

## Democracy in Action in Japan's Foreign and Security Policymaking

By Andrew L. Oros

One stubborn belief common in other developed democracies is that the Japanese electorate is somehow passive or unengaged. Moreover, the belief that in Japan important political decisions are made by unelected bureaucrats against the wishes of elected politicians or the electorate at large has stuck in the minds of many, propagated by the oft-repeated dictum that Japan is a place where “politicians reign but bureaucrats rule.”<sup>1</sup> In the area of foreign and security policy, however, there is no shortage of examples where powerful politicians and bureaucrats had their plans thwarted by vocal opposition from Japan's active civil society or by minority opinion in Japan's parliament, the Diet. Concerted efforts by the mass media and the policy priorities of individual prime ministers also have played important roles in foreign policy-making in postwar Japan. At its core, this is democracy in action.

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June 19, 1960: Japan-US Security Treaty demonstration. Source: <http://tiny.cc/z56nl>.

In contrast to some popular perceptions, a great variety of political actors have actively sought to influence the government on topics related to foreign and security policy—from anti-nuclear peaceniks to unapologetic Imperial Army sympathizers, and from agricultural cooperatives seeking to maintain high tariffs on imported rice to major corporations seeking to liberalize cumbersome regulations—including elected politicians seeking control over the way unelected bureaucrats implement declared policy principles. Industry actors, civil society movements, motivated individuals, and of course voters *en masse* have played important roles in crafting Japan's foreign and security policies.

Many foreign policy-related issues in recent years have attracted both newspaper headlines and the attention of bureaucrats and members of the Diet because of strong activism in Japan's vibrant but messy democracy. One prominent example has caused a major headache for managers of Japan's sixty-one-year-old security treaty with the United States. Sixteen years ago, the Japanese and US governments agreed that the US airbase at Futenma, located on the Japanese island of Okinawa, should be relocated to a less-populated area of the island due to concerns about the negative effect of the base on local residents. In 2009, after years of negotiation, the two governments signed a formal agreement to implement the relocation. Today, after several changes to Japan's ruling coalition and several prime ministers later, the two governments have been forced to examine new options. This is just one of many instances when democratic forces have influenced Japan's foreign and security policies. Another decade-long example is the “abduction issue” with North Korea, related to North Korea's 2002 admission that it abducted an undetermined number of Japanese citizens during the Cold War to serve as informants about Japan. The admission triggered concerted citizen and media efforts that complicated Japanese government policies on North Korea's nuclear and missile proliferation. Such citizen and media pressure also contributes to why there has not been any degree of Japanese government compromise over territorial disputes with Russia, South Korea, and China; the government's dogged clinging to arms export restrictions set almost half a century ago in a totally different technological and geopolitical context; and the continued controversy over reduction of tariff and other barriers to the import of agricultural products. Previous decades featured a similarly wide range of issues where democratic forces broadly set the direction of Japan's foreign policy as well as limited specific government policy decisions.

This said, one also can point to numerous high-profile foreign policy decisions where the apparent will of the majority was thwarted by minority opinion, usually of the conservative variety. Indeed, the largest public demonstrations in Japanese political history were mobilized in opposition to a foreign policy decision: to revise and extend the US-Japan Security Treaty in 1960 using questionable parliamentary procedures. Even in that case, though, the prime minister responsible for the decision, Kishi Nobusuke, was forced to resign due to criticism of his questionable tactics and his successor, Ikeda Hayato, sought to accentuate a different set of foreign policy issues.<sup>2</sup> More recently, the first non-conservative-led government in fifteen years revealed that one of the most popular foreign policies of postwar Japan, the so-called Three Non-Nuclear Principles, in fact had not been strictly followed during the years of conservative dominance of the political system due to several “secret treaties” negotiated with the United States, as had long been suspected.

In short, a close examination of the process of Japan's foreign and security policymaking operates as a microcosm of Japan's broader democratic practice, illustrating both its strengths and its weaknesses, as well as the evolution of Japanese democracy over time.

#### Four Long-Standing Themes in Debates and Activism over Foreign Policy

The postwar Japanese electorate possesses deeply held and long-standing differences over foreign policy issues. While specific issues have changed over time, many of the fundamental disagreements that emerged in the immediate postwar period continue to divide the electorate over a half-century later. Four principal areas of difference revolve around the following questions: (1) what are the political and governance lessons from the negative experience of World War II? (2) to what extent should Japan maintain military forces and seek to assume "great power" status in the world? (3) to what extent should Japan "ally" with the US to provide for its security, rather than building an independent military capability or following another strategy (like UN-centrism or unarmed neutrality)?; and (4) to what extent should Japan restructure government regulation to open the country to global competition? For three of these four themes, clearly the nature of the political system and issues of war and peace have been inextricably linked.

Within these major foreign and security policy cleavages, countless specific policy issues have emerged, and along with them, countless political activists, organizations, lobbying groups, and party platforms. For example, some argue vociferously that Japan must "remember Hiroshima" and thus advocate a "nuclear-free world" and a Japan without offensive military capabilities. Others passionately argue that Japan has been scapegoated for its wartime conduct by neighbors who exaggerate so-called atrocities for current political gain and thus advocate revision of Japan's history textbooks to instill more patriotism among Japan's youth. Some organized groups strongly lobby elected officials to maintain high tariffs and other barriers on imported goods, while others contend that Japan must lower such barriers in order to become more internationally competitive. As one of the world's largest democracies, it is no surprise that Japan's electorate possesses diverse views on a wide range of foreign policy issues. The degree to which diverse political actors have advocated for these issues and the extent that they have affected actual foreign policymaking in Japan belie the stereotype of Japanese democracy as somehow passive or unengaged.

#### The Centrality of Foreign Policy to Cold War Party Politics

Article Nine of Japan's postwar constitution—the so-called "war-renouncing clause"—is one of the most internationally recognized foreign policies of postwar Japan.<sup>3</sup> It also provides a good illustration of how democracy has shaped postwar foreign policy practice. Even before the postwar constitution was officially adopted on May 3, 1947, activists in Japan's fledgling democracy argued over the meaning and wisdom of this tenet of the American-drafted but Japanese-adopted document. Large numbers of Japanese did not support Article Nine then, and many still do not. They have worked hard to change it, just as supporters have struggled to keep it. Many Japanese felt that since its introduction, the spirit of Article Nine has not been observed in policies carried out by the succession of conservative-dominated Japanese administrations that governed Japan's parliament for all but ten months from mid-1955 until the late 2009 election. Numerous activists, lobbying groups, and political party platforms were crafted around either "respecting the constitution" or efforts to "revise Article Nine." In the end, as is often the case in a democracy, a de facto compromise was reached—with formal revision of Article Nine never taking place but with the interpretation of it evolving over time, largely in the direction of public opinion.<sup>4</sup> To handle the issue of interpretation, bureaucrats were used more than the courts.<sup>5</sup> This typifies a pattern seen in many other cases of foreign policymaking in postwar Japan: elected politicians set the guidelines or principles

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May 2011, protests calling for a change in the country's nuclear policy. Source: <http://tiny.cc/zto2a>.

for a policy—usually based on, or at least informed by, popular opinion—and bureaucrats are tasked with designing and implementing the specific policy implementation.

The dominant political party of the postwar period, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), came together as a party in the tumultuous 1950s when political conservatives were especially divided on national security issues—in particular the need for and extent of a long-term military alliance with the US, Japanese direct involvement in the emerging Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union, and Japanese military rearmament in general. What bound political conservatives together was an opposition to socialism and the party that supported it, the Japan Socialist Party (JSP). When rival factions of the JSP formed a unified front against divided conservatives in 1955, conservatives responded by merging the Liberal and Democratic parties into the LDP. This "1955 System" would provide the basis of Japanese electoral politics for the subsequent four decades and to a large degree rested on two foreign policy decisions, the LDP leadership strategy of limiting re-militarization and following the US lead in the Cold War while focusing energy and attention on impressive economic growth rates.<sup>6</sup>

One must be careful, however, not to oversimplify the nature of the 1955 system regarding the politics of national security. Despite a long-standing political party division that was under-girded by a foreign policy issue, public opinion polling throughout the postwar period shows large numbers of Japanese sympathetic to the minority JSP on many issues related to national security. These numbers were too large for the LDP to ignore if it sought to maintain an electoral majority, and thus party leaders were forced to be responsive to voter preferences on foreign policy issues. Among such public sympathies was the political force of "pacifism" or a related "anti-militarist" belief championed by the JSP.<sup>7</sup> The popularity of such ideas forced the LDP to compromise on many policy issues and more broadly kept the LDP on the defensive on policies related to Japan's postwar military forces, the so-called Self Defense Forces (SDF). For example, fearing a loss of its majority in elections in the late 1960s and 1970s, LDP leaders advocated "lite" versions of JSP policies regarding arms production and export, nuclear weapons, security relations with the United States, and the level of rearmament in an economically booming Japan.<sup>8</sup> It is in this period that now-famous Japanese security policies restricting arms exports and the introduction, maintenance, and production of nuclear weapons, limiting defense spending to less than 1 percent of GDP, and prohibiting the use of the SDF overseas were most

### The ability of activists based in Okinawa to slow and ultimately derail negotiations over base relocation contributed to a major fissure in the Japan-US alliance in the fall and winter of 2009–10.



May 27, 2010, protest in Okinawa. Source: <http://tiny.cc/m8yqd>.

clearly articulated. These policies were the direct result of citizen activists, concerted pressure from the minority JSP in the Diet, and voter preferences as expressed in public opinion polls.

At the same time, however, Japan's military capabilities and activities also increased substantially over the period of conservative dominance, despite an apparent consensus that Japan's constitution allowed it to maintain only the minimum military force necessary for defense of the home islands, to not possess offensive weaponry, and to not participate in "collective self-defense" activities, i.e., military activities in alliance with other states. What exactly constituted the "minimum necessary force" or "offensive" weapons was expanded little by little during the postwar LDP dominance, particularly during periods when more hawkish prime ministers such as Nakasone Yasuhiro (1982–87), Hashimoto Ryutaro (1996–98), and Koizumi Junichiro (2001–06) were in power. These leaders—working closely with Japanese bureaucrats and US counterparts—enacted important policy changes that included a new Maritime SDF (MSDF) role in patrolling sea lanes up to 1,000 nautical miles from Japan and a partial exception to the arms export ban for the United States (Nakasone), deepened security cooperation under US-Japan alliance revised "guidelines" (Hashimoto), and the first SDF overseas dispatches to areas of active combat—although still in non-combat roles—and the approval to develop mid-air refueling capabilities for combat aircraft (Koizumi).

In sum, during the Cold War, both major political parties—the LDP and JSP—competed for votes over a wide range of foreign and security policy-related issues. Even though the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) replaced the JSP as Japan's other major party, this competition for votes continues today. On the right, beyond the question of remilitarization, issues related to veterans' rights, commemoration of war dead, and patriotic education have been useful issues on the campaign trail. On the left, issues related to the SDF-constitutionality, of perceived censorship of textbooks, and of Japan's relationship with its Asian neighbors over questions of history similarly have been useful in campaigns. Nor was activism and debate limited to national security issues. Japan's broader policies toward Asia, its global economic and

trade policies, its Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) policies, and a wide range of other policies have been carefully considered and strenuously argued, lobbied, and considered by postwar political actors.

Democratic competition and contestation over foreign policy issues was not just the purview of political parties or of wrangling between politicians and bureaucrats. Many civil society activists and grassroots movements arose related to foreign policy as Japan's fledgling democracy took root. Peace and anti-nuclear activists—many originating in Hiroshima and Nagasaki—captured national attention via the mass media and highly organized and creative campaigns. The Japan Teacher's Union and other civil society activists have long advocated for revisions to the process by which school textbooks—in particular, those related to history—are approved, opening space for more frank discussions of Japan's wartime policies at home and abroad. The late historian and activist Saburo Ienaga pursued this issue through the courts from 1965 until a final 1997 Supreme Court ruling in his favor—which illustrates the power of an individual to affect the policy process and how difficult certain sorts of activism can be in the area of foreign policy. Far right activists have also enthusiastically promoted their preferred foreign policy agenda. "Sound trucks" that blare out nationalist slogans in public spaces are a pervasive part of Japan's democratic landscape. The far right has been associated with countless examples of less legitimate campaigns of intimidation to "persuade" those who dare to impugn the Imperial household (such as over the Shōwa emperor's role in the Second World War) or who violate a de facto taboo over public discussion of other subjects related to Japan's wartime conduct.<sup>9</sup>

#### Political Party Division on Foreign Policy Opens Greater Democratic Space

Throughout postwar Japanese political history, substantial divisions within political parties over foreign policy issues have created openings for activists, bureaucrats, and skillful politicians to exploit. The LDP has long been divided over the optimal level of remilitarization and reliance on the United States, as evidenced by the starkly different views of prime ministers Kishi Nobusuke (1957–60) and Nakasone (1982–87) when contrasted with Ikeda Hayato (1960–64) and Miki Takeo (1974–76). In the post-Cold War period, the contrast between Koizumi Junichiro (2001–06) and Fukuda Yasuo (2007–08) was equally stark in terms of Japan's engagement with China or the overseas role of Japan's SDF. Trade policy and the broader issues of deregulation and globalization similarly exposed substantial disagreements within the LDP. The JSP and its post-Cold War successor, the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), similarly were deeply divided on the two issues. In the post-Cold War period, these divisions became even more problematic for both parties—and for the new major party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)—often leading to political gridlock, dramatic policy shifts resulting from changing political dynamics within a party, and defections of party members to create new political parties or coalitions.

Ironically, this lack of ability of political parties to present a unified view on major foreign policy issues opened political space for other forms of democratic participation in the foreign policymaking process—from concerted media campaigns and citizen lobbying to the effect of different prime ministers—even of the same party—on foreign policy outcomes.

Democratic input into foreign policy formulation has been especially apparent in recent years, often to the chagrin of the ruling coalition and to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The "obstruction" of the government line on foreign policy has affected almost every major foreign policy issue facing contemporary Japan, including defense policy; alliance with the US; relations with China, South Korea, and especially North Korea; energy and trade policies; and ODA policy. Granted, the strong apparent influence of outside groups on foreign policymaking is partly the result of the aforementioned

disagreements within political parties and also due to a lack of broader political leadership and direction on the part of elected officials and to the “divided government” of different party control of the Diet’s Upper and Lower houses. Nevertheless, the ability of activists based in Okinawa to slow and ultimately derail negotiations over base relocation contributed to a major fissure in the Japan-US alliance in the fall and winter of 2009–10. Similarly, public criticism of government handling—or, as many saw it, mishandling—of the “abduction issue” with North Korea in the early 2000s greatly undermined Japan’s diplomatic effectiveness in the so-called Six Party Talks over North Korea’s nuclear programs. Also, persistent and widespread lobbying against agricultural liberalization by affected producers contributed to the ruling DPJ’s slow pace in including Japan in efforts to create the so-called Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with the United States and other nations.

Beyond attempts to influence the policymaking process, citizens have also sought to directly engage in foreign policy activities rather than trusting elected politicians and government bureaucrats. For example, when some on the political right became frustrated with the content and revision process of commercial textbook publishers, they created the Atarashi Kyōkasho wo Tsukuru-kai (New Textbook Making Group) to write a new school history textbook that was subsequently approved by the government for use in schools, though the adoption rate of the textbook was quite low. The political right was also successful in the mid-1990s on privately organizing groups to assert Japanese sovereignty over the disputed Senkaku islands (Diaoyu islands in Chinese) by visiting them against the wishes of the Japanese government. On the political left, activists have sought to buy small parcels of land leased to the Japanese government for US bases in order to revoke the leases. Some of those supportive of Japan expanding its ODA have foregone direct lobbying and instead begun to provide Japanese expertise and financial support overseas directly, through organizations such as Peacewinds Japan. Japan has seen a flowering of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Since laws regulating these institutions were relaxed in the mid-1990s, more and more NPOs have become involved in issues related to foreign policy. In the aftermath of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters of March 11, 2011, the trend toward direct provision of services formerly provided by the government has increased. The 2011 passage of a new law after the disasters that gives NPOs even more influence takes effect in 2012.

#### Looking Forward: Post-March 2011 Democracy in Foreign Policy

Japan’s engaged electorate has actively debated and ultimately set the path of foreign policy in the post-war era. The same is certain to be true as Japanese face the daunting challenge of rebuilding and creating new policies in the aftermath of the March 2011 disasters that will likely also have international ramifications. Already, elected leaders have responded quickly to calls from citizens to reduce Japan’s ODA in order to reallocate funds to disaster rebuilding. Similarly, there are calls for Japan’s SDF to improve capabilities related to disaster relief, perhaps at the expense of the acquisition of military systems designed for other defense objectives. Japan’s nuclear energy policy, which relates to its broader “energy security” policy, is also open to a fundamental redefinition. Most deeply, Japan’s understandable focus inward after the triple disasters calls into question when or whether Japan will again aspire to a larger leadership role in regional or global international policymaking.

While the likely outcome of these debates is not clear, the process is: it will be negotiated through the preferences of thousands of citizen activists, conflicting party policy platforms, varying bureaucratic interests, and the shifting priorities of Japanese voters. Changing demographics in twenty-first century Japan are sure to affect the specific processes as well. An older, smaller, and more urban society will employ different approaches than those of the past. Thus, both the process of foreign policy formulation and the policies themselves are sure to change in Japan’s democratic future. The high level of engagement and impact of citizens on Japan’s foreign policy formulation, however, will surely remain a constant in political analysis in the years to come. ■

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Trans-Pacific Partnership protest. Source: <http://tiny.cc/9j8m2>.

#### NOTES

1. Chalmers Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925-1975* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982).
2. George Packard III, *Protest in Tokyo: The Security Treaty Crisis of 1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966).
3. The complete text of Article Nine reads: “1. Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes. 2. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.”
4. For a more extended discussion of the politics of constitutional revision, see Andrew L. Oros, “The Domestic and International Politics of Constitutional Change in Japan,” *Education about Asia* 12 no. 3 (2007): 39-44.
5. The principal institution used to interpret the constitution is the bureaucrat-led Cabinet Legislative Bureau, largely because Japan’s Supreme Court has consistently refused to rule on the issue. For an introduction to this issue, see J. Patrick Boyd and Richard Samuels, “Nine Lives?: The Politics of Constitutional Reform in Japan,” *Policy Studies* 19 (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2005).
6. This and the subsequent three paragraphs have been adapted from a more extended discussion, presented in Andrew L. Oros, “The Politics of National Security,” in Alisa Gaunder, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Politics* (London: Routledge, 2011).
7. Thomas U. Berger argues convincingly for the important distinction between the political forces of “pacifism” and “anti-militarism” in postwar Japan in *The Politics of Anti-militarism: National Security in Germany and Japan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
8. See Andrew L. Oros, *Normalizing Japan: Politics, Identity, and the Evolution of Security Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), especially chapter four, for detailed discussion of such policy compromises in the Cold War period.
9. Two excellent studies of these diverse topics are Gavan McCormack, *Client State: Japan in the American Embrace* (London and New York: Verso, 2007) and Norma Field, *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor: A Portrait of Japan at Century’s End* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991).

ANDREW L. OROS is Associate Professor of Political Science and International Studies at Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland. He is author of *Normalizing Japan: Politics, Identity, and the Evolution of Security Practice* (Stanford University Press, 2008) and co-author of *Global Security Watch: Japan* (Praeger Press, 2010), in addition to numerous articles and book chapters on Japan and East Asian security.