

# The Myth of LDP Dominance under Abe: Komeito, Coalition Politics, and Why It Matters for Japan's Security Policy

Adam P. Liff \*

Since Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's impressive political resurrection in late 2012—following three rare years for his conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in the political wilderness—the LDP-Komeito ruling coalition has steamrolled a fractious opposition to five consecutive national election victories. Coming immediately on the heels of a “revolving door” of a half-dozen prime ministers in six years (2006–2012), Abe's now six-year-old administration stands out as exceptionally stable. He is already Japan's longest-serving prime minister since 1972. Despite major headwinds owing to a festering scandal concerning a discounted sale of public land to a controversial private academy with ties to the first family, the ruling coalition's “landslide” October 2017 election result prompted the latest round of influential commentary declaring that Abe is Japan's “strongest and most successful leader in the postwar era.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the LDP's repeated electoral success under Abe, together with his own prime ministership's longevity and relatively stable popularity since 2012, appear to have given his administration a powerful mandate

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to carry out his ambitious agenda: including pushing through major economic structural reforms, transforming Japan's security and foreign policy, and amending for the first time Japan's 1947 constitution's Article 9 "Peace Clause"—which renounces war and the threat or use of force to settle international disputes.<sup>2</sup>

No stranger to bold rhetoric, in the foreign policy domain Abe early on declared that "Japan is back" as a "first-tier nation." Throughout his tenure and repeatedly this spring, he has called revision of Japan's never-amended constitution an "historic task" necessary for "national rebirth" and an end to the post-war "regime" he and many fellow conservative LDP Diet members have long identified as shackling Japan since World War II.<sup>3</sup> With the 2020 Olympics rapidly approaching, on constitutional revision and other key policy priorities Abe has deemed 2018 "a year of action."<sup>4</sup>

Yet if one looks beyond the headlines and rhetoric to focus instead on the ability of Abe and his allies to implement its coveted policy priorities, especially in the security domain, the domestic political constraints on the administration appear far more significant than much of the public discourse about Abe's and LDP "strength" would suggest. Significant concessions made thus far on matters central to his national security agenda, such as collective self-defense, coupled with the fact that Abe continues to proceed so cautiously on constitutional revision and other core objectives the LDP has championed and campaigned on for, literally, decades, carry significant policy implications. That the administration's chary approach persists today despite Abe enjoying the ruling coalition's Lower House supermajority – now maintained over two election cycles —and a supra-partisan super-majority of "pro-constitutional revision forces" in the Upper House since 2016 presents a clear puzzle.

After nearly six years in power, and despite a now five-time electoral renewal of what appears to be a powerful domestic political mandate, what explains the Abe government's inability to achieve constitutional

revision and a more radical security policy reform agenda the prime minister transparently covets?

The question is hardly academic: Understanding the less conspicuous domestic political headwinds his government confronts on the security front is critical to assessing the significance of his administration so far, as well as prospects for major change in the years ahead. In particular, with imperial abdication (April 2019) and the 2020 Olympics over the horizon, if he wants to revise Article 9 to enable more fundamental security policy reforms—a goal he has expressed repeatedly—Abe is running out of time, *even if* he survives his current political difficulties and is elected to a third term as LDP president in September.<sup>5</sup>

In deciding whether and how to move forward, Abe faces one of the most significant domestic political dilemmas of his career.<sup>6</sup> Central to his calculations will be one inconspicuous yet hugely important factor: Komeito, the LDP's small and pacifist junior coalition partner, which enjoys significant leverage over Abe's (much) larger party on key issues greatly exceeding its actual Diet strength.

## **A Deceptively Limited Mandate**

Abe's second prime ministership has coincided with gradual but transformative changes to Japan's strategic environment. According to Abe, "the security environment surrounding Japan is its most severe since World War II."<sup>7</sup> The administration's most urgent concern is North Korea's rapidly advancing nuclear weapons and missile programs, including missile testing that has accelerated significantly under Kim Jong Un. In 2017, Pyongyang threatened to strike Japan and U.S. bases in the region; carried out its first-ever test of a thermonuclear weapon; tested two ICBMs it claimed could hit Washington, D.C.; and launched missiles both into Japan's exclusive economic zone and which overflowed Japanese territory. Beyond North Korea, seen from Tokyo other security concerns also challenge Japan's current policies, in particular: China's growing military and

paramilitary (especially coast guard) capabilities and apparent willingness to use operational and economic levers to coerce Japan and other neighbors, and qualitatively new security threats in the gray zone, cyber, and space domains.

These external developments, in turn, have accelerated a longer-term post-cold war trend significantly predating Abe: the gradual opening of domestic political space as the long-time major anti-LDP political forces have shifted from a more ideological, pacifist left to a moderate, pragmatic center-left. This shift manifests itself most conspicuously in support across the major political parties—including from the (now defunct) erstwhile leading opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) during its three years in power (2009–2012)—for evolutionary expansion of the roles, missions, capabilities, and authorities for Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), within and beyond a U.S.-Japan alliance context.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, under Abe these trends have enabled important security policy shifts. Since 2012, chief among these is the Cabinet’s successful effort to push through a 2014 “reinterpretation” of Article 9 to allow “limited” exercise of collective self-defense, effectively overturning sixty years of government policy.<sup>9</sup> This shift, in turn, paved the way for a major package of security legislation in 2015, which came into effect the following year.<sup>10</sup> Faced with a rapidly changing regional security picture, to many security experts in Tokyo and Washington such changes to Japan’s security posture are long overdue.<sup>11</sup>

Such global headline-making developments are undoubtedly significant in any practical sense. Yet often lost in the noise are two important signals: First, practically speaking, these changes are incremental; evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Major, largely self-imposed constraints on Japan’s ability to develop JSDF capabilities, much less allow it to employ kinetic force, within and beyond an alliance context, persist.<sup>12</sup> Second, Abe and his allies have repeatedly dialed back their policy ambitions owing to intense political pushback, often behind the scenes. The resulting

policy concessions, in turn, expose a significant political reality: that the administration enjoys a far weaker political mandate than the idea of Abe as a dominant leader or the LDP's post-2012 success in national elections would suggest. Domestic politics has repeatedly compelled pragmatic and practically significant restraint—even on the administration's top policy priorities.

With actual *revision* of Article 9—a fundamental objective of the LDP since its 1955 establishment—now on the docket for 2018, understanding the roots of the administration's cautiousness is crucial to assessing prospects for major change.

### **Coalition Politics and Komeito's Constraining Role**

Fundamental to the political calculations informing the Abe administration's cautious approach on security policy and constitutional revision has been its junior coalition partner: Komeito.

In a fateful, opportunistic step aimed at ending a divided Diet in 1999, the conservative LDP controversially invited Komeito, its ideological, political, and pacifist nemesis theretofore, to rule in coalition.<sup>13</sup> Excluding the three years both were in the wilderness (2009–2012), this political odd couple has governed Japan ever since—in a remarkably stable coalition, and with extremely close cooperation in every national election campaign. Continuing into the Abe era, the benefits for both are clear. Most recently, in last October's election, the coalition partners retained a two-thirds supermajority in the powerful Lower House.

Remarkably, despite Abe's LDP consistently accounting for over 85 percent of the coalition's Diet strength, less than 3 percent of Japanese voters identifying Komeito as their party of choice, and Komeito politicians averaging less than 7 percent of Lower House Diet seats, the smaller party has repeatedly extracted hugely consequential policy concessions (see below) from its ostensibly dominate senior coalition partner. As noted

above, this remarkable deference has continued despite five consecutive and decisive national election victories under Abe's leadership, to say nothing of the LDP's single party Lower House majority (currently 61 percent of seats).

Why, exactly, does Abe's LDP, unabashedly revisionist on constitutional and security matters, continue to tolerate a costly coalition with the pacifistic, status-quo-oriented Komeito—a small minority party which repeatedly frustrates its policy ambitions?

Though the LDP numerically dominates the coalition's Diet seats, not widely appreciated outside Japan is that a significant minority of LDP Diet members actually depend on Komeito to get elected. The net effect of this electoral dependence is that the much larger LDP faces powerful intra-coalition headwinds when its own policy objectives clash with those of its junior coalition partner. Given Komeito's largely lay-Buddhist, pacifist base, security affairs (especially Article 9) are particularly salient issues to party leaders. The net effect is that despite its size, Komeito can punch significantly above its weight in intra-coalition negotiations on defense matters—in key cases effectively exercising a virtual veto behind-the-scenes.

The specific secret to Komeito's disproportionate influence lies in a strange electoral codependence induced by Japan's electoral system, as well as the party's unique ability to rally its supporters to the polls. Here's the rub: Over the past two decades, these strange political bedfellows have become so reliant on mutual stand-down agreements for their candidates to get elected in single-member districts that a critical mass of each party's Diet members would probably be out of a job without the other's help. Case-in-point: in the critical 2014 general election immediately prior to the Abe government's major overhaul of security legislation the following year, votes from Komeito supporters in single-member districts where the smaller party agreed not to run a candidate put as many as fifty-nine LDP candidates over the top.<sup>14</sup>

## Why LDP-Komeito Codependence Matters for Japan's Security Policy

As noted above, this electoral dependence on Komeito can be particularly costly to Abe and the LDP on issues highly salient to Komeito's pacifistic support base: above all, security policy.

Komeito's ability to tie the LDP's hands in the security domain is not new. It has manifested previously when past LDP prime ministers pursued major, unprecedented security policy shifts—e.g., efforts to enable Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) participation in peacekeeping operations in the 1990s, before the coalition even existed, or as the Koizumi administration sought ways to “show the flag” in support of U.S. military operations after 9/11.<sup>15</sup>

But as electoral cooperation has deepened in the new millennium, candidates from each party have become increasingly reliant on support from the other's supporters.<sup>16</sup> One consequence is that since 2012 Komeito has become the most direct force compelling Abe and his allies to significantly dial back their most high-profile security policy ambitions. Without Komeito support in 2014, for example, the LDP probably would not have had the single party-majority that granted it crucial leverage over summer 2015's historic, controversial security legislation.<sup>17</sup> Less conspicuously, concessions to Komeito behind-the-scenes appear to have significantly watered down the historic 2014 Cabinet Resolution “reinterpreting” Japan's constitution to allow limited exercise of collective self-defense. A more recent case is Abe's formal plan—first announced in May 2017—for revising Article 9 by 2020.<sup>18</sup>

In the former instance, LDP-Komeito negotiations behind-the-scenes deboned the 2014 Cabinet Resolution formally “reinterpreting” Article 9 to enable “collective self-defense” operations: basically, the UN Charter-sanctioned right to use force to aid an ally suffering armed attack. So significant were LDP concessions that Abe, ignoring the recommendation

of his own advisory panel, abandoned a push to allow collective security operations (à la Operation Desert Storm in the 1991 Persian Gulf War). Meanwhile, lost in the noise regarding the fact of the Abe government's reinterpretation itself was the signal of its actual substance: Abe's original goal—rendering constitutional full exercise of Japan's collective self-defense right under international law—proved politically infeasible. More to the point—what emerged was an enabling of a “limited” exercise of collective self-defense severely limited by three internationally exceptional, strict conditions heavily shaped by Komeito.<sup>19</sup>

In the case of Abe administration's Article 9 revision proposal, despite years of talk and the centrality to the LDP's platform since 1955 of fundamental rewriting of Article 9, what Abe ultimately proposed in May 2017 shocked key leaders in his own party for its lack of ambition and the extent to which it bore no resemblance to the LDP's own 2012 proposal—negotiated when they were in the opposition (and out of coalition with Komeito).<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Abe's 2017 proposal bore an uncanny resemblance to a Komeito party proposal from 2004. Abandoning (at least for now) a sixty-year-old LDP goal of fundamentally revising Article 9 itself, Abe ultimately called only for the addition of a *new* third clause merely recognizing the constitutionality of Japan's sixty-four-year-old Self-Defense Forces. Shigeru Ishiba, a multi-time cabinet minister and—most likely—one of Abe's leading challengers for the LDP presidency this September, has openly opposed the plan, judging it a major departure from the party's longstanding position on constitutional revision.<sup>21</sup> In case there was any doubt why things played out this way, Abe reportedly explained his decision not to even attempt to eliminate Article 9's second clause as due to Komeito resistance, stating “It would never get through Komeito. It's impossible.”<sup>22</sup>

Even despite Abe's effective adoption of Komeito's own Article 9 revision proposal, recent reports suggest Komeito is nevertheless slow-walking the constitutional revision effort.<sup>23</sup>

These two high-profile policy concessions are remarkable not only because of Abe's repeated identification of these goals as his top personal priorities but also because of their status—literally—as foundational LDP objectives written into the Party's 1955 establishing charter.<sup>24</sup> They reveal the central, if often inconspicuous, role played by the LDP's junior coalition partner in constraining Abe (and LDP) ambitions in the security domain.

## Takeaways

Since Abe's remarkable return to the prime ministership in 2012, much of the discourse has focused disproportionately on the rhetoric and alleged personal ambitions of the prime minister himself. Together with a widespread penchant among observers to privilege conspicuous metrics such as cabinet support rates—and even Diet seat totals—when accessing the administration's (often ambiguously-defined) “strength,” this tendency frequently distracts from the issue of primary importance for policymakers: the practically significant but incremental nature of actual changes to Japan's security policy over the past six years, especially when baselined against transformative changes under way in Japan's security environment. It also tends to overlook powerful, yet often inconspicuous domestic political constraints the Abe administration confronts daily in the formation of national security policy.

Despite the headlines heralding the ruling coalition's admittedly remarkable string of electoral successes, its supermajority in the Lower House, the relatively high support rates for the Abe cabinet, and the fact that “pro-revision” forces make up two-thirds of the Upper House, the prime minister and his party continue to face stiff domestic political headwinds in their efforts to revise Article 9 and transform Japan's security posture. Beyond the Komeito factor, the Abe government also seems well aware that other metrics also suggest its mandate is not as robust as Diet seat totals would suggest—especially on issues of high salience to voters and where public opinion can be widely variant, such as security policy and constitutional revision.

For one thing, this is not Abe's father's LDP: since 1992 LDP-specific support has plummeted from over 50 percent of voters to less than 20 percent by 2012—and unaffiliated voters now make up a majority of the electorate.<sup>25</sup> Remarkably, the LDP's vote share in proportional representation districts was only slightly higher in its landslide election victory (2012) than its landslide election defeat three years earlier; demonstrating the extent to which its representation in the Diet is at least a partial artifact of lower turnout.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, historically low voting participation across all age groups and apparent widespread public disillusionment with their choices must also be factored in.<sup>27</sup> According to one recent poll, even among the roughly 46 percent of voters who supported the Abe cabinet, half did so only because they saw no alternative.<sup>28</sup> In sum, though elections have given Abe robust LDP support within the Diet building itself, these other factors further urge caution—especially about pursuing more ambitious measures that could embolden an opposition party or compromise the LDP's very advantageous cooperation in national elections with Komeito.

In sum, Abe's mandate is more fragile than much of the discourse would suggest. To a large extent it is *because of*, rather than *despite*, Komeito support that the LDP enjoys the Diet strength it has today. And as the landslide elections of 2009 and 2012 showed, voter preferences can be highly volatile. For advocates of a fundamental transformation of Japan's defense posture, the analysis herein should be sobering. Regardless of the fractiousness of Japan's formal opposition, Abe's ambitions are powerfully constrained by a junior partner able to punch significantly above its weight and yielding a virtual veto *inside* the ruling coalition. Barring an unexpected collapse of the ruling coalition, major structural change, or a large-scale military crisis, even if the opposition remains weak and Abe stays in power through 2021—two bigger ifs today than just a few months ago—Komeito alone is likely to continue to function as a powerful “brake” on Abe and LDP ambitions in the security domain. ■

## Chapter Endnotes

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- 1 For example, see Ian Bremmer, “Shinzo Abe’s Big Win in Japan Gives Him Time to Make History,” *Time*, October 26, 2017. <http://time.com/4998275/abe-win-japan-election-history/>.
- 2 CHAPTER II, RENUNCIATION OF WAR, Article 9. Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized. [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution\\_and\\_government\\_of\\_japan/constitution\\_e.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html).
- 3 Shinzo Abe, “Japan is Back” (Speech) (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 22, 2013) [http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/us\\_20130222en.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/us_20130222en.html); “Shinzo Abe calls for Japan’s ‘rebirth’ in 2020 along with constitutional revision,” *Japan Times*, December 19, 2017.
- 4 “2018 seen as make-or-break year for Abe’s constitutional revision quest,” *Japan Times*, January 1, 2018.
- 5 Abe’s ability to win a third term in September is less assured than it appeared to many only a few months ago. Tobias Harris, “Scandal raises doubts about Abe’s ability to win a third term,” *Japan Political Pulse*, March 16, 2018. <https://spfusa.org/category/japan-political-pulse/>.
- 6 *Japan Times*, January 1, 2018.
- 7 Shusho Kantei, “Abe Naikaku Sori Daijin nento kisha kaiken” [“Prime Minister Abe’s New Year Address”], January 4, 2018, [https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/98\\_abe/statement/2018/0104kaiken.html](https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/98_abe/statement/2018/0104kaiken.html).
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- 9 *Defense of Japan 2014* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defense, 2014), 125–127, [http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w\\_paper/pdf/2014/DOJ2014\\_2-2-1\\_web\\_1031.pdf](http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/pdf/2014/DOJ2014_2-2-1_web_1031.pdf); “Cabinet Decision on Development of Seamless Security Legislation to Ensure Japan’s Survival and Protect its People,” July 1, 2014 (Tokyo: Cabinet of Japan, 2014), [https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/gaiyou/jimu/pdf/anpohosei\\_eng.pdf](https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/gaiyou/jimu/pdf/anpohosei_eng.pdf).
- 10 Satoru Mori, “The New Security Legislation and Japanese Public Reaction,” *Tokyo Foundation*, December 2, 2015, <http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/articles/2015/security-legislation-and-public-reaction>.

- 11 Sheila A. Smith, “Japan’s Military Reforms are Long Overdue,” *Room for Debate* (*New York Times*), August 20, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/08/18/should-japan-allow-its-military-to-fight-in-foreign-wars/japans-military-reforms-are-long-overdue>.
- 12 Liff, “Japan’s Defense Policy.”
- 13 “A Sect’s Political Rise Creates Uneasiness in Japan,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/14/world/a-sect-s-political-rise-creates-uneasiness-in-japan.html>; For a seminal review of all things Komeito, see Ehrhardt, George, Klein, Axel, McClaughlin, Levi, Reed, Steven R., (eds.), *Kōmeitō: Politics and Religion in Japan* (Berkeley, Calif: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2014).
- 14 One recent study argues that without mutual stand-down agreements and Komeito supporters’ votes, the LDP would have lost as many as a quarter of the single-member districts it won. Adam P. Liff and Ko Maeda, “Explaining a Durable Coalition of Strange Bedfellows: Evidence from Japan,” *Working Paper*, 2017.
- 15 J. Patrick Boyd and Richard J. Samuels, *Nine Lives? The Politics of Constitutional Reform in Japan*. (Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2005), esp. 27–61.
- 16 Liff and Maeda, “Explaining a Durable Coalition of Strange Bedfellows.”
- 17 Satoru Mori, “The New Security Legislation and Japanese Public Reaction,” *Tokyo Foundation*, December 2, 2015, <http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/articles/2015/security-legislation-and-public-reaction>.
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- 21 Ibid.
- 22 *Mainichi Shimbun*, October 12, 2017.
- 23 “Komeito, Kaiken Sakiokuri no Shinbo Enryo ka?,” *Nikkei Shimbun Online*, April 3, 2018. <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZ028968080T00C18A4EA1000/>.
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- 27 The 2012 election that returned Abe to power marked a postwar nadir of 59.32 percent. This record was then broken in 2014, when turnout plummeted to 52.66 percent—a seventeen-point drop from 2009. “Kokusei senkyo no tohyoritsu no suii ni tsuite” *Somusho*, September 2016, [http://www.soumu.go.jp/main\\_content/000255919.pdf](http://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000255919.pdf) ; “Kokusei senkyo no nendai betsu tohyoritsu no suii nit suite,” *Somusho*, September 2016, [http://www.soumu.go.jp/senkyo/senkyo\\_s/news/sonota/nendaibetu/index.html](http://www.soumu.go.jp/senkyo/senkyo_s/news/sonota/nendaibetu/index.html).
- 28 “NHK poll: Cabinet support rate at 46%,” *NHK*, January 9, 2017, [https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20180109\\_32/](https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20180109_32/).