

ARTICLE



Japan's National Security Council: Policy Coordination and Political Power

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ABSTRACT

In 2013, Japan established its first-ever National Security Council (NSC) as the leading edge of ambitious reforms to its foreign-policy-relevant institutions. Within weeks, Japan's new national security tripod was firmly in place: the top-level, political NSC 'control tower' as well as Japan's first-ever National Security Strategy and National Security Secretariat. Ever 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 functioning, and offers a preliminary assessment of the current and likely future implications of this historic institutional reform. Beyond the 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.

Japan's security is not someone else's problem; it is a crisis that exists right there [...] By establishing a National Security Council as a 'control tower', and other such measures, the Cabinet is determined to strengthen our foreign and security policy framework.

Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, at his December 2012 inaugural press conference¹

Following the conservative Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) landslide election victory in December 2012 after three years during which the LDP–Komeito coalition was out of power, 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 13 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, a 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

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¹This and all other translations are by the author. Shushō Kantei, *Abe naikaku sōri daijin shūnin kisha kaiken*.

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(and some 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’.²

In light of the historical significance of Japan’s NSC as a major institutional reform, there is limited scholarly analysis outside Japan 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.³ 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 US NSC – which inspired it.⁴ It is also informed 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 – notably, 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 and the NSS have also come to play a key diplomatic function, especially by serving as the key contact point for foreign governments, not least the NSC of Japan’s ally, the United States.

Less conspicuous but no less important have been the NSC’s internal effects, especially on Japan’s foreign-policy decision-making. Of particular significance are the implications of the NSC 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 inter-agency 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 is motivated by a more comprehensive conceptualization of national security 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, nuclear proliferation, and gray-zone challenges), economics, and finance. Though the idea for an NSC-

²Heginbotham and Samuels, ‘Tokyo’s Arms Exports’.

³Several earlier English-language studies which have touched 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?’; and Pugliese, ‘Kantei Diplomacy?’.

⁴Hitoshi, “‘Nihon-ban NSC’ no kadai”; Matsuda, ‘Joshō’; Matsuda and Hosono, ‘Nihon’; Matsuda and Saitō, ‘Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?’; Asai, ‘Nihon-ban NSC’; Sunohara, *Nihon-ban NSC to wa nani ka?*; Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kiko*; Kotani, ‘Nihon-ban kokka anzen hoshō’; Oriki and Kaneko, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi*.

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 recurring theme in post-Cold War Japanese politics.⁶ Still, under Abe the prime minister and the Kantei have more directly influenced policy than any previous administration.⁷

This article first offers a historical baseline and overview of the motivations behind Japan's first-ever NSC. A very brief summary of key functions of the foreign exemplar that inspired Japan's NSC – the US NSC – is followed by a summary of the perceived shortcomings and evolution of its domestic forebears: Japan's erstwhile Defense Council (1956–86) and Security Council (1986–2013). This historical context helps elucidate why a US NSC-type institution had such appeal to reform-minded leaders in Japan. It also helps highlight a larger point: though often simplistically attributed to Abe himself, the 2013 establishment of the NSC represents a culmination of an institutional reform effort that is decades-old. Faced with a rapidly changing, increasingly complex, and ever more uncertain strategic environment, in recent years Japan's leaders across the political spectrum have supported moves to strengthen top-down political leadership and inter-agency coordination of national security decision-making, thereby ameliorating long-standing 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 the institution's post-2013 functionality in practice, it offers some preliminary findings. The third section discusses the NSC's bigger-picture significance and identifies key variables likely to shape its future evolution, especially in a post-Abe era. Inter alia, its analysis suggests a future research agenda for scholars as Japan's NSC evolves and new data emerge. A final section concludes.

The Institutional Origins of Japan's NSC

The Foreign Exemplar: the US 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 US 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,

⁵Studies 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 Politics and the US–Japan Alliance'; Liff, 'Japan's Defense Policy'; Hughes, 'Japan's Strategic Trajectory and Collective Self-Defense'; Oros, *Japan's Security Renaissance*; Liff, 'Japan's Security Policy in the 'Abe Era'.

⁶Takenaka, 'Expansion of the Power of the Japanese Prime Minister'.

⁷For a recent overview, see Mulgan, *The Abe Administration and the Rise of the Prime Ministerial Executive*, Chapter 3.

⁸Matsuda 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.

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'.⁹ Its creation was part of a 'complete restructuring of the entire national security apparatus' in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.¹⁰ This larger movement was motivated by a belief that strategic exigencies called on America to forsake isolationism and proactively engage the world.¹¹ The war's global scope and the centrality of alliances drove demand for more structured inter-agency processes to link various aspects of US foreign policy to a unified, comprehensive national security strategy.¹² The NSC was intended as an antidote to the 'ad hoc arrangements and informal groups of advisers' that presidents had previously relied upon to formulate and implement national security policy.¹³ Its basic intent was thus to institutionalize whole-of-government approaches to national strategy in response to the multidimensional nascent Cold War; that is, to ensure 'proper institutional coordination of political and military ends and means' and to integrate diplomatic, military, and economic power'.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

Though it generated little media fanfare upon its establishment,¹⁶ the US NSC's effects were transformative. But they were hardly stable. Over the past 70 years its form, function, and influence have fluctuated to an extent its designers could not have anticipated, leaving a dynamic empirical legacy with potentially significant implications for the future evolution of Japan's nascent NSC (see below). Three functions of the US NSC particularly attractive to critics of Japan's extant 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;¹⁷
- improving inter-agency coordination in support of a comprehensive strategy through frequent, institutionalized meetings and information/intelligence-sharing among all national security-relevant agencies;¹⁸

⁹DNI, 1947 *National Security Act*, Section 101.

¹⁰Best, *National Security Council*, 4.

¹¹Rothkopf, *Running the World*, 29.

¹²Best, *National Security Council*, 1.

¹³Imboden, 'The National Security Act Turns 70'.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵Inderfurth and Johnson, *Fateful Decisions*, 14.

¹⁶Daalder and Destler, *In the Shadow*, 3.

¹⁷Established in the Office of the President, the NSC consolidated foreign-policy agenda-setting and decision-making in the (political) executive. It allowed for advice from a dedicated staff beholden only to the president – not a home department or agency. Daalder and Destler, *In the Shadow*, 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*, 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.

¹⁸In 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 (or bureaucracies) 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.

- 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.¹⁹

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, the NSC's creation was the culmination of a multi-decade effort in part inspired by the US example but also with distinctly domestic motivations aimed at reforming Japan's national security-relevant institutions to ameliorate long-standing 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 that the NSC's establishment was specifically designed to address.

Part of the 1954 legislation creating Japan's Self-defense Forces (JSDF) and Defense Agency, the 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.²⁰ Example topics included the substance of Japan's Basic Defense Policy (*kokubō no kihon hōshin*) and JSDF mobilization. Importantly, however, the DC had significant constraints rendering it fundamentally distinct from a robust NSC-type institution. Its assigned mandate was important for Japan's nascent postwar democracy but narrow: 'prudent deliberation to ensure civilian control' (*shibirian kontorōru kakuho no tame no shinchō shingi*). Accordingly, JSDF officers were generally sidelined from deliberations in the interest of ensuring 'civilian superiority', a Japanese concept some scholars contend originated when the concept of 'civilian control' was imported and misinterpreted during the US Occupation.²¹

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 run day-to-day defense affairs or 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.²² Given the DC's limited mandate, prime ministers convened it rarely – twice per year, on average.²³

¹⁹Though the US 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 is probably the most influential player on foreign policy aside from the president. 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.

²⁰Matsuda and Hosono, 'Nihon', 283.

²¹Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kikō*, 48–49.

²²Matsuda and Hosono, 'Nihon', 284–85.

²³*Ibid.*, 282–83.

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 (1972–74), Miki (1974–76), and Fukuda (1976–78) 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 (1978–80) 'comprehensive security' concept shifted Japan's conversation about national security beyond an exclusive focus on traditional territorial defense. A 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 1990.²⁴ In the end, the reform effort achieved little concrete progress. Most notably, from 1956 to 1986 the Diet passed no reform legislation.²⁵

As the Soviet Far East military build-up exacerbated Cold War tensions in East Asia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Prime Minister Nakasone (1982–87), a former Defense Agency chief, championed various administrative and defense reforms to bolster political leadership of defense affairs and crisis management.²⁶ In 1986, the Security Council (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 limitations concerning emergency-situation response; information gathering and sharing among relevant organs; and rapid whole-of-government decision-making (*zenseifuteki na ishi kettei*).²⁷ 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.²⁸ Yet immediately prior to the SC's establishment, the DC secretariat expressed concern that a nine-minister meeting would be unwieldy and inflexible, and that responsibility for 'situation response' would dilute its defense functionality.²⁹ (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.)

²⁴Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kikō*, 74–77.

²⁵Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kikō*, 59–79.

²⁶Hitoshi, "Nihon-ban NSC" no kadai, 1.

²⁷Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kikō*, 90–91.

²⁸Kotani, 'Nihon-ban kokka anzen hoshō', 62–63; Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kikō*, 91, 115.

²⁹Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kikō*, 93–94.

Despite its 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 2013.³⁰ 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 (such as involvement in UN peacekeeping and anti-piracy operations) in regional and global security in the post-Cold War and post-9/11 periods.³¹ Prime ministers convened the 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).³² Failure to respond effectively to crises both foreign (such as the 1996–97 hostage crisis at Japan's embassy in Peru) and domestic (including the 1995 Kobe earthquake and terrorist incidents) drove internal reforms.³³ Nevertheless, as Japan's leaders and institutions struggled to cope with various complex twenty-first-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 (*Nihon-ban*) NSC' – approached critical mass.

Toward a 'Japan-style NSC'

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

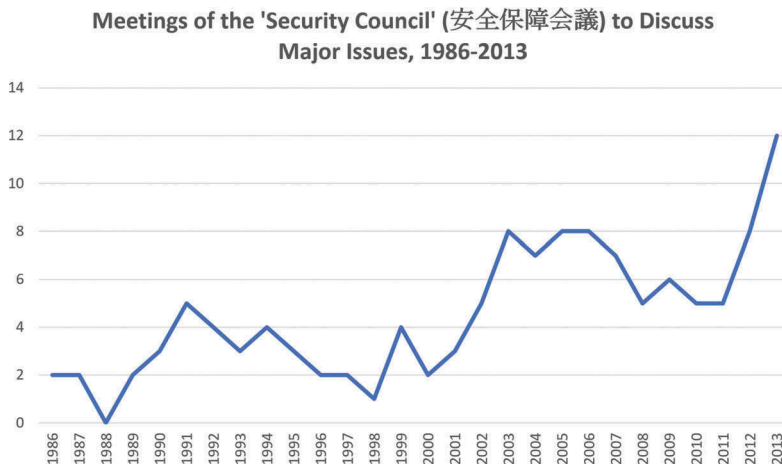


Figure 1. Frequency of SC meetings to discuss major issues. Drawn from author's analysis based on data in Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku*, 100–04.

³⁰ Author's calculations based on data in Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kikō*, 100–04.

³¹ Hitoshi, "'Nihon-ban NSC' no kadai", 2–3.

³² Author's calculations based on data in Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kikō*, 100–04.

³³ *Ibid.*, 155–57.

(2001–06) and first Abe (2006–07) administrations. Major drivers included Washington's calls for the JSDF to support US 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 played a central role. 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.³⁴ In 2003, the Diet passed three bills related to an 'armed attack situation' (*buryoku kōgeki jitai*), one of which revised the 1986 SC establishment law to bolster 'situation response'.³⁵ 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 in particular, 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, which was a post-1945 'first'.³⁶

Having shared many of his predecessor's frustrations while serving in the Koizumi Cabinet, upon his election as prime minister in September 2006 Abe 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 US NSC and especially during his consultations with US National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley about North Korean missile launches and other security matters.³⁷ Abe pursued 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 test of a nuclear weapon occurred two weeks after Abe became prime minister). He 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.³⁸ Notably, 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.³⁹ In 2007, the Abe Cabinet formally introduced legislation to establish Japan's first-ever NSC.

Nevertheless, due to Abe's health issues and the LDP losing its majority in the July 2007 Upper House election, the 'Japan-style NSC' movement lost momentum. Abe resigned in August, and his LDP successor, Prime Minister Fukuda (2007–08), did not appear to share his conviction that an NSC was urgently required or necessary. Consequently, the position of prime-ministerial assistant on national security affairs

³⁴Ibid., 146.

³⁵Ibid., 147, 158; Hitoshi, "'Nihon-ban NSC' no kadai', 1; Matsuda and Hosono, 'Nihon', 302–04.

³⁶Matsuda, 'Joshō', 14.

³⁷Matsuda and Hosono, 'Nihon', 308; Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kikō*, 162–63.

³⁸Matsuda, 'Joshō', 14.

³⁹Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kikō*, 162–63.

was not placed in the Cabinet, and the NSC-establishment bill was abandoned, reportedly without even being deliberated.⁴⁰ The long-time 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 US NSC.⁴¹

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 but unelected bureaucrats. After taking office, Prime Minister Hatoyama (2009–10) launched a 'National Strategy Office' to strengthen Kantei functioning.⁴² The DPJ's first and only 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG; *shin bōei taikō*) called for establishing an NSC-like institution.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ Thus, by the time Abe returned to the Kantei in December 2012, for reasons arising from both domestic politics and a worsening regional security environment, the NSC-specific reform movement's basic thrust had garnered supra-partisan support. In contrast to his abortive effort to create a national security council in 2006–07, these factors, coupled with a landslide election victory, ensured that in 2013 Abe's ambition of creating an NSC would face much less resistance.

As the 'Japan-style NSC's most prominent and outspoken political champion for a decade, it is no surprise that it was established under Abe. Yet this was hardly a one-person effort. The 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 the SC's large, unwieldy, relatively inflexible nature, coupled with a small and weak secretariat, was judged to be insufficient to handle increasingly severe and diverse security challenges, both non-traditional (e.g., natural disasters and terrorism) and traditional (e.g., North Korea's nuclear-weapons and ballistic-missile tests). In contrast to the relatively ad hoc, reactive, and more strictly traditional defense-oriented approaches adopted by past administrations, Abe and other LDP leaders in particular considered a more 'proactive', comprehensive strategy a national security imperative. Qualitative transformations widely perceived as worsening Japan's security environment and the emergence of new domains (such as space and cyber threats) introduced unprecedented, complex challenges which Japan's leaders judged would require more

⁴⁰Sunohara, *Nihon-ban NSC to wa nani ka?* 114–17, 187–88; Oriki and Kaneko, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi*, 24.

⁴¹Matsuda, 'Joshō', 14.

⁴²Sunohara, *Nihon-ban NSC to wa nani ka?* 118.

⁴³Oriki and Kaneko, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi*, 25.

⁴⁴Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kikō*, 193–96, 124.

flexible, rapid, comprehensive, and whole-of-government responses than the Cold War-era SC could provide. Meanwhile, a long-term trend of declining (relative) US military power and, in the eyes of some, increasing concerns about US security guarantees demanded both deeper coordination with and ability to operate more independently (*jiritsu*) of Washington.⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶ 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 – neither a pure peacetime nor a traditional armed-attack situation – for which Japan's extant institutions were ill equipped to respond.⁴⁷ A January 2013 hostage crisis involving Japanese citizens in Algeria – just weeks after Abe's return to the Kantei – also exposed for the general public major weaknesses in Japan's ability to gather, process, and share information internally, which further catalyzed the NSC movement.⁴⁸ In the context of these long-term trends and specific incidents, for some critics the nearly 30-year-old SC had become an 'empty shell' (*keigaika*).⁴⁹

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 [...], flexibl[e] and daily discussions of diplomatic and security affairs from a strategic perspective [...] and] rapid responses based on strong political leadership'. He stressed the NSC's establishment as an imperative 'to ensure Japan's peace and independence [...] amidst] a security environment increasing in severity'.⁵⁰ Together with a revised Cabinet law to create the NSS, the NSC-establishment law passed the Diet on 27 November 2013.⁵¹ On 4 December, Abe convened Japan's first-ever NSC meeting. A month later, the NSS launched with approximately 70 staff.

By late 2013, elite consensus on the need for reforms had coalesced sufficiently that the NSC-establishment law was remarkably uncontroversial. But there was some resistance. From Japan's more traditionally ideological left, criticism appeared motivated more by opposition to Abe and fears that associated reforms would enable him to carry out his more ambitious national security *policy* agenda, rather than the institution itself. One Japan Communist Party politician opined in the Diet that the NSC would not be a 'control tower for diplomacy and security', as had been advertised, but rather a 'control

⁴⁵Sunohara, *Nihon-ban NSC to wa nani ka?* 25.

⁴⁶Matsuda and Saitō, 'Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?', 58.

⁴⁷Liff, 'China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations in the East China Sea and Japan's Response'.

⁴⁸Sunohara, *Nihon-ban NSC to wa nani ka?* 37.

⁴⁹Matsuda and Saitō, 'Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?', 50, 55.

⁵⁰Shushō Kantei, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi no sōsetsu ni kansuru yūshikisha kaigi*.

⁵¹Technically this was a major revision of the 1986 Security Council-establishment law. For specifics regarding the legislation, see Naikaku Kanbō, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi ni tsuite*, 3.

tower for wars and military expansion' (*sensō, gunkaku no shireitō*).⁵² Other concerns varied. Some worried about institutional implications, especially excessive centralization of executive power and/or a belief that an (US-modeled) NSC did not suit Japan's parliamentary system and norms in favor of Cabinet consensus decision-making.⁵³ More politically incendiary than NSC's establishment was the controversial Secrets Protection Act (*tokutei himitsu hogohō*) that was passed around the same time and which was generally considered integral to the inter-agency information-sharing mandate of an effective NSC.⁵⁴ To the act's advocates, Japan's rudimentary postwar classification and security-clearance system constrained its ability to gather, conduct, and share (both internally and with the US and others) sensitive intelligence and analysis. But it raised significant transparency concerns.⁵⁵ A final group of NSC skeptics feared it would allow more extensive and direct US influence on Japanese foreign policy, especially through the sharing of sensitive information.⁵⁶

In the end, however, the 2013 NSC-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.⁵⁷

The National Security Council (2013–)

The first and central pillar of Japan's new Kantei-led national security tripod is the NSC itself, which in both form and function is fundamentally distinct from its closest institutional precursors (the DC and SC). In establishing the NSC, Japan's leaders had the following objectives:

- strengthen political leadership over national security decision-making;
- improve Japan's ability to strategize and act (/operate) more independently (and, paradoxically, in so doing strengthen the US–Japan alliance)⁵⁸;
- 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 decisions⁵⁹;
- significantly enhance inter-agency coordination.

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.⁶⁰ In stark contrast to its ad hoc and infrequently convened SC predecessor, the NSC has regularly

⁵²Kokkai kaigiroku kensaku shisutemu, 27 November 2013.

⁵³Kokkai kaigiroku kensaku shisutemu, 30 January 2007; Sunohara, *Nihon-ban NSC to wa nani ka?* 22; Matsuda and Saitō, 'Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?', 50.

⁵⁴*Asahi shimbun*, 22 November 2006; *Asahi shimbun*, 21 December 2013; *Asahi shimbun*, 20 September 2015.

⁵⁵For examples of the controversy, see Usaki, 'What Japan's Designated State Secrets Law Targets'.

⁵⁶Kokkai kaigiroku kensaku shisutemu, 25 November 2013; Sunohara, *Nihon-ban NSC to wa nani ka?* 22; *Asahi shimbun*, 20 September 2015.

⁵⁷*Yomiuri shimbun*, 27 November 2013.

⁵⁸Sunohara, *Nihon-ban NSC towa nani ka?* 30–38.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 35, 172.

⁶⁰Asai, 'Nihon-ban NSC', 1–3.

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' 'four-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: to 'giv[e] a fundamental direction to diplomacy and defense policy concerning national security from a strategic perspective'.⁶¹ The 4MM's small membership enables meetings to be convened frequently, regularly (in principle, biweekly at a minimum), and, in an emergency, rapidly.⁶² It also facilitates more substantive and efficient discussions.⁶³ 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. Though the new 4MM constitutes the NSC's core, principals' meetings can be expanded as needed. Usually, this is achieved through the 'nine-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 ministerial meeting' (*kinkyū jitai daijin kaigō*), with participants invited contingent on situational characteristics. This format is intended to strengthen responses and political decision-making (*seijiteki na 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.⁶⁴

In sum, 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.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶

The National Security Strategy (2013–)⁶⁷

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 (such as MOFA's blue books or the 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

⁶¹Bōeishō, 2013 *Bōei hakusho*, 105.

⁶²*Yomiuri shimbun*, 9 January 2015.

⁶³Matsuda and Saitō, 'Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?', 57.

⁶⁴Naikaku Kanbō, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi ni tsuite*, 2. For diagrams illustrating how the prime minister might convene the three meeting types, see Bōeishō, 2014 *Bōei hakusho*, 126.

⁶⁵Kotani, 'Nihon-ban kokka anzen hoshō', 61–62.

⁶⁶Kaneko, *Iyoiyo shidō Nihon-ban NSC*, 3.

⁶⁷Full text: Naikaku Kanbō, *Kokka anzen hoshō senryaku ni tsuite*.

(or, at least, explicit) comprehensive national security strategy presenting a unifying, whole-of-government medium- to long-term vision across all elements of national interest and power.

That all changed when, hours after NSC's establishment, the Abe administration promulgated the second pillar of its new national security tripod: Japan's 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 replaces⁶⁸ – focused exclusively on defense affairs, Japan's 2013 National Security Strategy covers various issue 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 creation⁶⁹ and its role as a hub for integrating medium- to long-term strategies of various domains into a single, comprehensive national strategy.⁷⁰ 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 long-standing ban on arms exports (*bōei sōbi iten san gensoku*) and the 2014 Cabinet Decision allowing limited exercise of collective self-defense (*shūdanteki jieiken*) – were based on the National Security Strategy.⁷¹ 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*).⁷²

The National Security Secretariat (2014 –)

Supporting the NSC's various responsibilities, including coordinating the inter-agency process required for the whole-of-government National Security Strategy, is the third pillar of Japan's new national security tripod: its first-ever NSS (*kokka anzen hoshō kyoku*). The NSS was formally launched on 7 January 2014 with, as mentioned above, approximately 70 staff, primarily (though not exclusively) career civil servants and JSDF officers, who were mostly seconded from MOFA and MOD.

Established within the Cabinet Secretariat, the NSS is organized into three regional and three functional teams, each of which is led by a counselor (*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 the MOFA and MOD; and typically three councillors (*shingikan*) – one each from the MOFA, MOD, and JSDF.⁷³ In October 2017, the NSS also created a 'special advisor'

⁶⁸Bōeishō, 2014 *Bōei hakusho*, 132–133.

⁶⁹Kotani, 'Nihon-ban kokka anzen hoshō', 61, 70–72.

⁷⁰Matsuda and Saitō, 'Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?', 57.

⁷¹Kotani, 'Nihon-ban kokka anzen hoshō', 72.

⁷²Bōeishō, 2014 *Bōei hakusho*, 134.

⁷³*Asahi shimbun*, 8 January 2014.

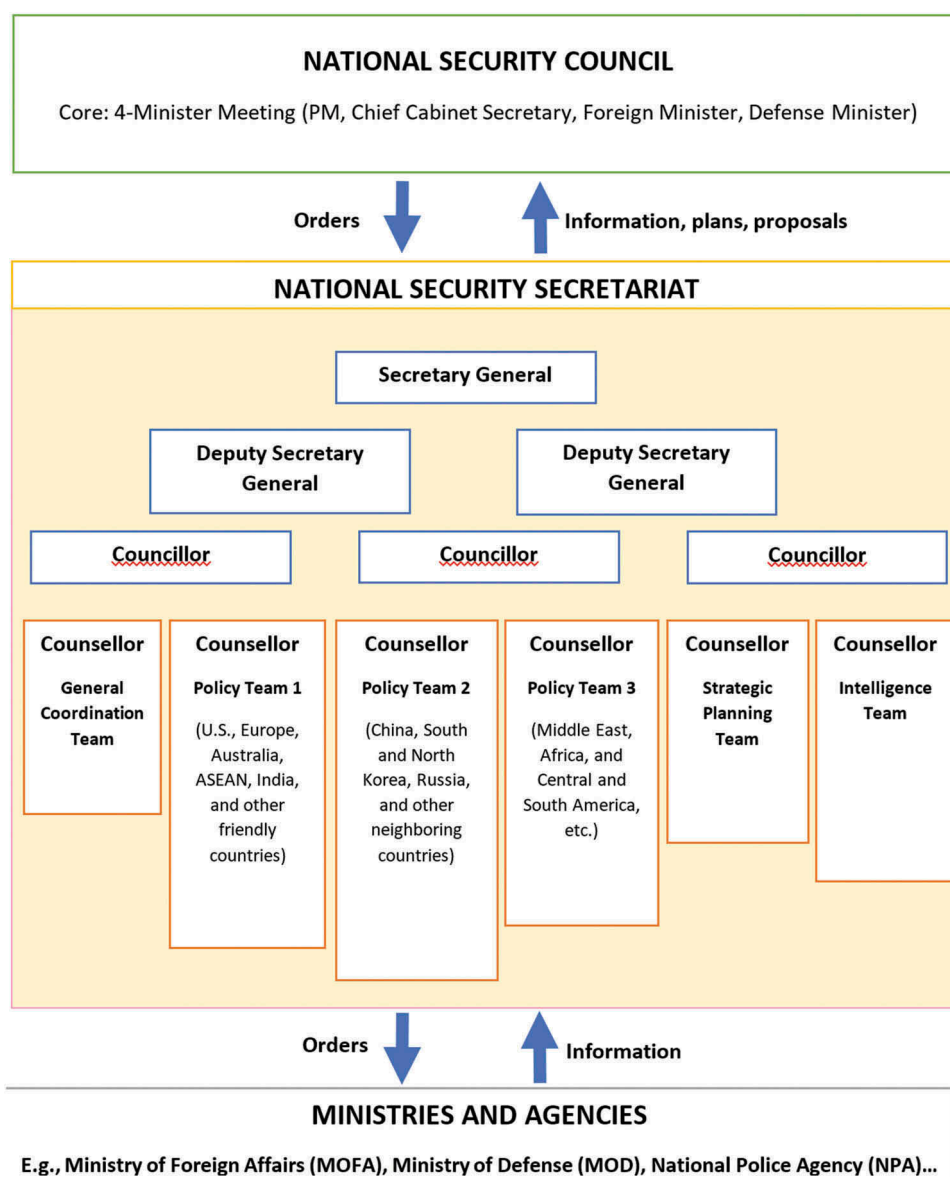


Figure 2. NSS organizational chart. Adapted from *Asahi Shimbun*, 8 January 2014.

post (*kokka anzen hoshō sanyō*), to which a former MOD administrative vice-minister was appointed.⁷⁴

The NSS's primary responsibilities are basic planning of foreign and defense policy; coordination of an inter-agency process aimed at ensuring policies of individual ministries and agencies comport with the comprehensive National Security Strategy; and issuing information requests from and sharing intelligence among relevant ministries and agencies.⁷⁵

⁷⁴*Yomiuri shimbun*, 5 October 2017.

⁷⁵Kotani, 'Nihon-ban kokka anzen hoshō', 65–66, 73.

The NSS has also played a central role in 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, which is traditionally the MOD's role.⁷⁶

The NSC and NSS in Practice: Preliminary Findings

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 one per week (180 times in its first 46 months), the 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.⁷⁷

In terms of frequency, Abe has convened the NSC far more often than the expected biweekly meetings. From 2014 to 2015, the NSC met 34 times annually. In 2016 and 2017, it met 47 and 46 times, respectively. Of these meetings, the core 4MM was held on average four times as frequently as the 9MM (145–35).⁷⁸ By comparison, the 1980 Ministerial Council on Comprehensive Security met an average of two times per year before it ceased functioning in 1993.⁷⁹ Even the NSC's immediate predecessor, the 1986–2013 SC, met on average to discuss major issues a half-dozen times per year.⁸⁰ In other words, NSC meetings already occur more frequently than in the SC era.⁸¹ 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 (such as an armed attack against Japan).⁸²

In terms of meeting substance, the 9MM appears to have inherited the erstwhile SC's basic composition and mandate.⁸³ It generally discusses basic policy issues, such as annual defense build-up plans, security-relevant legislation, and ongoing operations (such as Japan's participation in UNPKO).⁸⁴ 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 the NSC convened 37 times specifically to discuss North Korea, often immediately before or after a nuclear or missile test.⁸⁵ It did not convene in every case, however, such as when principals judged a given test posed no direct threat.⁸⁶ The NSS secretary-general serves as the meeting coordinator and invites bureau chiefs for

⁷⁶Shotaro Yachi's National Security Council eyes bigger policymaking role in 2018', *Jiji*, 6 January 2018.

⁷⁷Author's analysis of Cabinet data from Shushō Kantei, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi kaisai jōhō*.

⁷⁸*Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi kaisai jōhō*.

⁷⁹Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kikō*, 77–78, 158. It was formally abolished in October 2004.

⁸⁰*Bōei handobukku*, 26.

⁸¹*Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi kaisai jōhō*.

⁸²Oriki and Kaneko, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi*, 6. Confirmed in October 2017 meeting.

⁸³*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*, 4 April 2017.

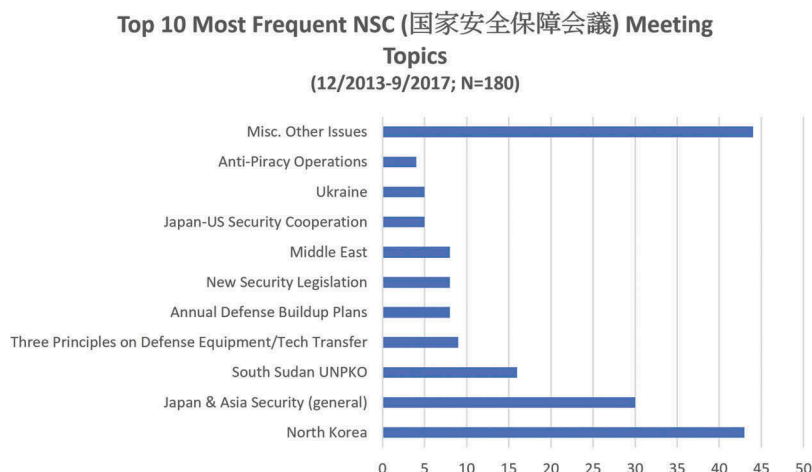


Figure 3. NSC meeting topics.

Source data from *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi kaisai jōhō*.

presentations. One example pattern is MOFA brief→MOD brief→intelligence brief, but sometimes the secretary-general will acquire the relevant information in advance and conduct the briefing himself. Attending principals then debate the issue until the prime minister indicates a policy direction. Minutes are kept.⁸⁷ The average length of NSC meetings is 40–60 minutes, reportedly much longer than the often pro forma erstwhile SC's meetings were.⁸⁸

The NSC has acquired a reputation as a venue for candid, off-the-record discussions, deriving in part from the 2013 Secrets Protection Act, though nascent internal disciplinary norms are also important.⁸⁹ Because sensitive intelligence is often discussed, the Chief Cabinet Secretary is given sole discretion over public summaries of NSC discussions.⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹

Additional measures bolster the Japanese government's (and the NSC's) potential efficacy and response time, especially in a crisis. For example, reportedly 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. 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).⁹² During Golden Week in May 2014, nine of 18 Cabinet ministers were required to remain in

⁸⁷Oriki and Kaneko, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi*, 28.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 26.

⁸⁹Author exchange with Japanese expert, January 2018.

⁹⁰*Kokkai kaigiroku kensaku shisutemu*, 17 March 2017.

⁹¹Oriki and Kaneko, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi*, 28; *Asahi shinbun*, 6 June 2016.

⁹²*Yomiuri shinbun*, 3 October 2017. Confirmed by author multiple times, including at public events involving DM Onodera.

Japan. A secure communication system also ensures contact even when NSC members are overseas.⁹³ In order to be readily available in a crisis, NSS staffers must remain within 30 minutes of the office and always carry a suit.⁹⁴ The NSC has even played a direct role in supporting international security cooperation, hosting the Australian and UK Prime Ministers Tony Abbott and Theresa May in 2014 and 2017, respectively.

Since its January 2014 launch, the NSS also appears to be playing its assigned roles administratively supporting the top-level NSC through 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 (such as the 2015 security legislation).⁹⁵ Its role in improving inter-agency coordination and information sharing is particularly significant given Japan's long-standing institutional weakness in this regard. In support of regular biweekly 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 of the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office (CIRO) and crisis-management office (*jitaishitsu*). These regular engagements reportedly facilitate inter-agency familiarity and mutual understanding that was lacking previously, serving NSC's bigger-picture objective of breaking down vertical hurdles across the government.⁹⁶

Japan's response to a July 2017 DPRK missile launch illustrates how the NSS functions in support of a non-regular 4MM, especially in its role facilitating information flow. In response to this launch, the NSS requested and the MOFA shared information from relevant diplomatic authorities; the MOD provided intelligence on the JSDF operational circumstances and information concerning US and South Korean forces; and the CIRO supplied satellite and other classified intelligence. Relevant NSS sections (such as the Northeast Asia, Intelligence, and Coordination sections) then organized the collected information for an NSC principals' meeting. All six NSS sections assembled to share information.⁹⁷ It appears to be for national security incidents such as this that Abe declared the 2013 Secrets Protection Act to be 'integral' (*ittai*) to NSC functioning by enabling inter-agency discussion of sensitive intelligence.⁹⁸

Yachi Shōtarō, the inaugural NSS secretary-general, is a key figure. Externally, he and his staff play an important diplomatic role, especially by facilitating working-level communications with foreign counterparts (such as US NSC staff). Yachi has also served as a high-level prime-ministerial envoy and meets directly with foreign national security advisors (or their rough equivalents) in Washington, Beijing, and elsewhere. Before 2013, there was no Kantei-based standing post playing a commensurate role, especially since the SC lacked a robust secretariat. The NSS secretary-general reportedly

⁹³ *Kokkai kaigiroku kensaku shisutemu*, 12 May 2014.

⁹⁴ *Nikkei shimbun*, 15 August 2017.

⁹⁵ Oriki and Kaneko, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi*, 30–32.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹⁷ *Nikkei shimbun*, 15 August 2017.

⁹⁸ Sunohara, *Nihon-ban NSC to wa nani ka?* 189.

(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.⁹⁹

Reportedly, the NSS staff has already expanded. As of November 2017, the NSS reportedly had roughly 80 personnel, comprising approximately 20 MOFA bureaucrats, 20 MOD bureaucrats, 20 JSDF officers, and 20 representatives of various other agencies (e.g., National Police).¹⁰⁰ This breakdown reinforces the primary defense and diplomatic focus of the NSC, as well as the effort to balance the MOD and MOFA against one another. The apparent doubling of JSDF representation between 2015 and 2017 has gone largely unnoticed.¹⁰¹ It suggests the Cabinet wishes to give uniformed officers a greater role in national security discussions.

The NSS appears to be attracting and retaining personnel with significant experience in national security affairs. Yachi, a retired career diplomat whom Abe appointed as the NSS's founding secretary-general, is the most prominent example. 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 2006–07 administration; after 2012, he served as Abe's 'special advisor' until the 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.¹⁰² Though Yachi originally intended to serve for only one year, he remains in the post and shows no signs of stepping down.¹⁰³ Yachi's original deputies reinforced national security expertise and the intentional balance of power between diplomacy and defense within the 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.

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 long-standing, pervasive obstacles to effective inter-agency coordination that negatively affected national security decision-making. In this basic effort, Japan was hardly alone. The centralization of foreign-policy decision-making is a global trend driven by multiple factors, including ongoing geopolitical shifts, changing technologies necessitating more rapid responses and crisis management, and a more complicated and uncertain potential threat environment, shaped in part by the end of US unipolarity. Major powers such as the UK and China also established roughly comparable institutions in 2010 and 2013, respectively.

In Japan's case, the NSC's establishment appears to carry particular significance as a major institutional reform. The idea of a US-type NSC was long considered controversial given Japan's parliamentary system, which favored decision-making centered on

⁹⁹*Kokkai kaigiroku kensaku shisutemu*, 9 September 2015.

¹⁰⁰Author meetings in Tokyo, November 2017.

¹⁰¹My 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.

¹⁰²*Yomiuri shimbun*, 9 January 2015; 4 December 2015; *Asahi shimbun*, 27 February 2017; 30 May 2017. Multiple author meetings in Tokyo, Fall 2017.

¹⁰³*Yomiuri shimbun*, 9 January 2015.

Cabinet consensus rather than an individual or sub-group of Cabinet officials, the constitutional constraints of Articles 9 and 65, and domestic political sensitivities.¹⁰⁴ Until recently, even some LDP leaders considered it unnecessary given US security guarantees and Japan's relatively passive posture in regional and global security affairs. By the eve of Abe's return to the office of prime minister 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 the NSC has played since, reveal much about the trajectory of and potential implications for Japanese politics and foreign policy beyond Abe's leadership.

Since Abe's first term as prime minister precipitously collapsed in 2007, a lot had changed to create a more receptive political environment for the creation of an NSC. To many, the March 2011 triple disaster provided a rude awakening to pervasive institutional deficiencies and coordination problems across the government and bureaucracies. Additionally, leaders across the political spectrum had become increasingly concerned about Japan's rapidly changing external strategic environment, and, for some, anxiety about possible over-reliance on Washington's security umbrella had grown. In the interim, North Korea had detonated multiple and increasingly powerful nuclear weapons. China had displaced Japan as the world's second-largest economy in 2010; by 2012 China's defense budget dwarfed Japan's own, enabling a rapid, ambitious military build-up and modernization campaign. In addition to these long-term trends, a mere two weeks before Abe recaptured the LDP presidency Beijing had responded to the Noda administration's purchase from a private Japanese owner 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 supra-partisan elite support for an institution to strengthen political leadership and facilitate more centralized and independent strategizing, intelligence analysis, inter-agency coordination, and crisis management. Political leaders aimed to accelerate the decades-old, incremental movement to loosen long-standing political constraints on Japan's security decision-making, especially prime-ministerial/Cabinet weakness relative to strong, independent government agencies; to overcome 'vertical barriers' (*tatewari no heigai*)¹⁰⁵ between bureaucracies; to weaken LDP-imposed constraints on executive power under the 1955 system; and to reduce the relative ostracization of uniformed JSDF officers from security deliberations.¹⁰⁶

So far it seems that Japan's NSC has made significant headway addressing perceived weaknesses. Since its establishment, regular, frequent, and top-level principal meetings and the creation of the standing NSS have improved whole-of-government national strategic planning, as well as inter-agency policy coordination and information sharing internally and with foreign governments (and especially with Japan's US 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 have further

¹⁰⁴Matsuda and Saitō, 'Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?', 50.

¹⁰⁵Matsuda and Saitō, 'Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?', 58.

¹⁰⁶For a discussion of related points, see Matsuda and Hosono, 'Nihon', 279–81.

strengthened Kantei-centered foreign policy. Collectively, these developments have strengthened and rebalanced the US–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

The NSC’s long-term significance for Japan’s security and foreign policy will hinge on its future form and function, especially after Abe and his inaugural NSS secretary-general, close advisor Yachi, are no longer in charge. Especially important will be how the NSC and the NSS perform under new political leadership and in response to inevitable changes to Japan’s strategic environment.¹⁰⁷ With Japan’s recent experiences in mind, an analysis of the 70-year legacy of the US NSC which inspired it suggests several variables that merit attention in the future. Especially across its first two presidential transitions, the US NSC evolved in ways entirely unanticipated by the 1947 establishing legislation’s authors – and in key instances based neither in law or statute.¹⁰⁸ This volatility during its formative first 15 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 preliminary.

Japan’s NSC was inspired by, and modeled to a significant extent on, the US NSC. Yet it is important to stress that it was created in a very different domestic institutional and strategic context. For manifold reasons, it was never feasible for Japanese leaders to import the US NSC into Japan without significant modifications.¹⁰⁹ The two countries have vastly different political systems (parliamentary versus presidential) and categorically different norms, laws, domestic politics, and constitutional constraints as concerns their armed forces – especially concerning ‘use of force’ (*buryoku kōshi*). Thus, an important caveat is in order: though the vicissitudes of the US experience (and the massive literature on the US 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 personal interest in and policy inclinations concerning Japanese security affairs, beliefs about the NSC’s centrality and appropriate role, and, perhaps above all, personnel decisions.¹¹⁰ A major downgrade or sidelining of the NSC seems unlikely given a basic consensus today among major political parties that Japan confronts severe security challenges. But it is worth noting that past prime ministers, even those 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

¹⁰⁷Leading Japanese experts identify three categorical variables to watch – institutions (*seido*), strategy (*senryaku*), and personnel (*jinzai*) – and offer nine recommendations. Oriki and Kaneko, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi*, 10–19.

¹⁰⁸Rothkopf, *Running the World*, 6.

¹⁰⁹Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kikō*, 282.

¹¹⁰Matsuda and Saitō, ‘Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?’, 61.

are arguably the historical exception rather than the norm, especially in terms of longevity and Cabinet stability.

The US 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 US's 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 Invasion. History also shows that the US 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 US's first-ever NSC meeting, Truman did not attend another until 10 months later. In contrast, his successor Eisenhower attended 90% of the almost weekly NSC meetings convened during his eight-year presidency.¹¹¹ Even across a single administration's term in office, interest in the NSC can fluctuate widely.¹¹² Furthermore, not all presidents pay close attention to the details of policy, and certainly not all prefer regular and formal procedures.¹¹³ Failure to establish clear divisions with other national security-relevant departments can also cause problems.¹¹⁴

NSS Secretary-general

After the prime minister, the most important individual likely to shape the future role and efficacy of Japan's NSC is the NSS secretary-general. His or her experience, knowledge, and management skills will be a major variable. Relationships will also be key. Yachi, Abe's inaugural NSS secretary-general, is a retired career MOFA diplomat close to the prime minister and well known in political and bureaucratic circles. Appointing an individual with a different background, or a current or former politician, could change the position and the NSS's role.¹¹⁵ More generally, the creation of a new position which supersedes or challenges the secretary-general's authority could also significantly affect the institution's mandate and efficacy, especially as it concerns inter-agency coordination and the power balance between the Kantei and the ministries.

When thinking about Japan's possible futures, it is important to recall that what ultimately evolved into the powerful US 'national security advisor' position did not exist, nor was it even anticipated, at the time of the US NSC's creation. The 1947 establishment act called only for a 'civilian executive secretary' to manage 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 the NSC's establishment – that the US national security advisor's role expanded to include responsibilities typically associated with the 'modern' NSC.¹¹⁶ Though the position has never been formalized in actual legislation, the contemporary

¹¹¹Daalder and Destler, *In the Shadow*, 4–5.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 70. For example, Nixon convened 27 NSC meetings his first six months but only three in all of 1972.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹¹⁵In several cases from the pre-NSC era, prime ministers tapped fellow politicians as point-persons on national security affairs. Koike Yuriko was chosen during Abe's first term and Nagashima Akihisa during the Noda administration.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 5, 299–301. Others point to Brent Scowcroft in the George H.W. Bush administration as the first modern example.

US national security advisor has achieved Cabinet-level status and is generally considered a ‘first among equals’ on the principals committee.¹¹⁷ 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.¹¹⁸ As a post beholden only to the US 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 (such as Kissinger under Nixon) to those who see their role more as largely impartial managers of a robust inter-agency process (Scowcroft under G.H.W. Bush).

Japan’s National Security Strategy

The 1947 US NSC was shaped heavily by lessons of the Second World War, the resulting perceived necessity for Washington to adopt an unprecedentedly proactive global leadership role to avoid a third one, and in 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.¹¹⁹ In subsequent decades, vicissitudes in the global security environment drove significant changes in the US’s national security strategy, which in turn caused major swings in the US NSC’s form and function.

Though 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 incremental, especially concerning circumstances under which kinetic military force is considered constitutional (*buryoku kōshi*). If the past several decades are any guide, major swings in Japan’s national security strategy seem less likely. However, Japan has only had one official national security strategy to date (promulgated under Abe, in 2013). In the years since, both the Asia-Pacific region and US grand strategy more generally have arguably entered a period of unprecedented potential volatility, with important implications for Japan. For now, Japan’s leaders appear to have responded to this uncertainty by doubling down on the US–Japan alliance. But what is currently in place is not necessarily what shall ever be. New challenges loom large in the calculus of Japan’s strategic planners: these include the Trump Administration’s ‘America First’ posture, China’s growing power and influence, and North Korea’s alleged development of a nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missile able to strike the continental United States. 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.

The US 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

¹¹⁷Rothkopf, *Running the World*, 7.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 6–7.

¹¹⁹Imboden, *The National Security Act Turns 70*, 4.

traditionally assigned to Cabinet departments.¹²⁰ The NSC staff numbered less than 20 under Kennedy but had doubled in size by the end of the Cold War (1991). Between 2000 and 2010 it grew from roughly 100 to over 370 personnel.¹²¹ 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 national security strategy may drive adjustments, as they have in the US case. Any expansion perceived as threatening Japan's other ministries/agencies – especially the traditionally powerful MOFA – may reduce 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 retired career MOFA diplomat as NSS secretary-general may have forestalled otherwise significant bureaucratic blowback. Whether or not 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.¹²²

Decision-making Authority

Japan's constitution stipulates that 'executive power shall be vested in the Cabinet'.¹²³ Accordingly, a common variable identified in Japanese analyses of the NSC's significance is whether the NSC can effectively function as a de facto top-level decision-making organization (*jijitsujō no ishi kettei no ba*) rather than as a relatively weak advisory body à la the erstwhile SC.¹²⁴ Inter alia, this may affect the NSC's and the NSS's ability to assert authority over other historically powerful ministries and agencies.¹²⁵ So far, however, even without a formal Cabinet Decision, it appears that the NSC does have independent authority over various administrative decisions.¹²⁶ It is authorized to carry out a general coordination function, request information/intelligence, and in practice has 'virtual decision-making authority' (*jitsujō no ketteiken*).¹²⁷

In the US 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.¹²⁸ Especially in light of the controversy over the 2013 Secrets Protection Act, also important will be political leaders' and the Japanese public's assessment of the balance struck between democratic transparency, or the citizen's right to know, and the need to keep especially sensitive and classified information and intelligence secret. Together with potentially politically incendiary constitutional issues and long-standing popular concerns about government secrecy, military affairs,

¹²⁰Rothkopf, *Running the World*, 6; Rothkopf, 'Inside the Committee That Runs the World'.

¹²¹Oriki and Kaneko, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi*, 44.

¹²²Matsuda and Saitō, 'Nihon no kokka anzen hoshō kaigi wa do aru beki ka?', 59; Oriki and Kaneko, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi*, 19.

¹²³Kotani, 'Nihon-ban Kokka Anzen Hoshō', 69; Chijiwa, *Kawariyuku naikaku anzen hoshō kikō*, 282.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, 10, 68–69; Asai, 'Nihon-ban NSC', 12.

¹²⁵Kotani, 'Nihon-ban kokka anzen hoshō', 68–70.

¹²⁶Kotani, 'Nihon-ban kokka anzen hoshō', 69–70.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*, 73.

¹²⁸Daalder and Destler, *In the Shadow*, 7–8.

and civilian control, the NSC's ability to actually make decisions will fundamentally shape its longer-term significance.

One final major theme in analyses of the US NSC is the tension inherent between its responsibilities for long-term strategic planning and day-to-day management of national security affairs.¹²⁹ A similar tension is manifest in recent Japanese writings on Japan's NSC.¹³⁰ 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.¹³¹

Conclusion

On 4 December 2018, Japan's first-ever NSC will mark its fifth anniversary. Coupled with its supporting NSS and National Security Strategy, Japan's NSC is the signal achievement of an ambitious agenda aimed at reforming Japan's national security-relevant institutions to cope more expeditiously, effectively, and flexibly with what Japanese leaders see as an increasingly complex, challenging, and rapidly changing strategic environment characterized by an array of traditional and non-traditional challenges. An extensive survey of the available data finds the NSC functioning largely as intended, already shaping key aspects of the strategic trajectory attracting global headlines in the post-2012 Abe era. Most importantly, the NSC has centralized foreign- and security-policy decision-making in the executive – the prime minister's office in particular – and ameliorated long-standing, 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 US President Eisenhower, who attended almost every US NSC meeting during his eight years in office, was reportedly wont to say (quoting Prussian General Von Moltke), 'plans are nothing, but planning is everything'.¹³²

The 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 DC (1956–86) and SC (1986–2013). Yet its creation was hardly preordained. Prior to 2013, Japan had lacked an explicit and comprehensive 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 in light of its parliamentary system, constitutional constraints, and long-standing norms against the concentration of executive power. Resistance from the bureaucracies with the most to lose (above all, MOFA) was also powerful. Indeed, just six years earlier, Abe's NSC campaign and the first Abe administration collapsed in the context of a larger backlash against his ambitious security agenda. Abe's own party abandoned the original NSC-establishment law his Cabinet submitted to the Diet in 2007.

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

¹²⁹This tension deepened after Kennedy expanded the NSC's mandate significantly beyond strategic planning. See Daalder and Destler, *In the Shadow*, especially Chapter 2; Yoshizaki, 'Beikoku: kokka anzen hoshō kaigi (NSC)'.

¹³⁰Matsuda, 'Jōshō'; Yoshizaki, 'Beikoku: kokka anzen hoshō kaigi (NSC)', 22; Oriki and Kaneko, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi*.

¹³¹Oriki and Kaneko, *Kokka anzen hoshō kaigi*, 16–17.

¹³²Daalder and Destler, *In the Shadow*, 5.

reforms to both security-relevant institutions and policy. The reasons why, and the front-line role the 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 dynamic and challenging period.

Though available data suggests it is functioning well to date, the NSC's longer-term significance will be determined by its performance in a post-Abe era. If the US NSC's 70-year history is any indication, particularly in light of its status as an institution situated within the executive, the form and function of future Japanese NSCs may evolve significantly. The manner in which it does will be an important factor in Japan's twenty-first-century strategic evolution.

Acknowledgments

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, two anonymous peer reviewers, and dozens of current and former US and Japanese officials who generously spoke with the author on background.

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