ABSTRACT
In 2013, Japan’s first-ever National Security Council (NSC) was established as the leading edge of ambitious reforms to Japan’s foreign policy-relevant institutions. Within weeks, Japan’s new national security tripod was firmly in place: the top-level, political NSC ‘control tower’, Japan’s first-ever National Security Strategy, and its first-ever National Security Secretariat. In the years since, the NSC has played a central role in every major aspect of the Japanese strategic trajectory that has attracted so much global attention (and controversy) in ‘the Abe era’. This study analyzes the motivations driving Japan’s decision to establish an NSC, the institution’s key characteristics, and offers a preliminary assessment of the current and likely future implications of this historic institutional reform. Beyond NSC’s impact on policy, of potentially greater long-term significance is its effects on Japan’s foreign policy decision-making processes: in particular, expanded Kantei-centered political leadership of national security affairs and more ‘whole-of-government’ approaches specifically designed to transcend the ‘vertical hurdles’ traditionally dividing Japan’s powerful bureaucracies. The goal of these reforms is as straightforward as it is ambitious: to transform Japan’s ability to flexibly and independently cope with a rapidly changing, increasingly complex, and ever more uncertain security environment in East Asia and beyond.

“This is an author’s original manuscript of an article forthcoming in the peer-reviewed journal Japanese Studies. The VoR is currently in production. Please check back here for a link to the latest version.

Suggested citation: Adam P. Liff, “Japan’s National Security Council: Policy Coordination and Political Power,” Japanese Studies (Forthcoming)

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1 Indiana University; aliff@indiana.edu. For valuable input at earlier stages, the author thanks Yasuaki Chijiwa, Andrew Erickson, Michael Green, Takako Hikotani, Masafumi Kaneko, Ken Kotani, John McHugh, Gregory Noble, Reimi Yamamitsu, Yasuhiro Matsuda, Richard Samuels, and dozens of current and former U.S. and Japanese officials who generously spoke with the author on background.
‘The security of Japan is not someone else’s problem; it is a crisis that exists right there and now[…]
By establishing a National Security Council to serve as a “control tower”, and other such measures,
the Cabinet will strengthen our foreign and security policy framework.’

Following the LDP’s landslide election victory in December 2012, a rehabilitated Prime
Minister Abe Shinzō made clear his intention to create Japan’s first-ever National Security Council
(NSC) as the leading edge of major reforms to Japan’s foreign policy-relevant institutions. Within
thirteen months, Abe’s Cabinet had succeeded in establishing the three elements of Japan’s new
national security tripod: the top-level, political NSC ‘control tower’ chaired by the prime minister;
Japan’s first-ever National Security Strategy; and, in January 2014, its first-ever National Security
Secretariat (NSS) within the Cabinet Secretariat.

In its first five years, the NSC’s impact on Japan’s national security decision-making has
been significant. Its institutional fingerprints can be found on almost every major aspect of the
Japanese strategic trajectory that has attracted so much global attention (and controversy) in the
post-2012 ‘Abe era’. No wonder, therefore, that leading scholars have called the creation of
Japan’s NSC ‘the most ambitious reorganization of Japan’s foreign and security policy apparatus
since the end of World War II’.

In light of the historical significance of Japan’s NSC as a major institutional reform, there
is limited scholarly analysis devoted to it. In particular, no focused academic study of the NSC's
form, function, general significance, or actual employment since 2013 has been published in
English. This study aims to address this gap comprehensively, in the process introducing to a
global audience the core features of Japan’s most significant foreign policy-relevant institutional
reform in decades. It also analyzes the motivations driving Japanese leaders’ decision to establish
an NSC, the institution’s form and function, and offers a preliminary assessment of the current and
likely future implications of this historically ambitious institutional reform. Its analysis draws on
and builds upon the small but important Japanese-language academic literature on Japan’s NSC,
as well as studies of the foreign institution—the U.S. NSC—which inspired it. It is also informed

2 Shushō Kantei, Abe naikaku sōri daijin shūnin kisha kaiken.
3 Heginbotham and Samuels, ‘Tokyo’s Arms Exports’.
4 Several earlier English-language studies have touching on aspects of Japan’s NSC include: Hughes Japan’s Foreign
and Security Policy under the ‘Abe Doctrine’; Maslow, ‘A Blueprint for a Strong Japan?’; Liff and Erickson, ‘From
Management Crisis to Crisis Management?’; Pugliese, ‘Kantei Diplomacy?’.
by extensive original research utilizing major speeches of and interviews with key principals, publicly-available data and government documents, and meetings with dozens of current and former Japanese government officials.

Together with its supporting NSS, over the past five years the NSC has become the nexus for major decisions and draft legislation defining Japan’s external orientation: its foreign policy and security posture. This list includes not only Japan’s first-ever National Security Strategy but also other global headline-grabbing policy shifts since 2013—in particular, the landmark, controversial reinterpretation of Article 9 of Japan's ‘Peace Constitution’ to enable limited exercise of collective self-defense (2014), and a major package of security legislation passed in 2015. The NSC/NSS has also come to play a key diplomatic function, especially by serving as the key contact point for foreign governments, in particular the national security council of Japan’s U.S. ally.

Less conspicuous but no less important have been NSC’s internal effects, especially on Japan’s foreign policy decision-making. Of particular significance are NSC’s implications as it concerns ameliorating what critics long perceived as institutional weaknesses of its predecessor institutions. The prescribed antidote has been expanding Kantei-centered political leadership over Japan’s traditionally powerful bureaucracies, and more effective and deeply institutionalized interagency coordination, strategic planning, and crisis management. The over-riding goal is to improve Japan’s ability to flexibly cope with a rapidly changing, increasingly complex and uncertain security environment. This orientation toward more whole-of-government approaches to national security is motivated by a more comprehensive conceptualization that transcends more traditional defense/military affairs to also encapsulate new domains such as cyber and space as well as non-traditional security threats (e.g., terrorism; proliferation; gray-zone challenges), economics, and finance. Though the idea for an NSC-type institution significantly predates Abe, and has political advocates beyond the LDP, over the past decade-plus he has been its most prominent advocate.

The NSC’s establishment is a natural culmination of longer-term, more general trends—in particular, a decades-old reform effort aimed at improving (“normalizing” in the parlance of some scholars) foreign and security policy and decision-making processes, and consolidating Cabinet and prime ministerial control over policy.\(^5\) Indeed, expanding prime ministerial power is a nearly

\(^5\) Studies of Japan’s post-Cold War security policy evolution include Berger, ‘Alliance Politics and Japan’s Postwar Culture of Antimilitarism’; Green, *Japan’s Reluctant Realism*; Lind, ‘Pacifism or Passing the Buck?’; Samuels, *Securing Japan*; Oros, *Normalizing Japan*; Samuels and Michishita, ‘Hugging and Hedging’. Specific to post-2012 Abe-era developments, in addition to those studies cited above, see Green, ‘Japan is Back’; Smith, ‘Japan’s New
constant theme in post-Cold War Japanese politics. Still, under Abe the prime minister and Kantei have more directly influenced policy than any previous administration.

This article is structured as follows. First, it offers a historical baseline and overview of the motivations behind Japan’s first-ever national security council. A very brief summary of key functions of the foreign exemplar that inspired Japan’s NSC—the U.S. national security council—is followed by a summary of the perceived shortcomings and tedious evolution of its domestic forebears: Japan’s erstwhile National Defense Council (1956-1986) and the Security Council of Japan (1986-2013). Together, this historical context helps elucidates why a U.S. NSC-type institution had such appeal to reform-minded leaders in Japan. This background also helps highlight a larger point: though often simplistically attributed to Abe himself, NSC’s 2013 establishment represents a culmination of a institutional reform effort that significantly predates him. Faced with an increasingly fast-paced, complicated, uncertain, and ‘severe’ strategic environment, in recent years Japan’s leaders across the political spectrum have supported moves to strengthen top-down political leadership over and inter-agency coordination of national security decision-making; thereby ameliorating longstanding institutional shortcomings. The second section, this study’s empirical core, analyzes Japan’s NSC itself, with a particular focus on its basic form and functional features. After assessing its post-2013 functionality in practice, it offers some preliminary takeaways. The third section discusses NSC’s bigger-picture significance and identifies key variables likely to shape the future evolution of Japan’s NSC, especially in a post-Abe era. Inter alia, its analysis suggests a future research agenda for scholars as the NSC evolves and new data emerge. A final section concludes.
I. NSC’s Institutional Origins

The Foreign Exemplar: the U.S. National Security Council

Abe and other major advocates of a Japanese NSC generally looked for inspiration to Washington’s 70 year-old NSC—the world’s oldest and best known, and an institution with which many of them had interacted directly. 8

The U.S. NSC’s original mandate upon its 1947 establishment was straightforward and similar in basic spirit to that of Japan 66 years later: ‘to advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to the national security so as to enable the military services and the other departments and agencies of the Government to cooperate more effectively’. Created in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the NSC was part of a ‘complete restructuring of the entire national security apparatus’; 9 one motivated by a belief that strategic exigencies called on America to forsake isolationism and proactively engage the world.10 The war’s global scope and the centrality of alliances drove demand for more structured inter-agency processes to link various aspects of U.S. foreign policy to a unified, comprehensive national security strategy.11 The NSC was intended as an antidote to the ‘ad hoc arrangements and informal groups of advisers’ upon which presidents theretofore had relied to formulate and implement national security policy.12 Its basic intent was thus to institutionalize whole-of-government approaches to national strategy in response to the multidimensional nascent Cold War; i.e., to ensure ‘proper institutional coordination of political and military ends and means’ and to integrate diplomatic, military, and economic power’.13 To that end, it was also to be a place where disagreements within and across agencies could be reconciled in service of a comprehensive national security strategy.14

Though it generated little media fanfare upon its establishment,15 the NSC’s effects were transformative. But they were hardly stable. Over the past seventy years its form, function, and influence have fluctuated to an extent its designers could not have anticipated—a dynamic

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8 Matsuda and Hosono, ‘Nihon’, 278; Asai, ‘Nihon-ban NSC’, 6; Matsuda and Saitō, ‘Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?’, 49; Chijiwa, Kawariyuku Naikaku Anzen Hoshō Kikō, 12.
9 Best, National Security Council, 4.
10 Rothkopf, Running the World, 29.
11 Best, National Security Council, 1.
12 Imboden, “The National Security Act Turns 70.”
13 Ibid.
14 Inderfurth and Johnson, Fateful Decisions, 14.
15 Daalder and Destler, In the Shadow, 3.
empirical legacy with potentially significant implications for the future evolution of Japan’s nascent NSC (see Section III). Three functions of the U.S. NSC particularly attractive to critics of Japan’s existing institutions were:

- Bolstering top-level political leadership of foreign policy, while shifting the nexus of decision-making to the executive branch, and within it, to the chief executive and his/her staff 16
- Improving inter-agency coordination in support of a comprehensive strategy through frequent, institutionalized meetings and information/intelligence-sharing among all national security-relevant agencies 17
- Direct administrative and policy support for the executive on national security affairs, especially through creation of a dedicated NSC staff and national security advisor institutionally beholden only to the president 18

**Domestic Origins: predecessor institutions and their shortcomings**

Despite widely being associated with Abe himself, the 2013 establishment of Japan’s NSC was a long time coming. It did not occur spontaneously in an institutional vacuum. Rather, NSC’s creation was the culmination of a multi-decade effort in part inspired by the U.S. example, but also with distinctly domestic motivations aimed at reforming Japan’s national security-relevant institutions.

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16 Established in the Office of the President, the NSC consolidated foreign policy agenda-setting and decisionmaking in the (political) executive. It allowed for advice from a dedicated staff beholden only to the president—not a home department or agency. Ibid, 2, 8 The NSC and its staff have also become increasingly political. Significantly, and unlike Cabinet secretaries, NSC staff are not subject to direct congressional oversight or Senate confirmation. Rothkopf, *Running the World*, Introduction; 7. Though originally designed to constrain and ‘regularize’ presidential decision-making, in practice presidents have a broad mandate to shape the NSC’s structure, personnel, and prescribed functions and roles. Daalder and Destler, *In the Shadow*, 3; Rothkopf, *Running the World*, 5-6.

17 In recent years, this manifests in a top-level NSC Principals Committee, a Deputies Committee, and inter-agency working groups organized functionally and regionally. Fishel, *American National Security Policy*, 28. These meetings and institutionalized interactions were designed not only to create a ‘network of relationships’ and ‘security community’ within the government. A second goal was to prevent any particular bureaucracy(ies) from dominating decision-making by ensuring that political leaders would be exposed to a range of views. These regular interactions and the NSC’s integrative function facilitated not only long-term strategic planning but also day-to-day policy implementation and crisis management. Daalder and Destler, *In the Shadow*, 5.

18 Though the U.S. NSC staff was originally conceptualized as a small advisory team supporting the president, its size, mandate, and influence have been highly variable. In recent administrations there have been as many as 400 NSC staff, responsible for administering committee meetings, drafting presidential speeches, coordinating with other agencies, liaising with ambassadors and Congress, and fulfilling whatever other tasks the president deems necessary. In practice, the national security advisor has been among—if not the—most influential player on foreign policy aside from the president. Though there is no one formula for an effective national security advisor, he or she typically serves as the president’s primary foreign policy advisor, chairs the NSC principals committee, and tends to be the president’s ‘point person’ for the NSC’s policy integration mandate Daalder and Destler, *In the Shadow*, 10, 301. The national security advisor can also be a crucial point of contact for other governments, sometimes even the driving force behind major diplomatic initiatives conducted in secret.
institutions to ameliorate longstanding inter-agency coordination problems and to further consolidate political, and especially prime ministerial, leadership over Japan's foreign policy. A brief institutional history helps shed light on several perceived shortcomings of domestic forebears NSC’s establishment was specifically designed to address.

Part of the 1954 legislation creating Japan’s Self-defense Forces (JSDF) and Defense Agency, the National Defense Council (DC; kokubō kaigi) was launched in 1956 as the postwar Cabinet’s first security institution. The DC was the highest-level political institution and venue in which defense-related matters and Japan’s defense orientation were deliberated prior to a formal Cabinet Decision. Example topics included the substance of Japan’s ‘Basic Defense Policy’ (kokubō no kihon hōshin) and JSDF mobilization. Importantly, the DC’s mandate was limited to strictly defense matters. Neither it nor its small secretariat were tasked with day-to-day handling of defense (much less comprehensive national security) affairs or crisis management. Its assigned mandate was important for Japan’s nascent postwar democracy, but extremely limited: ‘prudent deliberation to ensure civilian control’ (shibirian kontorōru kakuho no tame no shinchō shingi). Revealing of the DC’s priorities was the fact that JSDF officers were generally sidelined from deliberations in the interest of ensuring ‘civilian superiority’, a Japanese concept some scholars contend originated in over-(mis)interpretation of the ‘civilian control’ concept imported during the U.S. Occupation.

Narrowly focused on civilian control and deliberating ‘major defense issues’ (kokubō ni kan suru jūyō jikō), the DC was never authorized or adequately resourced to play diverse, flexible, and dynamic roles in national security decision-making. It had no mandate to respond to crises or engage in longer-term, more comprehensive strategic planning. Its secretariat was small, with a strictly administrative function. Nor was it able to engage regularly in policy planning, much less coordinate a robust inter-agency process. Given the DC’s limited mandate, prime ministers convened it rarely—twice per year, on average.

A deteriorating security environment in the 1970s led to greater internal recognition of the DC’s shortcomings. A former DC secretary-general even proposed reforms anticipating an NSC-like institution, particularly concerning strategic planning. Prime ministers such as Tanaka (1972-

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20 Chijiwa, Kawariyuku Naikaku Anzen Hoshō Kikō, 48-49.
22 Ibid., 282-3.
1974), Miki (1974-1976), and Fukuda (1976-1978) also called for the NDC’s small secretariat to consider major reforms. Despite this support, changes were not forthcoming.

Especially after the Iran Hostage and oil crises, however, Prime Minister Ōhira’s (1978-1980) ‘comprehensive security’ concept shifted Japan’s conversation about national security beyond an exclusive focus on traditional territorial defense. A June 1980 report from a group he formed even proposed a ‘national comprehensive security council’ (kokka sōgō anzen hoshō kaigi). Though Ōhira died before the council could be established, his successor established a Ministerial Council on Comprehensive Security (sōgō anzen hoshō kankei kakuryō kaigi). But this council did not replace the DC. Rather, it constituted a separate meeting of nine members convened by the Chief Cabinet Secretary. It also met infrequently—reportedly only 21 times between 1980 and 1990. In the end, the reform effort achieved little concrete progress. Most notably, from 1956 to 1986 no reform legislation was ever passed.23

As the Soviet Far East military buildup exacerbated Cold War tensions in East Asia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Prime Minister Nakasone (1982-1987), a former Defense Agency chief, championed various administrative and defense reforms to bolster political leadership of defense affairs and crisis management.24 In 1986, the Security Council of Japan (SC; anzen hoshō kaigi) replaced the DC. Despite its NSC-like name, however, various limitations to its mandate, structure, secretariat, and actual usage ensured it never achieved form, function, or significance commensurate with a more mature national security council.

Established in July 1986, the SC inherited the DC’s functions as a deliberative body responsible for political and civilian control of defense policy. But it also added new form and function. Critics had previously identified several weaknesses of Japan’s institutions, including emergency situation response; information gathering and sharing among relevant organs, and rapid whole-of-government decision-making (zenseifutekina ishi kettei).25 In response, the SC’s most important innovations were a ‘nine-minister meeting’ chaired by the prime minister, which ensured civilian control, and an expanded mandate to deliberate ‘important matters on coping with serious emergency situations’ (jūdai kinkyū jitai e no taisho). The latter constituted an unprecedented crisis response function.26 Yet immediately prior to SC’s establishment, the DC secretariat expressed

23 Chijiwa, Kawariyuku Naikaku Anzen Hoshō Kikō, 59-79.
24 Hitoshi, “‘Nihon-ban NSC’ no kadai”, 1.
concern that a nine-minister meeting would be unwieldy and inflexible, and that responsibility for ‘situation response’ would dilute its defense functionality.  

(27) The former concern proved especially prescient: a more flexible ‘four-minister meeting’ of national security principals would be the most prominent innovation of the NSC established in 2013.)

Despite shortcomings, the SC was considered a significant improvement over the disbanded DC. It provided a coordinating function (chōsei kinō) its predecessor lacked, and met more frequently to discuss major issues—a half-dozen times per year on average from 1986 to 2013.  

(28) It ultimately proved far more malleable, too. Both its mandate and meeting frequency expanded concomitant with the growing complexity of and JSDF’s expanded mission set (e.g., PKO, anti-piracy operations) in regional and global security in the post-Cold War and post-9/11 periods.  

(29) Prime ministers convened SC to discuss major issues twice as frequently in the post-9/11 period (average=7x/year) as 1986-2000 (average=3x/year) (See Figure 1).  

(30) Failure to respond effectively to crises both foreign (e.g., a hostage crisis at Japan’s embassy in Peru) and domestic (e.g., the 1995 Kobe earthquake and domestic terrorism) were also major drivers of internal reforms.  

(31) Nevertheless, as Japan’s leaders and institutions struggled to cope with various complex 21st century international security challenges, the SC’s limitations became increasingly apparent. By the end of the Koizumi administration, domestic calls for a fundamentally new institution—namely, a ‘Japan-style NSC’ (Nihon-ban NSC)—approached critical mass.
Calls for a ‘Japan-style NSC’ were part of a broader movement among Japan’s foreign policy community advocating major reforms to Japan’s security policy and institutions to enable more flexible, effective, and proactive responses to complex post-Cold War foreign policy challenges. This effort accelerated significantly during the Koizumi (2001-2006) and first Abe (2006-2007) administrations. Major drivers included Washington’s calls for the JSDF to support U.S. global military operations and Japan’s rapidly evolving regional security environment, defined in large part by North Korea’s nuclear weapons program and the longer-term challenge of China’s expanding military capabilities.

As the Koizumi administration struggled to cope with these challenges, the SC was on the institutional front lines. Remarkably, its first-ever convention in response to a dynamic emergency situation was the day after 9/11. This marked a ‘historical moment’ for Japan’s security institutions. In 2003, the Diet passed three bills related to an ‘armed attack situation’ (buryoku

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32 Author’s analysis based on data in Ibid., 100-104.  
33 Ibid., 146.
kōgeki jitai), one of which revised the 1986 SC establishment law to bolster ‘situation response’.34 Yet influential voices judged these reforms insufficient. The movement for further bolstering ‘cabinet-centered leadership’ (naikaku shudō) of security policy and crisis management, and the ‘Japan-style NSC’ idea gathered significant steam. Koizumi’s own ‘Commission on Security and Defense Capabilities’ called for further reforms of the SC and a comprehensive national security strategy—a post-1945 ‘first’.35

Having shared many of his predecessor’s frustrations while serving in the Koizumi Cabinet, upon Abe’s election as prime minister in September 2006 he immediately picked up the mantle of the ‘cabinet-centered leadership’ movement. Indicative of his ambition to transform Japan’s national security-relevant institutions, Abe had taken the remarkable step of writing the establishment of a Japan-style NSC into his campaign platform. As Koizumi’s chief cabinet secretary, he had reportedly become convinced of its potential value through frequent interactions with the U.S. NSC, especially consultations with U.S. National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley about North Korean missile launches and other security matters.36 Abe pursued major, ambitious reforms to Japan’s security-relevant institutions, undoubtedly helped in part by deepening domestic concerns about the regional security environment (inter alia, North Korea’s first nuclear weapon test occurred two weeks after Abe become prime minister). Abe succeeded in upgrading Japan’s Defense Agency to a ministry and pushed for further reforms to bolster security policy decision-making, information sharing, and crisis management centered on the Kantei.37 In particular, he created the position of ‘prime minister’s assistant on national security affairs’ and became the first prime minister to formally call for an NSC as a ‘control tower’ (shireitō) for security policy; improvement of information gathering functions; and a national strategy for diplomacy and security.38 In 2007, the Abe Cabinet formally introduced legislation to establish Japan’s first-ever NSC.

It was not to be, however. Plagued by health issues and with the LDP losing the majority in the July 2007 Upper House election, both Abe and the ‘Japan-style NSC’ movement lost momentum. Abe resigned in August and his LDP successor—Prime Minister Fukuda (2007-

34 Ibid., 147, 158; Hitoshi, “‘Nihon-ban NSC’ no kadai’, 1; Matsuda and Hosono, ‘Nihon’, 302-304.
38 Chijiwa, Kawariyuku Naikaku Anzen Hoshō Kikō, 162-163.
did not appear to share his conviction that an NSC was urgent, or even necessary. Consequently, the position of prime ministerial assistant on national security affairs was not placed in the Cabinet, and the NSC establishment bill was abandoned—reportedly without even being deliberated.\textsuperscript{39} The longtime leading opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) swept to power in 2009.

Though Abe’s NSC-specific push lost momentum, the underlying movement supporting Cabinet reorganization to consolidate political leadership over foreign and security policy continued. A critical mass of leaders in both major parties held that Japan’s institutions were ill-equipped to handle its rapidly changing security environment. Even before the DPJ was a governing party its key leaders had expressed support for reforms. For example, in 2005 then DPJ President Okada called for bolstering Kantei leadership, major reforms to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), and an ambitious strengthening of the SC. Former DPJ President Maehara had even explicitly called for a Japan-style NSC modeled on the U.S. NSC.\textsuperscript{40}

This movement was basically consistent with the DPJ’s more general priorities. Indeed, a major 2009 DPJ campaign theme had been strengthening political leadership over powerful (unelected) bureaucrats. After taking office, Prime Minister Hatoyama (2009-2010) launched a ‘National Strategy Office’ to strengthen Kantei functioning.\textsuperscript{41} The DPJ’s first and only 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines (\textit{shin bōei taikō}; NDPG) called for establishing an NSC-like institution.\textsuperscript{42} After next pursuing a ‘national strategy bureau,’ in 2011 the DPJ created a ‘study team for strengthening Cabinet function on national security,’ which considered various institutional reforms, including a possible NSC.\textsuperscript{43}

Thus, by the time Abe returned to the Kantei in December 2012, for reasons of both domestic politics and a worsening regional security environment, the NSC-specific reform movement’s basic thrust had garnered suprapartisan support. Unlike his abortive effort in 2006-2007, and with a landslide election victory providing a potent mandate, by 2013 Abe would be pushing on an unlocked door.

\textsuperscript{40} Matsuda, ‘Joshō’, 14.
\textsuperscript{41} Sunohara, Nihon-ban NSC towa nanika?, 118.
\textsuperscript{42} Oriki and Kaneko, \textit{Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi}, 25.
\textsuperscript{43} Chijiwa, \textit{Kawariyuku Naikaku Anzen Hoshō Kikō}, 193-196; Ibid., 124.
As the ‘Japan-style NSC’s most prominent and outspoken political champion for a decade, it is perhaps fitting that it was under Abe that it was finally established. Yet this was hardly a one-person effort. NSC’s establishment was the natural culmination of and response to long-term domestic and international trends. Recognition of existing institutional deficiencies and calls for an NSC-like institution to address them dated back to the 1970s. By 2013 these views had reached critical mass. The SC’s large, unwieldy, relatively inflexible nature, coupled with a small and weak secretariat, was judged to be ill-equipped to handle increasingly severe and diverse non-traditional (e.g., natural disasters; terrorism) and traditional security challenges (e.g., North Korea’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles). In contrast to the relatively ad-hoc, reactive approaches adopted by past administrations, Abe and other LDP leaders in particular considered a more ‘proactive’, comprehensive—not just defense—strategy a national security imperative. Qualitative transformations widely perceived as worsening Japan’s security environment and the emergence of new domains (e.g., space, cyber) posed unprecedented, complex challenges to Japan’s leaders which they judged would require more flexible, rapid, comprehensive, and whole-of-government responses than the Cold War-era SC could provide. All-the-while, a long-term trend of declining (relative) U.S. military power and, in the eyes of some, increasing concerns about U.S. security guarantees demanded both deeper coordination with and ability to operate more independently (jiritsu) from Washington.\textsuperscript{44}

Specific incidents had also greased the movement’s wheels while Abe was out of power, especially beyond Japan’s relatively conservative security community—even among those skeptical of his personal intentions. For many the March 2011 ‘triple disaster’ in Tōhoku brought into sharp relief pervasive vertical hurdles to information sharing and policy coordination across the government.\textsuperscript{45} China’s post-September 2012 assertion of its sovereignty claim to Japan-administered islands in the East China Sea posed a qualitatively unprecedented ‘gray zone’ challenge for which Japan’s extant institutions were ill-equipped to respond.\textsuperscript{46} A January 2013 hostage crisis involving Japanese citizens in Algeria—just weeks after Abe’s return to the Kantei—had exposed for the general public major weaknesses in Japan’s ability to gather, process, and share information internally, which further catalyzed the NSC movement.\textsuperscript{47} In the context of

\textsuperscript{44} Sunohara, Nihon-ban NSC towa nanika?, 25.
\textsuperscript{45} Matsuda and Saitō, ‘Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?’, 58.
\textsuperscript{46} Liff, ‘China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations in the East China Sea and Japan’s Response.’
\textsuperscript{47} Sunohara, Nihon-ban NSC towa nanika?, 37.
these long-term trends and specific incidents, to some critics the SC had already become an ‘empty shell’ (keigaika).\textsuperscript{48}

II. Japan’s National Security Council: A ‘Control Tower’ for Foreign Policy

In February 2013, Prime Minister Abe stated clearly his intent to establish an NSC as a ‘control tower […] for foreign and security policy centered on the prime minister[; …tasked with] flexibly and daily discussions of diplomatic and security affairs from a strategic perspective[; …] and creating an environment for rapid responses based on strong political leadership’. In light of major changes to Japan’s strategic context in East Asia, Abe stressed NSC’s establishment as an imperative ‘to ensure Japan’s peace and independence[…amidst] a security environment increasing in severity’.\textsuperscript{49} Together with a revised Cabinet law to create the NSS, the NSC establishment law passed the Diet on November 27, 2013.\textsuperscript{50} On December 4, Abe convened Japan’s first-ever NSC meeting. A month later, the NSS launched with approximately 70 staff.

By this point elite consensus had coalesced sufficiently that the 2013 NSC establishment law\textsuperscript{51} was remarkably uncontroversial. From Japan’s more traditionally ideological ‘left’, criticism appeared motivated more by opposition to Abe and beliefs about his coveted policies, rather than the institution itself. As one Japan Communist Party politician opined in the Diet, the NSC would not be a ‘control tower for diplomacy and security’, as had been advertised, but rather a ‘control tower for wars and military expansion’ (\textit{sensō, gunkaku no shireitō}).\textsuperscript{52} Other concerns related to excessive centralization of executive power and/or a belief that an (U.S.-modeled) NSC did not suit Japan’s parliamentary system;\textsuperscript{53} transparency, typically linked to the secrets protection act (\textit{tokutei himitsu hogohō}) that Abe was pursuing concomitantly and which was generally considered integral to the inter-agency information-sharing mandate of an effective NSC;\textsuperscript{54} and NSC’s likely implications for Japan’s relationship with Washington—especially fear of greater U.S. influence through sharing of sensitive information.\textsuperscript{55} In the end, however, the 2013 NSC

\textsuperscript{48} Matsuda and Saitō, ‘Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?’, 50, 55.
\textsuperscript{49} Shushō Kantei, \textit{Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi no sōsetsu ni kansuru yūshikisha kaigi}.
\textsuperscript{50} For specifics regarding the revised legislation, see Naikaku Kanbō, \textit{Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi ni tsuite}, 3.
\textsuperscript{51} Technically a (major) revision of the 1986 Security Council establishment law.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Kokkai kaigiroku kensaku shisutemu}, November 27, 2013.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Kokkai kaigiroku kensaku shisutemu}, January 30, 2007; Sunohara, Nihon-ban NSC towa nanika?, 2014, 22; Matsuda and Saitō, ‘Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?’, 50.
\textsuperscript{54} Asahi Shimbun, November 22, 2006; Asahi Shimbun, December 21, 2013; Asahi Shimbun, September 20, 2015.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Kokkai kaigiroku kensaku shisutemu}, November 25, 2013; Sunohara, Nihon-ban NSC towa nanika?, 22; Asahi Shimbun, September 20, 2015;
establishment bill passed the Diet 213-18, gaining support from the ruling coalition, the DPJ, Your Party, and the Japan Restoration Party. Members of the Japanese Communist Party, the Social Democratic Party and the People's Life Party opposed it.56

Japan’s New Kantei-led National Security Tripod

This section introduces Japan’s new Cabinet-centered ‘national security tripod’: the top-level, political NSC; its primary documentary output, the National Security Strategy; and its support staff in the new National Security Secretariat (NSS). In form and function, the NSC/NSS is fundamentally distinct not only from its closest institutional precursors (the DC and SC). In establishing the NSC, Japan’s leaders had the following objectives: 1) strengthen political leadership over national security decision-making; 2) improve Japan’s ability to strategize and act (operate) more independently, (and paradoxically, in so doing to strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance) 57; 3) better prepare for possible crises, either diplomatic or military, by bolstering intelligence gathering, protection, analysis, and sharing and the speed at which political leaders can make decisions; 58 and 4) significantly enhance inter-agency coordination.

National Security Council (2013- )

Abe’s stated objective for the NSC was to reorganize and strengthen prime ministerial control of diplomacy and security within the Kantei by creating an institution to deliberate important national security matters and advise the prime minister. 59 In stark contrast to its ad-hoc and infrequently convened SC predecessor, the NSC has regularly scheduled meetings and can also be convened flexibly—to discuss newly emergent or particularly time-consuming issues on-demand, and with participants invited on an as-needed basis.

The NSC’s most significant formal innovation is its ‘core’ ‘4-minister meeting’ (4 daijin kaigō; 4MM), which convenes Japan’s primary national security principals—the prime minister, chief cabinet secretary, and ministers of defense and foreign affairs—for focused discussions on newly emergent and long-term national security issues. Japan’s 2013 Defense White Paper defines its role straightforwardly: ‘Giving a fundamental direction to diplomacy and defense policy concerning national security from a strategic perspective’. 60 The 4MM’s small membership

56 Yomiuri Shimbun, November 27, 2013.
57 Sunohara, Nihon-ban NSC towa nanika?, 30-38
58 Ibid., 35:172
60 MOD, 2013 Bōei Hakusho, 105.
enables meetings to be convened frequently, *regularly*—in principle, biweekly at a minimum—and, in an emergency, rapidly.\(^6^1\) It also facilitates more substantive and efficient discussions.\(^6^2\) The 4MM is the primary venue for prime ministerial leadership over Japan’s national security affairs.

One of the NSC’s major improvements over its predecessor is its flexibility. Accordingly, though the new 4MM constitutes the NSC’s core, principals’ meetings can be expanded as needed. Usually, this is achieved through the ‘9-minister meeting’ (9MM) inherited from the SC, which maintains its original objective of civilian control. The prime minister is also now able to convene a new, third type of meeting: an ‘Emergency Situation Minister Meeting’ (*kinkyūjitai daijin kaigō*), with participants contingent on situational characteristics. This format is intended to strengthen responses and political decision-making (*seijitekina handan*) in major emergencies for which lower-level crisis management mechanisms are insufficient, such as a contingency involving North Korea or the East China Sea.\(^6^3\)

In terms of function, the NSC is tasked with facilitating politically-led deliberations and decision-making on national security issues; deeper integration and inter-agency coordination across diplomacy, security, economics, and crisis management; and a more robust, political demand-driven intelligence cycle.\(^6^4\) It is intended as a venue for de facto decision-making; not merely as a ‘talk shop’ and advisory body—two frequent criticisms of its SC predecessor.\(^6^5\)

**National Security Strategy (2013)**\(^6^6\)

Japan established its Basic Defense Policy in 1957, and in recent years various entities within Japan’s government have promulgated public reports intended to enhance transparency and explain their priorities, policies, and/or strategies. Yet these documents are generally ministry or agency-specific (e.g., MOFA’s blue books; Ministry of Defense’s (MOD) defense white papers). To critics, this approach is a public manifestation of the vertical divisions that have plagued Japan’s various ministries and agencies for decades. Specific to foreign policy, Japan has historically lacked an obvious (or, at least *explicit*) comprehensive national security strategy presenting a

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61 *Yomiuri Shimbun*, January 9, 2015.
62 Matsuda and Saitō, ‘Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?’, 57.
63 *Naikaku Kanbō, Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi ni tsuite*, 2. For diagrams illustrating how the prime minister might convene the three meeting types, see MOD, 2014 Bōei Hakusho, 126.
66 Full-text: Naikaku Kanbō, *Kokka anzen hoshō senryaku ni tsuite*. 
unifying, whole-of-government medium- to long-term vision across all elements of national interest and power.

That all changed when—literally hours after NSC’s establishment—the Abe administration promulgated its first-ever comprehensive National Security Strategy (kokka anzen hoshō senryaku). It defines as Japan’s fundamental principle of national security ‘proactive contribution to peace’ (sekkyokuteki heiwashugi). Whereas the 1957 Basic Defense Policy—which the new strategy formally replaces—focused exclusively on defense affairs, Japan’s 2013 National Security Strategy covers various issues areas, from territorial defense to diplomacy, international energy issues, cyber, space, and maritime security. Its existence and content reflect the ‘politics-led, top-down’ whole-of-government approach that motivated NSC’s creation, and its role as a hub for integrating medium to long-term strategies of various domains into a single, comprehensive national strategy. As an authoritative Cabinet-promulgated document, the Strategy also provides guideposts for Japan’s various government ministries and agencies to orient their own policies. As cases-in-point, two of the most significant policy shifts adopted since 2013—a major relaxation of a longstanding ban on arms exports (bōei sōbi iten san gensoku) and the 2014 Cabinet Decision allowing limited exercise of collective self-defense (shūdante ki jieiken) were based on the National Security Strategy. It also served as the basis for the objectives defined and conceptualization of Japan’s security environment delineated in the MOD’s seminal document articulating JSDF strategy: the 2013 National Defense Program Guidelines (shin bōei taikō).

National Security Secretariat (2014- )

Supporting NSC’s various responsibilities, including coordinating the inter-agency process required for the whole-of-government National Security Strategy, is Japan’s new National Security Secretariat (kokka anzen hoshō kyoku). NSS was formally launched on January 7, 2014 with approximately 70 staff, primarily (though not exclusively) career civil servants and JSDF officers, most of whom are seconded from MOFA and MOD.

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67 MOD, 2014 Bōei Hakusho, 132-133.
69 Matsuda and Saitō, ‘Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?’, 57.
71 MOD, 2014 Bōei Hakusho, 134.
Established within the Cabinet Secretariat, NSS is organized into three regional and three functional teams, each of which is led by a counsellor (sanjikan) of rank equivalent to a ministerial division chief (see Figure 2). Above those team leaders is an NSS-wide chain-of-command headed by the Secretary-General (kyokuchō); his or her two deputies (jichō), themselves deputy chief cabinet secretaries originally from MOFA and MOD; and typically three councillors (shingikan)—one each from MOFA, MOD, and JSDF.72 In October 2017, NSS also created a ‘special advisor’ post (kokka anzen hoshō sanyo), to which a former MOD administrative vice-minister was appointed.73

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72 Asahi Shimbun, January 8, 2014.
73 Yomiuri Shimbun, October 5, 2017.
FIGURE 2 NSS ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

Organizational chart adapted from Asahi Shimbun, January 8, 2014.
NSS’ primary responsibilities are basic planning of foreign and defense policy; coordination of an inter-agency process aimed at ensuring policies of individual ministries/agencies comport with the comprehensive (whole-of-government) National Security Strategy; and issuing information requests from and sharing intelligence among relevant ministries and agencies.\footnote{Kotani, ‘Nihon-ban Kokka Anzen Hoshō’, 65-66; 73.} NSS has also played a central role drafting major policies such as the 2014 Cabinet Decision on collective self-defense and the 2015 security legislation. As a sign of its expansive authority, recent reports suggest it will take over the lead role and coordinate the inter-agency process for the forthcoming NDPG—traditionally MOD’s role.\footnote{‘Shotaro Yachi’s National Security Council eyes bigger policymaking role in 2018’, Jiji, January 6, 2018.}

**The NSC and NSS in Practice: Preliminary Takeaways**

The record so far suggests Japan’s top-level NSC functions more-or-less as intended. Abe has convened it frequently (both regularly and irregularly) for substantive discussions of national strategy, specific legislation and policies, and crisis management. With top-level meetings averaging once per week (180 times in its first 46 months), NSC has enabled the prime minister to convene national security principals and relevant Cabinet ministers at a rate with no remotely close precedent in postwar Japan.\footnote{Author’s analysis of Cabinet data from Shushō Kantei, Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi kaisai jōhō.}

In terms of frequency, Abe has convened NSC far more often than the (in principle) biweekly meetings. From 2014 to 2015 NSC met 34 times annually. In 2016 it met 47 times and as of October 2017 is projected to meet 48 times in 2017. Of these meetings, the core 4MM was on average four times as frequent as the 9MM (145x vs. 35x).\footnote{Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi kaisai jōhō.} By comparison, the 1980 Ministerial Council on Comprehensive Security met an average of two times per year before it ceased functioning in 1993.\footnote{Chijiwa, Kawariyuku Naikaku Anzen Hoshō Kikō, 77-78; 158. It was formally abolished in October 2004.} Even the NSC’s immediate predecessor, the 1986-2013 SC, met on average to discuss major issues a half-dozen times per year.\footnote{Bōei Handobukku, 26} In other words, NSC meetings already occur more frequently than in the SC era.\footnote{Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi kaisai jōhō.} As of October 2017, the second new meeting
type—Emergency Ministerial Meeting—has never been convened. This is not surprising, as this meeting format appears to be designed for major crises (e.g., an armed attack against Japan).  

In terms of meeting substance, the 9MM appears to have inherited the erstwhile Security Council’s basic composition and mandate. It generally discusses basic policy issues, such as annual defense buildup plans, security-relevant legislation, or ongoing operations (e.g., UNPKO). These are policy issues usually anticipated far in advance and associated with longer-term planning. In contrast, the smaller 4MM—generally considered the NSC’s most significant innovation—tackles a wide range of issues, flexibly and in response to urgent policy matters, crises, or other vicissitudes of Japan’s security environment (See Figure 3). For example, from January 2016 to September 2017 NSC convened 37 times specifically to discuss North Korea, often immediately before or after a nuclear or missile test. It did not convene in every case, however, such as when principals judged a given test posed no direct threat. The NSS secretary-general serves as the meeting coordinator and invites bureau chiefs for presentations. One example pattern is MOFA brief → MOD brief → intelligence brief, but sometimes the secretary-general will acquire the relevant info in advance and conduct the briefing himself. Attending principals then debate the issue until the prime minister indicates a policy direction. Minutes are kept. Reportedly, the average length of NSC meetings is 40-60 minutes; reportedly much longer than the often pro forma SC meetings. The NSC’s reputation as a venue for candid, off-the-record discussions is linked to the 2015 secrets protection act, though nascent internal disciplinary norms may be at least as important. Because sensitive intelligence is often discussed, the Chief Cabinet Secretary is given sole discretion over public summaries of NSC discussions. Onodera Itsunori, the first defense minister to participate in NSC meetings, retrospectively lauded it—especially its small size—as providing what he judged postwar Japan lacked previously: a venue for ‘comprehensive’, ‘frank’, and ‘political discussions’ concerning security and diplomatic affairs.

82 Oriki and Kaneko, Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi, 6. Confirmed in October 2017 meeting.
83 Ibid. Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi kaisai jōhō.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid. Discussions about China are given deliberately vague regional topical headers (e.g. ‘East Asian security’). Author meeting in Tokyo, November 2017.
86 Kokkai kaigiroku kensaku shisutemu, April 4, 2017.
87 Oriki and Kaneko, Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi, 28.
88 Ibid. Authors exchange with Japanese expert, January 2018.
89 Kokkai kaigiroku kensaku shisutemu, March 17, 2017.
90 Author meeting in Tokyo, November 2017.
91 Oriki and Kaneko, Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi, 28; Asahi Shimbun, June 6, 2016.
Additionally, nascent informal rules such as prohibitions on excessive Cabinet member travel further bolster the Japanese government’s (and NSC in particular) potential efficacy and response time, especially in a crisis. For example, two of the four 4MM principals must always remain in Tokyo; and half the Cabinet membership (excluding the prime minister) must remain in Japan at any given time. For example, when Abe and Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide campaigned during the Fall 2017 general election campaign, Foreign Minister Kōno Tarō and Defense Minister Onodera were required to remain in Tokyo (with the deputy chief cabinet secretary standing in for Suga). And during Golden Week in May 2014, nine of eighteen Cabinet ministers were required to remain in Japan. A secure system also ensures contact even when NSC members are overseas. The NSC has even played a direct role supporting international security

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92 Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi kaisai jōhō.
93 Yomiuri Shimbun, October 3, 2017. Confirmed by author multiple times, including at public events involving DM Onodera.
94 Kokkai kaigiroku kensaku shisutemu, May 12, 2014.
cooperation, hosting Australia’s and Britain’s Prime Ministers Tony Abbott and Theresa May in 2014 and 2017, respectively.

Since its January 2014 launch with roughly 70 personnel, the NSS also appears to be basically playing its assigned roles administratively supporting the top-level NSC: strategy formulation/policy integration (its primary function); crisis management; information and intelligence sharing; serving as a counterpart to foreign NSC staff; and ad-hoc project support (e.g., security legislation). Its role improving inter-agency coordination and information sharing is particularly significant given Japan’s longstanding institutional weakness in this regard. In support of regular bi-weekly 4MM meetings, working-level meetings are typically convened in advance. Chaired by the secretary-general, regular attendees include the two NSS deputies; directors-general from MOFA’s Foreign Policy Bureau, MOD’s Defense Policy Bureau, and the JSDF Joint Staff Defense Plans and Policy Department (J-5); and representatives from the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office (CIRO) and crisis management office (jitaishitsu). These regular inter-agency engagements reportedly breed familiarity and mutual understanding absent previously, serving NSC’s bigger-picture objective of breaking down vertical hurdles across the government.

Japan’s response to a summer 2017 DPRK missile launch illustrates NSS function in support of a non-regular 4MM, especially as it concerns facilitating information flow: NSS requested and MOFA shared information from relevant diplomatic authorities; MOD provided intelligence on the JSDF operational circumstances and information concerning U.S. and South Korean forces; and CIRO supplied satellite and other classified intelligence. Relevant NSS sections (the Northeast Asia, Intelligence, and Coordination sections, specifically) then organized the collected information for an NSC principals’ meeting. All six NSS sections assembled together to share information. It appears to be for situations like this that Abe declared the 2015 secrets protection act to be ‘integral’ (ittai) to NSC functioning by enabling inter-agency discussion of sensitive intelligence.

Externally, the NSS also plays an important diplomatic role, especially by facilitating working-level communications with foreign counterparts (e.g., U.S. NSC staff). Yachi Shōtarō, the inaugural (and so far, only) NSS secretary-general, has also served as a high-level prime

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95 Oriki and Kaneko, Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi, 30-32.
96 Oriki and Kaneko, Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi, 29.
98 Sunohara, Nihon-ban NSC towa nanika?, 189.
ministerial envoy and meets directly with foreign national security advisors (or their rough equivalents) in Washington, Beijing, and beyond. Before 2013, there was no Kantei-based standing post capable of playing a commensurate role, especially since the SC lacked a robust secretariat. The NSS secretary-general reportedly (and somewhat controversially) avoids being subject to Diet interrogation so as to focus on running the NSS full-time and be on call in an emergency, while NSS staffers must remain within 30 minutes of the office and always carry a suit.

The NSS staff has reportedly already expanded. As of November 2017 NSS reportedly had roughly 80 personnel: approximately 20 MOFA bureaucrats; 20 MOD bureaucrats; 20 JSDF officers; and 20 representatives of various other agencies (e.g., National Police). This breakdown reinforces the primary defense and diplomatic focus of the NSC, as well as the effort to balance MOD and MOFA against one another. The apparent doubling of JSDF representation between 2015 and 2017 has gone largely unnoticed. It suggests a desire to give uniformed officers a greater role in national security discussions.

NSS appears to be attracting and retaining personnel with significant experience in national security affairs. Exhibit A is Yachi, a retired career diplomat whom Abe appointed as the NSS’ founding secretary-general. Abe has interacted closely with Yachi since Abe’s time as deputy chief cabinet secretary in the Koizumi cabinet. Yachi was vice-minister for foreign affairs during Abe’s 2006-2007 administration and after 2012 served as Abe’s ‘special advisor’ until NSS’s creation. In addition to frequent visits to Washington and other foreign capitals, Yachi has also served as Abe’s ‘special envoy’ (tokushi) when difficulties arise in relations with Japan’s neighbors. Though Yachi originally intended to serve for only one year, he remains in the post and shows no signs of stepping down. Yachi’s original deputies reinforced national security expertise and the intentional balance-of-power between diplomacy and defense within NSS: for example, Kanehara Nobukatsu (MOFA) and Takamizawa Nobushige (MOD), national security experts well known within and outside Japan, served early on as NSS deputy secretaries-general.

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100 Nikkei Shimbun, August 15, 2017.
101 Author meetings in Tokyo, November 2017.
102 My claim of a ‘doubling’ is based on Oriki and Kaneko’s reporting of only 10 JSDF members in October 2015. Oriki and Kaneko, Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi, 33.
103 Yomiuri Shimbun, January 9, 2015; December 4, 2015; Asahi Shimbun, February 27, 2017; May 30, 2017. Multiple author meetings in Tokyo, Fall 2017.
104 Yomiuri Shimbun, January 9, 2015.
III. Discussion, Variables to Watch, and Future Research Agenda

The establishment of Japan’s NSC in 2013 was the latest, most significant prime ministerial step to consolidate political leadership over foreign policy and national strategy, and to counteract what many critics saw as longstanding, pervasive obstacles to effective inter-agency coordination that negatively affected national security decision-making. In this basic effort, Japan was hardly alone. Centralization of foreign policy decision-making is a global trend driven by multiple factors, including ongoing geopolitical shifts, changing technologies (e.g., cyber) necessitating more rapid responses and crisis management, a more complicated and uncertain potential threat environment, and the end of U.S. unipolarity. Several other major powers, including Britain (2010) and China (2013), have also established roughly comparable institutions in recent years.

In Japan’s case NSC’s establishment appears to carry particular significance as a major institutional reform, not just in terms of crisis management, but also political leadership of foreign policy and comprehensive national strategic decision-making more generally. The idea of a U.S.-type NSC was long considered controversial given Japan's parliamentary system, constitutional constraints (Articles 9 and 65) and domestic political sensitivities.105 Until recently, even some LDP leaders considered it unnecessary given U.S. security guarantees and Japan’s relatively passive posture in regional and global security affairs. By the eve of Abe's return to the prime-ministership in December 2012, however, a gradual confluence of external and domestic developments coalesced in support for unprecedented reforms to Japan’s national security-relevant institutions. The Diet overwhelmingly supported legislation to establish the NSC. The reasons why, and the role JNSC has played since, reveal much about the trajectory of and potential implications for Japanese politics and foreign policy in the early 21st century: including beyond Abe.

Enabling NSC’s establishment was the reality that since Abe’s first prime ministership (and NSC establishment campaign) precipitously collapsed in 2007, a lot had changed. To many, the March 2011 triple disaster provided a rude awakening to pervasive institutional deficiencies and coordination problems across the government and bureaucracies. Additionally, seen from Tokyo there were deepening concerns about Japan’s rapidly changing external strategic environment and, to some, anxiety concerning possible (over-)reliance on Washington’s security umbrella. In the interim, North Korea had detonated multiple, increasingly powerful nuclear weapons. China had

105 Matsuda and Saitō, ‘Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?’, 50.
displaced Japan as the world’s second-largest economy in 2010 and by 2012 China’s defense budget dwarfed Japan’s own, enabling a rapid, ambitious military buildup and modernization campaign. Beyond these long-term trends, a mere two weeks before Abe recaptured the LDP presidency Beijing had responded to the Noda administration’s ‘nationalization’ of three Japan-administered islands in the East China Sea with gray zone and other operations widely seen in Japan as provocative.

By the time Abe returned to power, these longer-term developments had coalesced suprapartisan elite support for an institution to strengthen political leadership and facilitate more centralized and independent strategizing, intelligence analysis, inter-agency coordination, and crisis management. This effort aimed to accelerate the decades-old, incremental loosening of longstanding political constraints on Japan’s security decision-making, especially prime ministerial/Cabinet weakness relative to strong, independent government agencies; ‘vertical barriers’ (tatewari no heigai)\(^{106}\) between bureaucracies; LDP-imposed constraints on executive power under the 1955 system; and relative ostracization of uniformed JSDF officers from security deliberations.\(^{107}\)

The relative youth of Japan’s NSC requires that any conclusions be preliminary. Yet so far it seems that the institution has made significant headway addressing perceived weaknesses. Since its establishment, regular, frequent, and top-level principal meetings and the creation of the standing (roughly 80-strong) NSS have improved whole-of-government national strategic planning, as well as inter-agency policy coordination and information sharing internally and with foreign governments (esp. Japan’s U.S. ally). The NSS secretary-general’s ability to consult, share information, and even negotiate directly with foreign counterparts as the prime minister’s de facto representative further strengthen Kantei-centered foreign policy. Collectively, these developments have strengthened and rebalanced the U.S.-Japan alliance, while simultaneously bolstering Japan’s ability to develop strategy and carry out diplomacy independently.

**Japan’s NSC ‘beyond Abe’: key variables to watch**

NSC’s long-term significance for Japan’s security/foreign policy will hinge on its future form and function, especially after its political godfather Abe and first—and so far, only—NSS

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\(^{106}\) Matsuda and Saitō, ‘Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?’, 58

\(^{107}\) For a discussion of related points, see Matsuda and Hosono, ‘Nihon’, 279-281.
secretary-general (Abe’s close advisor Yachi) are no longer in charge. Especially important will be how NSC/NSS performs under new political leadership and inevitable changes to Japan’s strategic environment.108 With Japan’s recent experiences in mind, an analysis of the 70-year legacy of the U.S. NSC which inspired it suggests several variables to which scholars should pay particular attention going forward. Especially across its first two presidential transitions, the U.S. NSC evolved in ways entirely unanticipated by the 1947 establishing legislation’s authors, and in key instances based neither in law or statute.109 This volatility during its formative first fifteen years, coupled with its widely variable subsequent evolution over the next half-century, makes one caveat concerning this study abundantly clear: any analysis of Japan’s nascent NSC today is necessarily a first-cut.

Japan’s NSC was inspired by, and modeled to significant extent upon, the U.S. NSC. Yet it is important to stress at the outset that it is a different institution, created in a very different domestic institutional and strategic context. For manifold reasons, it was never feasible for Japanese leaders to import the U.S. NSC into Japan without significant modifications.110 The two countries have vastly different political systems (parliamentary versus presidential) and categorically different norms, laws, domestic politics, and constitutional constraints as it concerns their armed forces—especially concerning ‘use of force’ (buryoku kōshi). Thus, an important caveat is in order: Though the vicissitudes of the U.S. experience (and the massive literature on the U.S. NSC) can, and should, inform scholarly analyses of Japan’s own NSC, important differences should caution against superficial comparisons.

**The prime minister**

As an institution situated in the Cabinet Secretariat, the single greatest factor likely to shape the future evolution of Japan’s NSC and NSS is the prime minister, especially his or her interest in and inclinations concerning Japanese security affairs, beliefs about the NSC’s centrality and appropriate role, and, perhaps above all, personnel decisions.111 A major downgrade or sidelining of NSC seems unlikely given a basic consensus today among major political parties that Japan

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108 Leading Japanese experts identify three categorical variables to watch—institutions (seido), strategy (senryaku), and personnel (jinzai)—and offer nine recommendations. Oriki and Kaneko, *Kakka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi*, 10-19.
111 Matsuda and Saitō, ‘Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?’, 61
confronts severe security challenges. But it is worth noting that past prime ministers—even from Abe’s own party—have varied widely in how they value (or neglect) national security policy and/or assertive prime ministerial leadership of it. In several ways, leaders such as Abe are arguably the historical exception rather than the norm—especially in terms of longevity and cabinet stability.

The U.S. experience powerfully supports the basic point that the chief executive fundamentally shapes the NSC, especially in its early years. Whereas Eisenhower, the second president of the NSC era, significantly expanded and institutionalized various functions, his immediate successor (Kennedy) shrank the NSC and chose to rely more on informal groupings—an ad-hoc approach critics argue directly contributed to the disastrous ‘Bay of Pigs’. History shows the U.S. president’s interest in national security, and the NSC itself, can also vary widely; leader presence and engagement are also key factors. For example, after presiding over the NSC’s first-ever meeting, Truman next attendance occurred ten months later. In contrast, his successor (Eisenhower) attended 90% of the almost weekly NSC meetings convened during his eight-year presidency.\textsuperscript{112} Even across a single administration’s term in office, interest in the NSC can also fluctuate widely.\textsuperscript{113} Furthermore, not all presidents pay close attention to the details of policy, and certainly not all prefer regular and formal procedures.\textsuperscript{114} Failure to establish clear divisions with other national security-relevant departments can also cause problems.\textsuperscript{115}

NSS secretary-general

Beyond the individual his or herself, how the role of the NSS secretary-general evolves, or the creation of a new position which supersedes or challenges its authority, could significantly change the institution’s effective role, especially as it concerns inter-agency coordination and the power balance between the Kantei and the ministries. In several recent cases, past prime ministers have tapped fellow politicians as point-persons on national security affairs.\textsuperscript{116}

When thinking about Japan’s possible futures, it is important to recall that what ultimately evolved into the powerful U.S. ‘national security advisor’ position did not exist, nor was it even

\textsuperscript{112} Daalder and Destler, \textit{In the Shadow}, 4-5
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 70. Case-in-point: Nixon convened 27 NSC meetings his first six months, but only three all of 1972.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{116} Koike Yuriko during Abe’s first term and Nagashima Akihisa during the Noda administration.
anticipated, at the time of the NSC’s creation. The 1947 establishment act called only for a ‘civilian executive secretary’ to manage the NSC staff. It was not until Eisenhower that the position (technically, ‘assistant to the president for national security affairs’) was created. And it was not until Kennedy took office in 1961—14 years after NSC’s establishment—that the U.S. national security advisor’s role expanded to include responsibilities typically associated with the ‘modern’ NSC.\textsuperscript{117} Though the position has never been formalized in actual legislation, the contemporary U.S. national security advisor has achieved cabinet-level status and is generally considered a ‘first among equals’ on the principals committee.\textsuperscript{118} The post can also be heavily political; for example, unlike the secretaries of defense or state, the national security advisor is not subject to Senate confirmation.\textsuperscript{119} As a post beholden only to the U.S. president, its political nature creates a wide range of possible roles and mandates. Past cases run the gamut from extremely powerful advisors widely seen as dominating policy formulation and implementation (e.g., Kissinger under Nixon), to those who see their role more as largely impartial managers of a robust inter-agency process (e.g., Scowcroft under H.W. Bush).

\section*{Japan’s national security strategy}

The 1947 U.S. NSC was shaped heavily by lessons of the second world war, the resulting perceived necessity of Washington adopting an unprecedentedly proactive global leadership role to avoid a third one; and anticipation of what ultimately became the Cold War. These lessons and nascent challenges fostered a consensus in Washington concerning the necessity of a more complex, institutionalized national security process.\textsuperscript{120} In subsequent decades, vicissitudes in the global security environment drove significant changes to U.S. national security strategy, which in turn caused major swings in the U.S. NSC’s form and function.

Though the circumstances differed significantly in 2013, Japan’s NSC was also motivated by national security leaders’ desire for Japan to adopt a more assertive, less isolationist regional and global posture. Nevertheless, and despite the rhetoric of a more ‘proactive’ and ‘global’ security agenda for Japan as a more ‘normal’ security player in the post-Cold War world, the de facto and explicit changes to Japan’s national security strategy to date have been relatively small—especially as it concerns circumstances under which kinetic military force is considered

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\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 5; 299-301. Others point to Brent Scowcroft (H.W. Bush administration) as the first modern example.
\textsuperscript{118} Rothkopf, \textit{Running the World}, 7.
\textsuperscript{119} Rothkopf, \textit{Running the World}, 6-7.
\textsuperscript{120} Imboden, \textit{The National Security Act Turns 70}, 4.
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constitutional (buryoku kōshi). If the past several decades are any guide, therefore, major swings in Japan’s national security strategy seem less likely. However, Japan has only had one official national security strategy to date (2013). In the years since, both Japan’s region and U.S. grand strategy have arguably entered a period of unprecedented potential volatility. Though for now Japan appears to have responded to this uncertainty by ‘doubling-down’ on the U.S.-Japan alliance, what is currently is not necessarily what shall ever be. New challenges loom large in the calculus of Japan’s strategic planners: in particular, the Trump Administration’s ‘America First’ posture, China’s growing power and influence, and North Korea’s alleged acquisition of a nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missile within range of Washington. Any future changes to Japan’s strategy are undoubtedly an important variable to watch, and hold potentially significant implications for the form and function of Japan’s NSC.

**NSS staff size, organization, and role**

The U.S. NSC staff was originally a small advisory team to assist the president. Over time, however, it has ballooned in size and influence and coopted many functions traditionally assigned to Cabinet departments.\(^{121}\) The NSC staff numbered less than 20 under Kennedy, but doubled in size by the end of the Cold War (1991). Between 2000 and 2010 it grew from roughly 100 to over 370 personnel.\(^{122}\)

Given its far less ambitious contemporary mandate, significant expansion of Japan’s NSS (currently approximately 70-80 personnel) or its assigned functions seems unlikely. Yet major changes to Japan’s security environment or strategy may drive adjustments, as they have in the U.S. case. Any expansion perceived as threatening Japan’s other ministries/agencies—especially the traditionally powerful MOFA—may reduce the bureaucracies’ willingness to cooperate with (and provide their best personnel) to the NSS. The Abe administration’s obvious prioritization of national security affairs and appointment of a career MOFA diplomat as NSS secretary-general may have forestalled otherwise significant bureaucratic blowback. Whether NSS and the bureaucracies continue to cooperate remains to be seen. Were career bureaucrats to resist, Japan’s ability to consolidate a more robust ‘security community’ outside the government would become even more important.\(^{123}\)

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\(^{121}\) Rothkopf, *Running the World*, 6; Rothkopf, ‘Inside the Committee That Runs the World’

\(^{122}\) Orik and Kaneko, *Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi*, 44.

\(^{123}\) Matsuda and Saitō, ‘Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?’, 59; Ibid., 19.
Decision-making authority

Japan’s constitution stipulates that ‘executive power shall be vested in the Cabinet’. Accordingly, a common variable identified in Japanese analyses of NSC’s significance is whether NSC can effectively function as a de facto top-level decision-making organization (じじょう の いしずえ の はい と けいせい の ば)，rather than as a relatively weak advisory body a la the erstwhile SC. Inter alia, this may affect NSC/NSS’ ability to assert authority over the (historically powerful) ministries and agencies. So far, however, even without a formal Cabinet Decision it appears NSC/NSS does have independent authority over various administrative decisions. It is authorized to carry out a general coordination function; request information/intelligence; and in practice has ‘virtual decision-making authority’ (じじょう の けいせい の いしゅう ken).

In the U.S. case, the growth over time in the NSC staff and the shift in the ‘nexus’ of foreign policy and national strategy decision-making away from the Cabinet and toward the White House transformed the NSC’s importance, with significant implications not only for process and policy outcomes, but also transparency and accountability. Together with potentially politically incendiary constitutional issues and longstanding popular concerns about government secrecy, military affairs and civilian control, NSC’s ability to actually make decisions will fundamentally shape its big-picture, longer-term significance.

Balancing secrecy vs. transparency

Far more politically incendiary than NSC’s establishment was the controversial secrets protection act that Abe himself identified as ‘integral’ to its functioning. To the act’s advocates, Japan’s rudimentary post-war classification and security clearance system constrained its ability to gather, conduct, and share (both internally and with allies) sensitive intelligence and analysis. NSC’s long-term efficacy is likely to hinge on continued political and popular support for the new system, a perception that sincere efforts are being made to strike a balance between national security concerns and democratic transparency, and the avoidance of major scandals.

125 Ibid., 10; 68-9; Asai, ‘Nihon-ban NSC’, 12.
128 Ibid., 73.
129 Daalder and Destler, In the Shadow, 7-8.
130 For examples of the controversy, see Wakefield, ‘What Japan's Designated State Secrets Law Targets’.
Day-to-day affairs versus long-term strategic planning

A common theme in analyses of the U.S. NSC is the tension inherent between its responsibilities for long-term strategic planning and day-to-day management of national security affairs.\textsuperscript{131} A similar tension is manifest in recent Japanese writings on Japan’s NSC.\textsuperscript{132} Striking a balance and division of labor between NSC’s role in medium- and long-term strategic planning and day-to-day policy integration/crisis management within and outside the NSS will be a major task going forward.\textsuperscript{133}

IV. Conclusion

On December 4, 2018, Japan’s first-ever national security council will mark its fifth anniversary. Coupled with its supporting national security secretariat, Japan’s NSC constitutes what leading scholars have already judged ‘the most ambitious reorganization of Japan’s foreign and security policy apparatus’ since 1945\textsuperscript{134}; one with significant implications for politics and foreign policy decision-making. An extensive survey of the Japanese-language scholarly literature, government speeches and documents, inter alia, finds NSC functioning largely as intended, with its fingerprints already on almost every major aspect of the strategic trajectory attracting global headlines in the post-2012 ‘Abe era’. Most importantly, NSC has centralized foreign and security policy decision-making in the executive—the prime minister’s office in particular—and significantly ameliorated longstanding, pervasive vertical hurdles across Japan’s traditionally powerful bureaucracies in favor of a national strategy oriented toward whole-of-government approaches. This institutionalized inter-agency interaction is fundamental to its modus operandi. As Eisenhower, who attended almost every NSC meeting during his eight-year presidency, was reportedly wont to say (quoting Prussian General Von Moltke), ‘plans are nothing, but planning is everything’.\textsuperscript{135}

\textsuperscript{131} This tension deepened after Kennedy expanded NSC’s mandate significantly beyond strategic planning. See Daalder and Destler, \textit{In the Shadow}, esp. Ch. 2; Yoshizaki, ‘Beikoku: Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi (NSC)’.
\textsuperscript{132} Matsuda, ‘Joshō’; Yoshizaki, ‘Beikoku: Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi (NSC)’, 22; Oriki and Kaneko, \textit{Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi}.
\textsuperscript{133} Oriki and Kaneko, \textit{Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi}, 16-17.
\textsuperscript{134} Heginbotham and Samuels, ‘Tokyo’s Arms Exports’.
\textsuperscript{135} Daalder and Destler, \textit{In the Shadow}, 5.
NSC’s 2013 establishment was the culmination of a decades-long reform movement aimed at strengthening the prime minister and addressing perceived weaknesses of national security-relevant institutions, in particular the erstwhile National Defense Council (1956-1986) and Security Council (1986-2013). Yet its creation was hardly preordained. Prior to 2013, Japan had done without an explicit national security strategy for nearly 70 years. For decades, the idea of a Japanese NSC was considered by many—including some past LDP prime ministers—to be unnecessary, even inappropriate for Japan’s parliamentary system, constitutional constraints, and longstanding political and LDP-specific norms against concentration of executive power. Resistance from the bureaucracies with the most to lose (above all, MOFA) was also powerful. Just six years earlier, Abe’s NSC campaign (and administration) collapsed in the context of a larger backlash against his ambitious security agenda. The original NSC establishment law his administration submitted to the Diet in 2007 was abandoned by his own party.

By 2013, however, major qualitative transformations of Japan’s regional security environment and lessons learned during the DPJ era created domestic political space for major reforms to both security-relevant institutions and policy. The reasons why, and the front-line role NSC has played in Japan’s foreign policy decision-making since, reveal much about the trajectory of Japanese security relevant-institutions and policies in response to what is widely seen within Japan as a rapidly changing, increasingly complex, and even more uncertain security environment characterized by multiple traditional and non-traditional challenges.

Though available data suggests it is functioning well to date, NSC’s longer-term significance will be determined by its performance in a post-Abe era. If the U.S. NSC’s 70-year history is any indication, particularly in light of its status as an institution beholden to the executive, the form and function of future Japanese NSCs may evolve significantly. The manner in which it does will be an important part of the gradually unfolding drama of Japan’s 21st-century strategic evolution. Put another way: this is hardly the last word on Japan’s NSC. Students of Japanese politics and foreign policy are advised to watch this space.
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