 2, 13 Nov. 2013.

⁵⁸ Author's interview, senior government official, 3 July 2014. See also *Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi no Sosetsu ni kansuru Yushikisha Kaigi*, ed., 'Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi ni tsuite' [Regarding the National Security Council] and 'Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi (NSC) ni okeru jōho no nagare (imēji)' [The flow of information at the National Security Council], *Dairokkai Kaigo Setsumei Shiryo* [Handouts for the sixth meeting], 28 May 2013.

⁵⁹ *Sankei Shimbun*, 8 Jan. 2015.

⁶⁰ *Asahi Shimbun*, 8 Jan. 2015.

⁶¹ In addition to the NSC director-general, who is a former MOFA official, one of the two deputy directors-general, one of the three councillors and two of the six director-level policy section chiefs are also MOFA appointees.

⁶² PHP Institute, ed., *Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi*, pp. 40–41.

⁶³ Author's interview, senior government official, 29 June 2015.

⁶⁴ Author's interview, senior government official, 29 June 2015.

Any remaining lack of clarity regarding jurisdictional boundaries may also undercut the authority of the NSS. For example, when the International Counter-Terrorism Intelligence Collection Unit (Kokusai Tero Joho Shushu Yunitto) was established in December 2015, it was placed in MOFA's Foreign Policy Bureau under the direct management of the deputy chief cabinet secretary, a position long occupied by a senior NPA official.⁶⁵ There are already reports that the NSS may not be receiving all this unit's HUMINT-sourced intelligence.⁶⁶ Likewise, the NSC ad hoc internal working group that prepared security legislation to legalize collective self-defence in 2014 stepped on the toes of the Office of the Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary (for Emergency Response and Crisis Management), which had long been drafting security legislation.⁶⁷ Compounding the problem, in taking on this task the NSC legal team had to rely upon scarce NSS resources over an extended period of time, which could have led to a major crisis management failure had there been a military emergency.⁶⁸

The January 2015 hostage incident in Syria, in which the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) beheaded two Japanese journalists, is also suggestive of this problem. The NSC convened its four-minister meeting at least three times to discuss Japan's response to ISIS demands, and Secretary-General Yachi and Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga played central roles in coordinating relevant ministries. But handling this kind of hostage incident still falls primarily under the jurisdiction of the deputy chief cabinet secretary for crisis (naikaku kiki kanri kan). While there is no public evidence that the NSS is proactively coordinating policy on critical issues, such as cyber security, space strategy, energy security or foreign aid, that could similarly impinge on others' responsibilities, it is likely to be engaged in these (or other) grey areas that could further stretch NSS resources and undermine the original goal for which the NSC was created. In short, haphazard decisions by political leaders to involve the NSC may be accompanied by unintended costs, including jurisdictional confusion and the inefficient use of precious resources.

The NSC is also expected to enhance the government's capacity to respond to crises in real time by convening nine-minister or emergency situations ministerial meetings. Responses to North Korean missile and nuclear testing, to Chinese provocations in the East and South China Seas, and to disasters requiring relief activities are just some of the emergency issues with which it has had to deal soon after its creation and in real time.⁶⁹

NSC meetings have also focused on international crises in which Japan does not have obvious interests, for example President Trump's instruction of April 2017 to

⁶⁵ Author's interview, senior government official, 19 Jan. 2016. See also *Sankei Shimbun*, 22 May 2015, 14 Aug. 2015, 5 Dec. 2015.

⁶⁶ *Asahi Shimbun*, 24 Nov. 2015.

⁶⁷ This office had been responsible for both national security policies and crisis management until 2014 when, in accordance with art. 17 of the Revised Cabinet Act, part of its staff specializing in security policies was moved to the NSS, leaving it with little legal and security policy expertise.

⁶⁸ PHP Institute, ed., *Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi*, pp. 44–5.

⁶⁹ For more on the NSC's role in 'real-time' crisis management, see Adam P. Liff and Andrew S. Erickson, 'From management crisis to crisis management? Japan's post-2012 institutional reforms and Sino-Japanese crisis (in) stability', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40: 5, 10 March 2017, pp. 604–638.

launch Tomahawk cruise missiles against a Syrian air base from which chemical weapons had been allegedly delivered upon the civilian population. Prime Minister Abe's quick decision to support the US missile strike was connected by the government to the more immediate threat to Japan from North Korea. Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga told reporters after an NSC meeting that 'the proliferation and use of weapons of mass destruction . . . is not a problem in Syria alone. It could also occur in North Korea.'⁷⁰

Many believe that the main mission of the new NSC, however, is not *real-time* crisis management but *medium- and long-term* policy planning, because this is what the newly created four-minister meeting has mainly been tasked with. It began contributing in this domain immediately. The NSC oversaw production of postwar Japan's first formal National Security Strategy; it was central in generating the most recent National Defence Programme Guidelines; it served as Washington's counterpart in the drafting of the Japan–US Defence Cooperation Guidelines in April 2015; it was where the relaxation of Japan's self-imposed restrictions on weapons exports was outlined in 2014; and it was where the current Mid-Term Defence Programme was compiled. Much of the NSC's medium- and long-term planning has been facilitated by regular meetings between Yachi and his US counterparts—from Rice to Flynn to McMaster to Bolton—modelled on the successful '2+2' senior consultative committee meetings between Japanese and US defence and foreign ministers. The government of Japan has also used this 2+2 formula for consultations with India, the United Kingdom and even Russia. These connections are optimized in emergencies by NSC hotlines between Tokyo and Washington, and Tokyo and London, relieving the chief cabinet secretary and his or her aides from sole responsibility for security and crisis coordination with friendly nations.⁷¹ Before 2018 its most important long-term contribution was undoubtedly the role it played in convening the interministerial discussions that led to draft legislation on the exercise of collective defence, which sparked one of postwar Japan's most strongly contested Diet debates in 2015.⁷² Then, in January 2018, the government announced that the NSC would be responsible for crafting the next medium-term defence buildup plan (2019–23). This could enable the prime minister to set procurement targets that are driven more by national policy than by budget logics negotiated by the finance and defence ministries.⁷³

Conclusion

It is surely too soon to judge with certainty whether the NSC will produce all that is sought and expected from it. The history of intelligence and security policy-making reform everywhere is, after all, littered with failures that have stimulated

⁷⁰ *Jiji Press*, 7 April 2017; *Nikkei Asian Review*, 8 April 2017.

⁷¹ There were plans to follow these links with similar hotlines to Berlin, Canberra, New Delhi and Paris: *Nikkei Telecom*, 3 Dec. 2013.

⁷² Yuichi Hosoya, 'The role of Japan's National Security Council', *Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies—Commentary*, no. 199, 17 June 2014.

⁷³ 'Japan's NSC to control defence buildup plan, giving PM more say', *Kyodo World Service*, 7 Jan. 2018.

subsequent reforms. Failure-inspired reorganizations—usually resulting from exhaustive studies by blue ribbon panels and/or legislative oversight bodies in democratic systems—have led ironically to the enlargement of security apparatuses more often than to their contraction. Indeed, the expansion of the intelligence and security policy community may be the most impressive example of rewarded failure in the history of public policy.⁷⁴

That said, many early evaluations of the NSC have been positive. Professor Hiroshi Nakanishi credited Prime Minister Abe with undertaking ‘more security and defence reforms than any previous Prime Minister’, and said that he has ‘changed the doctrinal, institutional, and legal frameworks of Japanese security and defence policy’.⁷⁵ Officials declared themselves pleased by ‘surprising levels of effectiveness and interministerial cooperation’.⁷⁶ Some observed that the perennial problem of departmental proprietariness has been alleviated to some extent, partly because the NSS now enjoys legal authority to compel other ministries to share relevant information, a power never enjoyed by CIRO or any other predecessor. A Diet member in the ruling coalition suggests approvingly, but with tongue in cheek, that the NSS had effectively become the ‘Primary Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ (Daichi Gaimusho).⁷⁷ Even the centre-left *Asahi Shimbun* wrote sympathetically a year after the NSC’s establishment that the new body had played positive roles in decisions regarding a missing Malaysian aircraft and the crisis in Ukraine.⁷⁸ Although there are no public records of NSC meetings, Prime Minister Abe reportedly praised the NSC’s performance during a four-minister meeting in December 2014, remarking that ‘relevant information is now better sorted out and easier to understand’.⁷⁹

There is certainly evidence to support these affirmations. We are told that, because the NSS is established at a level higher than ministries in the government hierarchy, MOFA and MOD—which have had coordination problems for much of the last half-century—now work together effectively in this new context.⁸⁰ Another official confirmed this, adding that the NSC has dramatically increased the speed with which the Japanese government is able to make decisions on national security issues.⁸¹ Independent data are scarce, but we observe that at the NSC’s four-minister meeting convened on a Japanese holiday in December 2014, an unprecedented decision was made quickly—and without the customary handwringing—to transfer ammunition from SDF troops deployed in South Sudan to South Korean troops.⁸² In comparison, in late November 2013, before the NSC was established, it took the government three days to convene a meeting

⁷⁴ This astute evaluation is taken from Ariel Levite, *Intelligence and strategic surprises* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 18–19.

⁷⁵ Nakanishi, ‘Reorienting Japan?’, p. 406.

⁷⁶ Author’s interview, senior government officials, 14 Dec. 2015.

⁷⁷ *Sankei Shimbun*, 14 June 2014.

⁷⁸ *Asahi Shimbun*, 8 Jan. 2015.

⁷⁹ *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 9 Jan. 2015.

⁸⁰ Author’s interview, senior government official, 29 June 2015.

⁸¹ Author’s interview, senior government official, 3 July 2014.

⁸² *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 8 Jan. 2014.

to decide on a counter-measure to China's unilateral declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone, resulting in major Japanese airlines acting contrary to national policy and following directions from Chinese authorities.⁸³

The NSC has also been credited with contributing to formulating a strategy⁸⁴ to deal with Russia, one of Japan's longest-standing diplomatic problems. NSC principals faced two contradictory policy imperatives: on the one hand, pursuing a breakthrough in the longstanding Russo-Japanese dispute over the Northern Territories as a way to keep Russia from getting too close to China; and, on the other, the need to condemn Moscow's grab of Crimea and proxy war in eastern Ukraine to demonstrate solidarity with the United States and other western powers. The NSC is also credited with attempts to normalize Japan's relations with its other neighbours, China and South Korea. Its deliberations paved the way for regular dialogues between Japan and China, beginning with a November 2014 meeting between Abe and President Xi, the first Sino-Japanese summit in years.⁸⁵ Regarding South Korea, the NSC helped refine policy options on the 'comfort women' issue, leading to the December 2015 agreement between Seoul and Tokyo that the principals claimed—mistakenly—would resolve the issue once and for all.⁸⁶ In short, no major foreign or security policy issue has failed to engage the new organization in the three and half years since its inauguration.

That said—as we have argued above—problems remain. Japanese intelligence and strategic decision-making is still hampered by limited capacity. In July 2016, for example, a terrorist attack in Bangladesh left seven Japanese nationals dead. This evoked for many memories of the January 2013 hostage crisis in Algeria, because once again the Japanese government found itself unable to collect sufficient intelligence in real time or to intervene effectively to protect its citizens. In his press briefing after the murder of the seven Japanese citizens in Bangladesh, Minister of Foreign Affairs Fumio Kishida seemed implicitly to acknowledge that the Japanese government had largely been operating in the dark.⁸⁷ Obviously, one should not conflate Japan's HUMINT deficiencies with the NSC's administrative problems, but a weak intelligence capability makes it more difficult for the NSC to achieve the larger strategic goal of reducing dependence on the United States while strengthening the alliance.

Evaluating the NSC's performance requires more than a catalogue of specific cases of success and failure; its record has to be set in fuller historical and functional context. The NSC's creation may be just the latest in a series of doomed efforts by several generations of postwar leaders of all governing parties to establish political control of Japan's elite and powerful, but divided, bureaucracy.⁸⁸ LDP Prime

⁸³ *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 12 Dec. 2013.

⁸⁴ See James D. J. Brown's article in the special issue, James D. J. Brown, 'Japan's security cooperation with Russia: neutralizing the threat of a China–Russia united front', *International Affairs* 94: 4, July 2018, pp. 861–82, above/below.

⁸⁵ *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 17 July 2015.

⁸⁶ *Asahi Shimbun*, 6 June 2016; *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 4 Dec. 2015; author's interview, senior government official, 28 Dec. 2015.

⁸⁷ Press conference, 3 July 2016. See http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken3e_000015.html.

⁸⁸ See also Liff and Erickson, 'From management crisis to crisis management?'.

Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto engineered a frontal assault on financial market regulators in 1998, and Junichiro Koizumi dealt more indirectly with some of his diplomats in 2003 when he ordered troops to be dispatched to the Middle East. For their part, DPJ prime ministers tried unsuccessfully to eliminate the vice-ministerial councils as a locus of policy-making. Institutional change to rationalize, integrate and gain political control of the mutually insular components of an always fractious (some would say fratricidal) security policy process—while simultaneously coordinating with allies and consolidating political leadership—will require sustained political leadership of a sort that the Japanese system only intermittently generates.

In this sense, it may be that both the greatest successes and the potentially most debilitating weaknesses of the new arrangement are connected to Secretary-General Yachi's exceptional access to Prime Minister Abe, as well as to his *de facto* authority over MOFA senior officials—most of whom are his former subordinates. If so, the NSC's future performance will be contingent on whether the government can find successors to Mr Yachi who are similarly empowered to ignore the special pleading by powerful ministries whose jurisdictions may be challenged and whose policy roles may occasionally be trespassed upon by the NSS. Weaker trust between the prime minister and Yachi's successors could easily revive bureaucratic infighting, especially between the NSS and CIRO, and between MOD and MOFA. This is indicated by the currently unclear demarcation of responsibilities for all-source intelligence analyses, blurred boundaries for NSS responsibilities, and the possibility of competition between the NSS director-general and the special adviser to the prime minister in charge of national security. We know from Japan's long history of ineffective bureaucratic reforms that efficient and ordered flows of information and swift decision-making cannot be guaranteed so long as powerful ministries maintain direct reporting lines to the prime minister. For the present, then, we note the possibility that NSC successes in the short term may be contingent on two factors: the level of trust vested by the political leadership in those who control the new unit; and whether this trust can be transformed into the institutional consolidation of the NSC as the preferred venue for effective decision-making.

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