

Continuity and Change in Japan's Security Policy: Challenges, Constraints, and Options (2)

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- Table of Contents Introduction
- 1 Continuities and Changes in Japan's Security Policy
 - (1) Ending the Occupation and Start of the Cold War
 - (2) Korean War and the Peace Treaty
 - (3) Kishi Administration and Revision of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty
 - (4) 1960s: Japan-U.S. Joint Communique and Reversion of Okinawa
 - (5) 1970s: First Japan-U.S. Guidelines for Defense Cooperation
 - (6) 1980s: Japan-U.S. Alliance and the End of the Cold War
 - (7) 1990s: Post-Cold War Adjustments
 - (8) 2000s: Out-of-Area Cooperation: Afghanistan and Iraq
 - (9) Period of the Democratic Party of Japan (2009-12)
 - (10) Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Second Period (2012-2020)
 - (11) Overview of Japan's Security Policy (end of Part 1)
- 2 Major Constraints on Japan's Security Policy (beginning of Part 2)
 - (1) Constitution and Pacifism
 - (2) Fiscal Constraints and Demographic Change
 - (3) History Issues
- 3 Policy Implications
 - (1) Addressing History Issues
 - (2) Strengthening Diplomacy with Neighboring Countries: South Korea, China
- Conclusion

2 Major Constraints on Japan's Security Policy

Japan, like other ordinary countries, has made pragmatic adjustments to “the trend of time” and “the given environment” to maintain its own security and achieve its prosperity since the end of World War II. Now Japan is facing unprecedented security challenges: the rapidly changing security environment resulting from the intensification of the U.S.-China strategic competition, and security concerns about China, North Korea, and Russia. Most of the Japanese feel that current relations between Japan and each of the neighboring countries (China, Russia, North Korea, South Korea) are not good, and the security environment in

East Asia has gotten increasingly worse. Japan's basic approach in enhancing the effectiveness of its security policy has not been changed for the last 70 years and will be expected to be the same in the near future: to strengthen the credibility of Japan-U.S. Alliance, to build up its own defense capabilities, and to develop security partnerships with like-minded countries. Japan, however, has been facing persistent constraints on its formulation and implementation of security policy: constitution and pacifism; fiscal constraints and demographic change; and diplomatic obstacles from historical issues.

(1) Constitution and Pacifism

Pacifism has been a sacred tenet of Japan's national identity since the end of World War II. Japan's postwar pacifism has been rooted in its constitution and influenced postwar strategic culture in which people have not had to face traditional security needs squarely and independently, and even the discussion of a Japanese military role has become almost taboo. Japan has kept a pacifist constitution, which states, in Article 9, "Japanese people forever renounces war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes," and for that purpose, "land, sea, and air force, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained." Japan, however, has long interpreted the article to allow for self-defense purposes since 1954, and it has more than 225,000 active duty troops and advanced armaments like naval destroyers equipped with sophisticated missile defense and fighter jets. Most Japanese do not and never have rejected the use of force to protect their country; what they have resisted is the unbridled use of force by Japan itself.

Throughout the postwar era, national security has been the most divisive issue in Japanese domestic politics. Because of its devastating defeat, many Japanese people have a strong aversion to war. Yutaka Kawashima, former vice foreign minister of Japan, wrote that there have been clashing positions between those who believe that the SDF and the U.S. alliance serve as a deterrence and are essential for Japan's security, and those who believe that the very notion of deterrence is a dangerous ploy to entangle Japan in another war.

Especially, during the Cold War era, the fear that Japan might inadvertently be entangled in hostilities was widely expressed. Perhaps the hidden assumption of non-believers of deterrence was that unless Japan initiates war and avoids entanglement, the country will be able to enjoy long lasting peace, since history shows that Japan has started most of the wars that it has been. He added that this perception is in marked contrast to the lessons of history learned by the Europeans, who harbor vivid memories of centuries of mutual invasions.¹⁾

While Japan has been facing a complex security landscape in the region since the end of the Cold War, the Socialist Party of Japan finally endorsed the SDF and the Japan-U.S. Security arrangements. Japanese government has moved to become more "normal," in the sense of shedding limitations on military activities. The Japanese public has gradually changed from its pacifist stance to be more accepting of a more forward-leaning defense posture. This adjustment, however, has been largely incremental, rather than fundamental. Since 1992, Japan has allowed the SDF to participate in non-combat roles overseas in the U.N. peacekeeping operations (PKO), including U.S.-led coalition in Iraq. The 2015 security legislation adjusts the SDF rules of engagement to allow more proactive missions and to

participate in non-U.N. PKOs in a similar capacity.

Observers continue to caution that there is still deep-seated reluctance among the public to shift away from the tenet of “peace constitution.” The public fears that without restrictions on the military’s capabilities and missions, Japan would face heightened tensions with neighboring countries and could find itself embroiled in foreign wars. There is also the lingering concern that political leaders might lose control over the military, raising the specter of a return to the militaristic policies of the 1930s.²⁾ The SDF’s direct participation in combat operations is considered unconstitutional unless there is a threat to Japan’s existence. The Cabinet Office polls showed that most of the Japanese think that the SDF’s primary role is disaster relief (2015: 81.9%, 2018: 41.7%).³⁾

A 2015 Pew Research Center poll found that among the Japanese, there is little desire for their country to play a greater role in the region’s security. Just over two-thirds (68%) want Japan to limit its military activity. Only 23% want the country to play a more active role.⁴⁾ Even though they have grown anxious about the threats from outside, the Japanese people, as citizens of the only country to have experienced the horror of a nuclear bomb, have remained steadfastly committed to the war-renouncing Article 9 of the Constitution. Protests have long continued in front of American bases in Okinawa to object to the U.S. military presence, even though about 80% of Cabinet Office poll respondents expressed support for the alliance with the United States (2015: 82.9%, 2018: 77.5%).⁵⁾ The passage of the 2015 security legislation generated intense opposition, both in the Diet and among the general public. The critics included the majority of constitution scholars; nearly 10 thousand people, including scholars, artists, and a Nobel laureate, signed a petition opposing the new legislation, and tens of thousands of people participated in demonstrations. Polls showed voters oppose the legislations by a two-to-one margin.⁶⁾ They criticized the laws as unconstitutional and claimed that they risked pulling Japan into U.S.-led wars overseas. A survey by *Kyodo News* showed 58.4% opposed Japan’s December 2019 decision to dispatch a warship and patrol planes to the Middle East to help protect ships bringing good to Japan.⁷⁾ On the occasion of 5th anniversary of passage of the security legislation, a leading newspaper criticized in an editorial that the legislation is the most prominent example of how the Abe administration undermined the rule of law during its seven years and eight months in power, sharply expanded the discretion of the government with regard to overseas operations by the SDF, and made it all the more important for the Diet to monitor SDF activities outside Japan closely and effectively.⁸⁾

Constitution Revision

The constitution has never been revised since it went into effect in 1947, nor has a bid been made to initiate a formal amendment process, partly because of the high hurdle on proposing an amendment in parliament before it can be put to a referendum. To revise the constitution would require at least two-thirds approval in both Houses of Parliament followed by a simple majority in a national referendum.

A March 2017 poll by *Kyodo News* showed that 75% of respondents recognized the role of Article 9 has played in Japan’s pacifism, saying the clause has enabled Japan to stay away from using force overseas since the end of World War II. 51 percent of respondents were

against any constitutional amendments under the Abe administration, compared with 45 percent in favor.⁹⁾ The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has long put the revision of the constitution on the list of policy goals from its start in 1955. Former Prime Minister Abe had consistently advocated for revision as a way of “escaping the postwar” constraints on Japan’s autonomy. In his writings during his time out of office, Abe unabashedly argued that Japanese themselves did not author the document, and its origins as a product of the U.S. occupation compromises its ability to represent Japan’s contemporary identity.¹⁰⁾ After deciding July 2014 reinterpretation of Article 9 of the constitution, in May 2017, Abe called for clarity about legal status of the Self Defense Forces (SDF), arguing that the lack of a reference to the SDF in the constitution leaves room for them to be called “unconstitutional” and it makes it “irresponsible” to ask them to risk their lives to defend Japan against North Korea and other security threats. He came up with his Article 9 revision proposal, which would create a new “Article 9-2” section to the effect that the SDF shall be maintained. He asserted that the current restrictions imposed on SDF activities by Article 9 will remain because the original two paragraphs will be left intact. But Abe’s idea drew a negative response from 52.7% of respondents with only 35.3% percent in favor in a poll.¹¹⁾ The ruling Liberal Democratic Party made it public in March 2018 that they will work toward the direction of seeking a revision in line with Abe’s idea, but opposition parties argued that the pacifism embedded in the original text would likely be weakened through the newly added language and questioned the need to such an amendment just to affirm the status quo.¹²⁾ Public opinion in Japan is split over whether to revise the constitution in general, with 2018 polls indicating 41%-45% of Japanese adults support revision. According to *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)* analysis of polling trends, “the Japanese people are in no hurry to revise their constitution.”¹³⁾

(2) Fiscal Constraints and Demographic Change

Defense Budget

The fact that Japan fixed the level of defense budget at “1% of the gross national product(GNP) or less,” instead of assessing the threats from outside and properly determining it according to the division of roles and responsibilities between Japan and its ally, the United States, placed certain limitations on building its own defense capability and the Japan-U.S. security arrangement. In this manner, Japan managed its defense expenditure as a percentage of GDP at a level lower than those of more than 100 other countries¹⁴⁾ In 1987, Henry Kissinger saw Tokyo’ decision to break the ceiling of one percent of GNP for defense spending, which had been adopted as its policy by Prime Minister Takeo Miki back in 1976, as making it “inevitable that Japan will emerge as a major military power in the not-too-distant future.” But Japan’s defense budget climbed to only 1.004 percent of GNP that year, and it fell below the threshold again the following year.¹⁵⁾

Today, the ceiling is no longer official government policy, but, as a political marker, Japanese government has kept its defense spending at or slightly below one percent of GDP.

During the 2000s, the defense budget has shrunk in each of the last 11 years. Since Prime Minister Abe took office again in December 2012, the trend has stopped, but, due to Japan’s fiscal problems, the increase in military spending has been modest and slightly more than

1% annually in recent years. Defense accounts for a little more than 5% of the government's total budget. What the Abe administration had tried to do was informally to advertise Japan's defense spending by NATO standards. By incorporating the Japanese Coast Guard budget and other line items seen on Japan's official defense accounting, the Japanese government has argued that Japan is spending more like 1.1 to 1.3 percent of its GDP on defense. In the burden-sharing argument, however, critics would say that the NATO standard is 2 percent, so Japan still has a way to go.¹⁶ FY 2020's defense spending reached 5.31 trillion yen and accounted for 5.2% of the government's budget. The 2019-2023 Midterm Defense Program calls for total spending of 27.5 trillion yen for five years through FY 2023, excluding expenses associated with U.S. forces in Japan. Average annual growth is targeted at a little over 1%, up from 0.8% during the preceding five years.

Some Japanese and U.S. politicians and pundits argue that it will become necessary to reconsider the appropriateness of continuing to link the size of the Japanese defense expenditures to an economic index (GDP) in light of the continuing expansion of China's military expenditures. Unless China's economy collapses, its growth, and commensurate growth in China's defense spending is going to present serious challenges for Japan. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), while China was the second largest military spender (\$261 billion, 1.9% of GDP) in the world in 2019, an 85% increase compared with 2010, Japan ranked the 9th (\$47.6 billion, 0.9% of GDP), a 2% increase compared with 2010.

China's military expenditure has increased continuously since 1994 for 25 consecutive years and its share of GDP almost remained unchanged at 1.9 percent between 2010 and 2019. Among the top 15 military spenders in 2019, Japan had the lowest military burden: it devoted only 0.9 percent of its GDP to military expenditure.¹⁷ In reality, it would be politically difficult for any administration of Japan to significantly increase defense spending without any imminent security threat or termination of Japan - U.S. alliance relationship, mainly because of continued rising social security expenditure due to a demographic shift—an aging and shrinking population, and growing gross public debt (237% of GDP in 2019).¹⁸ It makes the Japanese government the biggest borrower among the major industrialized nations, although most of this is borrowing from domestic sources.

Japan's GDP in the world is third only to that of the United States and China, but its share is at one-third of its heyday level. Its average growth remains around 1%. While there were various assessments on "Abenomics" and its "three arrows", there was no noticeable impact on the long-term of Japan's economic growth and its rate of productivity improvement, nor its birth rate in the 2010s. Japan's economic recovery ended in October 2018 after 71 months, missing the postwar record set by the "*Izanami* boom" of 2002 to 2008. Abe administration sought to boost nominal GDP to 600 trillion yen (\$5.7 trillion) by around 2020, but that goal was not achieved. Annualized quarterly GDP peaked at 557 trillion yen in the third quarter of 2019, followed by three quarters of negative expansion after the consumption tax was raised again in October 2019.¹⁹ With the impact of coronavirus pandemic and uncertainty of overseas economies, the future of Japan's economy is not so bright. The 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), which aim to guide Japanese defense policy for the next decade, acknowledged the impact that nation's continued "severe fiscal situa-

tions” will be on the defense.²⁰⁾

Demographic Change

Japan’s indigenous population has steadily been declining for 11 years in a row to about 124,271 thousand as of January 1, 2020, falling 505 thousand from the previous year- the highest on record since statistics were first kept in today’s manner in 1968. The number of Japanese births totaled about 866 thousand, the fewest since fiscal 1979. The total population (including foreign nationals) shrank by about 305 thousand compared to the previous year to about 127,138 thousand.²¹⁾ Aging demographics have been emerging as a matter of concern throughout the developed world. But international similarities underplay Japan’s predicament. Japan faces the most severe demographic problem by far.

The decline of Japan’s population is rooted in decades of low fertility. As a core feature of Abenomics 2.0 set forward in September 2015, the Abe administration pledged to raise birthrate to the “publicly desired level” of 1.8 children per woman, and further advance structure reforms to ease the burden of child and elderly care for working generations. Even calling the status of Japan’s dwindling population a “national crisis,” Abe dissolved the Lower House in 2018 for a snap election that gave voters a mandate for his administration’s policy on tackling the issue. But such measures were far from effective and may be too little, and too late.²²⁾ The 2019 birth rate was 1.36 per woman, decreasing in consecutive 4 years, far below the figure of 2.1 required to sustain the population. A 2015 National Institute of Population and Social Security Research of Japan survey showed that even though most men and women do want to marry, more than 40 percent of them cited a “lack of funds” as the biggest impediment to marriage. Experts say that people must overcome layers of hurdles to get married and have children, and the government has failed to resolve various social issues and other problems facing the child-bearing age population.²³⁾ Japan’s child population younger than 15 has declined for the 39th year in a row and is now at record low. The number stood at 15.21 million as of May 2020 and made up just 12.0% of Japan’s total population (125.89 million). Japan ranks lowest among countries with a population exceeding 40 million, followed by South Korea at 12.9% and Italy and Germany at 13.4%, according to Japan Statistics Bureau.²⁴⁾

About 25 years after high growth ended in the early 1970s, Japan’s working-age population started to decline. Initially, the decline was slow but then it accelerated until it almost reached an annual loss of one million working-age people at times in the past decades. Its huge impact is best illustrated by Japan’s economic growth since the start of the 21st century: by total gross domestic product, it is the lowest among G-7 countries. But by GDP per working-age person, its cumulative growth rate is the highest.²⁵⁾

The estimated number of people aged 65 or older in Japan stood at 36.17 million, based on data as of September 15, 2020, released by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan, up by 300 thousand from a year earlier and accounting for 28.7 percent of overall population. The percentage of people in this age group is the highest among the world’s 201 countries, regions and territories, followed by Italy’s 23.3 percent and Portugal’s 22.8 percent. According the ministry’s projections, the figure is expected to come to as high as 35.3 percent in 2040, when the so-called second baby-boomer generation,

or people born in 1971-1974, reaches the age of 65 or older.²⁶⁾

As the population has aged, expenditure on social security has continuously increased 17.5 percent of the national budget in FY1990 to 34.9 percent in FY2020, almost perfectly mirroring the change in the percentage of population over retirement age. The ratio of social security spending to gross domestic product is projected to rise to 24 percent in fiscal 2040. The prospect calls for a radical overhaul of the system.²⁷⁾ With the nation's debt already exceeding 200 percent of GDP, the financial situation would continue to be challenging for Japan. The heavy burden of a growing national social security budget is a major source of this debt.

Recruitment for the Self Defense Forces (SDF)

Due to a decline in the population of young people, the recruitment for the SDF has been smaller than planned for six consecutive years since 2013.

Taro Kono, then Japan's defense minister, in an interview with the *Financial Times* in November 2019, said that his three top priorities were to improve Japan's readiness by rolling out new equipment and cyberspace capabilities; improve conditions for troops, given the difficulty of recruiting in Japan's aging society; and strengthen the nation's defense industrial base.²⁸⁾ The Ministry of Defense removed the restriction on what women can do in the Self Defense Force. The *first-ever* female anti-tank helicopter operator was assigned in 2017, the first female fighter pilot in 2018, and the first-ever Aegis destroyer commander in 2019. The Ministry also decided to pave the way for women to be assigned to submarine crews in 2019 for onboarding in 2020.²⁹⁾ In October 2020, the five female officers, in their 20s to 40s, completed their training at the submarine training center at the Maritime Self Defense Force Kure base and stand ready to serve abroad.³⁰⁾

All Politics is Local

It is inevitable for the elderly to prefer the status quo and support income redistribution favoring them, not growth-friendly public expenditure with benefits reaped in the long run. Aging changes voters' preferences in public policies. A Japanese professor analyzed that it is difficult to counter "silver power" in Japan. Politicians in Japan sometimes claim that we should raise taxes in order "not to leave a debt to our children," but rarely claim that we need benefit cuts (e.g., old-age pension) in order "not to leave a debt to our children." He raised five reasons that politicians in Japan should not make grandmas unhappy: There are more elderly than younger voters; elderly voters are much more likely to vote than younger ones; elderly voters have clear preferences on welfare issues; elderly vote always care about "welfare" issues when they make voting decisions; The electoral system gives additional power to elderly and/or more active voters. The combination of these five factors (i.e., numbers, turnout, preferences, issue saliency and institutions) makes any benefits cut for the elderly extremely difficult in Japan.³¹⁾ Recent polls show the almost same trend among Japanese public. 62% of respondents aged 29 and younger in a 2019 *Kyodo News* poll said that they are not interested in the election.³²⁾

A 2019 Cabinet Office poll showed that more than half of Japanese citizens think that the government should put more effort into "Development of social security such as healthcare,

pensions, etc. (66.7%), “Economic measures (52.5%), and “Measures to counter aging society (50.7%), rather than “Defense/Security (29.5%), and Diplomacy/International cooperation (25.9%).³³⁾ The nationwide survey conducted by *Asahi Shimbun* following the July 2019 Upper House election revealed almost same results. The survey gave respondents five options to choose from regarding issues they want Prime minister Abe to prioritize on going forward. Thirty-eight percent of respondents chose “social security, including pensions.” That was followed by “education and child-rearing” with 23 percent, “economic conditions and employment with 17 percent and “diplomacy and national security” at 14 percent. “constitutional revision,” one of Abe’s stated goals, was the lowest with 3 percent.³⁴⁾

(3) History Issues

Japan has become one of the world’s most successful democracies and largest economies, with a stable society and a high standard of living. In an era defined by the populist backlash in the West, Japan looks like the land of the establishment compared to other advanced democracies afflicted by rising populism, the Japanese polity appears in good health.³⁵⁾ In terms of social cohesion, sense of community, and general civility, the Tohoku disaster- the triple shock of the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear catastrophe in 2011- showed the world how strong Japan is. Cleanliness, low crime rates, and basic good manners make Japanese cities like Tokyo some of the world’s most comfortable, civilized places to live.³⁶⁾ Despite its economic slowdown, Japan’s culture, overseas development assistance, and support of international institutions are major sources of soft power. In recent years Japan’s overall international image has regularly ranked among the top ten countries in the world in terms of favorability. It has been lauded for its cultural achievements (both traditional and contemporary), to the point where some analysts have called it a “soft power superpower.”³⁷⁾ In the annual survey by the ASEAN Studies Center at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, Japan regularly tops the lists of most respected nations in Southeast Asia. Japan, which is not as highly regarded as either China or the U.S. in hard power and regional influence, is widely seen as the most trusted major power and the most successful non-Western/Asian “soft power nation” in Southeast Asia, solidifying its position as one of the region’s preferred strategic partners and a potential source for regional leadership.³⁸⁾ According to a 2018 *Gallup* poll, American’s favorable views on Japan climbed to landmark level (87%) in 2018. At least 80% of Americans have viewed Japan favorably in every year since 2005, except 2010 (77%). That represents a vast improvement from the early 1990s, when Japan’s favorable ratings dropped below 50% as Americans feared that Japan’s economy threatened the prosperity of the United States.³⁹⁾

Despite its good reputation in the international community, Japan’s ability to play a credible leadership role, however, is commonly believed to be undermined by its stance on historical issues. Joseph Nye said that unlike Germany, which repudiated its past aggression and reconciled with its neighbors in the framework of the European Union, Japan has never fully come to terms with its record of foreign aggression in the 1930, and that the residual suspicion that linger in countries such as China and Korea sets limits on Japan’s soft power. He added that Japan does not have full admiration of its Asian neighbors.⁴⁰⁾ A former diplomat of Singapore, in an interview with *Nikkei*, said that recognizing Japan’s important role

in Southeast Asia's economic development, the argument by Japan's right-wing nationalists about the number of civilian killed in the Nanjing Massacre, or whether comfort women were volunteers, cannot be accepted by anybody, adding that in order to Japan to play the more active diplomatic role, the history issue has to be reconciled.⁴¹⁾ Yutaka Kawashima, former vice foreign minister correctly observed that the issue with Japan's neighbors is not about apology per se. They often stress that what they are most concerned about is whether the Japanese people have genuinely learned the lessons of history; they believe that only if the Japanese people do so can the resurgence of Japanese militarism be prevented. Whenever Japan's neighbors begin to suspect that Japan's pre war history is going to be officially glorified, for example, in the process of certifying a history textbook or when a prime minister makes an official visit to Yasukuni Shrine, a memorial to Japan's war dead (including several major war criminals), they express their strong resentment.⁴²⁾ Ezra Vogel said, in an interview with *Asahi Shimbun*, that "many Japanese feel that what was bad was militarism and ordinary Japanese did not do anything, but were, in fact, the victims. But from the eyes of foreigners, there is a decisive lack of awareness among the Japanese that they were the aggressors with respect to neighboring nations."⁴³⁾ In recent years, Japan's relative unwillingness to address its record of aggression and atrocity in the pre-1945 period, and to offer apologies and compensation to its victims, has been the source of constant friction with its closest neighbors- China and South Korea- and at times has caused trouble in its relationship with the United States.⁴⁴⁾ As for the United States, at least until the Obama administration, the concerns and frustrations arising from Japan and "history" have generally been expressed in terms of "alliance management," principally but not exclusively with South Korea, and "strategic relations management" with China.

Among history issues between neighboring countries and Japan, the comfort women issue and Yasukuni issue have continuously been sensitive and tricky in terms of interactions among countries concerned and impact on the political and security dynamics in East Asia. This paper will touch mainly on these two issues from the early 2000s.

Prime Minister Koizumi's Period (2001-2006)

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi made his first visit to Yasukuni Shrine on August 13, 2001. China and South Korea criticized the visit. Prime Minister Koizumi said, in his statement issued after his visit to Yasukuni, that "as an issue for the future, I think that we need to discuss what could be done in order for people at home and abroad to pay memorial tribute without discomfort, while respecting the feelings of the Japanese people toward Yasukuni Shrine and Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery."⁴⁵⁾ After this statement, in 2002, a private advisory panel to then Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda compiled a report calling for the establishment of a state-run, non-religious facility for memorial services for the war dead. No substantial progress has not been made yet. Koizumi's repeated yearly visits had disrupted relations with neighboring countries. Domestically, viewpoints were divided regarding the appropriateness of such visits to Yasukuni, and during the five years from 2001 to 2006, Japanese society seemed to have nothing else to occupy its attention than Yasukuni.⁴⁶⁾ In 2004, Japan launched a full-scale campaign to reform the UN Security Council. With the aim of marking the UN's 60th anniversary in September 2005, the G4

(composed of Japan, Germany, India, and Brazil) was formed, and a draft resolution was submitted. It is said to have failed due to the opposition from the U.S. and China. In March 2001, Koizumi's predecessor, Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori had agreed with President Bush in a joint statement that "expressing their commitment to promoting United Nations security council reform with the goal of strengthening its effectiveness, they agreed to continue to work together to obtain for Japan a permanent seat on the security council."⁴⁷⁾ A Japanese scholar argued that "the biggest reason for this failure was the lack of a strategic approach. It would have materialized if Prime minister Koizumi had persuaded Bush and adopted a more flexible stance on the issue of the visit to Yasukuni Shrine, which was a point of contention with China."⁴⁸⁾

In March 2006, Koizumi said, in a press conference that "I don't understand why China and the Republic of Korea will not carry out summit meetings with Japan on account of my visits to Yasukuni Shrine," adding that "I have not changed my view on this matter up to now, and neither will I do so in the future."⁴⁹⁾ He chose August 15, the most politically sensitive and diplomatically explosive day, which is the anniversary of the end of World War II, for his last visit in office to Yasukuni. He said in a news conference later that he dismissed criticism that his visits had harmed relations with China and South Korea, which have suspended summit meetings over the visits, and he would have even rejected a request by President Bush not to visit the shrine.⁵⁰⁾ South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun and Koizumi agreed to meet annually in 2004, but Koizumi's continued visit to Yasukuni forced Seoul to take this off the table. Events in 2005, including declaration of "Takeshima" ("Dokdo" in Korea) Day by Shimane prefecture, adoption of new textbooks that downplayed Japanese wartime misbehavior and Koizumi's sixth visit to Yasukuni, led President Roh to declare his readiness for a "diplomatic war" with Japan.⁵¹⁾ The *Economist* commented in 2006 that Koizumi's visits have undermined his own vision of making Japan more "normal," and that the consequences extend beyond the refusal by China and South Korea to hold summit meetings with Koizumi. They lie at the root of regional opposition to Japan's attempts to gain a permanent seat on the UN security council, it also suggested, concluding that "the trouble is that, with no consensus about the past, Japan's establishment is inept at articulating a better future. That future should start at Yasukuni."⁵²⁾

Prime Minister Abe's Periods (2006-2007, 2012-2020)

In October 2006, just a few weeks after Abe had become Prime Minister, Japanese government called for a new study of the comfort women issue. Members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party set up a "Committee to Consider Japan's Future Historical Education" in the Diet (parliament) in early 2007. Abe and his Cabinet issued a few statements in March 2007, which denied the military's role in coercing the women into servitude. Abe said he would preserve the 1993 Kono statement but denied its central admission of the military's role, saying there had been no "coercion, like the authorities breaking into houses and kidnapping" women. Abe's comments were a reversal from the government's previous stance. The denial by Abe drew official protests from South Korea, China, Taiwan, and the Philippines, some of the countries from which the sex slaves were taken.⁵³⁾ Some of the statements drew criticism in the U.S. and a warning from the U.S. ambassador to Japan,

Thomas Schieffer that attempts to revise the Kono Statement and revise historical accounts of the comfort women system would have a negative impact in the United States.⁵⁴⁾ In a meeting with reporters, Ambassador Schieffer said that he hoped that the (Japanese) government “would not back away” from the 1993 statement. He described as “credible witnesses” former comfort women who recently testified in the U.S. Congress about being coerced into prostitution by the Japanese authorities. He said “I take the word of the women that testified. I think they were coerced to engage in prostitution. That means they were raped by Japanese military at that point in time.”⁵⁵⁾ The *Washington Post* editorial of March 24, 2007 criticized Abe’s “double talk” and contrasted Abe’s insistence on North Korean accountability for the kidnapping of Japanese citizens with “his parallel campaign to roll back Japan’s acceptance of responsibility for the abduction, rape and sexual enslavement of tens of thousands of women during the World War II.” The editorial asserted: that “Mr. Abe would retreat from previous statement is a disgrace for a leader of a major democracy”; “if Mr. Abe seeks international support in learning the fate of Japan’s kidnapped citizens, he should straightforwardly accept responsibility for Japan’s crime and apologize to the victims he has slandered.”⁵⁶⁾

Before his official visit to the U.S. at the end of April, 2007, in a telephone conversation with President Bush on April 3, 2007, Abe explained that he had been following the consistent position of the Japanese government, which was represented by the chief cabinet secretary Kono statement, and that he sympathized from the bottom of his heart with the former comfort women who suffered the hardships, and he had expressed his apologies over the extremely painful situations into which they were placed. In response, President Bush said that he trusted Prime Minister Abe and believed in Japanese people’s compassion for the former comfort women.⁵⁷⁾

On the contrary to his explanation to the U.S. President Bush, Abe had not given up his endeavors to revise Japan’s previous official statements. As soon as Abe returned the center of power again in December 2012, with a well-deserved reputation as a conservative nationalist who have held decidedly revisionist view about Japan’s past, he indicated the intention to revise the two important official statements of Japanese responsibility for wartime crimes- the 1993 Kono statement on “comfort women” and the 1995 Murayama statement on apology for aggression and colonial rule.

Visit to Yasukuni Shrine

Abe made an official visit to Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013, the *first* visit by a Japanese Prime minister since Koizumi’s visit in August 2006. He told the reporters after the visit that “Japan must never wage war again. This is my conviction based on severe remorse for the past. I have no intention at all of hurting the feelings of the Chinese or the South Korean people.”⁵⁸⁾

The response to the visit, which had been discouraged in private by U.S. officials including Vice President Joe Biden, was uniformly negative outside of Japan.⁵⁹⁾ Abe’s sudden visit triggered strong criticism from China and South Korea, but also a rare admonition from the United States. The U.S. Embassy issued a statement, saying that “the United States is disappointed that Japan’s leadership has taken an action that will exacerbate tensions with

Japan's neighbors,"⁶⁰⁾ in an unusual direct criticism of Japan's leader by the U.S., its ally second to none. The statement may have decisively influenced Abe not to repeat the visit and return to a more prudent policy.

Abe had repeatedly said he regretted not visiting the shrine during his first tenure as prime minister from 2006-2007. He said in an interview with *Foreign affairs* in July 2013 that "Professor Kevin Doak of Georgetown University points out that visiting the Arlington National Cemetery does not mean endorsing slavery, even though Confederate soldiers are buried there" and adding that "I am of a view that we can make a similar argument about Yasukuni, which enshrines the souls of those who lost their lives in the service of their country."⁶¹⁾

American officials had reportedly expressed concern that historical issues may isolate Japan, the U.S.' largest Asian ally, at a time when Washington faces a more assertive China and a nuclear North Korea.⁶²⁾ Just before Abe's visit to Yasukuni, during an October visit to Tokyo for the annual Security Consultative Committee meeting between the two countries, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel made a very high-profile visit and paid respects at the Chidorigafuchi national cemetery, containing the graves of 369,854 Japanese unknown war dead (as of August 2020), in a move widely seen as a message to Japan to reckon with its past and stop visiting to Yasukuni. The *New York Times* reported that during his visit to Japan in December, Vice President Joseph R. Biden will likely encourage Abe to keep staying away (from Yasukuni).⁶³⁾ Seeking to quell a resurgence of historic animosities, Biden played emissary from Prime Minister Abe to the South Korean President Park.⁶⁴⁾ Biden subsequently encouraged South Korean President to sit down with the Japanese leader, although she questioned whether Abe could be trusted to hold his historical revisionism in check—a concern that was clearly justified.⁶⁵⁾ After the return home of his visit to Japan, China and South Korea, Biden urged again Abe by phone not to go Yasukuni.⁶⁶⁾

Abe's aides said that what they cared about most was the U.S. reaction (not South Korea's nor China's). "The biggest, or should I say, the only concern is what the U.S. would say," said a senior government official who was aware of the prime minister's plan in advance.⁶⁷⁾ But Abe ignored Biden's suggestion not to visit Yasukuni Shrine.⁶⁸⁾ Abe may have miscalculated the U.S. response. Abe seemed to make a calculated choice for the date, December 26, of the visit to Yasukuni. Abe may have thought that first, his ambitious security reform plans, which were delivered in the Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee meeting two months ago, would largely meet the U.S. expectations and second, his December 25 domestic achievement to get the approval of a new base for the U.S. forces in Okinawa, a long-standing irritant in bilateral relations since 1996, could fully recover trust from the U.S. His judgement, however, proved to be wrong. Despite deep satisfaction of the U.S. with the deal for Okinawa base, a congratulatory telephone call expected on December 27 between Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and his Japanese counterpart, Itsunori Onodera, was put off. At the same time, a State Department spokeswoman, Jen Psaki, said in a statement that the U.S. was disappointed that Japan's leadership has taken an action that will exacerbate tensions with Japan's neighbors," echoing a statement on December 26 by Ambassador Caroline Kennedy.⁶⁹⁾

Abe's visit to Yasukuni was made just a month after China's unilateral declaration of an air defense identification zone over a chain of islands in the East China Sea claimed by China and administered by Japan. His visit plunged relations with South Korea into an even deeper freeze. His visit undermined the American strategy of "rebalancing" in Asia-in particular, the Obama administration's efforts to bolster its alliance with Japan and South Korea, in the context of China's expansionist foreign policy and ever-present security threat posed by North Korea. This was a move that may ultimately serve the interests of China and North Korea, rather than Japan.⁷⁰⁾ Sheila Smith, an expert of Council on Foreign Relations(CFR) warned that Abe's visit will "throw a wrench" in political reconciliation efforts and in contrast, Japanese-South Korean tensions have been "welcome news" for China, noting that his visit will further isolate Japan diplomatically from other countries in the region.⁷¹⁾ Members of U.S. Congress also warned that revisionist statements of Japanese lawmaker or commentators as well as Abe's visit to Yasukuni would only benefit China.⁷²⁾ The *New York Times'* editorial of December 26, 2013 criticized "risky nationalism in Japan" that "the United states need to make it clear that Mr. Abe's agenda is not in the region's interests, surely what is needed in Asia is trust among states, and his actions undermine that trust."⁷³⁾ The dispute over history had complicated the U.S.' continued attempts to persuade Japan and South Korea to present a united front to a more assertive China, while also trying to avoid antagonizing the Korean and Chinese people. The trilateral summit meeting among Japan, China and South Korea had not been held since 2012 until 2015. The three major national newspapers- *Yomiuri*, *Asahi* and *Mainichi*-had been editorializing against a prime ministerial visit to Yasukuni, especially in the year since Abe took office again in 2012. According to a January 2014 *Asahi Shimbun* survey, more among Japanese public said that Prime Minister Abe was "wrong" (46%) than "right" (41%) to visit the shrine, and a majority thought the visit had a negative influence on Japan's diplomacy (56% vs. 36% not a negative influence). By a 5 to 4 margin, more Japanese said that it is important to take "seriously" the strong criticism of Abe's visit to Yasukuni from China, South Korea, the United States and Russia (51% to 40%).⁷⁴⁾ Abe then refrained from visiting the shrine for the rest of his tenure until September 2020.

Emperor Hirohito stopped visiting Yasukuni because of displeasure over its 1978 enshrinement of top war criminals after his eighth trip in 1975. In a July 31, 2001, entry of his diary, published by *Asahi Shimbun*, the chamberlain, Ryogo Urabe, wrote that "the direct cause" was that the Emperor was "displeased about inclusion of Class A war criminals." That passage exactly matches an entry in a diary dated April 28, 1988, kept by the Imperial Household Agency chief, Tomohiko Domita, who quoted the Emperor as saying he had stopped his visits after the chief priest at Yasukuni decided to include top war criminals among those commemorated at the shrine.⁷⁵⁾ His successor Emperor Akihito and current Emperor Naruhito have not visited the shrine either. A few days before Abe visited Yasukuni, Emperor Akihito, in comments marking his 80th birthday, expressed his "deep appreciation" toward those who wrote the post-1945 constitution in order to preserve the "precious values of peace and democracy." Three-quarters of Japanese people responding to a *Kyodo News* survey feel positive about Emperor Naruhito, who ascended the Chrysanthemum Throne on May 1, 2019.⁷⁶⁾ As a leading Japanese newspaper indicated, the fact that Japan's

postwar pursuit of responsibility has been lukewarm at best is reflected in the enshrinement of wartime leaders such as Hideki Tojo at Yasukuni. By lumping together the leaders who recklessly took the country into war, and regular citizens who were drafted and sent to their deaths, the simple act of honoring fallen soldiers has continued to be an awkward task in Japan.⁷⁷⁾

Revisit to the Kono statement and Murayama statement

In a December 2012 interview with Sankei Shimbun, Prime Minister Abe was quoted by Reuters as saying he wants to replace the 1995 Murayama statement of apology with an unspecified “forward looking statement.” He said that his previous administration, in 2006- 2007, had no evidence that the women who served as sex slaves to Japan’s wartime military had, in fact, been coerced. However, at an ensuing news conference, chief cabinet secretary, Yoshida Suga, said that Abe would uphold the 1995 Murayama apology but hinted he may revise the 1993 (Kono) statement.⁷⁸⁾ After Abe’s visit to Yasukuni, the U.S. had continued to deliver its concern to Japan about how to deal with history issues and urged not to engage in historical revisionism that might isolate Japan in the region. In February 2014, Suga said a team of scholars would examine what historical evidence had been used in composing the apology of the Kono statement. Whatever the intent, forming the review team of scholars led to explosive criticism from South Korea and renewed concerns in Washington. In preparation for the trilateral summit meeting of Japan, South Korean and the U.S. at the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit meeting in the Hague, Abe began to shift his administration’s stance to the formal maintenance of both statements. In mid-March, Abe told the Diet (parliament) that “Abe cabinet has no intention to review the Kono statement.” It was the *first* time since taking office more than a year ago that Abe had explicitly stated that his administration would uphold it. Japanese officials suggested that his statement might be part of an effort by Abe to mend relations with South Korea and to persuade President Park Geun-hye of South Korea to meet him in the Hague. Political analysts said that they doubted his statement would be enough to appease Ms. Park, and that Abe’s real target may be the United States, with whom he has sought to build close ties.⁷⁹⁾ By the spring of 2014, Abe and Park had yet to meet even though they had been in office at the almost same time for more than a year. President Obama brought the two leaders together during the summit meeting at the residence of the U.S. ambassador to the Hague on March 25, 2014. While the meeting was focused on North Korea’s nuclear program, not disputes stemming from World War II, several U.S. aides said it helped open a line of communication between Abe and Park and underscored the idea of what was at stake. “Figuratively and politically, it created a platform for them to focus on what united them, and not divides them,” said Assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel R. Russel, who attended the meeting.⁸⁰⁾

In an interview with the *New York Times* just before President Obama’s visit to Japan in April 2014, Fumio Kishida, then foreign minister, restated the Japanese government’s intention to uphold apologies made by earlier Japanese leaders to Japan’s wartime and colonial-era victims. He said that “Prime minister Abe and the Abe cabinet are firmly continuing the views on history, and the position on history of previous administrations. We must face

history and be humble before it.”⁸¹⁾ The U.S. President Obama said, in a press conference with South Korean President Park during his visit to South Korea at end of April, 2014, that “with respect to historical tensions between South Korea and Japan, I think that any of us who look back on the history of what happened to the comfort women here in South Korea, for example, have to recognize that this was a terrible, egregious violation of human rights. They deserve to be heard; they deserve to be respected; and there should be an accurate and clear account of what happened.”⁸²⁾ The study team initiated by Suga reported in June 2014 and did not challenge the facts of the 1993 Kono statement, but did make clear the document was in part the product of months of Japan-South Korea discussions over the level of the ‘coerciveness’ of the recruitment of women to brothels and that Japanese side implied that some may have joined voluntarily.⁸³⁾ South Korea criticized Japanese government in a foreign ministry spokesman’s statement that “the review by the Japanese government itself runs counter to its pledge to uphold the Kono statement and the ROK government urges the Japanese government to clearly acknowledge its responsibility over the issue of victims and present as soon as possible a solution to the issue that is acceptable to the victims.”⁸⁴⁾ The Obama administration had continued to deliver its concern on Japan’s dealing with history issues. In January 2015, the Year of the 70th anniversary of the end of the World War II, U.S. State Department Spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters that “Our view is that the apologies extended by previous Prime Minister Murayama and former Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono marked important chapters in Japan’s efforts to improve relations with neighbors.” She denied the next day her remarks were meant as pressure to Japan, but few took her words as face value.⁸⁵⁾

Abe, in an interview with *Washington Post* in March 2015, said that “Abe cabinet upholds the position on the recognition of history of the previous administrations, in its entirety, including the (1995) Murayama statement, (2005) Koizumi statement and is not reviewing the (1993) Kono statement.” He added that “on the question of comfort women, when my thought goes to these people, who have been victimized by human trafficking and gone through immeasurable pain and suffering beyond description, my heart aches. On this point my thought has not changed at all from previous prime ministers.”⁸⁶⁾ Before Abe’s visit to the U.S. in April 2015, Ben Rhodes, U.S. deputy security adviser, told reporters that Obama administration has urged Abe to constructively address history in line with Japan’s past statements to defuse tension in the region. He underscored Washington’s view that Abe needs to follow the words of former Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama’s 1995 statement in his upcoming address to Congress as well as in his statement commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, to be released in August. His remarks could gravely impact U.S. diplomatic relations with its two Asian allies, Japan, and South Korea, as well as U.S. domestic policy.⁸⁷⁾

Abe said, in the April 2015 address to a joint meeting of the U.S. congress, that “Post war, we started out on our path bearing in mind feelings of deep remorse. Our actions brought suffering to the people in Asian countries. We must not avert our eyes from that. I will uphold the views expressed by the previous prime ministers in this regard.”⁸⁸⁾ He did not touch on Japan’s “colonial rule and aggression” or express his “heartfelt apology”- key expressions from the Murayama statement. He emphasized that Japan and the U.S. had overcome their

historic differences and become close allies. He addressed the historical controversy when he spoke of his “deep repentance in my heart” for American lives lost fighting in the Pacific in World War II and reaffirmed the apologies of prior Japanese premiers for their nation’s conduct. As an American expert argued, however, he should use the same tone in addressing his neighboring countries and his government should avoid new incidents.⁸⁹⁾ Seoul deemed it deeply regrettable that “although his address could have become a turning point toward genuine reconciliation and cooperation with neighboring countries by expressing a correct view of history, he failed to express both such a view and heartfelt apology.”⁹⁰⁾

Yoichi Funabashi introduced an episode in the *Washington Post* that Abe asked the U.S. Ambassador Caroline Kennedy for advice on his statement to commemorate 70 years since the end of World War II. She advised Abe to make his reflections on the history between Japan and Korea more explicit.⁹¹⁾ Beijing and Seoul had made it clear to Tokyo that they expected Abe to adhere to the 1995 Murayama statement, widely considered the Japanese government’s official apology for its wartime and colonial era actions, in which then Prime Minister Murayama offered a “heartfelt apology” for Japan’s colonial rule and aggression.” Koizumi used identical wording a decade earlier, on the 60th anniversary of Japan’s surrender. Abe’s statement, however, did not repeat those phrases. He tried to appease his nationalist supporters at home, while seeking to avoid further angering China. He also was cautious not to displease the U.S.⁹²⁾ Abe did not mention a single word about Korea nor the history between Japan and Korea. Instead, as Funabashi wrote, there was a line in the statement, which was a hint toward the so-called comfort women issue.

Comfort Women Deal

Foreign Ministers of Japan and South Korea announced on December 28, 2015 that they reached a deal over “comfort women” that has bedeviled relations between the two countries since early 1990s. Prime Minister Abe expressed separately, in a telephone call with President Park, “sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.”⁹³⁾ Japan also promised one billion yen (\$8.3 million) to a foundation which will be made for them. The settlement was welcomed in Washington. Deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes told the *Washington Post* that Obama raised the issue in nearly every meeting “he’s had with the leaders of Japan and South Korea over the last several years.” Repairing the Japan-South Korea relationship was essential to Obama for two reasons. A closer alliance between the two could help counterbalance China’s growing military and economic influence in the region and help keep North Korean aggression in check. “This wasn’t just a question of wanting our two friends to get along; it mattered strategically.” Deputy Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said in an interview. Obama Administration officials-including the President himself- intervened at pivotal points over the past two years to help bring Abe and Park closer together, fostering an environment that made possible for the two countries to settle their grievances over the “comfort women.”

The most important U.S. contribution to the process came at the start of the trilateral summit meeting in Hague in March 2014. Since then, Japan and South Korea started bilateral negotiations on the question of the comfort women.⁹⁴⁾ Blinken continued to emphasize

that the “comfort women” agreement between Japan and South Korea has helped “create space for a continued process of healing and reconciliation and opened the door to greater bilateral and trilateral collaboration.”⁹⁵⁾ Taking advantage of reconciliation mood between Japan and South Korea, the U.S. diplomats continued to work hard to broker the December 2016 General Security of Military Intelligence Agreement (GSOMIA) between the two countries. The *New York Times* commented in an editorial that “Obviously, nothing can erase the incalculable damage that Japan’s wartime aggression did to so many lives. But Mr. Abe has moved further than expected in personally accepting Japan’s responsibility to address the past and no matter what his government calls the \$8.3 million (1 billion yen) payment, there is no doubt why it is being paid.”⁹⁶⁾

The deal, however, quickly proved controversial in Tokyo and Seoul. Some analysts also questioned whether the deal could hold, given the strength of opposition on both sides. Barely an hour after the agreement was announced, Akie Abe, the Japanese prime minister’s wife, made a visit to Yasukuni. She wrote in a post on Facebook that “*Heisei 27*, the year when we marked the 70th anniversary of the end of the war,” refers to the Japanese calendar year, and “we only have a few (days) remaining”. She added that it was “the last visit of the year,” above two photos of the shrine at dusk. Although it is common for Japanese to visit shrines on the last day of the year, some analysts doubted the timing of Akie Abe’s early visit was coincidental.⁹⁷⁾ A Japanese official said that the funds were contingent on removal of the statue of a girl representing the women from outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul and that the South Korean government understood that, *Kyodo news* reported.⁹⁸⁾ The “comfort women” deal has been unpopular among South Koreans, including some of the surviving victims, who say it fell short of official reparations and a declaration of legal responsibilities on Japan’s part. Over 70 percent of 47 former comfort women still alive at the time accepted programs offered by the foundation which had been established based on the accord. There was also a time when Prime minister Abe told the Diet (parliament) that he “had no intention of sending out letters of apology for former comfort women, which unnecessarily provoked Seoul.”⁹⁹⁾ During the South Korean presidential election campaign in spring 2017, all candidates said that they would review the deal if elected. South Korea has not formally abandoned the agreement. The foundation set up for implementing the deal was closed in July 2018. The current Korean government, seemingly reluctant to damage relations with Tokyo, stopped short of formally nullifying the agreement or demanding that it be renegotiated.

3 Policy Implications

Despite above-mentioned internal and external constraints, Japan will continue to enhance its own defense capabilities, to further strengthen the Japan-U.S. alliance, and to expand security cooperation with other countries, as means to fulfill its responsibilities to maintain Japan’s peace and security and ensure its survival. At the same time, Japan, as a major power, will continue to play its proactive role in supporting the international order and contributing to peace and development in the world. Among those security and diplomatic agendas for Japan, to enhance friendly and mutually beneficial relations with neighboring

countries has always been an utmost important and demanding one.

In the last 10 years, Japanese people have felt that the security environment around Japan has become worse, that their favorable perceptions toward neighboring countries have decreased, and that Japan's relations with neighboring countries have become worse. The Japan's Cabinet Office polls showed that in 2011, 72.3 percent of Japanese citizens believed there was a danger Japan could get wrapped up in a war, compared to 55.4 percent at the end of the Cold War (1991) and the highest mark of 57 percent in 1978.¹⁰⁰ A March 2020 poll by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs showed that 84.9% of respondents either fully or somewhat agreed that the security environment in East Asia has gotten increasingly worse.¹⁰¹ Another 2019 Cabinet Office poll showed that Japanese people do not feel an affinity toward neighboring countries (Russia 76.2%, China 74.9%, South Korea 71.5%), and that they do not think the current relations between Japan and neighboring countries are good (Russia 66.8%, China 75.5%, South Korea 87.9%), but that they think Japan's future bilateral relations is important (with Russia 75.2%, China 75.1%, South Korea 57.5%).¹⁰²

Japan should put top priority on its diplomacy with its neighboring countries to improve the security environment surrounding Japan. Among neighboring countries, Japan's stable relations with China are important not only for the two countries but also for the region and the international community. South Korea is an important neighboring country for Japan.¹⁰³ In January 2000, Prime Minister Obuchi's commission on Japan's goals in the 21st century is sued a report provocatively titled "The Frontier Within" (In Japanese, "*Nihon no furontia wa Nihon no naka ni aru*"). On relations with China and South Korea, the commission called for "relationships of greater depth" to distinguish these ties from "foreign relations" in the conventional sense. It argued that "in order to develop relationships of long-term stability and trust with China and Korea, the ordinary diplomatic efforts are not sufficient, A national commitment is needed, and that is the nature of the neighboring relations."¹⁰⁴ There is no need to describe how complex and complicated these relations among these three countries-Japan, China, South Korea- have been and will be in terms of history, culture, and geopolitics. The annual Cabinet Office polls have shown that Japanese feelings and attitudes toward China and South Korea have been more fluctuating than those toward the U.S. and Russia, which has been relatively steady and stable. When it comes to bilateral relations, one country is not solely responsible for the gulf or conflicts of interests that separates it from its neighboring country. However, what is not to change and what is not changeable is that neighboring countries are and will always be here. Japan's prudent neighboring diplomacy to build trust with them and promote regional stability, will be reinforcing Japan's legitimate security policy in the future. In that process, history issues need to be steadily addressed and relations with South Korea and China need to be improved respectively.

(1) Addressing History Issues

If Japan wants to play a more serious and extensive leading role in Asia, it must overcome its own historical legacy of antagonizing neighbors with sincere reconciliation efforts. Japan's historical revisionism has escalated regional tensions in Asia. It has seriously damaged relations with neighboring countries, Japan's global standing and soft power in

the international community.

Many Japanese suspect that China and South Korea exploit the past to win favors from Japan or to stir anti-Japanese propaganda for domestic political purposes. It is a fact that Japan has already offered apologies on various occasions. Another fact, however, is that official Japanese apologies and commitments have constantly been undermined, publicly repudiated, and watered down by some Japanese political leaders' outright denial of war-time responsibility and endeavors to revisit the previous statements. The victims and peoples in neighboring countries, particularly in China and South Korea, do not believe the sincerity of Japanese apologies. Some of them are still suspicious about Japan's perspective of history. As Thomas Burger suggested, Japan's security necessity might be the most powerful impetus for Japan to downplay historical revisionism. It is crucial, from a strategic standpoint, that Japan reassure not only its neighbors but also the United States that it will act in accordance with international norms regarding historical justice issues.¹⁰⁵⁾

No Official Visit to Yasukuni Shrine

For securing long-term national interests of Japan and genuinely reconciling with peoples in neighboring countries, the Prime Minister and high-level officials should no longer make their official visits to the Yasukuni Shrine.

If Japanese are to find other ways to honor their war dead, Japanese emperors, and foreign leaders, including Chinese and South Korean leaders, could visit the memorial to pay tribute as a common protocol, which will eventually contribute to enhancing solidarity of the Japanese people and achieving genuine reconciliation with neighboring countries.

To Abide by Official Statements

Japanese government and leaders should abide by the contents and spirits of the previous official statements concerning history issues, including the 1982 Miyazawa policy in textbooks, the 1993 Kono statement, the 1995 Murayama statement, and the 2010 Kan statement. As Abe stated in the U.S. congress in April 2015,¹⁰⁶⁾ Japan's prime minister should continue to uphold the official positions expressed by the previous prime ministers on history issues and should not try to revise those statements.

(2) Strengthening Diplomacy with Neighboring Countries: South Korea, China Japan-South Korea Relations

As Prime Minister Abe said in a CSIS Forum in February 2013 that "South Korea is the most important neighbor for Japan. The ties between Japan and South Korea are something that cannot be severed. And dealing with the North Korean issue, the relations that we have with South Korea is extremely important."¹⁰⁷⁾ The security of the Korean peninsula is essential to the security of Japan. Abe expressed his view in an interview with the *Financial Times* in October 2018 that Japan opposes any withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula in exchange for North Korea's denuclearization.¹⁰⁸⁾ A columnist of *Washington Post* argued that Abe was able to dissuade U.S. President Trump from pulling U.S. troops out of South Korea.¹⁰⁹⁾

It is certainly easy to understand from a map that the geopolitical and security environment

should make Japan and South Korea natural partners. The Korean peninsula has long been a region of vital importance for Japan. The U.S. security engagements in East Asia have significantly contributed to maintaining security and achieving prosperity of Japan and South Korea. The two East Asian democracies have feuded over their troubled history, mainly on Japan's colonization of Korea from 1910 to 1945.

Now the bilateral relations are at a historic low. The Cabinet Office polls shows that the percentage of Japanese people who think the current bilateral relations between the two countries are good has dropped from 66.5% in 2009 to 7.5% in 2019.¹¹⁰⁾ The relations have become particularly deteriorated from territorial issue and comfort women issue since 2012. Even though Japan and South Korea reached the 2015 "comfort women" agreement, which was supported by the U.S., the relations have fallen in a negative spiral of tit-for-tat moves mixed with another history issue, namely "forced workers" issue, trade, and security issues. After the July 2018 closure of the foundation for "comfort women," in October 2018, the South Korean Supreme Court handed down landmark rulings in favor of forced workers who had brought claims against Japanese firms that had used South Korean workers before 1945. Japan has argued that South Korea is reneging on the terms of both the 1965 agreement that "completely and finally" settled individual claims and the 2015 agreement on the "comfort women." The two countries have unprecedentedly expanded their fronts to the economic and security areas. In July 2019, immediately after the G-20 Osaka summit meeting hosted by Japan, in which Abe called for "free and fair trade," Japan responded with a Trumpian measure: restrictions on exports to South Korea, including chemicals vital to its big chip-manufacturing industry and removal of South Korea from its preferred "white list" of trading partners of strategic goods. South Korea responded in kind and went a step further by announcing its intention to terminate its GSOMIA with Japan, which was withdrawn later. While the U.S. observers and former policy makers were critical of Japanese action, they were not so sympathetic with South Korean reaction either, interpreting as a plea for help from Washington or an act of alliance damage.¹¹¹⁾

Meanwhile, the feelings and views on relations between Japan and South Korea among the people in both countries have become more serious and negative. Yet, perception of the environment surrounding the two countries remains almost the same. According to a 2020 poll jointly conducted by *Yomiuri Shimbun* and *Hankuk Ilbo* of South Korea, 84% of Japanese respondents and 91% of South Korean respondents said the current bilateral relations are "bad." Majority of respondents in both countries answered that they cannot trust each other. As to a question about which country the respondents feel threatened by militarily, 79% of Japanese and 63% of South Korean mentioned "North Korea," the highest for both countries. About 80% of the respondents of both countries replied that China was "unreliable."¹¹²⁾ In another interesting 2014 CSIS polls of strategic elites in Asia, Japanese and Korean respondents are the most closely aligned on the importance of democratic values and a robust American leadership role in the region. Korean and Chinese views of historical issues with Japan diverge in important ways. Where 80 percent of Korean respondents expect historical issues with Japan to remain a purely diplomatic or political issue, 43 percent of Chinese thought these issues could be a source of military conflict (only 15 percent of Korean respondents thought so).¹¹³⁾ A 2018 Pew Research Center poll showed that opinions of U.S. are

quite positive in South Korea (80%) and Japan (67%), while perceptions of American foreign policy as not taking into account their country's interests are also widespread in South Korea (75%) and Japan (71%).¹¹⁴ A 2020 Pew Research Center poll also showed that Korean and Japanese people share their similar perception on the U.S. and China. While views of the U.S. are more favorable than views of China in most countries surveyed, the gap is more than 30 percentage points only in South Korea (U.S. 59% vs China 24%) and Japan (U.S. 41% vs China 9%). While a plurality or majority in every European country surveyed say China is the top economy in the world, only in South Korea (77%), Japan (53%) and the U.S. (52%) itself do more people name the U.S.¹¹⁵

Now, the bilateral historical issues have had seriously negative impacts everywhere in the bilateral relations and each country's international soft power. Japan and South Korea have every reason to resolve their differences. Each side says that its actions are not linked to other issues, but everybody knows bilateral issues are all connected and influenced together. The leadership of the two countries need to recognize the gravity of the situation and do their best to search for pragmatic compromise between the two countries. They should return to basics of relations with neighboring countries. History issues cannot so easily be re-tuned, nor can it reliably be muted. Therefore, the history issues should be addressed in a long-term vision of reconciliation without being interfered by domestic politics and nationalism.

Japan and Korea need to return to a two-track approach that separates history issues from mutually beneficial areas- the economy, security, cultural and people to people exchange where bilateral cooperation would enhance understanding and trust toward each other and eventually contribute to reconciliation of the two peoples. Vital economic and security cooperation between Japan and South Korea should first be back to normal. South Korea and Japan are each on one another's list of top five trading partners, and both countries rely on exports to fuel their economies. On the rare occasions when trade ties appeared to be threatened, leaders of business federation like Japan's *Keidanren* (Japanese Business Federation) and South Korea's Federation of Korean Industries (FKI) publicly lobbied for a return to cooperative relations.¹¹⁶ Japan and South Korea should withdraw all regulatory trade measures and return to normal before July 2019.

The U.S. has long kept deep concern about the relations between Japan and South Korea. For the U.S., the crisis between the two key allies in Asia is detrimental in multiple respects. It is detrimental to the bilateral alliance with South Korea, the bilateral alliance with Japan, trilateral allied policy coordination, and deterrence postures against North Korea and China. It weakens the overall U.S. position in Asia in the face of a rising China.¹¹⁷ The U.S. says that Japan is the cornerstone of security in the Indo-Pacific and its relationship with South Korea is the linchpin. A U.S. policy maker said that "these are carefully chosen words, they are meaningful, and they are in fact reflective of how the U.S. view these very important relationships."¹¹⁸ The U.S., South Korea, and Japan have shared universal values and, as status quo powers, are committed to a rule-based international order. The three countries are committed to the final fully verified denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. In the face of shared security challenges posed by North Korea, China, and Russia and transnational challenges in the region, it is critical now more than ever to ensure that there

are close relations and effective formulas between and among the three countries. Japan and South Korea should more actively participate in trilateral cooperation. At the same time, Japan and South Korea need to resume a strategic dialogue to share perceptions of the “real threat” to national and regional security, opening meaningful opportunities for enhanced cooperation to achieve regional peace and stability. The security of the Korean peninsula is essential to Japan’s own security and the U.S. forces in Japan are integral to the defense of South Korea. The strengthened U.S.-Japan alliance could be an insurance against Japanese militarism for South Korea. Japan and South Korea may find some strategic differences in dealing with China and North Korea, but they would find more common ground in the face of their large and nuclear armed neighbors. South Korea and Japan have gotten through unprecedented experiences during the unconventional Trump presidency.¹¹⁹⁾ The two countries could effectively obtain some experiences and lessons with each other and possibly form a united approach to address the dilemma issues of alliance management with the United States.

Japan-China Relations

As Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said in a January 2021 policy speech to the Japanese Diet, a stable Japan-China relationship is important not only for the two countries but also for the region and the international community. Since Japan and China normalized diplomatic relations in 1972, there have been ups and downs in the bilateral relations. China’s attitude toward the U.S.-Japan alliance has over the years shifted from outright condemnation and opposition in the 1960s, to tacit acquiescence as a net good in the 1970s and 1980s, to growing criticisms since the end of the Cold War. In the 1990s, China began to rise, while Japan stagnated in terms of economic growth. Historical revisionism in Japan began to surface, while strengthening patriotic education in China. Beijing reacted negatively to the 1996 U.S.-Japan Joint Declaration on Security, the September 1997 U.S.-Japanese Defense Cooperation Guidelines. From 2000 onward, in large measure reflecting China’s rise since joining the WTO of 2001 and the evolution of the U.S.-Japan alliance, the bilateral relations have been on a downhill slide. As Japan’s 2004 National Defense Planning Guidelines pointed out, Japan had to remain attentive to China’s ongoing military upgrades and expanding maritime operation. Prime Minister Koizumi’s repeated visits from 2001 to 2006 to Yasukuni disrupted the political relations with China. His successor Abe refrained from visiting the shrine during his term as prime minister, which opened the door to improving Japan’s historically strained relations with its neighbors.¹²⁰⁾ Japan and China resumed summit meetings and official exchanges including those between the two militaries until 2010. Chinese premier Wen Jiabao, in a historic speech to the Japanese Diet during his April 2007 visit to Japan, said that appreciating Japanese leaders admitted on many occasions that Japan had committed aggression and expressed deep remorse and apology to the victimized countries, Chinese people hope that Japan will “act as it has stated and honor its statement.” He also appreciated Japan’s path of peaceful development after the war and Japan’s support and assistance in China’s reform, opening-up and modernization drive, which “the Chinese people will never forget.”¹²¹⁾ During his visit, the two countries also agreed to strive to build “a mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic

interests,” looking for a long-term friendly relations. Yet since 2010, the bilateral relations have dramatically deteriorated mainly due to the Senkaku islands issue and Yasukuni issue. The 2010 Japan Cabinet Office poll showed that only 8.3% of Japanese public thought that the bilateral relations were good.¹²²⁾ In November 2014, the two countries reached a “four points of principled agreement.” The two sides reached “some agreement” (“some recognition,” according to the Japanese translation) on “overcoming political difficulties” in a spirit of “facing history squarely and looking to the future,” and recognized that “different positions” (“different views,” according to the Japanese version) exist between them regarding the tensions in the waters of the East China Sea, including those around the Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands.¹²³⁾ Two days later, Abe shook hands with a stone-faced Chinese President Xi Jinping, the bilateral relationship has gradually improved. In this way, Japan and China reached a certain level of understanding in dealing with the Senkaku Islands and Yasukuni issue. The *Global Times* of China commented in an editorial that though the agreement did not mention Yasukuni, the “overcoming political obstacles” in it will become an important restraint on Abe’s visit to Yasukuni in the future and this is the first time the two countries have officially mentioned the Diaoyu islands and the disputes over its sovereignty have become the new reality.¹²⁴⁾ Since then, Abe had not visited Yasukuni during his tenure until September 2020. As for the Senkaku islands issue, it could be interpreted as a compromise from Japanese perspective. Yet Japanese government has maintained the same position that “there exists no issue of territorial sovereignty to be resolved concerning the Senkaku islands.”¹²⁵⁾ Gerald Curtis commented in a March 2013 essay in *Foreign Affairs* that “Abe could take a helpful first step by giving up the fiction that no dispute over the islands exists,” adding that Abe’s willingness to discuss it would give China an opening to back down from its confrontational stance and would better align U.S. and Japanese policy.”¹²⁶⁾ Since securing the *first* public remarks by a U.S. President stating the U.S. position on the Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands issue in April 2014, Japanese government and leaders have made the U.S. commitment public as a symbol of a reliable and strong alliance with U.S. after their meetings and conversations with their U.S. counterparts. When Prime Minister Suga had telephone talks with U.S. President-elect Biden in November 2020 and President Biden in January 2021, Biden affirmed his commitment to apply article 5 of the Japan-U.S. security treaty to the Senkaku Islands.¹²⁷⁾

Since late 2014, bilateral relations have improved to a degree of normalcy and stability. Both countries wanted to further develop their economic ties. China needed a better relationship with Japan in the strategic competition with the U.S. In July 2015, the *first* Japan-China high-level political dialogue was held in Beijing.¹²⁸⁾ High-level exchanges and dialogues gradually restored with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s *first* visit to Japan in May 2018 and Abe’s visit to China in October 2018, marking the 40th anniversary of the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship. During Abe’s visit to China, 52 MOUs on cooperation in third country markets were signed between companies and business organization, which suggested Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision and China’s Belt and Road Initiative could overlap and co-prosper.¹²⁹⁾

According to a joint annual survey conducted by the Genron NPO and the China International Publishing Group, comparing with a gradual improvement in Chinese people’s favorable

perception of Japan (21.4% in 2015, 31.5% in 2017, 45.9% in 2019, 45.2% in 2020), Japanese people's favorable perception of China has not been changed much and remains continuously very low (10.6% in 2015, 11.5% in 2017, 15.0% in 2019, 10.0% in 2020). Yet, perceptions of about 70% of Japanese and Chinese people that the Japan-China relations are important have not changed in the last 10 years. As for the Japan's role under the U.S.-China confrontation, a majority (58.4%) of respondents believed that Japan should not avoid taking sides and 37.1% agreed that Japan should manage to minimize the effect of the U.S.-China confrontation and foster the Japan-China cooperation.¹³⁰⁾ The Japanese people's perception of China has deeply been influenced by China's assertive maritime activities around the Senkaku islands since 2008.

China has expressed deep concern about Japan's recent legislative and policy reforms on security and continued to ask Japan to "learn the lessons of history" and maintain its "exclusive defense-oriented" policy under the war-renouncing constitution. Kong Xuanyou, Chinese Ambassador to Japan, in an interview with Asahi Shimbun, said that "the lack of mutual trust in the security field is a large problem" in improving the Japan-China ties from the Chinese standpoint, adding that the new China-Japan ties suitable for the new era would not be established without constructive security cooperation.¹³¹⁾ Japanese citizens' concern is growing that their country depends too much on China for its prosperity and too much on the U.S. for its security. As Chinese leaders have admitted, Japan has tremendously contributed to China's economic development and its rise as the world's factory and a top trading partner for Asian countries. It has deepened economic integration with China but, at the same time, increased the risk of relying too much on China. China and the U.S. have repeatedly alternated as Japan's leading trading partner since the late 2000s. During the 2010s, the share of Japanese exports going to China held steady between 17% to 19% despite continued deterioration of political relations between the two countries and Japanese negative perception of China. In 2020, China accounted for 22% (\$ 146 billion) of all exports, while the U.S. trailed at 18.4%.¹³²⁾ In a December 2020 Nikkei survey, 70% of corporate Japan's top executives want the U.S. President Biden to relax Trump-era measures (such as additional tariffs) targeting China.¹³³⁾

Under these circumstances, seeking to isolate China or sever its commercial or exchange link with China is a non-starter. Japan should deal with China as a geographic and geostrategic reality. Instead of a confrontational strategy toward China, which some Japanese have supported, a nuanced one with engagement and influence should be continued for Japan's long-term security and prosperity. As Prime Minister Abe stated in his December 2019 visit to China, Japan and China have a significant responsibility toward peace, stability, and prosperity of region and world and "ceaseless exchanges" should be continued for improving and deepening Japan-China relations.¹³⁴⁾ In that regard, Japan needs to play a more active and constructive role in the Japan-China-Republic of Korea (ROK) trilateral cooperation, and especially summit meeting. Launching in the wake of the Asian financial crisis in 1999, the trilateral cooperation has constantly enhanced mutual trust, deepened cooperation, and pursued common development for more than 20 years. The trilateral summit has been held since 2008 and the eighth one took place in December 2019 in China.¹³⁵⁾ Some disputes among the three countries have prevented them from having an annual trilateral summit

meeting. Japan could play a leading role to have an annual one under any circumstances and to contribute to achieving genuine reconciliation and future-oriented cooperation among the three countries.

Conclusion

When we look back on the continuities and changes of Japan's security policy for more than 70 years, major countries involved in it have not changed at all: the U.S., Russia, China, and two Koreas. Most of the security policy speeches and documents issued by Japanese government and leaders have mainly described the relations with these countries. In recent years, the relations with ASEAN countries, India, and other countries have been added in those documents.

Japan has now faced unprecedented multiple and complicate security challenges: "A serious security concern" on Chinese military and other developments, coupled with the lack of transparency its defense policy and military power; North Korea's "grave and imminent threats" from nuclear and missile capabilities; Russia's enhanced military posture.¹³⁶⁾ On top of that, strategic competition between the two largest powers-the U.S., China-is to a considerable extent hardwired into the emerging structure of the international system and some aspects of that competition cannot help but be zero-sum.¹³⁷⁾ The U.S.-China competition will inevitably affect the security environment in East Asia. Amidst the increasingly severe security environment, Japan will continue to further strengthen the Japan-U.S. alliance, to enhance its own defense capabilities, and to expand security partnerships and coalitions with likely-minded countries. The relevance of the Japan-U.S. alliance will only increase in defending Japan and maintaining regional stability. In a 2018 survey conducted by Japan's Cabinet Office, 77.5 percent of respondents expressed support for the alliance with the United States.¹³⁸⁾ The U.S. President Biden, in his first foreign policy speech on February 4, 2021, made it public to work together with its allies and partners in dealing with China, which he defined as the most serious competitor of the United States.¹³⁹⁾ Japan, however, will be facing persistent constraints as mentioned above-domestic pacifism, severe fiscal conditions and demographic change, and conflicts with neighboring countries on historical issues- in formulating and implementing its security policy. Though Japanese people have come to highly appreciate the SDF and fully support the Japan-U.S. alliance, pacifism across the Japanese society will not disappear overnight. It will continue to influence Japan's security policy. Fiscal constraints and demographic change could be slowly and effectively addressed by structural reforms, on which most administrations have put priorities. Little progress has been produced yet. Given continued economic stagnation, the political system's weakness and risk-averse, resistance to gender equality and immigration, and a tendency to turn inward, bold structural reforms to ease fiscal constraints and to address demographic change will not be easy to effectively implement.

With these current domestic situations, it is critical for Japan to maintain and develop friendly relations with Japan's neighboring countries for its security and prosperity. Improving its relations with neighboring countries is directly and deeply related with Japan's security policy, because Japan's major security concerns come from them. Historically,

Japan has been unable to build mature, mutually beneficial relations with its neighboring countries. For any country, neighborly relations (*rinkou*) are an indispensable and challenging task of its diplomacy and tango needs two for its success. It would be in Japan's best interest to carry out prudent and sensible neighboring diplomacy, especially with South Korea and China, while further strengthening the Japan-U.S. security treaty and building its own defense capability within its capacity. Japan should squarely face history issues and abide by its international commitments for better relations with neighboring countries based on trust and mutual benefits. Japan's leading and constructive role in trilateral cooperation among Japan, the U.S. and South Korea and parallel trilateral cooperation among Japan, China, and South Korea could be instrumental in securing peace and promoting prosperity, connecting free and open Indo-Pacific, and eventually contributing to maintaining rule based international order in the region and the world. Japan's neighborly diplomacy matters along with its security policy for its long-term interests. What is done cannot be undone, however, a future could be made by today's options. What options Japanese people would take for their future remains to be seen. (end)

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