



# ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXI / 2020

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## Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises

Edited by  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Nicola Mocci**  
**Filippo Boni**

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CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

# ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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## JAPAN 2020: ABE'S WELL-LAID PLANS GO AWRY\*

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*Like elsewhere, the COVID-19 pandemic caused substantial disruptions in Japan. While generous fiscal spending mitigated the pandemic's economic fallout, and Japan is poised in 2021 to rebound from its year-on-year 4.8% fall in GDP, there was significant political fallout in 2020. The postponement of the Olympic Games, the Abe government's perceived inability to tackle the pandemic, and the (re)surfacing of political scandals led to Japan's longest-serving Prime Minister popularity plummeting. The re-emergence of Abe's health problems then precipitated his abrupt resignation. This ushered in the premiership of Suga Yoshihide, who promised to enact structural reforms and ambitious digitalization and environmental programmes, while also promising to continue significant elements of Abe's policy agenda. Internationally, COVID-19 accelerated US-China tensions and, in connection to that, China's regional assertiveness. This perceived assertiveness as well as China's political involution and human rights violations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, in turn, hardened the Japanese government's position vis-à-vis Beijing. This happened despite Abe's early 2020 efforts towards hosting a state visit by the Chinese president. Instead, the year ended with a «Quad» meeting at the ministerial level, hosted in Tokyo, rather than an entente with China. At the same time, Japan deepened its «Indo-Pacific» engagement with important European nations as well as the European Union itself. It did so while doubling down on economic security initiatives that strengthened supply chain resiliency and provided telecommunication alternatives to Chinese initiatives, thereby restraining Chinese strategic influence. Security cooperation with the United States – through joint development of weapons systems, such as a new Japanese fighter, and close coordination in space, cyber and electromagnetic warfare – continued unabated in 2020.*

KEYWORDS – COVID-19, Suga Yoshihide, Free and Open Indo-Pacific, Japanese foreign and security policy, economic security, O-RAN

\* The authors wish to thank two anonymous reviewers, Glen Fukushima and Paul Nadeau for feedback. First name follows family name for East Asian names.



1. *COVID-19 and Abe's downfall*

2020 was supposed to be a capstone year for Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō. Ideally, Abe and a newly enthroned Reiwa Emperor would welcome Xi Jinping to Tokyo, in the first official state visit to Japan by a Chinese leader since 2008, and put the finishing touches on a tactical détente in Sino-Japanese relations. Cashing in on his appearance as Super Mario at the Rio 2016 closing ceremony,<sup>1</sup> Abe would then preside over a successful Tokyo Olympics. With a special emphasis on the Tōhoku region's post-3/11 reconstruction, the government would showcase to the world a uniquely hospitable (*omotenashi*), culturally popular, and still technologically sophisticated Japan.<sup>2</sup>

In this scenario, positive patriotic sentiments would accompany record revenues for corporate and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) due to the impressive number of visitors and spending – especially from China – before, during and after the Olympics. Together with the massive ¥ 26 trillion stimulus package (ca. € 208 billion) and ¥ 4.4 trillion (ca. € 35 billion) supplementary budget, the Japanese economy would then fight off the effects of the September 2019 consumption tax rise and slowdown in Olympics-related construction, extending the anti-recessionary successes of the eponymous Abenomics growth strategy.<sup>3</sup> A very light legislative agenda in the first half of 2020 would also leave plenty of time for debate and legislative preparations for legacy-making constitutional revision.<sup>4</sup> By leveraging economic tail winds and the diplomatic and domestic shine of a successful Olympics, Abe could then secure one final landslide electoral victory for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Autumn. This victory would ripen the conditions for one final constitutional revision push and give Abe significant influence in selecting his successor. His successor would then be set up to break the cycle of six consecutive year-long premierships preceding Abe's record-breaking administration.

Fast forward one year, things looked very different from this idealised timeline. There was no meeting with Xi Jinping, and Sino-Japanese relations reverted to troubled form. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a one-year postponement of the Olympics and then its hollowing out due to overseas spectators not being able to attend. This dealt a financial and psychological blow to the Japanese people, to Japan's SMEs, and to the 68 official corporate sponsors anticipating brand enhancement from the most heavily

1. Abe was dressed up as Super Mario for public diplomacy purposes.

2. Oki Nagai, 'Japan's Once-a-decade Mind Games with China over Top Leader Visit', *Nikkei Asia*, 27 January 2020.

3. Yuko Aizawa, 'Tough Diet Session Begins', *NHK World*, 27 January 2020; 'Cabinet Approves ¥26 trillion Stimulus Package to Prop up Slowing Japanese Economy', *Japan Times*, 5 December 2019.

4. Adam Liff, 'Japan in 2020: COVID-19 and the End of the Abe Era', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 61, Issue 1, 2021, pp. 49-64.

sponsored athletic event ever.<sup>5</sup> In addition to enduring pandemic-related medical stresses on social services, Japan entered a recession for the first time in half a decade, arguably enduring its «largest [economic] crisis since World War II.»<sup>6</sup> Abe was gone, and his successor, Suga Yoshihide was already struggling as LDP factions again appeared ascendant. No election had been called and constitutional revision was barely discussed in 2020.

This article elaborates on these developments and their implications. They portend a more dynamic domestic and international environment for Japan and its leaders in the years ahead, compared to the relative stability of the «Abe era». COVID-19 clearly played a role in hastening Abe's premature departure by depriving him of the economic, diplomatic, and political tools that had hitherto sustained his administration.<sup>7</sup> Up until the end of 2019, the government of Japan could claim a number of economic successes under the rubric of Abenomics: a yen weakened by 20% against the United States Dollar which had precipitated a 20% jump in annual exports and the tripling of overseas visitor and spending numbers; the doubling of share market prices and pre-tax corporate returns; a 50% increase in tax revenue and a reduction in the government's budgetary bond dependency ratio; and a plummeting unemployment rate (2.2% - down from 4.3%) as 4.1 million more people – and 3.1 million more women – found work despite the accelerated onset of an aging and shrinking population.<sup>8</sup>

The global COVID-19 onslaught, however, undermined these achievements and narratives of success. Exports dropped 11.1% to the lowest level since 2012 thanks in part to China's severe first quarter GDP contraction (-6.8%) – its first negative growth since 1976. At the same time, private financial institutions and spenders tightened their belts as deflation reappeared.<sup>9</sup> COVID-19 also undercut the Abe government's

5. 「復興」が「打倒コロナ」へ 安倍政権、五輪の意義語れず\* («Reconstruction» Turns into «Corona Overthrow»; Abe Administration Unable to Appeal to the Significance of the Olympics), *Fiji Tsūshin*, 28 August 2020; Leo Lewis, Robin Harding & Kana Inagaki, 'Olympic Sponsorship: Japan Inc Pressed into National Service', *The Financial Times*, 15 August 2019; 'New Record for International Visitors to Japan', *Nippon.com*, 27 January 2020; 'Foreign Tourists Spend Record 4.8 Tril. Yen in Japan in 2019', *Kyodo News*, 17 January 2020; Rurika Imahashi & Francesca Regaldo, 'Tokyo Olympics Delay Leaves Sponsors Facing Losses and Lawsuits', *Nikkei Asia*, 16 February 2021.

6. 'Japan Slides into Recession as Economy Shrinks 3.4%', *Kyodo News*, 18 May 2020.

7. Liff, 'Japan in 2020'.

8. Government of Japan Website, 'Abenomics', January 2019 ([https://www.japan.go.jp/abenomics/\\_userdata/abenomics/pdf/1901\\_abenomics.pdf](https://www.japan.go.jp/abenomics/_userdata/abenomics/pdf/1901_abenomics.pdf)).

9. National Bureau of Statistics of China, *Decline of Major Economic Indicators Significantly Narrowed Down in March*, 17 April 2020 ([http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202004/t20200417\\_1739339.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202004/t20200417_1739339.html)); Adam Posen, 'Lessons from Japan: High-income Countries have Common Problems', *The Financial Times*, 24 November 2020; 'Japan's Exports Fell 11% in 2020, Taking Biggest Hit in 11 Years Amid Pandemic', *Japan Times*, 21 January 2021.

big bet on increasing inbound tourism.<sup>10</sup> Expectations around the Olympics, consumption tax exemptions for tourists, and relaxed visa rules for Chinese visitors raised the possibility of 40 million visitors spending over ¥ 5 trillion (ca. US\$ 48 billion) in 2020, stimulating the construction of world-class hotels. With the restrictions on overseas visitors and the postponement of the Olympics, Japan struggled to reach four million visitors (down 87.1%) in 2020.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, internal movement was discouraged and business hours limited by COVID-19, meaning the tourist and hospitality industries bore the burden of sunk costs in tourist infrastructure and preparations. This and the diminished economic activity of other industries, such as the entertainment and transportation sectors, contributed to the jobs-to-applicants ratio plummeting back to 1.08 from a healthy 1.63 in 2019. Unemployment also jumped to 2.9% as women lost 70% of the more than 700,000 jobs that vanished during 2020. Japan's real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) even temporarily fell back to 2012 levels – and nominal GDP fell far short of the promised ¥ 600 trillion (ca. US\$ 5.5 trillion) 2020 target.<sup>12</sup> Falling tax revenue and unprecedented stimulus packages undid any progress made by Abe on fiscal sustainability as ¥ 175.7 trillion (US\$ 1.7 trillion) in direct spending resulted in the issuance of ¥ 112.5 (US\$ 1.07 trillion) trillion of bonds (64.1% bond dependence ratio) – double the amount issued following the 2008 Lehman Shock.<sup>13</sup>

10. While the decision to pursue and promote tourism to Japan was a long-standing policy, this bet was also taken on the advice of a British entrepreneur based in Japan who would later become a member of the future premier's and then Chief Cabinet Secretary's economic policy council. 'Sources: British Businessman to Sit on Economic Policy Council', *Asahi Shimbun*, 14 October 2020.

11. Japan National Tourism Organization '訪日外客数 (JNTO推計値)' (JNTO Estimates of Foreign Visitors' Arrivals), December 2020 ([https://www.jnto.go.jp/jpn/statistics/data\\_info\\_listing/xls/210120\\_monthly.xlsx](https://www.jnto.go.jp/jpn/statistics/data_info_listing/xls/210120_monthly.xlsx))

12. Makiko Eda, 'COVID-19 Shows Why Japan Cannot Wait to Act on Gender Equality', *Nikkei Asia*, 23 October 2020; Komiya Kazuyoshi, '「7年8カ月もやってはいけなかった」安倍長期政権が残した巨大なツケ' (The Big Unpaid Bills for What Couldn't be Done in the Abe Administration's Seven Years, Eight Months), *President Online*, 11 September 2020 (<https://president.jp/articles/-/38684>); Harada Yutaka, 'アベノミクスへの辛口評価は根拠なし、景気実感は実は改善している' (Criticisms of Abenomics Unfounded, Actual Economic Sentiment Improving), *Diamond Online*, 14 September 2020; Noriyuki Suzuki & Su Xincheng, 'Focus: Abe's Departure with Mixed Economic Results to Test Market Confidence', *Kyodo News*, 31 August 2020.

13. Including credit guarantees, loan facilities and other support instruments, the COVID-19 stimulus package amounted to almost two-thirds of Japan's GDP: 'Japan compiles ¥73.6 trillion stimulus package to fight pandemic', *Japan Times*, 8 December 2020; Naoki Tsuzaka, 'Japan to Issue Bonds in Excess of 100 Trillion Yen for the First Time', *Asahi Shimbun*, 16 December 2020.

Abe's proactive public and global diplomacy – the most publicly appreciated aspect of Abe's leadership and what arguably won Tokyo the Olympics along with the metropolitan government's good efforts – was also restrained as countries turned inward.<sup>14</sup> Abe's proactive attempts to enhance Japan's partnerships with India, ASEAN nations, Australia, New Zealand, Europe and even nations in the East Africa subregion had turned him into a recognizable figure in world affairs as he set world records for prime ministerial visits.<sup>15</sup>

Unperturbed by the failure of his two immediate predecessors to join the TPP, Abe also tamed traditionally recalcitrant anti-trade interest groups at home, and Japan carved out a more «liberal» foreign economic policy. The highlights were the adoption of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement (JEEPA). Enabling a degree of strategic diversification between China and the United States and the restoration of Japan's «geoeconomic agency», Japan continued to play a pivotal role in regional rulemaking on trade through Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership negotiations.<sup>16</sup>

Abe survived and even thrived during the first three years of a potentially perilous Trump administration. Deflecting attention from tensions in the US-Japan alliance that could have manifested in politically inconvenient ways for Japan's leaders, Abe's Trump diplomacy eventually persuaded the US administration to adopt the Indo-Pacific strategic framework. Abe grew sufficiently confident in the strength of Trump's backing and in his own domestic political situation that he pursued a tactical *détente* with the People's Republic of China (PRC). COVID-19, however, not only short-circuited Abe's use of summit diplomacy for strategic diplomacy and foreign economic policy, but also deprived Abe of a way to grandstand in front of domestic audiences and reassure Japanese citizens about the country's international position.

A third factor in Abe's success – as an able crisis manager and commanding leader – was also undermined. Despite Abe-era enhancements in the government crisis management abilities, such as the establishment of the National Security Council (NSC) and Secretariat (NSS) within the Cabinet Secretariat in 2014, the actual government crisis management response

14. 'NHK世論調査' (NHK Opinion Survey), *NHK Senkyo Web*, 11 November 2019; '安倍政権 外交・安保「評価」 57% コロナ対策は29%' (57 Percent Rate Abe's Diplomacy, Security Policies, 29 Percent its COVID-19 Response), *Mainichi Shimbun*, 10 September 2020.

15. Corey Wallace, 'Leaving (North-east) Asia? Japan's Southern Strategy', *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, Issue 4, July 2018, pp. 883-904.

16. 'Book Review Roundtable: Saori N. Katada's Japan's New Regional Reality: Geoeconomic Strategy in the Asia-Pacific', *Asia Policy*, Vol. 15, Issue 4, October 2020, pp. 134-154.

did not seem to benefit from these institutions.<sup>17</sup> Japan lacks a dedicated pandemic unit within the NSS and/or an institution like the United States' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). There was thus little coordination of the collection, analysis and sharing of critical information and public communications, including the provision of expert advice to officials and local authorities on travel restrictions, quarantines, and isolation. Bureaucratic silos and parallel task forces developed in the Prime Minister's office, the Cabinet office, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and the Tokyo metropolitan government. In fact, nobody, including Prime Minister Abe, appeared to be leading a focused government response in the early stages.<sup>18</sup> The government was also limited in its legal powers to compel public cooperation. Legislation passed in 2012 gave the central government the right to declare a state of emergency in response to a Novel Influenza pandemic and delegate powers to prefectural governors to close schools and fine businesses that did not comply with closure requests. This never-used-before legislation did not initially cover COVID-19. Even after the government updated the legislation, local governments could not do more than «request» (*yōsei*) individual residents limit their movements.

## 2. *The political genesis of Abe's downfall*

Attributing Abe's downfall to COVID-19 provides a parsimonious explanation – but also an unsatisfying one. After all, governments in Taiwan, Vietnam, and South Korea managed to enhance their political support and legitimacy during the crisis through proactive measures without long lockdown periods. Japan's prefectural governments, despite having less fiscal and personnel resources, also attained better appraisals than central government for their COVID-19 response.<sup>19</sup> The Japanese government also did not have to deal with strong public sentiments to prioritise the economy over stopping the spread of the disease, and the Japanese public generally supported decisive pandemic suppression measures. Beginning societal *jishuku* (self-restraint) well ahead of government action, the public also bought time for the government as Japan registered COVID-19 outcomes that compared

17. Harukata Takenaka, 'Expansion of the Prime Minister's Power in the Japanese Parliamentary System: Transformation of Japanese Politics and Institutional Reforms', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 59, Issue 5, 2019, pp. 844-869; Mayumi Fukushima & Richard J. Samuels, 'Japan's National Security Council: Filling the Whole of Government?', *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, Issue 4, July 2018, pp. 773-790.

18. Hiromi Murakami, 'A Japan Divided over COVID-19 Control', *East Asia Forum*, 8 March 2020; Linda Sieg, '«Where's Abe?», Critics Ask, as Coronavirus Spreads in Japan', *Reuters*, 25 February 2020.

19. '2020年11月全国郵送調査「いまの政治と新型コロナ、東日本大震災」' (November 2020 National Postal Survey: COVID-19, Contemporary Politics, Tohoku Disaster), *Asahi Shimbun*, November 2020.

favourably with most Western nations, notwithstanding international and domestic criticism of Japan's initially low levels of PCR testing. Furthermore, Japan's relatively modest year-on-year fall in GDP of 4.8% in 2020 suggests that generous countercyclical fiscal policies helped economically, as did the rebound in neighbouring East Asian and Australasian countries that also performed well at suppressing the pandemic. Even Japan's SMEs proved more resilient than has generally been the case worldwide. The job situation was still healthy compared to Japan in 2008 when unemployment was 5.5% and the job-to-applicant ratio was 0.42.<sup>20</sup> The pandemic was an unprecedented but surmountable challenge for the Abe administration.

The Abe government ultimately lost public legitimacy due to a confluence of failures in communicating urgency, ethical discipline, and inter-personal administrative functionality. Also, problems in intra-LDP and coalition unity became apparent precisely when transparent, coherent government was needed most. First, the Abe administration did not communicate a strong sense of urgency by using the powers, resources, and warning times it did have. It moved slowly to introduce pandemic-specific official and expert task forces within the Cabinet Secretariat to provide advice to the government and guidance to the public about pandemic suppression. The government's «Basic Plan» was therefore not announced until February 25, – almost two months after China officially informed the World Health Organization (WHO) about the Wuhan cluster and five weeks after Japan's first reported case. The cabinet was also slow to tighten up border restrictions on visitors from Hubei and other China hotspots, resulting in the first COVID-19 wave during February. It similarly hesitated to restrict visitors from Europe and North America until March, too late to prevent a much worse second wave in April.<sup>21</sup> The Diamond Princess saga also brought increasing domestic and international concern over the administration's handling of the quarantine while also drawing attention to the lack of testing kits, Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and sufficiently trained personnel.<sup>22</sup>

The government continued to ignore prefectural government appeals for greater resources to fortify local health authorities who were at the fore-

20. 'GDP実質年率12.7%増、10～12月 20年は4.8%減' (Real GDP Growth between October and December is 12.7%; in 2020, GDP shrunk by 4.8%), *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 15 February 2021. Yuta Koga, 'Japan's Smaller Companies Prove More Resilient to COVID-19', *Nikkei Asia*, 26 August 2020. Mitsuru Obe, 'Japan's Youth Worst Hit by Country's COVID Job Losses in 2020', *Nikkei Asia*, 29 January 2021.

21. 'Japan Bans Entry from 2nd Chinese Province, Raises Travel Advisory', *Asahi Shimbun*, 12 February 2020; 'Japan to Restrict Travel to and from China, S. Korea over Virus', *Kyodo News*, 6 March 2020; 'Japan to Expand Entry Ban to include U.S., China and Most of Europe', *Japan Times*, 30 March 2020; '軽症、無症者間で感染継続か 新型コロナウイルス一時収束後も一感染研' (NIID: Continued Transmission Even After COVID-19 Suppressed?), *Jiji Tsūshin*, 7 August 2020.

22. The Diamond Princess was a cruise ship with COVID-19 clusters that docked in Yokohama in February.

front of battling the pandemic. Moreover, the government did not implement a state of emergency and delegate powers to prefectural governments until 7 April, and even then, it did not provide local authorities with money to compensate businesses that had closed or reduced hours during the state of emergency. Unlike prefectural governors like Osaka's Yoshimura Hirofumi and Tokyo's Koike Yuriko, who the public viewed as responsive communicators and decisive,<sup>23</sup> the national government and Abe personally were consistently given very poor marks for their COVID-19 response. Opposition to a fourth Abe term as LDP president hardened further even as public and local government-led COVID-19 suppression started to work. Abe's cabinet support rate did not recover until he announced his resignation.<sup>24</sup>

There were other reasons for Abe's inability to regenerate public support in 2020. Old Abe-linked scandals and deceptions intersected with new developments, distracting from the pandemic fight and compounding mistrust in Abe.<sup>25</sup> For example, in late-2019 there was already dissatisfaction with Abe's transparency due to the taxpayer-funded cherry blossom viewing parties (*sakura wo miru kai*) and the irregular disposal of guest lists rumoured to contain many Abe supporters.<sup>26</sup> The scandal then deepened in March 2020 when it became known that the expenses for an 800-person gathering of Abe's supporters, held the evening before the viewing parties, were not listed in the Prime Minister's political funds report. While Abe claimed that he had paid ¥ 5000 for each attendee, he did not provide verification for this claim.<sup>27</sup>

23. '最も評価する政治家は大阪・吉村知事 2位東京・小池氏 発信好感 毎日新聞世論調査 (Mainichi Survey: Impressed with Clear Messaging, Osaka's Yoshimura Highest Rated Politician/Tokyo's Koike No.2), *Mainichi Shimbun*, 7 May 2020; '新型コロナ対応、評価トップは吉村大阪府知事 毎日新聞世論調査' (Mainichi Survey: Osaka Governor Yoshimura Best Rated for COVID-19 Response), *Mainichi Shimbun*, 23 May 2020; '新型コロナ対応、評価トップは吉村知事 理由は丁寧な姿勢? (Top COVID-19 Response Politician: Governor Yoshimura, Reason is Respectful Approach?)', *Asahi Shimbun*, 29 December 2020; '新型コロナ対応、評価する政治家は 1位は吉村大阪府知事、2位は小池東京都知事 朝日新聞社世論調査' (Yoshimura No.1, Koike No.2 Rated Politicians for COVID-19 response - Asahi Survey), *Asahi Shimbun*, 30 December 2020).

24. '世論調査一質問と回答 (2月15、16日実施)' (Asahi Survey Questions and Answers—Conducted 15 and 16th February), *Asahi Shimbun*, 17 February 2020; '朝日新聞世論調査一質問と回答 (5月23、24日実施)' (Asahi Survey Questions and Answers—Conducted 23rd and 24th May), *Asahi Shimbun*, 25 May 2020.

25. Giulio Pugliese & Sebastian Maslow, 'Japan 2019: Inaugurating a New Era?', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2019, pp. 125-62; pp. 127-131.

26. Cherry blossom viewing, or *hanami*, is a traditional spring festivity in Japan, during which people gather under the white and pink blooms to eat, drink and be merry. For years, the government has hosted parties meant to honor the accomplishments of athletes, celebrities and other luminaries. Revelations that Abe's supporters were rewarded by inserting them among the invitees raised questions about inappropriate use of public funds. Rintaro Tobita, 'Abe Cherry Blossom Scandal Stirs up Tweet Storm of Rare Intensity', *Nikkei Asia*, 30 November 2019.

27. *Ibid.*; '調査結果' (Survey Results), *Kyodo Tsūshin*, 16 March 2020.

Akimoto Tsukasa, a prior Abe appointee to the role of senior vice minister at the Cabinet Office and in charge of integrated resort (IR) projects, was arrested on Christmas Day 2019 for taking bribes from a Chinese business in connection with IR projects. Accused of taking more bribes in January 2020, and then bribing witnesses in August, he became the first Japanese lawmaker in a decade to be indicted.<sup>28</sup> The wait for the next two indictments was, however, much shorter. In July, Abe's justice minister in 2019 and long-time confidant, Kawai Katsuyuki, and his wife, Kawai Anri, were both indicted for vote-buying involving millions of yens during the 2019 House of Councillors election.

The *Moritomo Gakuen* controversy from 2017, which revolved around a heavily discounted public land sale to an Abe supporter and the falsification of related official records, also inserted itself into the mix. This happened when the bereaved family of an official in the Kinki Bureau of the Ministry of Finance released his suicide note, revealing pressure by a Ministry of Finance executive to falsify documents.<sup>29</sup> Despite strong support for the issue to be reopened, the government refused, and continued to do so even after the bereaved family filed a lawsuit in July for damages and to establish the truth.

The most damaging question of political ethics for Abe involved Japan's second-highest ranking prosecutor, Kurokawa Hiromu. Close to Abe and to his then Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga due to his stint as Vice-Minister of Justice in September 2016, Kurokawa helped contain the fallout over the *Moritomo Gakuen* land purchase investigation. Subsequently appointed to head up the Tokyo High Public Prosecutors Office, in February 2020 the cabinet extended his tenure beyond the mandatory retirement age (63) for prosecutors. This positioned Kurokawa to become Japan's top prosecutor when the then Prosecutor General retired in June. This went against prior practice and was possibly in breach of the Public Prosecutor Office Law. The government then exacerbated the controversy by drafting legislation giving the cabinet the discretion to raise the retirement age to 65. Allowing the retention of certain prosecutors longer than others challenged the traditional independence of prosecutor offices. In fact, it introduced incentives for prosecutors to turn a blind eye to the types of influence-peddling scandals playing out in public at that very moment. This resulted in strong opposition to the bill from not only former high-ranking prosecutors but even from Japan's famously apolitical celebrities.<sup>30</sup> Kurokawa's resignation in May after being caught flouting social distancing rules during the state of emergency by (ille-

28. 'Japan Lawmaker in Casino Scandal Faces Fresh Bribe-taking Allegation', *Kyodo News*, 14 January 2020.

29. Takashi Endo, 'Order to Falsify Document led to Steady Decline in Mental State of Official', *Asahi Shimbun*, 19 March 2020.

30. Julian Ryall, '«Don't Destroy this Country» Japan Celebrities Break with Tradition to Lead anti-Abe Protest on Social Media', *South China Morning Post*, 11 May 2020.



gally) playing Mahjong for money worsened Abe's position while removing Kurokawa from contention for Prosecutor General. The Abe administration then antagonized public opinion further by lightening the justice ministry's punishment for Kurokawa under the National Personnel Law.

Coming during the COVID-19 crisis response and overlapping in the way they did, these scandals contributed to public perceptions that the Abe administration was distracted and fatigued by the weight of its own deceptions after almost eight years in office.<sup>31</sup> Interpersonal coordination and communication within the executive started to suffer, with cascading effects on relations between the government and the LDP, and with coalition partner Komeito. This undermined the Abe administration's core appeal, built on a judiciously cultivated appearance of administrative competence and political stability. It also disproved the conviction that Abe was better than any potential replacements inside the LDP and the fragmented opposition from which he «took Japan back» in 2012.

Never shy of reminding his own party of their electoral woes in 2009 after three years of political instability, and replacement with an equally unstable Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), Prime Minister Abe had always aimed to draw a sharp contrast with past political practice by limiting and controlling turnover in high-level cabinet positions, top bureaucratic posts, and in his circle of personal advisers. His finance minister and deputy prime minister (Aso Taro), chief cabinet secretary (Suga Yoshihide), and administrative deputy chief cabinet secretary (Sugita Kazuhiro) had been with Abe from beginning to end. The same was true in the case of special advisors Hasegawa Eiichi, Izumi Hiroto, Saiki Kozo, and Imai Takaya. Yachi Shōtarō, Abe's key foreign policy adviser and first ever NSC/NSS head, had been with Abe until his retirement in September 2019, when he was replaced with Kitamura Shigeru, a former executive secretary to Prime Minister Abe in 2006-07, and a long-time Director of Cabinet Intelligence between 2011 and 2019. Abe also had had only two foreign ministers: one (Kōno Tārō) subsequently became his defence minister; the other (Kishida Fumio) became the Chairperson of the LDP Policy Research Council for the remainder of Abe's term. The establishment of the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs (2014) also gave Abe and Suga greater control over top level personnel appointments from within the bureaucracy. In the security sphere, the role of informal actors such as academics like Kitaoka Shin'ichi and diplomats such as Kanehara Nobukatsu in giving coherence and credibility to Abe administration security initiatives was also vital.<sup>32</sup>

31. '舛添氏「長期政権の墮落」 情報公開せず、遅すぎた対応' (Masuzoe: Degradation of the Long Abe Administration – Lack of Transparency, Slow Response), *Asahi Shimbun*, 28 February 2020.

32. Misato Matsuoka, 'The Role of Informal Political Actors in Japanese security Policymaking: The Case of Kitaoka Shin'ichi', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 6, 2020, pp. 670-686.

Up until 2019, Abe had therefore been able to count on the support of an informal «leading small group», which created coherence between the political and bureaucratic executive and gave the Prime Minister's Office and the Cabinet Secretariat the upper hand in policy formation against vested bureaucratic and parliamentary interests and factions.<sup>33</sup> As long as he sustained the strategically convenient relationship with Komeito – on which the LDP depends for winning the majority in single member districts in the House of Representatives – Abe's claim to be a stabilising force rang true. In 2020, however, several successive incidents revealed dysfunction in the management of inter-personal relations and policy between Abe and top political figures, between Kantei and the Cabinet Secretariat, and between the political executive and ruling parties.<sup>34</sup> Immediately after the announcement of the COVID-19 Basic Plan in February, Abe made an unprecedented announcement requesting Japanese elementary, junior and senior high schools nationwide to close for up to five weeks. This decision, bound to have a major impact on families and educators, was made abruptly and without consultation with Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga or Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Sugita. It was also contrary to the advice of education officials and Education Minister Hagiuda Kōichi, arguably his closest political ally.<sup>35</sup> The lack of consultation and internal fissures became public knowledge and Abe admitted in parliament that he had made the school closure decision on his own and without consulting his expert advisory group.

This unsystematic and seemingly improvised approach was reminiscent of one of Abe's favourite talking points, the DPJ era's ad hoc crisis management. Abe compounded this perception by unilaterally ending the state of emergency on 25 May, three days before the expert group was to meet to consider the issue; later he decided to abolish the expert panel. Also evoking DPJ-era dysfunction was Abe's repeated clashes with health ministry officials over a range of issues ranging from testing availability to authorisation of Avigan, Abe's personal preference as a COVID-19 treatment. Abe's actions had already contributed to built-up resentments within the bureaucracy due to a perception of heavy-handed personnel management

33. 'Inside Japan's Politically Powerful Nerve Center', *Nikkei Asia*, 25 April 2017; Giulio Pugliese, 'Kantei Diplomacy? Japan's Hybrid Leadership in Foreign and Security Policy', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2017, pp. 152-168; 'Japan's Kissinger? Yachi Shōtarō: The State Behind the Curtain', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 2, 2017, pp. 231-251.

34. '永田町大混乱! 「新型コロナvs安倍vs菅」最後に勝つのは誰だ!' (Nagata-cho in Turmoil: Who Will Win? COVID-19, Abe, or Suga?), *President Online*, 6 March 2020; Satoshi Sugiyama '«Single Mind» No More: Abe's Onetime Right-hand Man Sees His Influence Dwindle', *Japan Times*, 7 July 2020.

35. '臨時休校要請、首相「独断」に腹心の影 菅氏ら置き去り' (In the Shadow of the PM's Arbitrary Temporary School Closure Request, Suga and Others Left Out), *Asahi Shimbun*, 28 February 2020.

and illegitimate pressure on officials.<sup>36</sup> The Prime Minister's «Abenomask» PR blunder – another ad hoc decision – then provoked a much wider political backlash. Without consultation beyond a small circle of officials, Abe announced in early April a policy of distributing two single cloth masks to households ahead of the much-anticipated household economic support packages. Traditional and social media ridicule of the «Abenomask» policy accompanied public criticism from within the LDP, with Kishida Fumio, chairperson of the Policy Research Council (one of the top three positions in the LDP), expressing his surprise on national television.<sup>37</sup> The «Abenomask» fiasco came together with the widely-recognised insufficiency of the Abe administration's proposed economic package of a one-time payment of ¥ 300,000 (ca. € 2,400) limited to families whose incomes had halved due to COVID-19.<sup>38</sup> In turn, this stimulated an unprecedented pushback from the LDP and Komeito. The Komeito flashed the coalition dissolution card for the first time in eight years, something it had previously been unwilling to do, despite strong internal resistance to Peace and Security Legislation (PSL) and Integrated Resort legislation. This helped the LDP to restrain Abe from forcing through the Diet his own household economic support package. As a consequence, the government adopted the «Kishida plan» of a ¥ 100,000 (ca. € 800) payment to every resident of Japan and their dependents (*ichiritsu kyūfu*), rent support proposals, and the doubling of employment adjustment subsidies.

This signalled a shift in the tectonic plates of power that had until then supported Abe and catalysed further challenges to his political authority. In quick succession, Abe was forced to scrap the revision to the Public Prosecutor's Office Act, suspend discussions over the visit of Xi Jinping, and, through Defense Minister Kōno Tarō's lobbying, cancel the Aegis Ashore programme – despite Abe's sensitivity to Trump's preferences for Buy American (weapons) to shrink the trade deficit (see below). Secretary General Nikai Toshihirō's unsubtle factional manoeuvring to replace Abe in June were the *todome* (finishing blow) for his administration.<sup>39</sup> It lead Suzuki Shun'ichi, chairperson of the General Council, to publicly express concern that the poor polling and internal discord in the LDP could lead to a DPJ-

36. '官僚の村度、背景に内閣人事局 異を唱えれば「クビ...」' (Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs the Source of Bureaucrats Following Unspoken Orders: If you Disagree, «You're Fired»), *Asahi Shimbun*, 15 March 2018.

37. Tomohiro Osaki, 'Abenomask? Prime Minister's «Two Masks per Household» Policy Spawns Memes on Social Media', *Japan Times*, 2 April 2020; Yuki Fujita, 'Abe Faces Calls for Decisive Action after «Abenomask» Blunder', *Nikkei Asia*, 3 April 2020.

38. '72% support state of emergency over virus in Japan, 70% say declaration came too late', *Mainichi Shimbun*, 9 April 2020; '政府の経済対策に「満足していない」64%' (64% Say Government's Economic Measures Insufficient), *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 7 June 2020.

39. Michael MacArthur Bosack, 'The Post-Abe Leadership Race', *Japan Times*, 25 June 2020.

like situation of alienation from public opinion.<sup>40</sup> By then, Abe could no longer sustain his political authority or claim to be a net asset to the LDP at election time – the key to any prime minister’s political longevity.

### 3. *The Abe to Suga hand-off*

The first public reports of Abe’s rapid weight loss and the return of his ulcerative colitis surfaced in early June as officials and allies noticed a deterioration in Abe’s performance and gradual disengagement from policy and parliamentary matters.<sup>41</sup> A seemingly irreversible drop in public support, angst around the realisation that a number of legacy achievements had been derailed by COVID-19, and the stress caused by the unique challenges of pandemic management likely precipitated bad health. Abe’s highly publicised check-up at Keio University Hospital on August 17 took more than seven hours.<sup>42</sup> Seemingly content to become the longest continuously serving Japanese prime minister in history, Abe announced his resignation on 28 August, four days after passing the mark of his uncle, Satō Eisaku. Despite the premature end of its prime ministership, Abe received an average gross positive rating of almost 70 % from six media company surveys for the overall achievements of the almost eight-year-long administration.<sup>43</sup>

Opinion was mixed, however, when it came to specific policies and outcomes. The public was ambivalent about whether their lives had gotten better during the Abe administration, and whether the positives outweighed the negatives. Also, the public was generally negative about whether Abe’s successor should inherit his policies, including Abenomics.<sup>44</sup> Abe was also unable to play much of a role in selecting his successor as LDP Secretary General Nikai Toshihirō took advantage of the party presidency election format (no grassroots membership input) to engineer a fait accompli that

40. ‘党内抗争回避を 自民・鈴木総務会長’ (LDP General Council Head Suzuki: Avoid Intra-Party Turmoil), *Jiji Tsūshin*, 9 June 2020.

41. ‘Japan PM Abe Resigns Due to Illness with Many Issues Unresolved’, *Kyodo News*, 28 August 2020.

42. Gaku Shimada, ‘A Legacy Slipping Away: Why Shinzo Abe Stepped Down’, *Nikkei Asia*, 30 August 2020.

43. ‘安倍政権、平均60点’ (Abe Administration Gets 60 Points), *Mainichi Shimbun*, 18 September 2020.

44. ‘57 Percent Rate Abe’s Diplomacy’, *Mainichi Shimbun*, 10 September 2020; ‘世論調査一質問と回答’ (Survey Questions and Answers), *Asahi Shimbun*, 3 May 2020; ‘調査結果’ (Survey Results), *Kyodo Tsūshin*, 9 September 2020; ‘継続望む政策「コロナ対策」44%、改憲は13%’ (Preferred Policies to Continue: COVID-19, 44%, Constitutional Revision, 13%), *Nikkei Shimbun*, 30 August 2020.

put 71-year-old Suga Yoshihide in the Kantei.<sup>45</sup> Barely discussed as a potential successor until endearing himself to the public as «Uncle Reiwa» (*reiwa ojisan*), when formally announcing the new era name in April 2019,<sup>46</sup> Suga was not necessarily Abe's first choice.<sup>47</sup> Suga had actually fallen out of Abe's favour in late-2019 over the cherry blossom scandal, Suga's increased prominence, and the political perception that Suga had been the key reason for the success and longevity of the Abe administration. Suga was subsequently isolated from Abe's decision-making small group.<sup>48</sup>

Suga also initially enjoyed surprisingly high support.<sup>49</sup> He vowed to more aggressively tackle vested interests and bureaucratic inefficiencies, perhaps the least fired of Abenomics' three arrows. He also promised to work on behalf of the citizenry as a self-made son of a humble strawberry farmer from Japan's deep snow country (a contrast with the patrician Abe).

Suga, nevertheless, struggled to distance himself from Abe, the associated scandals, and ultimately his own role in distorting political accountability as Abe's Chief Cabinet Secretary.<sup>50</sup> Suga also stumbled into a highly unnecessary showdown with the media and academy when he refused to appoint six scholars to the prestigious Science Council of Japan recommended by the Council. Funded by and housed in the Cabinet Office, the Council's institutional task was to give independent advice on policy, as it had been doing during COVID-19. This was the first time a prime minister had rejected the names of possible Council members recommended by the Council itself.<sup>51</sup> Suga refused to either explain or reverse his decision, merely saying that the

45. Eric Johnston, 'Meet the «Shadow Shogun» behind the Making of Japan's Next Prime Minister', *Japan Times*, 11 September 2020; Tazaki Shirō, 'キングメーカー、二階俊博幹事長の視線' (Kingmaker, Secretary General Nikai's Perspective), *Nippon.com*, 17 August 2020; '絶滅危惧種」二階氏の変幻自在' («Endangered Species» – Mr. Nikai's Transformations), *Jiji News*, 28 June 2020.

46. Shunsuke Shigeta, 'How Abe's Deputy Suga Grew to Power Broker and Possible Successor', *Nikkei Asia*, 12 May 2019.

47. Rui Abiru, 'Abe's Cabinet Reshuffle Signals Push for Constitutional Reform, Grooming of Next Leaders', *Japan Forward*, 16 September 2019.

48. '永田町大混乱! 「新型コロナvs安倍vs菅」最後に勝つのは誰だ!' (Great Chaos in Nagatachō: «Novel Coronavirus vs. Abe vs. Suga» Who Will Win in the End?), *President*, March 2020, Vol. 6; '首相と菅氏にすさまじい風? ポスト安倍めぐる政局の引き金にも' (A Rift between the Premier and Mr. Suga? It Could also Trigger Post-Abe Evolutions in the Political Landscape), *Sankei Shimbun*, 15 May 2020.

49. '内閣支持率、報道各社60%超え 人柄・政策が好感' (Favourable towards Policy and Political Personality, Suga's Cabinet Support Over 60% in Each Survey), *Nikkei Asia*, 18 September 2020.

50. Aurelia George Mulgan, 'Suga's Accountability Problem', *East Asia Forum*, 8 December 2020.

51. '社説: 内閣支持率低下 首相は国会で説明尽くせ' (Editorial: As Cabinet Support Dives, the PM Should Face the Diet), *Nishi Nippon Shimbun*, 20 October 2020.

unprecedented intervention was «relevant and legal».<sup>52</sup> However, critics noted that this was likely a petty payback for the six scholars' opposition to Abe's designated secrets legislation and the 2015 PSL. Possibly, Suga's decision was also a warning to the Council, which had refused to change its cautious stance on academic collaboration in military research, distancing themselves from the Ministry of Defence's policy.<sup>53</sup>

Framed by the media as another politically motivated intervention in the personnel affairs of important societal institutions, and a possible threat to academic freedom guaranteed under the Constitution, the controversy dragged on for months, even garnering international attention. Then, new revelations raised further questions about the ethics of officials from the Abe administration, including whether Abe himself had lied under oath in the Diet. The result was that the public concluded that Suga was disinterested in accountability concerns, and therefore not the right person to deal with money and political influence problems.<sup>54</sup>

Suga COVID-19 missteps were also reminiscent of Abe's botched political response. Seeming disinterested in the growing concern around COVID-19's spread in November, the Suga government ignored calls for more decisive action. The government also pushed ahead on the nation-wide Go-To-Travel scheme, an indirect aid package for the tourism industry that subsidized domestic travel by up to ¥ 20,000 (ca. € 160) per day. Go-To-Travel had been Suga's pet project during his months of isolation in the Abe administration. Launched in July 2020, it excluded Tokyo due to the concern that the capital's inclusion would spread the novel coronavirus. Despite this fear, and the additional anxiety that travel during the mid-winter period could worsen the situation due to higher viral transmission and susceptibility, the Suga cabinet only reluctantly agreed to halt the policy in late-December 2020.<sup>55</sup> By then, evaluations of the administration's COVID-19 response and Suga's personal leadership had turned highly negative, with cabinet support ratings deteriorating at

52. Suvendrini Kakuchi, 'Pressure Piling up Against PM's Science Council Decision', *University World News*, 8 December 2020.

53. Two of the scholars were particularly prominent in heading up the Association of Scholars Opposed to the Security-related Laws, while another testified against the legislation's constitutionality in parliament. Masato Shimizu, 'Suga's Rejection of Science Nominees Spurs Constitutional Storm', *Nikkei Asia*, 24 October 2020.

54. '共同通信世論調査結果' (Kyodo News Survey Results), *Kyodo Tsūshin*, 6 December 2020; '共同通信世論調査結果' (Kyodo News Survey Results), *Kyodo Tsūshin*, 10 January 2021; '五輪「再延期を」51% ワクチン接種「様子見」は7割' (51% Support Postponing Olympics Again; 70% Will Wait and See on Immunization), *Asahi Shimbun*, 25 January 2020.

55. 'Japan to Halt Travel Program Over New Year Holidays Amid Virus Surge', *Kyodo News*, 15 December 2020.

a record pace, particularly among independent voters.<sup>56</sup> Suga's «prime minister premium» – the difference between the premier's popularity and that of the LDP itself – shrank to less than 5 % by January 2021, while Suga also oversaw a rare reduction in the popularity of the LDP, including in voting intention. According to December surveys conducted by the *Yomiuri* and *Asahi* newspapers, the majority of the public also switched from its initial view favouring Suga's permanence in the prime ministership beyond the next LDP presidential election and for at least two years or more, to one wanting Suga to stand down as soon as his term was up in September 2021.<sup>57</sup>

As prime minister, Suga still held the snap election card which he could use before the LDP presidential election to secure a modest win to enhance his claim to the LDP presidency. Suga was nevertheless limited in the use of this card, given public expectations, his own promises to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need to prioritise the Olympics and International Olympic Committee requirements.<sup>58</sup> Suga's biggest challenge was preventing a narrative from taking hold, namely that, rather than a genuine reformist, he was, after all, the head of a caretaker government beholden to the factions.<sup>59</sup> In spite of his efforts, the public in general, LDP supporters, and the business community had already started to gravitate towards Kōno Tarō as the preferred next prime minister by the end of 2020.<sup>60</sup>

56. '内閣支持率33%に続落、不支持45% 無党派層で急落' (Continued Fall in Cabinet Support to 33%, 45% Non-Aligned Support Dives), *Asahi Shimbun*, 25 January 2021; '内閣支持続落 33% 緊急事態「遅すぎ」71%' (Continued Fall in Cabinet Support to 33%, 71% Say State of Emergency Too Late), *Mainichi Shimbun*, 17 January 2021. '菅政権支持率、3カ月で32ポイント低下、麻生政権に並び最大' (Suga's Cabinet Support Plunges 32% in 3 Months, Same as the Aso Administration), *Nikkei Shimbun*, 29 December 2020; '劣化する「令和おじさん」' (Deteriorating Uncle Reiwa), *Tokyo Shimbun*, 6 January 2021.

57. '2020年9月 菅内閣発足電話全国世論調査 質問と回答' (September 2020 Suga Cabinet Inauguration National Telephone Survey Question and Answer), *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 21 September 2020; '2020年11月 電話全国世論調査 質問と回答' (November 2020 National Telephone Survey Questions and Answers), *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 10 November 2020. '菅政権「来年9月まで」29.0% 続けてほしい在任期間' (29% Want Suga Administration to Continue to September 2021), *Jiji Tsūshin*, 16 October 2020; '2020年12月26～27日 電話全国世論調査 質問と回答' (December 26-27 2020 National Telephone Survey Questions and Answers), *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 28 December 2020; '朝日新聞世論調査一質問と回答' (Asahi Survey Questions and Answers), *Asahi Shimbun*, 21 December 2020.

58. Leo Lewis & Murad Ahmed, 'Japan: How Coronavirus Crushed Abe's Olympics Dream', *The Financial Times*, 30 March 2020.

59. 'Suga, Favored to Succeed Abe, Says Won't Lead «Interim Government»', *Japan Times*, 6 September 2020.

60. 'Reform Minister Taro Kono Most Favored for Japan PM as Suga Slips to 3rd: Mainichi Poll', *Mainichi Shimbun*, 18 January 2020; '次の首相ふさわしい人 河野氏がトップ' (Kōno Tops for Next PM), *Nikkei Shimbun*, 1 February 2020; '2月ロイター企業調査' (February Reuters Company Survey), *Reuters*, 18 February 2021.

Kōno represents a blend of administrative reformism, anti-nuclear scepticism, cautious social liberalism, and a foreign policy that, although internationalist in general, is hawkish towards China. This position aligned with public opinion and the increasing salience of «democratic» formulations of Japan's foreign policy identity (see below).

Suga still had other cards to play. While Suga acted in full continuity with the Abenomics agenda, he initially appeared serious about structural reforms that would flesh out the Abe era rhetoric, portraying Japan as on the cusp of a fourth industrial revolution (4IR) and positioned to benefit from a clean energy revolution.<sup>61</sup> With an eye on the COP26 UN Climate Change Conference negotiations of November 2021, Prime Minister Suga boldly vowed to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 (reflecting similar announcements made by the UK, the EU, and China). While this surpassed Japan's 2015 Paris Agreement vow, what made it bold is that it requires radical changes to Japan's energy infrastructure and usage patterns, hard to fathom in 2020. After all, only nine nuclear reactors out of 60 were in operation at the end of 2020, and Japan's reliance on fossil fuels for 87% of energy consumption, including coal, remained unabated.<sup>62</sup> New investments in renewable technologies, increased use of hydroelectric and geothermal resources, accelerated development and adoption of energy storage technologies such as hydrogen, and nation-wide proliferation of local smart grids are all essential if Tokyo is to achieve its stated energy objectives.<sup>63</sup>

Suga's own stimulus package targeted direct fiscal spending and credit resources for trillion-yen funds towards post-pandemic growth based on reducing carbon emissions and boosting adoption of digital technology.<sup>64</sup> Promising regulatory reform and digitalization to complement 4IR productivity gains and clean energy advancements,<sup>65</sup> Suga appointed the popular Kōno Tarō to crucial ministerial roles for administrative, regulatory, and civil service reform. In addition to making Kōno responsible for the gov-

61. Ryutaro Abe, 'Suga Finds Own Pet Policies of Cutting Red Tape, Digitization', *Asahi Shimbun*, 17 September 2020. See also: Erik Brynjolfsson & Andrew McAfee, *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014; Kai-Fu Lee, *AI Superpowers*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018, pp. 12-25.

62. 'Japan says nuclear crucial to hitting net zero goal by 2050', *Financial Times*, 2 February 2021. US Energy Information Administration, *Country Analysis: Japan*, Last Updated on November 2020 (<https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/JPN>).

63. Paul Midford, 'Presentation: EU-Japan Relations: Beyond the Strategic Partnership Agreement', *European Japan Advanced Research Network Conference*, 26 November 2020.

64. Leika Kihara & Tetsushi Kajimoto, 'Japan Unveils \$708 Billion in Fresh Stimulus with Eye on Post-COVID Growth', *Reuters*, 8 December 2020.

65. Hideaki Tanaka, '菅義偉政権、3つの課題' (Three Issues Confronting the Suga Administration), *Japan Center for Economic Research*, 30 September 2020 (<https://www.jcer.or.jp/blog/tanakahideaki20200930.html>).



ernment's immunization campaign, Suga instructed him to work with Hirai Takuya, the newly-appointed minister for digital transformation, to oversee the creation of a new government agency dedicated to digital transformation.<sup>66</sup> Attuned to public sentiment, Kōno's first act in the de-bureaucratization and digitalization campaign was a war (*datsu-hanko*) declared on the mandatory use of the personal seal (*hanko*) for official documentation, registration, and private business. Emblematic of menial paperwork, the *hanko* was required in as many as 15,000 types of administrative procedures. Kōno declared that he would lower the number to less than one hundred.<sup>67</sup> The Suga administration also announced government-mandated cuts in mobile phone fees as part of this reform agenda.

The Suga administration could also emphasise success in the deflation battle. Despite quantitative and qualitative monetary expansion, Abenomics did not have much success in its inflation targeting even before COVID-19 precipitated a 1% fall in Japan's Consumer Price Index. While monetary policy had positive business and corporate-side effects, it did not deal with the underlying mechanisms – such as limited real wage increases or rising education costs – that discipline spending by the public. Wage hikes remained modest despite the Japanese government having actively encouraged companies to raise wages faster since 2014, during the annual *shuntō* negotiations between unions and large employers.<sup>68</sup> At the end of 2020, the Suga administration was working towards a nation-wide minimum wage hike to ¥ 1000 per hour, up from a national average of ¥ 902.<sup>69</sup> This could play a major role in stimulating domestic demand.<sup>70</sup> Also, by making it a national minimum, the hike's likely popularity in the regions where vote-value disparities advantage the LDP could influence political calculations ahead of the 2021 House of Representatives and LDP Presidential elections.<sup>71</sup>

66. 'Japan Aims to Create Digital Agency in 2021: Minister', *Nippon.com*, 19 September 2020.

67. Tarō Kōno & Toyotaka Sakai, '「脱ハンコ」から始まる日本経済再生' («The Seal Wars» will kickstart Japan's Economic Revitalization), *Chūō Kōron*, December 2020, pp. 100-7; p.102.

68. Suehiro Toru, '人々はなぜ「インフレ率」を高く感じているのか' (Why Do People Believe There's «High Inflation»?), *Toyo Keizai*, 19 February 2021.

69. Takahashi Kanji, '新政権、最低賃金の大幅上げで中小企業に「荒療治」も' (The New Government Considers Considerable Raises to the Minimum Wage, Also as «Drastic Treatment» for Small and Medium Enterprises), *Sankei Business*, 25 September 2020.

70. Motoshige Ito & Takeshi Niinami, '需要喚起のアベノミクスから企業活性化のサガノミクス' (From Abenomics' Demand Stimulation to Sukanomics' Corporate Revitalization), *Chūō Kōron*, December 2020, pp. 26-34.

71. In Japan, a vote-value disparity arises when a given constituency has fewer voters than another constituency but can still send the same number of members of parliament to the Diet. The disparity has reached as high as 3:1 in the House of Councillors for rural constituencies compared to urban ones.

Such reforms will require political courage. The lack of immediate-term direct household and SME relief, and the continued intransigence of COVID-19, will restrain the recovery, however, potentially denying Suga the long-term political benefits of any stimulus or reforms instituted under his watch. An underwhelming and hollowed-out Tokyo Olympics with no non-resident spectators and characterised by public disinterest – and marred by sexism scandals – may also have a dampening effect.<sup>72</sup> Suga's sponsor, LDP Secretary General Nikai Toshihirō, also suffered a loss of influence due to his erratic response to sexism and COVID-19 scandals within the party.

Both Kōno and Suga's leadership prospects could still rise or fall. Kōno status as a maverick and his past behaviour also do not necessarily comport with vested LDP or factional interests. This all has unpredictable effects on political calculations. Any move by popular local politicians to insert themselves into national politics ahead of mandatory elections in 2021 would only compound this uncertainty. It is plausible, however, that popular Osaka governor Yoshimura Hirofumi and Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko will step on to the political battlefield to usurp national leadership. Yoshimura is also vice president of the national Japan Innovation Party (*Nippon Ishin no Kai*), while Koike played a prominent role in almost mortally harming Abe and the LDP in the 2017 House of Representatives election, when she established a political party to run candidates in urban districts.<sup>73</sup>

#### 4. *Japan's foreign policy between China and the US in 2020*

During the Abe administration, Japanese strategists and leaders have focused on satisfying two geopolitical imperatives. The first was a much more forthright balancing of China through greater alignment with the United States' regional strategic interests without alienating the PRC to the point of jeopardising commercial interests. The second imperative was to continue the pursuit of strategic «Indo-Pacific» diversification for long-term, strategic autonomy-enhancing effects.<sup>74</sup> While Japan's Indo-Pacific outreach in 2020 was relatively successful in reinforcing «cross-bracing» among regional part-

72. 'Japan: How Coronavirus Crushed Abe's Olympics Dream'.

73. Corey Wallace, 'Losing Hope in Japan's Snap Election', *East Asia Forum*, 18 October 2017.

74. Richard J. Samuels, *Securing Japan: Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007. Corey Wallace, 'Leaving (North-east) Asia?', see also: Corey Wallace, 'Japan's Strategic Contrast: Continuing Influence Despite Relative Power Decline in Southeast Asia', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 32, No. 5, 2019, pp. 863-897.

ners in trade, technology, and national security domains,<sup>75</sup> further deterioration in Sino-American relations complicated the first imperative.

Initially, the Abe government tried its best throughout the first half of 2020 to salvage momentum for a state visit by Secretary General of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping. A part of his legacy building, Abe sought to stabilize diplomatic relations with its giant neighbour, boost win-win economic activity (such as the aforementioned inflow of Chinese tourists), and extract some strategic leverage, aimed at convincing Beijing to restrain its East and South China Sea encroachment. Early in the pandemic there were signs that Beijing also aspired to smoothen relations with Tokyo, although it was not always clear to local experts what Xi's aspirations were for a «new era» in Sino-Japanese relations.<sup>76</sup> There were also encouraging signs of grassroots and bottom-up Chinese efforts towards improving the relations with Japan. Chinese sister cities and provinces repaid Japanese generous personal protective equipment (PPE) donations in kind,<sup>77</sup> while donations from the likes of Jack Ma and his Alibaba group were symptomatic of a concerted effort to woo Japanese citizens.<sup>78</sup> Also, the PRC's medical aid diplomacy in Japan kept a low profile. This contrasted with China's activities in Europe where, in the attempt to undermine the narrative that the PRC bore responsibility for the novel coronavirus' diffusion, Beijing presented itself as the «world's saviour», for both domestic consumption and diplomatic point scoring.<sup>79</sup>

The deepening of the COVID-19 crisis and questions over China's WHO behaviour, however, soured international sentiment regarding the PRC<sup>80</sup> and, in the process, revealed the shaky foundations of the Sino-Japanese tactical *détente*. China found itself in a relatively comfortable position following its draconian lockdown and test-and-tracing countermeasures,

75. Euan Graham, 'Maritime Security and Capacity-Building: The Australia-Japan Dimension', *NIDS Joint Research Series*, Vol. 10, 2014, pp. 43-58.

76. Interview, Japanese academic and government official, 27 December 2019, Tokyo.

77. '新型コロナウイルス 中国、県にマスク寄付 友好関係の2省が3万枚 / 和歌山' (Novel Coronavirus: China's Sister Provinces Donated 30 Thousand Masks to Wakayama Prefecture), *Mainichi Shimbun*, 19 March 2020; 'マスクの恩返しは「10倍返し」新華社も報道 箱には漢詩 中国・無錫市新呉区→愛知県豊川市' (Return for Mask Kindness «Times Ten», Xinhua News Agency also reports of Wuxi's Xiwu District gift to Aichi Prefecture's Toyokawa City with Chinese poems written on the boxes), *Mainichi Shimbun*, 26 March 2020.

78. 'Chinese Billionaire Jack Ma Donates 1 Million Masks to Coronavirus-hit Japan', *The Straits Times*, 4 March 2020.

79. Nahoko Etō, '新型コロナウイルスをめぐる中国の対外宣伝—人類運命共同体を促進する統一戦線工作' (China's External Propaganda on the Novel Coronavirus: United Front Operations Push for a Community of Common Destiny), *SPF China Observer*, No. 31, 20 May 2020.

80. François Godement, 'Fighting the Coronavirus Pandemic: China's Influence at the World Health Organization', *Institut Montaigne*, 23 March 2020.

stoking the resentment of international leaders now tasked with fighting the pandemic. In particular, in the US, COVID-19 turned from a potential point of strategic leverage over China, which would bolster Trump's 2020 re-election chances, to a domestic crisis that imperilled them.<sup>81</sup> This resulted in the Trump administration turning up the volume of its confrontational policy towards China. In particular, the Trump administration pursued what looked like a race to the bottom through the all-out information war with China on the outbreak and handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>82</sup>

PRC's policymakers' approaches to various domestic and international issues hardened and adversely affected Sino-Japanese relations.<sup>83</sup> China's accelerated authoritarian involution – notably in Hong Kong and Xinjiang – resulted in Japan joining Five Eyes nations and Europe in condemning China. The breaking of Beijing's commitments under international law towards Hong Kong and perpetrating human rights abuses in Xinjiang, evidence of which accumulated throughout the year, were criticized by Tokyo, including at the bilateral leadership level. Japan's critical stand on China was coupled with coordination on issues of global strategic importance with the anglophone nations and complemented intensive discussion in 2020 of Japan officially joining the Five Eyes as an intelligence partner alongside concrete military engagement.<sup>84</sup>

Tensions were particularly pointed surrounding East and South China Seas issues in 2020. In the South China Sea, Beijing appeared to take advantage of regional strategic distraction when it established two administrative districts on the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos and allegedly sunk a Vietnamese fishing vessel near the Paracel Islands in April. This nationalistic assertiveness also allowed Beijing to channel domestic frustrations. An increased tempo of PLA aerial incursions beyond the median line in the Taiwan Straits was complemented by a live-fire drill that obstructed navigation within the Strait as well as increasingly belligerent communications signalling Chinese impatience with progress on the peaceful reunification of Taiwan. The Chinese Coast Guard's Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands presence also troubled Tokyo as various incidents suggested that Beijing may be laying the groundwork for longer periods of law enforcement within the

81. John Bolton, *The Room Where it Happened: A White House Memoir*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020, p. 301; conversation with European diplomat, 19 March 2020, Washington DC.

82. Giulio Pugliese, '新型コロナウイルス危機で米中摩擦の狭間に立つEU: 中国の挑戦と米中情報戦を中心とした分析' (The EU Amid US-China Confrontation During the Novel Coronavirus Crisis: An Analysis Focused on the China Challenge and the US-China Information War), 東亜 (*Tōa*), Vol. 8 (August), 2020, pp. 18-27.

83. Giulio Pugliese, 'COVID-19 and the Reification of the US-China «Cold War»', in Jeff Kingston-edited special issue «COVID-19 in Asia», *Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 18, Issue 15, No. 3, 2020.

84. Hiroyuki Akita, 'Pros and Cons of a Six Eyes with Japan and Allies', *Nikkei Asia*, 22 December 2020.

islands' territorial and contiguous waters. The Japanese government even warned that it would consider allowing the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) to act in concert with the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) if China's encroachment was substantial enough to make it impossible for the JCG to respond alone. At the same time, the government continued to push for an emergency hotline.<sup>85</sup> One little remarked upon development, however, was a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) destroyer running into trouble with a Chinese fishing boat (in all likelihood part of China's maritime militia) 100 km off Ningbo in international waters in March, where the PLA's East Sea Fleet is based. While the incident was reported in the Japanese media, the nature of the warship's mission was left unmentioned upon by the Japanese Ministry of Defense, suggesting that the SDF was testing and probing China's navy. Two retired US navy officials noted that this could represent a turning point given that Japan has traditionally exercised restraint in such operations.<sup>86</sup>

In the South China Sea and East China Sea cases there is analytical disagreement about whether such activities constituted a new coercive stage, building on long-term strategies to assert effective control, or were business as usual in terms of Beijing contesting sovereignty.<sup>87</sup> Regarding Taiwan, too, explanations were contested; they ranged from Beijing embracing an accelerated timetable for forcible reunification, engaging in cognitive warfare, and the idea that such actions were a response to an uptick in America arms sales and regional military activities that highlighted PLA weaknesses in island air defence.<sup>88</sup> It was clear, however, that no consideration from Beijing was forthcoming in solidarity with regional nations now fighting a pandemic, whose elites, in many cases, were all too willing to frame China as the pandemic's originator or enabler. Indeed, anti-China hawks and Japanese conservatives that made up Abe's base became increasingly agitated with Abe himself as he hesitated in impos-

85. 'Kono Tells China SDF Will Respond to Intrusions around Senkakus', *Asahi Shimbun*, 5 August 2020; Junnosuke Kobara, 'Japan Defense Chief Calls for China's Restraint on the Senkakus', *Nikkei Asia*, 15 December 2020.

86. Ankit Panda, 'Japanese Naval Ship Involved in Collision With Chinese Fishing Vessel in East China Sea', *The Diplomat*, 31 March 2020; Testimony by two former US navy officers, 31 March 2020; 3, and 7 April May 2020, (online); see also: '台國防部智庫：大陸或藉與日越海事衝突觀察美日反應' (Taiwan Ministry of Defense Think-tank: Mainland China May Take Advantage of Clashes with Japan and Vietnam to Test US-Japan alliance's Reaction), *HK01*, 7 May 2020 (<https://bit.ly/3f5uBdR>).

87. Ole Tangen Jr., 'Is China taking advantage of COVID-19 to pursue South China Sea ambitions?', *DW.com*, 26 May 2020; Mike Mochizuki & Jiaxiu Han, 'Is China Escalating Tensions With Japan in the East China Sea?', *The Diplomat*, 16 September 2020; Alessio Patalano, 'What is China's Strategy in the Senkaku Islands', *War on the Rocks*, 10 September 2020.

88. Lu Li-shih, 'China's Military Exercises Near Taiwan: The Lowdown on an Uptick', *The Diplomat*, 20 October 2020; Joyce Huang, 'China Using «Cognitive Warfare» Against Taiwan, Observers Say', *Voice of America*, 17 January 2021.

ing travel restrictions on visitors from the PRC, due to his concern that it would have serious repercussions on Chinese President Xi Jinping's scheduled visit.<sup>89</sup> Abe also initially rebuffed LDP lawmakers' calls to cancel Xi's state visit.<sup>90</sup> As Abe's political strength diminished, LDP lawmakers and even his own defence minister, Kōno Tārō, publicly expressed reticence about Abe still entertaining thoughts of a Xi Jinping visit in 2020. Kōno publicly criticised Beijing's increase in defence spending despite the fallout and economic impact from COVID-19 as well as regional maritime tensions.<sup>91</sup>

Two features of Japan's China criticism in 2020 bear noting. First, criticism resonated throughout the political spectrum from the LDP to the Japan Communist Party. Second, this criticism was strongly focused on democratic and human rights abuses in China, in a marked contrast with the substantial lack of political and parliamentary interest at the time of the June 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. In 2020, Japanese lawmakers considered the need for a human rights sanctions regime that targeted key individuals and institutions responsible for gross violations, and the LDP set up a project team to consider responses to PRC crackdowns in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.<sup>92</sup> Japanese lawmakers also proposed a Taiwan Relations Act that would commit Japan to greater support of the fellow democracy.<sup>93</sup> While the government is unlikely to take up this suggestion, it is notable that Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu sent an official congratulatory message to President Tsai Ing-wen for her «democratic» re-election in January.<sup>94</sup> His ministry later emphasized the «extreme» importance of Japan's partnership with Taiwan.<sup>95</sup> When former prime minister Mori Yoshihiro visited Taiwan in August, to attend former Taiwanese President Lee Deng-hui's memorial service, he met President Tsai, lauded Japan-Taiwan relations, their sharing of «the same values of freedom and democ-

89. 'Editorial: Diet Session Ends with Abe Failing to Address Many Policy Failures', *Asahi Shimbun*, 18 June 2020; Linda Sieg, '«Where's Abe?» Critics Ask, as Coronavirus Spreads in Japan', *Reuters*, 25 February 2020; Devin Stewart, 'China's Influence in Japan: Everywhere Yet Nowhere in Particular', *CSIS Southeast Asia Program Report*, July 2020, pp. 5-6.

90. 'Japan Should Reconsider State Visit by China's Xi: LDP Lawmakers', *Kyodo News*, 29 May 2020.

91. '習氏来日、閣僚から慎重論 河野防衛相、尖閣・台湾に言及' (Cautious Stance by Ministers on Xi's Visit, Kōno mentions Senkakus and Taiwan), *Jiji Tsūshin*, 5 June 2020;

92. 'Japan Eyes US-style Law to Sanction Uighur Human Rights Abuses', *Nikkei Asia*, 12 November 2020.

93. Takuya Mizorogi & Masaya Kato, 'Japan Lawmakers Want "Taiwan Relations Act" of their Own', *Nikkei Asia*, 6 February 2021.

94. Global Taiwan Institute, 'Sino-Japanese Relations in 2020 and Implications for Taiwan', *Ketagalan Media*, 11 March 2020.

95. 'Taiwan is «Extremely» Important, Japan's Diplomatic Guideline Says', *Nikkei Asia*, 20 May 2020.

racy», and passed on Suga's message that, «[i]f there is an opportunity, I would like to speak (with Tsai) over the phone».<sup>96</sup>

Japan's «democratic» foreign policy identity is still in a nascent stage, given Tokyo's traditional emphasis on pragmatic diplomacy that avoids emphasising liberal democratic ideals or economic liberalism. Indeed, Tokyo willingly downplayed universal values for most of the Trump administration, given the American president's disinterest.<sup>97</sup> This new and nascent identity is nevertheless increasingly derived not only from changes in public opinion internally, but by a re-elaboration of Japan's national character in the face of authoritarian China's economic rise, which has caused a liberal turn in Japanese nationalism.<sup>98</sup> Still, the Abe government, which tended to instrumentally invoke liberal democratic values, and Japanese officials were put off balance by Washington's more aggressive China policy in 2020. They feared entrapment in a maximalist China strategy that went beyond the defence of already existing global democracy to, apparently, advocating regime change in Beijing.<sup>99</sup> At the same time, the United States government became somewhat dissatisfied with Japan's milder China policy,<sup>100</sup> another way the tables had turned from the years of the Obama administration, when the Japanese government had pushed for a more aggressive American China policy.

The election of Biden in November 2020 with his emphasis on universal values will allay some of the above fears. Multiple Japanese policy planners have explicitly testified to the infusion of universal values into Japan's foreign policy initiatives to better tune in with the US government, especially Democratic Party administrations.<sup>101</sup> Japanese policymakers also sighed in relief at a likely end to US mercenary requests for «protection money», rumoured to include demands for a fourfold increase in Japanese budget spending for the stationing of American troops on Japanese soil.<sup>102</sup>

96. 'Japan's ex-PM Mori Meets Taiwan Leader Ahead of Memorial Service', *Kyodo News*, 18 September 2020.

97. Testimony by former government official, Prime Minister's Office, 31 January 2019, Tokyo. President's Trump lack of interest, if not hostility, towards democratic principles and narratives ran against his administration's insistence on those themes.

98. Kai Schulze, 'Risks of Sameness, the «Rise of China» and Japan's Ontological Security', in Sebastian Maslow, Ra Mason & Paul O' Shea, *Risk State: Japan's Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, pp.101-16.

99. Hiroyuki Akita, 'Deepening US-China Strategic Conflict and Japan's Way Forward', Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies: Policy Paper (2021: soon to be published); Hiroyuki Akita, 'US Digs in for Long War against China's Communist Regime', *Nikkei Asia*, 24 July 2020.

100. 'U.S.-Japan Dueling China for Influence in Indo-Pacific Region', *Asahi Shimbun*, 1 June 2020.

101. Testimony by former mid-ranking official from the National Security Secretariat, 2 February 2021, Tokyo (online).

102. Lara Seligman & Robbie Gramer, 'Trump Asks Tokyo to Quadruple Payments for U.S. Troops in Japan', *Foreign Policy*, 15 November 2019.

At the same time, Biden's pre-inauguration phone calls with foreign leaders stimulated Japanese sensitivity about the fate of the government's successful «Free and Open Indo-Pacific» vision, as transition team readouts suggested that the new US President was going for a different Indo-Pacific wording – «Secure and Prosperous Indo-Pacific» – potentially portending a markedly different American policy.<sup>103</sup> Yet, these fears were soon proven overblown, as the Biden administration rapidly reverted to standard Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) wording and even created an Indo-Pacific «tsar» within the National Security Council.<sup>104</sup>

### 5. *Japan's deepening Indo-Pacific outreach*

One question raised even before 2020 was the post-Abe fate of Japan's Indo-Pacific outreach given Abe's long-standing personal connection to the vision. During Abe's short-lived first premiership (2006-7), he and a small number of Japanese diplomatic and strategic thinkers grew wary of China's growing strategic clout relative to the United States.<sup>105</sup> They expressed concerns that widening economic asymmetries between China and Southeast Asian nations would facilitate a sphere of influence where Beijing could deploy economic tools for coercive purposes. Additionally, China's rapid naval modernisation could turn the South China Sea into «Lake Beijing», thereby enabling the PLA to cut off resources-poor Japan's sea lines of communications for coercive purposes or during war.<sup>106</sup> The Abe administration's vision of an Arc of Freedom and Prosperity was not widely embraced at the time in Japan. Nonetheless, a slow consensus within officialdom and across political party lines started to form during the DPJ administration on the need to diversify relations away from China by increasingly centring Southeast Asia and India in Japanese foreign policy thinking. The political environment was thus very amenable for Abe to enhance his vision on his return to the premiership in December 2012.<sup>107</sup>

103. Yūichi Hosoya, 'インド太平洋地域における「自由」と「開放性」の終わりか?' (Is This the End of «Freedom» and «Openness» in the Indo-Pacific Region?), *blogpost*, 15 November 2020.

104. 'Joe Biden Considers Appointing a White House Tsar for Asia', *Financial Times*, 2 December 2020.

105. MOFA, *Confluence of the Two Seas*, 22 August 2007 (<https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>); Yuichi Hosoya, 'The Rise and Fall of Japan's Grand Strategy: The «Arc of Freedom and Prosperity» and the Future Asian Order', *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2011, pp. 13-24.

106. Abe Shinzō, 'Asia's Democratic Security Diamond', *Project Syndicate*, 27 December 2012 (<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe>).

107. Corey Wallace, 'Japan's Strategic Pivot South: Diversifying the Dual Hedge', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2013, pp. 479-517.



Prime Minister Abe signified the importance and the energy his administration would invest into Southeast Asia by first visiting the strategically critical states of Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand in mid-January 2013. His government promised aid financing and a more proactive regional engagement, also of the military kind, to maintain international public goods in the Pacific *and* Indian Oceans.<sup>108</sup> Over time Abe refined this vision into the «Free and Open Indo-Pacific», which quickly gained currency in domestic discourse as a way of framing Japan's strategic attention – that is, attention focused not just on optimising relations between China and the United States. Given more pronounced multipolarity, the Japanese government focused on taking advantage of new diplomatic opportunities with other powers to go beyond the constraints placed on Japanese (and other's) autonomy by the two great powers and the state of relations between them.<sup>109</sup> At the same time, much of Japan's engagement with «middle powers» was in line with US strategic interests and aimed at China.<sup>110</sup> So much so that the Trump administration's 2018 strategic framework for the Indo-Pacific, a key strategic document declassified by the outgoing Trump administration, underlined the US government's need to «reinforce Japan's proactive leadership to amplify U.S. strategic goals in Southeast Asia».<sup>111</sup>

Will this Indo-Pacific framing of Japan's foreign policy endure? The long-term prospects are good given its wide acceptance in Japan. The framing is flexible and allows Japanese governments to adjust the degree of emphasis they want to place on consolidative, constructive, and competitive aspects of regional messaging and actions as Tokyo adapts to short-term strategic exigencies and post-pandemic geopolitical challenges. The Indo-Pacific vision supports narratives of consolidation as Japan signals geopolitical alignment with the United States. The shared policy vision keeps the U.S. government strategically interested in the region and in Japan's national defence, while it avoids framing the policy as exclusionary towards Beijing. Thus, FOIP extends the period of time for Japanese commercial interests to extract benefits from Japan's prior economic engagement with the PRC. It allows constructive messaging by rhetorically centring new future-oriented bilateral and mini-lateral relations with the non-great powers and includes «third-country» cooperation with the two great powers. It also allows expressions of competition as Japan seeks to

108. MOFA, *Bounty of the Open Seas: Five New Principles for Japanese Diplomacy*, 18 January 2013 ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/abe\\_0118e.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/abe_0118e.html)).

109. Wallace, 'Leaving (Northeast) Asia?'

110. Marco Zappa, *Il Giappone nel sistema internazionale*, Venezia: Cafoscarina, 2020: pp. 229-32.

111. US National Security Council, *US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific*, 15 February 2018 (<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>).

cross-brace militarily, economically, and technologically with both new and traditional regional partners in ways that decentres China as the key focus of regional engagement, thereby restraining Beijing's ability to exploit relative power asymmetries.

Short-term prospects that Abe's Indo-Pacific framing of Japan's foreign policy might endure are also good and belie initial anticipation, including in Beijing, that Suga's anointment and his reappointment of Nikai to the Secretary-General role signalled a friendlier Japanese policy towards the PRC.<sup>112</sup> The reality is that Suga's well-known lack of interest in foreign policy grants Abe a potential role as a coach to Suga and as a go-between in his prime ministerial afterlife.<sup>113</sup> Suga thus vowed to continue his predecessor's work during his LDP presidency candidacy: «Prime Minister Abe's leadership diplomacy was truly amazing. I don't think I can match that. [I] will stick to my own style, while also seeking assistance from the Foreign Ministry. And of course, I will consult with (Abe)».<sup>114</sup> Suga signalled his reliance on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with Motegi Toshimitsu's reappointment as foreign minister, and shortly after the inauguration Suga visited Vietnam and Indonesia, recalling Abe's first prime ministerial visit in 2012. Ichikawa Keiichi, who now heads up the North American Affairs Bureau, represented further continuity between Suga and Abe. Ichikawa worked under Kanehara Nobukatsu in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Foreign Policy Bureau that promulgated the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity vision that later informed the FOIP. Ichikawa returned as executive secretary when Suga was chief cabinet secretary. Ichikawa then found himself in the Foreign Policy Bureau in 2016 as he coordinated with Kanehara and Abe's diplomatic brain, Yachi Shōtarō, in the crafting of FOIP.<sup>115</sup>

Furthermore, Japanese leaders and officials have been encouraged by their success in influencing audiences sitting in foreign capitals by making use of the «Indo-Pacific» framing.<sup>116</sup> This result was partially aided by Trump's lack of a clear Asia strategy and the more assertive and riskier Chinese foreign and security policy under Xi Jinping. Tokyo has of course had to make its own adjustments, such as the transmutation of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy into an inclusive vision that was rhetorically inclusive of China. This served to assuage ASEAN, which announced

112. Tomoyuki Tachikawa, 'China Expects Japan's Next PM to be Conciliatory amid U.S. Tensions', *Kyodo News*, 9 September 2020.

113. Hugo Dobson & Caroline Rose, 'The Afterlives of Post-War Japanese Prime Ministers', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 49, Issue 1, 2019, pp. 127-150.

114. 'Japan PM Hopeful Says he May Need Help from Abe on Diplomacy', *Mainichi Shinbun*, 13 September 2020.

115. Testimony by former mid-ranking official from the National Security Secretariat, 2 February 2021, Tokyo (online).

116. Testimony by former high-ranking official from the National Security Secretariat, 2 February 2021, Tokyo (online).

its own *Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, as well as countries like New Zealand, which adopted the terminology in 2019, and Australia, which had adopted Indo-Pacific terminology in its 2013 sans the «Free and Open» rhetorical flourish.<sup>117</sup> As ASEAN and the Australasian countries endorsed Japan's approach, Japan succeeded in convincing European nations of the virtues of FOIP-centred strategic action as the Europeans also recalibrated relations with China. Germany published its rather comprehensive Cabinet-approved «Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific» in September 2020, the Netherlands published a non-paper on its own Indo-Pacific guidelines in November 2020,<sup>118</sup> and France, which is a resident power in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, announced its «Indo-Pacific strategy» in 2018. Germany and France, namely the two major EU member states, pushed for an EU-wide strategy on the Indo-Pacific in the late-Autumn of 2020. The United Kingdom has also trumpeted the synergy between its Global Britain and Indo-Pacific conceptions. All of the afore-mentioned European documents on the Indo-Pacific aimed at the twin challenges of balancing their relationship with China by deepening their relationship with East and South Asian players such as Japan, India and ASEAN countries, while avoiding the pitfalls of a US-China strategic rivalry that risks rocking the entire regional architecture, if not the multilateral global order.

Japan's role in these European conceptions has been pivotal, as signalled by the invitation of Foreign Minister Motegi to the EU Foreign Affairs Council of January 2021, a first in the history of EU-Japan relations. Moreover, various security agreements on intelligence, defence equipment, and regularised two-plus-two dialogues with Japan provided momentum for European Indo-Pacific outreach. France, the United Kingdom, and Germany have all announced their interest in the region by sending military assets to East Asia for exercises. These coups were the result of US lobbying, but also of the Japanese government's quiet diplomacy and strategic communications efforts throughout the second Abe administration: after all, major European think-tanks and, to a lesser extent, academic institutions benefitted from Japanese funding to put the spotlight on Tokyo's initiatives and transmit its strategic narratives to policymakers and the expert community. And by 2020, the government of Japan had decided to invest in two major EU research-intensive universities with close links to the policy world, to inaugurate a Japan programme and an EU-Asia project, respectively, at The Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the

117. Fusaku Gō, '安倍氏と国際政治 「友達外交」相手が去ると...' (Mr. Abe and International Politics – What Happens to «Friendship Diplomacy» when the Counterpart Leaves the Scene?), *Asahi Shimbun*, 19 September 2020; Corey Wallace, 'Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand's Layering of Strategic Communications (2016-2020)', *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 45, Issue 3, 2021 (Forthcoming).

118. Gudrun Wacker, 'Europe and the Indo-Pacific: comparing France, Germany and the Netherlands', *Real Instituto Elcano ARI 29/2021*, 9 March 2021.

European University Institute (Florence). These initiatives would be led by experts on Japan and East Asia's international relations.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, throughout 2020 the EU and Japan undertook a series of Track 1.5 and webinar discussions, which culminated in a Joint Study on Connectivity Cooperation. These discussions aimed at building on the 2019 EU-Japan Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure Agreement to identify flagship projects entailing joint EU-Japan private-public financing, with an eye on the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and Central Asia.<sup>120</sup> In the process, Japan's leadership role has helped build a loose coalition of middle powers that may come handy in the face of two nightmare scenarios: American abandonment and the potential for Sinocentric hegemony, or excessive U.S.-China competition that risks ushering in a world defined solely by power politics.

#### 6. *National security: supply chain resiliency and technological autonomy*

The twin lens of managing Japan's position within the Sino-American relationship and pursuing Indo-Pacific diversification also applies to Japan's economic and military security. Even before 2020, fears lingered about China's asymmetric ability to leverage its centrality in many global and regional value chains as a form of «weaponized interdependence».<sup>121</sup> COVID-19 only drew more attention to this concern as China's stringent lockdown measures initially created a bottleneck in the supply of PPE and other medical necessities. In 2019, China was the largest supplier of PPE in medical goods, with a market share of 64% for surgical masks, 59% for goggles, 47% for protective wear, and 37% for gloves. As of May 2020, Japan still depended on China for 96% on masks, 73% on goggles, and between 80% and 90% of imported protection gear (including those products produced by Japanese companies in the People's Republic).<sup>122</sup> COVID-19's impact, therefore, ultimately enhanced regional (geo)political preferences for diversification – whether the Trump administration's maximalist position of

119. One of the two authors is a direct beneficiary of this engagement and is a holder of a part-time professorship at EUI. He can personally testify to freedom of expression and lack of self-censorship. Readers should be able to judge for themselves on his academic integrity.

120. E-mail exchange with European External Action Service official, 16 April 2020; Marie Söderberg, 'Eu-Japan Connectivity Promises', Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies: Policy Paper, 2021 (forthcoming).

121. Henry Farrell & Abraham L. Newman, 'Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion', *International Security*, Vol. 44, Issue 1, 2019, pp. 42-79.

122. Yukiko Fukagawa, 'Post Mega-FTA Integration in Asia: Asia-Pacific, Indo-Pacific, or Eurasia?', *Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies: Policy Paper*, 2021 (forthcoming).

decoupling from China or the more subtle pursuit of enhanced «Indo-Pacific» strategic «resilience» favoured by other nations.<sup>123</sup>

In terms of the former, COVID-19 developments initially buoyed Trump administration officials with further justification for their scepticism towards globalisation in general, and China's central role in driving it forward since it joined the WTO in 2001 in particular. In January 2020, Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross suggested that COVID-19 would alert companies about the multiple risks associated with China and bring jobs back to the United States.<sup>124</sup> COVID-19 and PRC actions throughout 2020 also provided the Trump administration with ample opportunity to emphasise the Communist Party of China's (CPC) «malign» intent and China's sustained technological and military modernization, and hegemonic aspirations at the expense of the rest of the world.

Washington's emphasis on national security considerations in Sino-American economic relations was not new. The Trump administration had already identified the need to apply maximum «asymmetric pressure» to defend America's domestic industrial base, impose serious costs on China's party-state regime,<sup>125</sup> and avoid assisting the PRC in sectors where state subsidies, distorted market practices, and economies of scale nurtured its national champions. In 2020, the United States sought to accelerate decoupling further through a wide range of tightened export controls and foreign investment screening mechanisms, including adding various Chinese companies to the entity list (EL), which lists goods and services requiring export licences, managed by the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security. This made it increasingly difficult for Chinese companies to do business in the United States as well as around the world with companies that also want to operate in the United States.<sup>126</sup>

Washington's combative approach during the Trump administration rested on the insight that the CPC's legitimacy was based on economic performance and that China's catch-up in high-tech sectors, such as semiconductors, was still dependent on market access and technology cooperation with Western nations and American allies like Japan.<sup>127</sup> For its

123. Corey Wallace, 'Australia and Aotearoa'.

124. 'Wilbur Ross Says Coronavirus Could Bring Jobs Back to the U.S.', *New York Times*, 30 January 2020.

125. US National Security Council, *US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific*, 15 February 2018 (<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>); 'Virtual Alexander Hamilton Society Book Talk: The China Nightmare: Dan Blumenthal, Matt Pottinger, & Nadia Schadlow', *The Alexander Hamilton Society* (webinar), 9 March 2021.

126. Hiroyuki Suzuki, 'Building Resilient Global Supply Chains: The Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific Region', *CSIS Report*, 19 February 2021.

127. Evan Medeiros, 'China Reacts: Assessing Beijing's Response to Trump's New China Strategy', *China Leadership Monitor*, 1 March 2019; 'Virtual Alexander Hamilton Society Book Talk: The China Nightmare: Dan Blumenthal, Matt Pottinger, & Nadia Schadlow', *The Alexander Hamilton Society* (webinar), 9 March 2021.

part, the Abe administration had started moving before 2020 to defend Japan's technological base through tighter export controls and foreign investment screening mechanisms. It also established funding mechanisms to woo Japanese companies to diversify away from China,<sup>128</sup> and sought to mitigate the economic consequences of China establishing a sphere of influence through its own connectivity initiatives by promoting Japan's own «high quality» infrastructure initiatives.<sup>129</sup> In 2020, Tokyo strengthened surveillance of university laboratories to prevent outflows of advanced technologies,<sup>130</sup> updated its Data Privacy Law in line with the strict standards of the EU's GDPR and its vision for a Data Free Flow with Trust initiative.<sup>131</sup> Finally, Tokyo agreed to a EU-Japan-US trilateral proposal for strengthening industrial subsidy discipline within the World Trade Organization.<sup>132</sup>

Tokyo also launched a supply chain diversification campaign initially provisioned with US\$ 2.3 billion in subsidies, a sum which it later matched in early 2021.<sup>133</sup> This was complemented by an Indo-Pacific-focused «Supply Chain Resilience Initiative» agreed to with Australia, and India in September 2020. India and Australia both suffered economic fallout from heightened diplomatic disputes with the PRC in 2020, and like Japan, sought to increase supply chain «resilience» with financial incentives.<sup>134</sup>

The ultimate effectiveness of these diversification initiatives and the United States' trade war is still unclear, however. China's position in global value chains is, after all, mostly dependent on regional demand, rather than American demand.<sup>135</sup> Foreign Direct Investment into China actually grew in

128. Giulio Pugliese & Sebastian Maslow, 'Japan 2019', pp. 141-45. Interview with senior official from the Trump administration, Washington DC, 5 March 2020.

129. Aurelio Insisa & Giulio Pugliese, 'The Free and Open Indo-Pacific versus the Belt and Road: Spheres of Influence and Sino-Japanese Relations', *The Pacific Review*, 2020 (online first); Wallace, 2019.

130. 'Japan Considers Tougher Rules on Research Interference amid US-China Tensions', *Nature*, 4 August 2020.

131. Paul Hastings, 'New Amendment To Japan's Data Privacy Law (APPI)', *Lexology*, 10 December 2020.

132. Office of the United States Trade Representative, *Joint Statement of the Trilateral Meeting of the Trade Ministers of Japan, the United States and the European Union*, 14 January 2020 (<https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2020/january/joint-statement-trilateral-meeting-trade-ministers-japan-united-states-and-european-union>); 'Push for Japan, Korea to Join Breakaway Trade Disputes Body', *Financial Review*, 16 June 2020. Japan did not ultimately follow through on the EU's initiative for an ad interim appellate body within the WTO.

133. 'Japan Boosts Incentives to Counter China's Factory Dominance', *Bloomberg News*, 3 February 2021.

134. Amitendu Palit, 'Resilient Supply Chain Initiative: A Political Driver to Revive Asian Regional Growth', *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs Online*, 30 January 2020.

135. Fukagawa, 'Post-Mega FTA Integration in Asia'.

2020, making China the largest recipient of global FDI.<sup>136</sup> Japanese businesses, much like the rest of the world, also continued to do business with and locate their supply chains in China. According to JETRO's regular business conditions survey, ten times more Japanese businesses are considering expanding their China business in the future (40 %) than are considering withdrawal (4 %) as of December 2020.<sup>137</sup>

One commercial domain where Japanese government and corporate manoeuvring is likely to profoundly affect strategic diversification is telecommunications. Beginning in 2017, the Japanese government began encouraging Japanese companies to develop 5G/6G infrastructure through spectrum allocation policies, tax incentives and credit facilities, and by extending the support of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) to cooperative R&D and test-bed facilities. While China's national champions, Huawei and ZTE, were increasingly excluded from Western and American allied 5G networks, national leaders publicly wondered what the affordable alternatives were.<sup>138</sup> Tokyo positioned itself as that alternative in late-2019, when it signalled its desire for Japan to «lead America and the EU on 5G development».<sup>139</sup> These ambitions have been greatly helped by the emergence of the Open Radio Access Network (O-RAN) concept and alliance. O-RAN implementation proceeds from open standards in data transmission and enhanced interfacing between different network devices and infrastructure components to prevent «lock-in» by singular infrastructure vendors or nations.<sup>140</sup> O-RAN does not require a single telecommunications vendor to provide an infrastructure «backbone», and allows governments to customize their networks with equipment from multiple vendors. In the long run, these «virtualized» networks may also be cheaper, and governments will not need their own national telecommunications champions to retain strategic autonomy. Governments will, however, need initial assistance from equipment «integrators». Japanese companies are well positioned to

136. UNCTAD, *Global Foreign Direct Investment Fell by 42% in 2020, Outlook Remains Weak*, 24 January 2021.

137. 'Survey on Business Conditions of Japanese-Affiliated Companies FY2020', *Japan External Trade Organization*, December 2020. According to a survey by the Japan External Trade Organization, more than 40% of Japanese companies considered expanding their business in China, while the percentage of businesses considering a withdrawal from that offshoring economy almost halved to less than 4%.

138. Kate Proctor, 'Johnson: Huawei Critics «Must Tell us What's the Alternative»', *The Guardian*, 14 January 2020.

139. 'Japan to Earmark ¥50 Billion for 6G Development', *Japan Times*, 10 December 2020; Ruling Bloc Approves Tax Reforms to Boost Tech Investment in Japan', *Japan Times*, 12 December 2019; 'Japan Approves Bill to Help Firms to Develop 5G, Drone Technologies', *Reuters*, 18 February 2020.

140. Mihoko Matsubara, 'Japan's 5G Approach Sets a Model for Global Cooperation', *Lawfare*, 14 September 2020; Yohei Hirose & Naoyuki Toyama, 'Chile Picks Japan's Trans-Pacific Cable Route in Snub to China', *Nikkei Asia*, 29 July 2020.

provide this assistance given their world-leading demonstrations of the ability to integrate O-RAN compliant equipment in early-2020. METI followed up on these developments in June 2020 when it announced a «Beyond 5G» support initiative and accompanying international strategy. In the second half of 2020 there was rapid consolidation of strategic 5G/6G partnerships between domestic Japanese companies and international allies.<sup>141</sup>

Domestic developments were augmented by international dynamics. The 2019 Prague 5G Security Conference saw 32 countries, NATO and the EU agree on security standards for 5G rollout (The Prague Proposals) while excluding Russian and Chinese representatives and companies. The United States placed Huawei on its entity list in May 2020 against the background of its Clean Path initiative to exclude «unreliable» vendors like Huawei and ZTE from any networks that connect through American diplomatic facilities.<sup>142</sup> Moreover, the formulation of the Open RAN Policy Coalition brought NEC, NTT, Rakuten Mobile, and Fujitsu together with Samsung, and large American and European telecommunications, computing, and systems technology companies to advocate for the O-RAN consortium. This firmly ensconced Japanese companies at the centre of geopolitical machinations over telecommunications infrastructure. In December 2020, the United States government lent its imprimatur to the Open RAN Policy Coalition when the Federal Communications Commission unanimously voted to support making O-RAN solutions eligible for federal funding. This was followed by Congress passing the Utilizing Strategic Allied (USA) Telecommunications Act to provide funding and assist with the deployment of O-RAN 5G network solutions throughout the United States and to remove «unreliable» equipment. Congress also passed the Multilateral Telecommunications Security Fund Act, establishing a fund to prevent the spread of equipment made in China overseas, specifically noting the Five Eyes countries and Japan as likely contributors.<sup>143</sup>

Beyond North America, Japanese providers like NEC, NTT, HAPS-Mobile (Softbank subsidiary), Fujitsu, and Rakuten have served as testers, integrators, and equipment providers for multi-vendor O-RAN systems in cooperation with the British government, BT and O2 in the United Kingdom, Madrid-based Telefonica, Deutsche Telekom in Germany, and Vodafone in the Netherlands. Japanese providers have also made high profile demonstrations of the O-RAN alliance's potential in France, Thailand, and

141. James L. Schoff & Rika Kamijima-Tsunoda, 'The United States and Japan Should Team Up on 5G', *Carnegie Commentary*, 23 July 2020; 'NTT to Take over Docomo, Aiming to Accelerate Research on 6G Tech', *Nikkei Asia*, 29 September 2020; 'NTT to Take Stake in NEC, as they Form Alliance to Develop 5G', *Asahi Shimbun*, 26 June 2020.

142. Hiroyuki Suzuki, 'Building Resilient Global Supply Chains'.

143. 'U.S. 5G Fund to Attract Japan, 'Five Eyes' against China', *The Japan News*, 1 February 2021.



India – with Japanese and Indian governments agreeing to the mutual enhancement of technology development and human resource provision.<sup>144</sup> It ought to be stressed, however, that, in the short-to-medium term, open radio access network-based 5G is still being tested and its deployment and adoption is substantially behind traditional «hardware»-centred suppliers, such as Huawei, Nokia and Ericsson, whose components are ready to be deployed. In short, the US-led O-RAN alliance was playing to the United States' strengths in software-based ICT solutions and is only likely to pose a serious challenge in the medium-term to Huawei and European telecommunication components providers.<sup>145</sup>

While virtualized Open-Radio Access Network solutions might be sufficient for domestic telecommunications, international traffic is still overwhelmingly transmitted by submarine cables. Japanese companies were at the centre of strategic machinations in this item as well in 2020. In October 2020, the US-Australia-Japan Trilateral Partnership for Infrastructure Investment in the Indo-Pacific agreed to its first project to fund a large-capacity submarine optical cable built by NEC to connect Oceania's Palau to Southeast Asia and the U.S. mainland.<sup>146</sup>

Japan's telecommunications aspirations and «middle power» cooperation also got a boost in 2020 due to the Chilean government's decision to snub Huawei Marine for the Transoceanic Cable.<sup>147</sup> Huawei had planned landing points in Shanghai and Hong Kong for the first submarine cable linking South American to Asia. However, with encouragement from United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Santiago eventually chose Tokyo's proposed route connecting Santiago and Auckland to a landing point at Sydney. This will in turn connect to a cable that links Sydney to Japan through Guam, completed in July 2020. Japanese government funding will support NEC to construct the Transoceanic Cable, with the two governments agreeing to a digital partnership that will assist Chile in fulfilling its ambition to become the Southern American digital hub.

The Transoceanic Cable and Japan's 5G/6G ambitions are also timely for New Zealand and Australia after the two nations effectively excluded Chinese telecommunications vendors from their 5G networks in 2018.<sup>148</sup> Indeed, Australia and Japan agreed to cooperate in the 5G field in mid-July, essentially closing the Quad loop on 5G cooperation, and

144. 'NEC to Support 5G Networks in UK as Alternative to Huawei', *Nikkei Asia*, 26 October 2020; Japan to Help India with 5G to Counter China's Growing Influence', *Nikkei Asia*, 29 November 2020.

145. 'How the Biden Administration will handle high-tech', Asia Times webinar with Dr. Robert Atkinson and RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery, 10 December 2020 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kKq-sTBKFM>).

146. Yohei Hirose, 'Japan, Us and Australia to Finance Undersea Cable for Palau', *Nikkei Asia*, 28 October 2020.

147. Mihoko Matsubara, 'Japan's 5G Approach'.

148. Corey Wallace, 'Australia and Aotearoa'.

NEC announced its plans in August to enter the Australian 5G market as a replacement for Huawei. NEC also hired a recently retired top-ranked Australian telecommunications official as its chairman to lead its penetration strategy in Australia.<sup>149</sup>

The Transoceanic Cable plan is not the first instance of proactive middle power diplomacy involving Japan, Australia and New Zealand. The three countries came together to forge the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) after the withdrawal of the United States from the original Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and continued in 2020 to promote the agreement with «likeminded» countries such as Thailand, Colombia, Switzerland, South Korea (ROK), Philippines, Indonesia, and the UK (who would in early 2021 apply for membership). Japan, Australia, and New Zealand also pushed for a higher quality version of the ASEAN-centred Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreed upon in late-2020, with Japan playing an important role as an «interlocutor for [RCEP] negotiating members».<sup>150</sup>

New Zealand and Australia, while announcing their Pacific Reset and Pacific Step-up policies in partial response to concerns over China's increasing influence in the Pacific Islands region, encouraged Japan to take up a greater infrastructure, aid, and even military role in the region. Finally, inevitably described as a «Quad Plus» initiative, New Zealand, Australia, and Japan joined Vietnam, South Korea, India, and the United States to form the Economic Prosperity Network (EPN). The EPN held weekly meetings throughout 2020 just below the ministerial level to discuss supply chain resilience and trade in a post-pandemic world.<sup>151</sup>

### 7. Military balancing in 2020: the QUAD and beyond

Japan continued to enhance Quadrilateral Security Dialogue («Quad») activity in 2020. Japan and India finalized an Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) agreement in September just as Abe left office. This will have particular strategic significance as it allows the Indian military to access Japan's Djibouti base near key Middle East sea lanes and provides the SDF access to major Indian bases in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal, which sit astride western approaches to the Malacca Strait. Then, in October, the second ever ministerial-level Quad meeting took place in Tokyo ahead of Australia's November return to the

149. 'NEC Aims to Enter Australia's 5G Market in 2021', *Japan Times*, 3 August 2020; 'NEC Pitches Itself as Huawei Replacement in 5G Rollout', *Australian Financial Review*, 22 June 2020.

150. Saori Katada, 'RCEP is Concluded and the Middle Powers Carry the Torch', *Australian Outlook*, 18 February 2021.

151. Corey Wallace, 'Australia and Aotearoa'.

Malabar Naval Exercises and the first four-member Quad military exercise in 13 years.<sup>152</sup> The Quad's growing momentum was facilitated by mounting tensions between its four members and China throughout 2020, especially between India and China.

Further tightening of the Australia-Japan security relationship was of particularly profound significance in 2020. The completion of a reciprocal access agreement (RAA) that will govern the presence of their respective militaries in each other's territory represents Japan's first such post-war agreement with a singular non-allied nation and the first since the 1960 Status of Forces Agreement with the United States. Japan also joined Australia and the United States in multiple naval exercises in the US Navy's 7th Fleet's area of operations, including the South China Sea.<sup>153</sup> After this exercise, defence minister Kishi Nobuo announced that Japan would look at permitting the SDF to provide «asset protection» to Australian military presence in East Asia. It is worth stressing that only the United States had hitherto benefited from the authorisation of such missions under Japan's PSL.

The precedents established by these activities and new agreements are not only important in a Quad context but could form the foundation for Japan to play a greater role in military cross-bracing amongst middle and regional power partners present in the Indo-Pacific, given mutual concerns about both PRC activity and American reliability and commitment to Indo-Pacific stability. While the Australia-Japan relationship is the most advanced, Japan continued to pursue an acceleration of strategic cooperation with non-Quad members in 2020. This accelerated program included maritime and amphibious military training exercises that involved non-Quad Indo-Pacific democracies such as Canada and New Zealand in Anti-Submarine Warfare exercises, as well as new defence equipment agreements, and equipment sales to ASEAN nations to enhance their maritime domain awareness.

Despite COVID-19, the UK, Australia, NZ, Canada, and France continued to operate out of the United States' pivotal Kadena Air Base to perform aerial and maritime monitoring of UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea (DPRK). To match words with deeds in their strategic partnership, Europe and Japan converged on hard and soft security cooperation. While European navies steadily engaged in the Indo-Pacific region, commitments by the UK, France and Germany to increase their military presence were welcomed by Japan (and the US) in 2020.<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, the EU and the development agencies of major EU member states inaugurated a four-year «Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia» project. It

152. Junnosuke Kobara, «Quad» Nations Flaunt Stronger Ties with First Drill in 13 Years', *Nikkei Asia*, 7 November 2020.

153. Euan Graham & Yuka Koshino, 'Australia and Japan Inch Closer towards Landmark Defense Agreement', *IJSS Analysis*, 17 December 2020.

154. Hiroyuki Akita, 'European Navies Hold Stronger China Deterrent than First Appears', *Nikkei Asia*, 5 March 2021.

aimed to promote policy dialogue, confidence building, and capacity building with partners such as India, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Vietnam, in the fields of maritime and cyber security, counter-terrorism, and training in peacekeeping.<sup>155</sup>

## 8. Alliance developments

The alliance with the United States was enhanced in two notable ways in 2020. The first reflected Japan's increased recent focus on enhancing multi-domain warfare capabilities with space, cyber and electromagnetic spectrum technologies. Space cooperation took a big leap forward in particular. Half a year after the creation of the United States Space Force (USSF), the Japanese government established the Space Operations Squadron (SOS) as a specialized space domain unit within the Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) in May. Then in June, the United States released its Defense Space Strategy and Japan adopted a new *Basic Plan on Space Policy*. The two governments agreed to expand space cooperation in a number of civilian and military space and technology areas, including the all-important space situational awareness (SSA). The SOS soon signed an MOU for cooperation with the United States Space Force (USSF). The allies later concluded an agreement to strengthen their space-monitoring capabilities through mutual use of their satellites. Part of it was Japan's decision to mount two United States optical sensors to enhance Space Domain Awareness on Japan's Michibiki Quasi-Zenith (QZ) satellites to be launched from Japan's Tanegashima Space Centre. The QZ satellites have significant future commercial and civilian applications by improving on the United States' GPS system in terms of both coverage and precision for Japan and the Western Pacific. However, the fused civilian-military strategic aspects of space systems are also important as exemplified by the United States and its allies' increasingly competition with the PRC's «Space Silk Road» in the provision of commercial space services. On the launch of the SOS, the Japanese government stated forthrightly its need to protect commercial and military space assets from new anti-satellite weapons and the need to build «the capability to disrupt the C4I (command, control, communication, computer, and intelligence) of opponents with combined use of the electromagnetic domain».<sup>156</sup>

155. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ), *Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia*, January 2020 (<https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/87412.html>).

156. Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission', *USCC Website*, November 2019, p. 359 (<https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2019-11/2019%20Annual%20Report%20to%20Congress.pdf>); 'Special Feature: Launch of the Space Operations Squadron', *Japan Defense Focus*, No. 125, July 2020 (<https://www.mod.go.jp/e/jdf/no125/specialfeature.html>).

A second positive development for the alliance was the Japanese government welcoming significant involvement of American companies in its ¥ 5 trillion (ca. US\$ 48 billion) F-3 project to develop 90 fighters to replace Japan's F-2 and the older F-15Js from 2035. This was the first Japanese-led fighter initiative since the Mitsubishi Heavy Industries (MHI) F-1 in the 1970s. Tokyo nevertheless anticipated enhanced alliance integration through deepened industrial and technological cooperation and interoperability. Tokyo also envisioned the development of a platform that enhances resilience to the networking-disrupting electronic warfare capabilities deployed by China to counter the United States and Japan's ability to operate within the 1st Island Chain. Project-lead Mitsubishi Heavy Industries would engage Lockheed Martin for systems integration, stealth-and-airframe/mobility enhancements, and, in all likelihood, Northrop Grumman for sensors and data-linking. In addition to using performance-enhancing materials developed by MHI and IHI that lighten the airframe and engine, the F-3 will include new systems such as an Electromagnetic Warfare-resilient fly-by-optics control system, a self-repairing flight control capability, a VR helmet, and the use of drones as «loyal wingmen» for forward sensing and combat purposes.<sup>157</sup> Various new technologies could thus be improved through co-operation and plausibly taken up into a future United States 6<sup>th</sup> generation fighter, allowing development costs to be reduced.

A third development was more mixed in symbolism. As the United States and Japan welcomed the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Mutual Security Treaty in January, Japan's inability to take part in the «collective» contribution to United States' pressure on Iran by joining an international coalition to protect ships that pass through the Strait of Hormuz highlighted the continued restraints on Japan's ability to contribute to the alliance. The government dispatched the *Takanami* destroyer and two P-3C surveillance craft in February to the Middle East, but operations were limited to independent «research and study», the use of weapons restricted to the protection of Japan-related ships, and the MSDF prohibited from operating in the critical Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf areas, traversed by ships carrying 80% of Japan's crude oil imports, which are there potentially at maximum risk.<sup>158</sup> While the United States welcomed Japan's move, President Trump and the United States Ambassador in Tokyo both noted their expectations of greater alliance contributions ahead of Host Nation Support negotiations

157. Sebastian Roblin, 'Japan Plans to Spend \$48 Billion To Field F-X Stealth Fighters By 2035 That Would Outperform F-35 And Chinese Fighters', *Forbes Online*, 15 December 2020.

158. Giulio Pugliese & Sebastian Maslow, 'Japan 2019', pp. 141-45; Corey Wallace, 'The End of the Golden Weather for Abe's Diplomacy?', *Australian Outlook*, 1 August 2020.

scheduled for 2020.<sup>159</sup> With Trump's re-election still a realistic possibility at the time, Japan's leaders could not but be anxious about American perceptions of Japan's commitment to the alliance and what was to come.

### 9. Domestic security politics

COVID-19 ultimately obscured discussions of security matters in Japan in the first half of 2020. This changed with Minister of Defence Kōno Tarō's abrupt June cancellation of the Aegis Ashore midcourse ballistic missile defence (BMD) system. Several developments foreshadowed cancellation, however. In Akita Prefecture, existing reservations over the health effects of emplacing Aegis Ashore's AN/SPY 7 radar next to a residential area were transformed into resistance after mid-2019 revelations that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) had miscalculated elevation angles used to rule out alternative Tohoku candidate sites. A MOD official falling asleep at a June 2019 meeting dedicated to assuaging Akita residents' safety concerns worsened matters. With the prefectural governor and 60% of all Akita residents opposing Aegis Ashore's deployment, the LDP lost Akita Prefecture's sole single member district seat in the July 2019 House of Councillors election, and Akita was withdrawn as a candidate site in May 2020.<sup>160</sup> The MOD then informed Kōno of problems near Southwestern Japan's Yamaguchi Prefecture candidate site, where modifications to prevent interceptor boosters landing in a residential area would add ten years to deployment time and a further ¥ 200 billion to already ballooning life-cycle costs.<sup>161</sup>

With North Korea's recent missile testing programme reminding the Japanese government that Aegis Ashore was not optimised for the interception of ballistic missiles with lofted, depressed, or boost-glide trajectories in addition to cruise missiles, Kōno convinced Prime Minister Abe to cancel the whole programme, burnishing his own credentials as a decisive and fiscally sensitive reformer in the process. This cancellation, however, startled an American defence establishment that had grown used to a more accommodating Tokyo, which, following the Abe administrations support

159. Taketsugu Sato, 'U.S. Diplomat Confident that U.S., Japan Will Contribute More to Alliance', *Asahi Shimbun*, 31 January 2020; 'Statement from the President on the 60th Anniversary of the United States-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security', *White House Website*, 18 January 2020 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200119023009/https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-60th-anniversary-united-states-japan-treaty-mutual-cooperation-security>).

160. '陸上イージス、秋田市配備を断念 県内で再選定へー防衛省' (Abandoning Akita City Deployment of Land-based Aegis, Re-selection within Prefecture: MOD), *Jiji Tsūshin*, 6 May 2020.

161. Isabel Reynolds & Emi Nobuhito, 'Abe's Plan for U.S. Aegis Ashore Missile Shield Rattles Akita Residents', *Japan Times*, 10 September 2019.

for the revision of the Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defence Cooperation and the passage of the PSL, had become open to greater operational integration and expensive purchases of American military equipment. Cancellation also bifurcated domestic security debate into two streams: one focused on a BMD replacement as an alliance contribution, and another on overseas territorial strike roles for the SDF as a hedge against American abandonment.

Regarding BMD, the Japan government's selection of Lockheed Martin's AN/SPY 7 radar system as the core of Aegis Ashore in 2017 was particularly significant for alliance integration. Using active electronically scanned arrays (AESA) more resistant to jamming and difficult to detect, SPY-7 promised greater precision and three times more coverage than the passive phased array AN/SPY-1D radars on Aegis-equipped MSDF and US Navy destroyers on BMD duty in the Western Pacific. The deployment of SPY-7 and Aegis Ashore interceptor batteries to land-based locations in Akita and Yamaguchi would enhance Japan's integration into the United States' regional BMD network, free up the MSDF and US Navy from ballistic missile defence duties, and potentially enable Japan to make a genuine «collective self-defence» contribution to protecting Guam or Hawaii, while also mollifying Trump administration demands for increased Foreign Military Sales (FMS) purchases by allies.

Balancing alliance and domestic demands, Tokyo eventually settled on a five-year plan to build two destroyers modified to house the SPY-7. While it adds flexibility about radar and interceptor battery placement and concealment, «Aegis Afloat» will not be a true replacement for Aegis Ashore. It will also eventually cost more in terms of the maintenance and manpower required to operate the vessels.<sup>162</sup> Space and power generation limitations will likely result in decreased radar sensitivity compared to a ground-based system, and will prevent future performance enhancements of this modular system. Maritime weather conditions and the upkeep requirements for the vessels also make the promise of 24/7 radar coverage of potential ballistic missile threats impossible to realise. Instead of reducing the need for two MSDF destroyers to be out at sea on BMD duty, «Aegis Afloat» will enhance the MSDF need to recruit and retain enlarged crews for its existing fleet and missions. This was demonstrated immediately by the MSDF proposing to assign 500 Ground Self-Defence Force troops to crew the new ships.<sup>163</sup>

Aegis Ashore's cancellation temporarily breathed new life into Japan's perennial policy debate over acquisition of a strike capability against

162. Reito Kaneko, 'Japan to Build 2 New Aegis Ships as Alternative to Land-Based System', *Kyodo News*, 9 December 2020. A past Ministry of Defence analysis showed that 30-year life cycle costs for a two-ship-based option would be closer to ¥ 700 billion rather than the MOD's quoted ¥ 480 to ¥ 500 billion.

163. Yukio Tajima, 'Japan Aims to Recruit 500 New Crew for Future Aegis Ships', *Nikkei Asia*, 14 November 2020.

military bases in foreign territory. Increasing awareness of BMD costs and effectiveness limitations, diffidence towards President Trump's enthusiasm for foreign arms sales, and doubts about Japan's «excessive dependence on the U.S. for its defense» catalysed by uncertainties about COVID-19's geopolitical implications moved the LDP to establish a task force to re-evaluate Japan's missile defence options in July.<sup>164</sup> When the task force submitted its proposals to Prime Minister Abe in August, it highlighted the need for «new measures that will heighten deterrence, including possession of the capability of preventing ballistic missile launches even from within enemy territory». This policy was called «missile interdiction», watering down the previous terminology, «enemy base strike».<sup>165</sup> Abe immediately convened a meeting of the NSC to consider the changes, promising to «“move ahead in setting a new direction and swiftly implement” the change».<sup>166</sup>

Despite this promise, authorisation of foreign territory strike missions under the guise of missile interdiction was eventually rejected. Defence analysts and some former defence ministers cautioned that the type of missile threat North Korea (and China) posed in 2020 was very different from even five years before, given their enhanced launcher mobility and deception practices. To eliminate enemy missile positions, Japan's recent acquisition and development of long-range «stand-off» weapons would need to be accompanied by the SDF acquiring familiarity with even more expensive and costly-to-maintain detection and support platforms operating close to heavily contested DPRK (or Chinese) territory.<sup>167</sup> Even with United States (and unlikely) ROK help, Japanese experts doubted the plausibility of pre-empting a missile attack and questioned the effectiveness of hunting down mobile launch platforms after an initial saturation

164. Yukio Tajima, 'Japan Must Rethink Excessive Reliance on US Security, Says Expert', *Nikkei Asia*, 7 July 2020; '政府・自民にトマホーク配備論 中朝のミサイル攻撃抑止に期待' (Government, LDP Debate Tomahawk Deployment, Anticipating Deterrent against PRC/DPRK Missile Attack), *Sankei Shimbun*, 27 July 2020; Mori Eisuke, '日本のミサイル防衛はキーパーだけでサッカーするようなもの: 中谷元・元防衛相に聞く' (Japan's Missile Defence is Like Playing Soccer with Just the Keeper: Interview with Former Defence Minister Nakatani Gen), *Nikkei Business*, 24 August 2020.

165. '自民、ミサイル防衛の提言了承 「相手領域内で阻止」' (Liberal Democratic Party Accepts Missile Defence Proposals for «Interdiction Inside Foreign Territory»), *Nikkei Shimbun*, 4 August 2020.

166. 'Abe Pushes «New Direction» in Defensive Policy: 1st Strike Option', *Asahi Shimbun*, 5 August 2020.

167. Takahashi Kousuke, '日本の敵基地攻撃能力保有、7つの課題' (7 Challenges for Japan's Possession of Enemy Base Attack Capability), *Yahoo News*, 21 June 2020; '敵基地攻撃「論理の飛躍」 政府の検討批判一石破氏' (Ishiba Calls Enemy Base Attack 'Leap of Logic', Criticizes Government Review), *Jiji Tsūshin*, 26 June 2020; Jeffrey Hornung, 'Three Questions Japan Must Answer as It Seeks Missile Strike Options', *Nikkei Asia*, 13 August 2020.



attack. In their evaluation, such an attempt was unlikely to generate much more than damage mitigation or enemy firing-rate disruption effects.<sup>168</sup>

Foreign experts questioned the cost-benefit calculations of Tokyo concerning stand-off weapons for purposes other than maritime domain denial and their contribution to alliance burden sharing. They noted the lack of Japanese investment into affordable, but symbolically prosaic, lower technology adaptations, which would enhance the resilience of the US-Japan alliance. Likewise, they assessed long-standing ASDF and MSDF deficiencies in ISR capabilities, air/sea lift, and logistical support as more urgent needs for a Tokyo wanting to add value to American operations during a regional conflict.<sup>169</sup> These conventional weapons are also unlikely to generate the expected strategic and deterrent effects for retaliation, punishment, and counterforce missions as they lack destructive and penetrative power. On top of this, the quantities Japan could acquire will be limited by other expensive military acquisitions and fiscal restraints. Most problematically, the likely targets for more aggressive uses of these weapons are nuclear-armed authoritarian states that share, and nurture, historical antagonism towards Japan due to its brutal imperial legacy. Ultimately, carrying out «missile interdiction» would be unwise without a solid commitment from Washington, which might, however, be undermined by incessant Japan's doubts about the alliance with the United States.

Commentators increasingly saw this missile interdiction agenda as Abe's attempt to leave a stronger diplomacy and security focused legacy and as compensation for his failures on «revising the pacifist Constitution, regaining sovereignty of some or all of the Northern Territories from Russia and resolving the thorny problem of Japanese nationals abducted by North Korea».<sup>170</sup> As Abe's political authority deteriorated, criticism of the rationale for missile interdiction gained traction. Coalition partner Komeito – already chastened by stakeholder criticism over its close cooperation with LDP hawks during the Abe era – exerted itself to protect Japan's *senshu bōei*

168. Grant Newsham, 'Abe's Aegis Ashore Cancellation Doesn't Add Up', *Asia Times*, 30 June 2020; Ken Jimbo, 'ポスト・イージスアショアの防衛構想: 中国との「戦略的競争」を焦点に' (Post-Aegis Ashore Defense Initiative: Focusing on 'Strategic Competition' with China), *Canon Institute for Global Studies Website*, 14 July 2020 ([https://cigs.canon/article/20200714\\_6558.html](https://cigs.canon/article/20200714_6558.html)); Mori Eisuke, '敵基地攻撃能力で朝鮮半島有事の損害を限定' (Limiting the Damage During a Korean Peninsula Contingency through Base Attack Capability), *Nikkei Business*, 13 August 2020.

169. Eric Heginbotham & Richard J. Samuels, 'Active Denial: Redesigning Japan's Response to China's Military Challenge', *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 4, 2018, pp.128-169; 'A New Military Strategy for Japan', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 July 2018; Jeffrey Hornung, 'Japan's Potential Contributions in an East China Sea Contingency', *RAND Research Report*, 2020; '南西諸島防衛、空港足りぬ' (Nansei Islands Defence, Airport Shortage), *Sankei Shimbun*, 22 August 2020; Jeffrey Hornung, 'Is Japan's Interest in Strike Capabilities a Good Idea?', *War on the Rocks*, 17 July 2020.

170. 'Abe Pushes 'New Direction' in Defensive Policy'.

or «defensive defence» policy. In September, Abe, in a public statement, made no specific mention of the SDF being able to strike missile positions in enemy territory, only going as far as to note «there is a need to heighten deterrence to further reduce the possibility of an attack on Japan».<sup>171</sup> Even within the LDP, Abe's statement did not get the approval of the relevant policy body, and the statement was generally ignored by newspaper editorial boards.<sup>172</sup> In December 2020, the debate was once again quietly shelved, just as the government announced its most anaemic increase (0.5%) in defence spending for almost a decade. This limited increase occurred despite the PRC's 6.6% 2020 increase in defence spending and awareness about the future burdens coming from Aegis Afloat and F-3 development.

Like commitment to revising Article 9 of the constitution, rolling back *senshu bōei*, retains totemic symbolism for many revisionist conservative politicians, looking to transcend the «post-war regime».<sup>173</sup> However, *senshu bōei* is a symbolic policy stance rather than a strategic doctrine. The focus on it by both its defenders and assailants ultimately obscures needed debates about the strategic rationale for ensuring Japan's security and prioritization of defence options in the constrained context of a limited defence budget. And, as COVID-19 demonstrated all too painfully in 2020, geopolitical insecurity may not necessarily be the most pressing security problem. The government does not seem to have learned this lesson, however, despite the major political consequences it had. When the government tasked a team in the NSS to craft Japan's pandemic response on April 1, it was tacked on to a new unit focusing on economic security, making it seem like a makeshift and temporary adaptation.<sup>174</sup> Similarly, there has been a surprising lack of progress on instituting a Japanese disease control and prevention centre despite support from within the LDP, Komeito, the Science Council of Japan, and Japan Medical Science Federation for an independent, expert-focused agency.<sup>175</sup> As globalization is only being reworked rather than being rewound in response to recent political and pandemic-related instability,

171. 'Abe in One of Last Policy Steps Calls for New Defense Policy Initiative', *Asahi Shimbun*, 12 September 2020.

172. Kuni Miyake, 'Abe's Last National Security Legacy for Suga to Complete', *Japan Times*, 15 September 2020.

173. Shogo Suzuki & Corey Wallace, 'Explaining Japan's Response to Geopolitical Vulnerability', *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 4, 2018, pp. 711-734; Shelia Smith, *Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019, p.172.

174. 'Japan Sets up NSC Team to Meet Coronavirus, Tech Challenges', *Mainichi Shimbun*, 1 April 2020; 'Japan National Security Secretariat to Form Economic Division', *Nippon.com*, 18 September 2020.

175. Rieko Miki, 'Slow Pandemic Response Inspires Japan to Build Own CDC', *Nikkei Asia*, 24 June 2020; '科学的な政策提言を行う常設組織を要望:日本医学会連合' (Japan Medical Science Federation: Appeal for Permanent Organisation to Provide Scientific Policy Recommendations), *Mainichi Shimbun*, 16 January 2021.

there is no guarantee that COVID-19 will be the most serious pandemic facing Japan in the years ahead. The safety and strategic implications of non-traditional security threats require greater institutional attention from the Japanese government than has been the case up to the end of 2020.

## 10. *Conclusion*

Up until 2020, increased strategic uncertainty in Japan's geopolitical environment and the unpredictability of international events experienced during the Abe administration appeared to be balanced out by Prime Minister Abe introducing greater predictability to Tokyo's domestic, foreign, and security policies and imposing on to national politics a rare sense of stability. With the Olympics as the backdrop, 2020 was supposed to serve as a symbolic if not substantive turning point for consolidating consensus around Tokyo's long-standing national challenges, as Abe looked towards building his political legacy. The developments of 2020 surveyed in this article, however, mean that Japan's political elite entered 2021 with more questions than ever to answer in the pursuit of national wellbeing. Abe's departure from the premiership and Japan's ongoing battle with COVID-19 left a strategic vacuum domestically. Political actors from within the LDP, a consolidated national opposition, and newly resurgent local and national-level populist politicians will seek to occupy it. At the same time, local populist politicians gain little national traction and the opposition – a collection of small parties with different agendas – has hardly consolidated. More likely, rising stars in the LDP will be able to consolidate and reinvigorate it to face old and new challenges. Japan's attempts to balance relations between China and the United States became even more perilous as both nations signalled their acceptance of a new era of strategic competition and communicated their resolve to shape international relations more aggressively. While Japan's attempts to diversify its «Indo-Pacific» partnerships appeared to bear fruit, questions remained about how much and how quickly such outreach would generate alternative sources of strategic autonomy. Japan's leaders – whoever they might be – clearly face more dynamic and testing domestic and international environments in the years ahead.