

# Japan's Revolutionary Military Change: Explaining Why It Happened Under Kishida

Ayumi Teraoka and Ryo Sahashi

## ABSTRACT

Japan's security policy is changing rapidly, with drastic increases to its defense budget and the acquisition of counterstrike capabilities. While the deteriorating security environment undeniably motivates Japan's defense posture, the speed and extent of these recent changes still present a puzzle. Why was it under Kishida Fumio—a former leader of Kōchikai, the liberal and oft-considered pacifist faction within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)—that Japan achieved its watershed moment on defense? This article explains this change through the exigencies of Kishida's domestic political survival. It was through his leadership of a minority faction within the LDP, his image as a dove, and support for fiscal discipline, that Kishida managed to find the largest common denominator among competing domestic political forces. Had it not been for Kishida, the speed and degree of Japan's recent transformation in security policies would have been unlikely. In light of these findings, we conclude by considering the policy implications for understanding Japan's security posture.

**Keywords:** defense policy, international security, East Asia, Japan, domestic politics, foreign policy analysis, international relations

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## Introduction

Japan's security policy is changing rapidly, with newly announced plans in December 2022 to increase defense spending, introduce strike capabilities and a new cyber force, enhance its integrated air and missile defenses, and place legislation on economic security into its new national security strategy.<sup>1</sup> The introduction of counterstrike capabilities prompts a major rethink of the longstanding role composition of the US-Japan alliance, where Japan focused on serving as a “shield,” while leaving the “spear” striking power to the US military. Revising this alliance design has long been considered difficult, but this has now changed.<sup>2</sup> Prime Minister Kishida Fumio alluded to the significance of this shift in March 2023 when he said, “From now on, we will no longer be completely dependent on US strike power.”<sup>3</sup> Retired Japanese defense chiefs, both civilian and uniformed, described the recent developments as “the biggest shift in Japanese security policy” since 1945.<sup>4</sup> The speed and extent of the transformation are remarkable for a country that has historically been characterized as “a reactive state.”<sup>5</sup>

Japan's deteriorating security environment—China's more assertive behaviour, North Korea's growing nuclear arsenal, and Russia's unrepentant violation of international law—undeniably motivates the country's further investment in defense. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has shown many in Japan that outright invasion of territories is not a thing of the past, and Kishida has repeatedly warned, “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow.”<sup>6</sup> A majority of the Japanese public expressed support for a more robust defense buildup throughout 2022.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, the speed and extent to which the Kishida government achieved these policy changes still present a puzzle. For example, the ideas of increasing

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<sup>1</sup> “National Security Strategy of Japan,” Cabinet Secretariat, Japan, 16 December 2022, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>; “National Defense Strategy,” Japan Ministry of Defense (MOD), Japan, 16 December 2022, [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/policy/agenda/guideline/strategy/pdf/strategy\\_en.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/policy/agenda/guideline/strategy/pdf/strategy_en.pdf); “Defense Buildup Plan,” MOD, Japan, 16 December 2022, [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/plan/pdf/program\\_en.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/plan/pdf/program_en.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> “Abe shi ni tachihadakatta dagekiryoku hoyū e no kabe” [Barrier to possession of striking power stands in Abe's way], *Sankei shimbun*, 12 September 2023.

<sup>3</sup> “Bei no dagekiryoku, kanzen izon sezu' tekikichi kōgeki nōryoku meguri shushō” [Prime Minister: “Won't depend completely on US striking power” regarding enemy-base attack capability], *Asahi shimbun*, 2 March 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Oriki Ryōichi, Kuroe Tetsurō, Isobe Kōichi, Sumita Kazuaki, Ikeda Tokuhiko, Takashima Tatsuhiko, Araki Junichi, and Mutō Shigeki, “Senryaku sanbunsho ni kansuru hyōka kadai to teigen” [Evaluations and proposals regarding three strategic documents], *Kokka anzenhoshō senryaku kenkyūkai*, February 2023, 17.

<sup>5</sup> Kent E. Calder, “Japanese Foreign Economic Policy Formation: Explaining the Reactive State,” *World Politics* 40, no. 4 (1988): 517–541.

<sup>6</sup> Kishida Fumio, “Keynote Address,” IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2022, Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), 10 June 2022, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100356160.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> See various public opinion polls, including *Sankei shimbun*, 19 April 2022; *Nikkei shimbun*, 25 April 2022; *NHK News*, 9 May 2022; *Mainichi shimbun*, 24 May 2022; *Yomiuri shimbun*, 6 June 2022; *Asahi shimbun*, 19 July 2022; *Sankei shimbun*, 10 October 2022; *Yomiuri shimbun*, 5 September 2022; *NHK News*, 12 October 2022.

defense spending to two percent of GDP and introducing strike capabilities were considered by Kishida's predecessors, including Abe Shinzō, who was more ideologically committed to these issues. Nonetheless, neither Abe's leadership nor the decades of aggressive behaviour by Japan's neighbours prompted Tokyo to make these changes.<sup>8</sup> It was under Kishida—a former leader of *Kōchikai*, the liberal and oft-considered dovish and pacifist faction within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)—that Japan achieved its watershed moment on defense and did so relatively quickly. Why did Japan's defense buildup efforts accelerate *so rapidly* under his leadership?

We argue that a unique confluence of factors and decisions related to Kishida's domestic political survival best explains this question. As a leader of a minority faction within the LDP marked by a dovish image, Kishida needed to navigate a landscape characterized by the tremendous influence of the late Abe and the largest and more hawkish faction he led. By pursuing massive defense buildups, Kishida managed to gain support from the Abe faction, notably Abe, who saw Kishida's image as a dove useful in achieving his unfinished agendas, especially on security. Moreover, as a greater supporter of fiscal discipline than his predecessors, Kishida opened the path for tax hikes to account for the increase in the defense-related budget, without which the goal of two percent of GDP would have been more difficult to achieve.<sup>9</sup> It was through his leadership of a minority faction within the LDP, his image as a dove, and his support for fiscal discipline that Kishida managed to find the largest common denominator among competing domestic political forces. Had it not been for Kishida, the speed and degree of Japan's recent transformation in security policies would have been unlikely.

To illustrate, this article focuses on two key decisions by the Kishida government—the upsurge in the defense-related budget and the introduction of “counterstrike” capabilities. We consider these decisions particularly significant and potentially revolutionary for Japan's security policy. Not only do they mark departures from the past, but they may also enormously impact the future of Japan's military statecraft and the regional balance of power. Already, the anticipated resource increase has prompted debates inside the Ministry of Defense (MOD) about how to reinvigorate the entire Japanese defense industry.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Japan's introduction of strike capabilities has triggered serious rethinking about the future command-and-control structure

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<sup>8</sup> Adam P. Liff, “Japan's Defense Reforms under Abe: Assessing Institutional and Policy Change,” in *The Political Economy of the Abe Government and Abenomics Reforms*, edited by Takeo Hoshi and Phillip Lipsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021): 479–510.

<sup>9</sup> The defense-related budget is the sum of the MOD budget and the “security-related budget” that accounts for costs for the coast guard, research and development, and civilian infrastructure, among others.

<sup>10</sup> Acquisition, Technology & Logistics Agency, Japan, “Kongo no bōei seisan gijutsu no iji kyōka ni tsuite” [About maintaining and bolstering future defense industrial and technological base], <https://www5.cao.go.jp/keizai-shimon/kaigi/special/reform/ab1/20230417/shiryō1-2.pdf>.

of the US-Japan alliance, potentially resonating across the broader US alliance system in Asia.<sup>11</sup>

This article aims to contribute to the literature in two ways. First, this is one of the earliest scholarly investigations of Japan's recent security policy-making and, to our knowledge, the first examination that delves into the Kishida cabinet's decision-making processes. It derives original data from almost two dozen interviews the authors conducted from March to June 2023 with senior government officials—both elected and civil-servant—and journalists familiar with the subject.<sup>12</sup> It also draws on rich empirical data from various Japanese-language sources, including media coverage and policy documents.

Second, the article provides a domestic political lens to understand the causes of Japan's changing security policy, especially during the Kishida administration. Recent scholarship on Japanese security policy has closely investigated Japan's (re)turn to great power politics,<sup>13</sup> its emerging foreign policy vision,<sup>14</sup> and the degree of its evolutionary change,<sup>15</sup> most of which take Japan's changing international environment and Abe's personal traits as major causes of Japan's defense reforms. While the authors do not disagree with these perspectives, we make a case that Kishida faced a unique domestic political environment, which made him one of the biggest accelerators of Japan's security policy in history.

The article begins by laying out existing explanations for Japan's recent security policy change, neither of which can independently nor fully explain the research puzzle. It then provides the broader domestic political situations Kishida faced *before*, *in the process of*, and *after* winning the prime minister's office. Third, the article traces how Kishida made specific decisions on defense spending and strike capability. It concludes by summarizing the findings and presenting policy implications and avenues of future research.

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher B. Johnstone and Zack Cooper, "Getting U.S.-Japanese Command and Control Right," *War on the Rocks*, 28 June 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/06/getting-u-s-japanese-command-and-control-right/>.

<sup>12</sup> Many of our interviews were conducted confidentially. See appendix for details of interviewees. All interviews were conducted in Japanese and translated into English by the authors.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth B. Pyle, "Japan's Return to Great Power Politics: Abe's Restoration," *Asia Policy* 13, no. 2 (2018): 69–90.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Green, *Line of Advantage: Japan's Grand Strategy in the Era of Abe Shinzō* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022); Tomohiko Satake and Ryo Sahashi, "The Rise of China and Japan's 'Vision' for Free and Open Indo-Pacific," *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 127 (2021): 18–35; Kei Koga, "Japan's 'Indo-Pacific' Question: Countering China or Shaping a New Regional Order?" *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 49–73.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher W. Hughes, "Japan's Strategic Trajectory and Collective Self-Defense: Essential Continuity or Radical Shift?" *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 43, no. 1 (2017): 93–126; Leif-Eric Easley, "How Proactive? How Pacifist? Charting Japan's Evolving Defense Posture," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 1 (2017): 63–87; Adam P. Liff, "Kishida the Accelerator: Japan's Defense Evolution after Abe," *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (2023): 63–83.

## Setting the Puzzle: Speed and Degree of Kishida's Defense Buildup

Japan's worsening security environment is undeniably the primary cause of the Kishida cabinet's recent decisions for historic defense buildups. While Japanese public opinion toward China has soured amidst various points of political friction since the early 2000s,<sup>16</sup> Tokyo's threat perception toward China's defense buildup has been particularly acute over the last five years.<sup>17</sup> Concerns over the Taiwan Strait heightened in 2021, as policymakers, experts, and pundits frequently discussed the likelihood of a contingency in Japan's proximity.<sup>18</sup> Among those contributing to such public discourse was Abe, who, as a single Parliamentary member after stepping down from office in 2020, became much more outspoken about the importance of Taiwan to Japan's security.<sup>19</sup>

Against this backdrop, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine led many Japanese to immediately draw connections to a situation in Taiwan, raising public support for bolstering Japan's defenses. One public poll in May 2022 suggested that 80 percent of respondents felt "more concerned" about the possibility of war between Japan and neighbouring countries than before.<sup>20</sup> Senior elected officials both inside and outside the Kishida cabinet have all perceived such an impact on Japanese public opinion, for example, by helping to "get rid of taboos" on defense that historically existed in line with its Peace Constitution.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the increasing missile capabilities of Japan's hostile neighbours, including hypersonic systems, also drew attention to the need for alternative methods to counter enemy missiles other than the current missile defense systems.<sup>22</sup>

Another variable shaping Japan's external environment is the credibility of the security guarantee by its sole alliance partner. Japan's defense buildup measures might be prompted by fear of abandonment by the United States, for instance, due to an emerging perception that America is no longer "the absolute power."<sup>23</sup> Some scholars even argue that Japan may be "looking for

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<sup>16</sup> Sheila A. Smith, *Intimate Rivals: Japanese Domestic Politics and a Rising China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> L and Onodera Itsunori, interviews by authors, Tokyo, 6 and 7 June 2023.

<sup>18</sup> L and O, interviews by authors, 6 and 7 June 2023. Cabinet Office, Japan, "Public Opinion Poll on Diplomacy," February 2023, 19, <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/r04/r04-gaiko/gairiyaku.pdf>; "Davidson: China Could Try to Take Control of Taiwan in 'Next Six Years,'" *USNI News*, 9 March 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/03/09/davidson-china-could-try-to-take-control-of-taiwan-in-next-six-years>.

<sup>19</sup> "Taiwan Contingency Also One for Japan, Japan-U.S. alliance: Ex-Japan PM Abe," *Kyodo News*, 1 December 2021, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/12/b38433927c1e-taiwan-contingency-also-one-for-japan-japan-us-alliance-abe.html>.

<sup>20</sup> "How security perceptions have changed with the invasion of Ukraine *Asahi Shimbun* Poll" *Asahi shimbun*, 3 May 2022. On public polls, see also citation 7.

<sup>21</sup> A, B, C, D, E, F, L, O, P, Q, S, T, and Onodera Itsunori, interviews by authors, Tokyo and via Zoom (C only), various dates (see Appendix).

<sup>22</sup> "'Tate' to 'hoko' yakuwari minaoshi" [Reviewing the roles of "shield" and "spear"], *Yomiuri shimbun*, 13 January 2022. Q, T, and Onodera Itsunori, interviews by the authors, Tokyo, various dates.

<sup>23</sup> Onodera Itsunori, interview by authors, 7 June 2023.

‘Plan-B.’<sup>24</sup> Tokyo’s acute sense of the need to keep the United States engaged in the region is apparent in Japan’s new National Security Strategy, which notes that “deepened cooperation” between the two countries “is of vital importance” particularly “for the U.S. commitment to the region to be maintained and strengthened.”<sup>25</sup> The advent of the Trump administration and the Biden administration’s withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2021 likely sharpened such concerns. The deteriorating-security-environment thesis, including the more unpredictable United States, thus helps explain *why* Japan bolstered its defense.

Nevertheless, external factors alone cannot elucidate why such transformational choices on defense were made in the manner and at the time they were. While the Ukraine factor certainly tipped the scales in favour of a more permissive domestic environment for robust security policies, Kishida’s decision to revise the three defense documents and discussions about increasing defense spending and strike capabilities *preceded* Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>26</sup> The Japanese government opened a serious discussion on strike capabilities in the summer of 2020 when the planned deployment of the new Aegis-Ashore system was suddenly cancelled by unrelated events. Japan under the leadership of Abe and Suga Yoshihide had already faced a volatile external environment in Northeast Asia, yet it was under Kishida that Japan underwent this transition.

Alternatively, as Biden claimed to his supporters, these policy changes might have resulted from direct US pressure.<sup>27</sup> The Japanese government certainly informed the Biden administration about domestic developments on security policies and had consulted with Washington, especially regarding the possible sale of Tomahawk missiles to Japan, since mid-2022.<sup>28</sup> In multiple summit meetings in 2022, Kishida also promised Biden “his determination to fundamentally reinforce Japan’s defense capabilities and secure a substantial increase of its defense budget needed to effect it.”<sup>29</sup> The cabinet was undoubtedly keen on concluding the three new strategy papers before another Kishida-Biden Summit in January 2023.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, “Vulnerable US Alliances in Northeast Asia: the Nuclear Implications,” *The Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2021): 157–175.

<sup>25</sup> “National Security Strategy of Japan,” 12–13; D, interview by authors, 30 March 2023.

<sup>26</sup> “Bōeihi GDP hi ichi pācentowaku kodawarazu” [Not fixated on defense spending’s GDP one percent cap], *Nikkei shimbun*, 20 May 2021, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOUA193HI0Z10C21A5000000/>.

<sup>27</sup> “Nihon no bōeihi zōgaku ‘watashi ga settoku shita’” [“I convinced” Japan to increase defense spending], *Yomiuri shimbun*, 21 June 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Michelle Lee and Ellen Nakashima, “Japan to Buy Tomahawk Missiles in Defense Buildup amid Fears of War,” *Washington Post*, 13 December 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/12/12/japan-tomahawk-missiles-ukraine-war/>; R, interview by authors, Tokyo, 8 June 2023.

<sup>29</sup> “Japan-U.S. Joint Leaders’ Statement,” The White House, 23 May 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/japan-u-s-joint-leaders-statement-strengthening-the-free-and-open-international-order/>.

<sup>30</sup> T, interview by authors, 13 June 2023.

However, senior officials involved in the process of formulating the strategy papers, including former Defense Minister Onodera Itsunori, attest that the influence of the United States was negligible.<sup>31</sup> A senior Lower House member even said he refrained from contacting US representatives during the process to avoid being seen as influenced by Washington.<sup>32</sup> Despite some media speculations, Japanese officials reflected that it was also unrealistic to promise anything concrete to the United States without finalizing domestic processes.<sup>33</sup> While Washington certainly played a key role by approving the selling of Tomahawks to Japan and in creating a welcoming international environment for Japan's updated defense policies, no concrete evidence suggests that US pressure accelerated Kishida's decisions. Retracting his previous claim, Biden also said Kishida "did not need to be persuaded" because he "had already decided on increasing defense spending."<sup>34</sup>

### **Kishida's Domestic Political Survival**

Why, then, were Japan's recent defense buildup measures realized under Kishida's leadership in such a rapid manner and significant degree? The following section provides the contours of the political background Kishida faced, including how he won the prime minister's seat and managed his administration. This shows that Kishida's political ambition for his faction, Kōchikai, his acute awareness of the political power balance within the LDP, and his partnership with Abe and the Abe faction broadly shaped Kishida's approach to defense issues.

#### *Turning Kōchikai into a Competitive Political Force*

Kishida's image as a dove and liberal statesman is rooted in his long-time affiliation with Kōchikai, otherwise known as the Kishida faction.<sup>35</sup> Though disbanded in 2024 amidst financial scandals, Kōchikai was known for prioritizing economic growth and pursuing light armament during the Cold War, with an emphasis on Asian diplomacy. The pacifist tradition ran long and deep within the faction. Its founder, Ikeda Hayato, who served as prime minister following the much-contested revision of the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty in 1960, prioritized dialogue with opposition parties on the left and shelved the LDP's agenda of constitutional revision. While supportive of the alliance with the United States, Foreign Minister Ōhira Masayoshi—also of Kōchikai and who later became prime minister—was instrumental in leading Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei's diplomatic normalization process

<sup>31</sup> L, O, R, T, and Onodera Itsunori, interviews by authors, various dates.

<sup>32</sup> O, interview by authors, 7 June 2023.

<sup>33</sup> "Shushō zōzeigiron o shudō" [PM leads discussions on tax hikes], *Yomiuri shimbun*, 17 December 2022; R and T, interviews by authors, 8 and 13 June 2023.

<sup>34</sup> "Bei Baiden daitōryō Nihon no bōeihi 'settoku' hatsugen o teisei" [US President Biden retracts his statement about having persuaded Japan on defense spending], *NHK News*, 28 June 2023, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20230629/k10014112511000.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Kishida stepped down from his faction's leadership position in December 2023.



with China.<sup>36</sup> As a representative from Hiroshima, Kishida also cares deeply about nuclear disarmament and arms control issues.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, he continued to show a strong affinity to *Kōchikai* even after becoming prime minister. Unlike many of Japan's past prime ministers, Kishida chose to be double-hatted as the head of his faction and the Japanese government until December 2023. In his keynote speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2022, he did not shy away from explaining Japan's approach to Asian diplomacy in terms of the *Kōchikai* tradition.<sup>38</sup>

Despite long being labeled as the “mainstream” conservative faction within the LDP, *Kōchikai*'s influence gradually waned in post-Cold War Japan as the country turned more to the right. After all, Kishida was the first *Kōchikai* prime minister in the three decades since Miyazawa Kiichi stepped down in 1993.<sup>39</sup> Critics called them *okuge shūdan*—meaning a group of aristocratic civil servants in Japanese—to suggest their lacking the fighting spirit necessary in politics. Heading the group since 2012, Kishida sought to transform this perception of *Kōchikai*. He argued ardently for revitalizing *Kōchikai* within the LDP by turning it “into a political force capable of political combat.”<sup>40</sup>

The process began with redefining what the group represented at its core. Serving as foreign minister under Abe from 2012 to 2017, Kishida faced Japan's rapidly changing security environment and expanding role in regional security. Kishida likely realized that *Kōchikai*—and ultimately himself too—would not be competitive if its only image was liberal and pacifist.<sup>41</sup> Starting in 2015, he began to relabel *Kōchikai* as a realist force that valued liberal ideas.<sup>42</sup> At a faction gathering, Kishida said:

*Kōchikai*'s guiding principle is not the light armament, economy-first policy but rather its pursuit of realistic policies to meet the demands of the era and people without any fixation with particular ideologies...the basic thinking behind Darwin's biological evolution theory is that it is not the powerful that survive, but those most adept at adjusting to the changing times.<sup>43</sup>

As prime minister, Kishida continued to explain that *Kōchikai* embraced

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<sup>36</sup> Nakakita Kōji, *Jimintō* [LDP] (Tokyo: Chūō kōron shinsha, 2017)

<sup>37</sup> Kishida Fumio, *Kakuheiki no nai sekai e* [Toward a world free of nuclear weapons] (Tokyo: Nikkei BP, 2020); Kishida Fumio, *Kishida bijon* [Kishida vision] (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2020).

<sup>38</sup> Kishida, “Keynote Address.”

<sup>39</sup> “*Kōchikai*, ‘higan’ no shushō tanjō e” [Wish comes true—*Kōchikai* prime minister], *Nikkei shimbun*, 29 September 2021, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOUA291L00Z20C21A900000/>.

<sup>40</sup> “Okuge shūdan’ henkaku ni fushin” [Taking pains to reform “okuge shūdan”], *Yomiuri shimbun*, 24 December 2021.

<sup>41</sup> J, interview by authors, Tokyo, 2 June 2023.

<sup>42</sup> Kishida Fumio, Foreign Affairs Committee, House of Representatives, 189th Diet, 27 March 2015, <https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/#/detail/minId=118903968X00320150327&spkNum=4&current=42;SerikawaYoichi,Kochikai%20seiken%20no%20kiseki> [Track record of the Koikekai administration] (Tokyo: Nikkei BP, 2023).

<sup>43</sup> “Doraemon no inai Nobita” [Nobita without Doraemon], *TBS News*, 12 March 2023, <https://newsdig.tbs.co.jp/articles/-/372663>.



both liberalism and realism and, therefore, that the Kōchikai leader pursuing massive defense buildup was not inconsistent. Kōchikai's policy of light armament and emphasis on the economy was the "realistic way to protect freedom" in the past, yet now investing in defense was a realistic measure for defending such values in today's international environment.<sup>44</sup>

In the beginning of these efforts, however, Kishida faced pushback from Kōchikai elders, who saw light armament as Kōchikai's core principle.<sup>45</sup> Under such circumstances, Kishida initially did not endorse—and at times, publicly opposed—particular defense agendas, including Abe's career-long goal of revising Article Nine of the Constitution, as well as Japan's strike capabilities.<sup>46</sup> Kishida had also kept his political mentor, Koga Makoto, a firm supporter of the Peace Constitution, as the honorary chairman of the faction.<sup>47</sup> Kishida's initial reluctance to endorse constitutional revision and strike capabilities indicates that his experience as Abe's foreign minister was not enough to trigger a complete transformation of his position on these key defense issues.

### *Getting the Prime Minister's Seat*

After serving as the LDP's Policy Research Council Chairperson from 2017 to 2020, one of the most senior positions in the party, it was a natural next step for Kishida to aim for the prime minister's office. With the current reality of power balance in the Japanese Parliament, where the LDP remains dominant and opposition parties weak and fragmented, securing the most votes of LDP lawmakers is the path to the prime minister's seat. In 2021, the largest LDP faction was still the Abe faction with 96 members, followed by the Asō faction with 53 members; the Takeshita faction, now renamed as the Motegi faction, with 52 members; and the Nikai faction with 47 members. The Kishida faction, or Kōchikai, only ranked fifth in size with 46 members.<sup>48</sup> As a leader of the minority faction within the LDP, it was imperative for Kishida to secure endorsements from other factions within the LDP, in particular, the largest Abe faction. When he failed to do so, Kishida lost against Suga in September 2020; when he succeeded in his second attempt, he became the 100th prime minister of Japan in September 2021.

To gain support from Abe, Kishida began to endorse and take on hard-line security issues. Before his first bid in 2020, he launched the new party

<sup>44</sup> "Kishida shushō futanzō 'shinbō zuyoku uttaeru'" [PM Kishida says he will patiently persuade public about increasing burdens], *Nikkei shimbun*, 10 May 2023, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOUA109DQ0Q3A510C2000000/>.

<sup>45</sup> N, interview by authors, Tokyo, 7 June 2023; "Hato nakenu jimin" [LDP doves can't chirp], *Nikkei shimbun*, 25 October 2015.

<sup>46</sup> "Kishida jimin seichōkaichō kenpō kyūjō no kaisei huyō tonō kangae kata wa kawarazu" [LDP Policy Research Council Chairperson Kishida's position unchanged: Article Nine revision is unnecessary], *Bloomberg*, 5 September 2017; C and J, interviews by authors, 30 March and 2 June 2023.

<sup>47</sup> Koga Makoto, *Kenpō kyūjō wa sekai isan* [Article Nine is world heritage] (Tokyo: Kamogawa shuppan, 2019).

<sup>48</sup> "Jimintō no habatsu to wa" [What are LDP factions], *Yomiuri shimbun*, 13 September 2021, <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/20210913-OYT1T50126/>.

headquarters on economic security.<sup>49</sup> Kishida also openly supported constitutional revision, which close observers saw as signs of Kishida “crossing the Rubicon.”<sup>50</sup> After he still lost the race, however, Kishida shifted even further to minimize the liberal and pacifist image of Kōchikai.<sup>51</sup> As a start, Koga stepped down from the faction’s honorary position.<sup>52</sup> Kōchikai members like Onodera and Tsuji Kiyoto, a fourth-term Lower House member, both attest that the efforts to signal Kishida’s ability and commitment to “continue Prime Minister Abe’s vision” accelerated during this time in order “to win support from the Abe faction.”<sup>53</sup> Given Kōchikai’s limited size, support from other factions, particularly Seiwakai or the Abe faction, was necessary.<sup>54</sup> As the case study section reveals in detail, Kishida’s support for introducing strike capabilities also appeared in this context.

Kishida’s decisions to take on more hawkish agendas and reduce ties with the liberal ideologues in Kōchikai was a signal to other LDP leaders of his seriousness for power. His separation from Koga enabled support from Asō Tarō, Koga’s political rival, who then persuaded Abe to endorse Kishida.<sup>55</sup> In convincing Abe, Asō referred to the “Nixon-goes-to-China Reverse” effect, meaning that *dovish* leaders face fewer domestic barriers than *hawks* when pursuing more *robust* and *offensive* defense policies.<sup>56</sup> Asō argued, “it will be easier for a liberal person like Kishida to achieve what you [Abe] want to do,” including Abe’s unfinished conservative and hawkish agendas.<sup>57</sup> Abe ultimately agreed and endorsed Kishida in 2021. Kishida’s dovish reputation, which Abe likely found useful, was not possessed by other realistic contenders, such as Kōno Tarō.

### *Handling Power under the Philosophy of Ellipse*

Ever since taking office, Kishida has taken careful steps to consult with other faction leaders over key policies.<sup>58</sup> In his first year as prime minister, Kishida visited LDP headquarters 81 times, more than doubling the number of visits made by his predecessors.<sup>59</sup> In particular, Kishida cherished his friendship

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<sup>49</sup> “The launch of strategic headquarters of the creation of a new international order,” Kishida Fumio Official Website, 4 June 2020, <https://kishida.gr.jp/activity/1143>.

<sup>50</sup> J, interview, 2 June 2023; “Abe sōri kara no ‘zenjō’ wa arienai” [No way to be picked as Abe’s heir], *Bungei shunjū*, November 2019, 134–138.

<sup>51</sup> T, interview by authors, 13 June 2023.

<sup>52</sup> “Saiki naruka Kishida no henshin” [Will a transformed Kishida be revived?], *NHK Magazine*, 21 October 2020, <https://www.nhk.or.jp/politics/articles/feature/46757.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Onodera Itsunori and Tsuji Kiyoto, interviews by authors, Tokyo, 7 and 8 June 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Onodera Itsunori and Tsuji Kiyoto, interviews by authors, 7 and 8 June 2023.

<sup>55</sup> J and S, interviews by authors, 2 and 9 June 2023.

<sup>56</sup> J, interview by authors, 2 June 2023; Mattes and Weeks define “Nixon goes-to-China” logic as the following: “hawkish leaders face fewer domestic barriers than doves when it comes to pursuing reconciliation with foreign enemies.” Michaela Mattes and Jessica L. P. Weeks, “Hawks, doves, and peace: an experimental approach,” *American Journal of Political Science* 63, no. 1 (2019): 53–66.

<sup>57</sup> J, interview by authors, 2 June 2023.

<sup>58</sup> J and S, interviews by authors, 2 and 9 June 2023.

<sup>59</sup> “Kishida ryū seiji kenshō ichinen” [Kishida’s political style: the first year examined], *Yomiuri shimbun*, 7 October 2022.

with the late Abe. The two leaders came from the same cohort of lawmakers first elected in 1993, and as the Abe cabinet's foreign minister, Kishida traveled the world advocating for Abe's diplomatic slogans like the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Prime Minister Kishida not only loyally succeeded Abe's foreign policy visions but also frequently met with the former prime minister and appointed senior members from the Abe faction to key cabinet and party positions.<sup>60</sup>

While maintaining close ties with Abe was essential for Kishida given the LDP's internal power balance, the presence of Abe and the Abe faction also let Kishida follow Kōchikai's "philosophy of ellipse." This philosophy, proposed by Ōhira who was strongly influenced by Hegel's dialectical thought, advocates not putting two potentially conflicting elements in opposition but searching for an answer that satisfies both.<sup>61</sup> Accordingly, it views having two centers of gravity as more stabilizing than having just one.<sup>62</sup> Kōchikai politicians such as Kishida and former Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa continued to refer to this philosophy as their guiding political principle.<sup>63</sup>

It was easy to put the philosophy of ellipse into practice with the presence of Abe who could represent the views of almost a hundred fellow parliamentary members in one voice. If Kishida represented a liberal voice in the LDP—being from Hiroshima and Kōchikai, advocating for visions such as a world without nuclear weapons—the late Abe was an archetype of a conservative voice within the party, who sought to lift constraints on Japan's defense, most recently calling for nuclear-sharing with the United States.<sup>64</sup> By closely coordinating with Abe, Kishida sought to identify policies that would satisfy both his followers with more liberal predilections and Abe's more conservative forces. The prime minister's office was one center of gravity, while the opposite political spectrum Abe powerfully represented in the LDP made another.<sup>65</sup>

As a Japanese senior Cabinet member reflected, the Kishida government was able to get "a sense of assurance that once Mr. Abe was convinced, the agenda would carry forward."<sup>66</sup> In this sense, the political positioning of Kishida, at least ostensibly representing the liberal wing of the party, played a key role in establishing political stability and accelerating otherwise more

<sup>60</sup> "Kishida shushō Suga Abe shi ra to menkai" [PM Kishida meets with Suga and Abe], *Asahi shimbun*, 10 February 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Tsujii Takashi, *Akane iro no sora* [Dark red sky] (Tokyo: Bungei shunju, 2010); Ryuji Hattori, *Japan and the Origins of the Asia-Pacific Order: Masayoshi Ohira's Diplomacy and Philosophy*, edited by Graham Leonard (Singapore: Springer, 2022), 7–17 and 118.

<sup>62</sup> "Jimintō, Abe shi ushinai kuzureta 'daen'" [LDP, ellipse collapsed after losing Abe], *Nikkei shimbun*, 12 July 2022, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOUA1021R0Q2A710C2000000/>.

<sup>63</sup> Ōhira Masayoshi Foundation, ed., *Ohira Masayoshi to sono seiji saihen* (Tokyo: PHP Editors, 2022).

<sup>64</sup> "Abe moto shushō 'kaku kyōyū' no giron o" [Former PM Abe: time to discuss "nuclear sharing"], *Sankei shimbun*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.sankei.com/article/20220227-WAR5FEF3SVOYLFMCC7FOUYSOL4/>.

<sup>65</sup> "Jimintō, Abe shi ushinai kuzureta 'daen,'" *Nikkei shimbun*, 12 July 2022.

<sup>66</sup> T, interview by authors, 13 June 2023.

controversial defense agendas. Had the country been ruled by another political leader, then the philosophy of ellipse could not have been implemented to attract a wider domestic support for policy agendas while establishing a stable equilibrium with the force behind Abe.

With the passing of Abe, however, Kishida was no longer able to gain such assurance. Yet, at the same time, no coherent voice of opposition reached the prime minister's office from the Abe faction since the group had since been divided.<sup>67</sup> The prime minister shifted to managing his power through close ties with LDP Vice President Asō and Secretary-General Motegi Toshimitsu, as the members of the three factions they led outnumbered that of the Abe faction.<sup>68</sup>

### **Achieving Japan's Revolutionary Military Change**

The following section traces the Kishida administration's specific decision-making processes on defense spending and strike capability. Each part briefly introduces the issue's background and then lays out events that led to the Kishida government's decisions in December 2022.

#### ***Doubling Defense Spending***

##### *Background*

Since 1976, Japan maintained a self-imposed cap on its defense budget at around one percent of GDP. Despite never being codified as law and the initial cabinet decision eliminated in 1987, subsequent prime ministers more or less followed the one percent cap because it was popular among the public.<sup>69</sup> As Japan's economy grew and trade imbalance with the United States became more serious, however, Japan's subdued defense spending periodically drew attention from American critics, who saw it as a sign of Japan's cheap-riding on the alliance.<sup>70</sup>

US pressure toward its allies to spend more on defense continued into the Obama and Trump administrations. Partly in response to such US calls, NATO members have explicitly committed to increasing defense spending to two percent of GDP since the Wales Summit Declaration in 2014.<sup>71</sup> US pressures only accelerated with the advent of President Donald Trump, who made the burden-sharing debate a focal point of the Atlantic partnership. In 2022, many more NATO members achieved the two percent target.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>67</sup> T, interview by authors, 13 June 2023.

<sup>68</sup> "Natsumade yareba" Kishida shushō zainichi nissū no yashin" ["Until summer" PM Kishida's ambition for days in office], *Asahi shimbun*, 5 May 2023; T, interview by authors, 13 June 2023.

<sup>69</sup> James E. Auer, "Japan's Defense Policy," *Current History* 87, no. 528 (1988): 145–182.

<sup>70</sup> Mike M. Mochizuki, "Japan's Search for Strategy," *International Security* 8, no. 3 (1984): 152–179.

<sup>71</sup> "Wales Summit Declaration Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government," NATO, 5 September 2014, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm).

<sup>72</sup> Jason Davidson, "No 'Free-Riding' Here: European Defense Spending Defies US Critics," *Atlantic Council*, 13 March 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/no-free-riding-here-european-defense-spending-defies-us-critics/>.

Unlike NATO members and South Korea, Japan managed to fend off the direct attack from the Trump administration on burden-sharing issues thanks largely to Abe's personal ties with Trump.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, several elected officials dismiss the direct impact of US pressure on Japan's recent decision on the defense budget, including Secretary of Defense Mark Esper's call in October 2020 for all US allies to "invest more in defense—at least two percent of GDP as the floor."<sup>74</sup> If anything, the effect of such external pressure was indirect since the NATO decision was used as the benchmark in Japanese discourse.

*Influence of the Abe faction*

The idea of defense spending's two-percent target was first adopted in the LDP's election manifesto in October 2021, just weeks after Kishida took office.<sup>75</sup> Kishida's position on this issue only became clear in the LDP leadership race as a response to the position taken by his rival, candidate Takaichi Sanae. A vocal supporter of raising the defense budget, Takaichi was Abe's confidante and was slated to receive Abe faction support in the initial round of voting. Consequently, candidate Kishida said the defense budget "should not be confined to any specific number, such as one percent (of GDP)."<sup>76</sup> When Kishida won the LDP election thanks to Abe faction votes in the runoff, Kishida appointed Takaichi as the chairperson of the LDP's Policy Research Council, which then drafted the October 2021 manifesto. Various media portrayed the manifesto as heavily reflecting Takaichi's vision, as indicated by its adoption of the two-percent goal on defense spending.<sup>77</sup> The target gained even more prominence in the following Upper House Election in 2022.<sup>78</sup>

Takaichi's influence was underpinned by the support of Abe, who was also vocal about the issue. Despite not touching the issue as prime minister, he now endorsed the two-percent target and vocally insisted that the increased spending be covered by national bonds—a thinking in line with his economic

<sup>73</sup> R, interview by authors, 8 June 2023.

<sup>74</sup> L and O, interviews by authors, 6 and 7 June 2023; Mark T. Esper, "Secretary Esper Discusses Strengthening Allies and Partners at the Atlantic Council" (Washington, DC, 20 October 2020), <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2389097/secretary-esper-discusses-strengthening-allies-and-partners-at-the-atlantic-cou/><https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FTranscripts%2FTranscript%2FArticle%2F2389097%2Fsecretary-esper-discusses-strengthening-allies-and-partners-at-the-atlantic-cou%2F>.

<sup>75</sup> "House of Representatives General Election 2021," LDP, [https://www.jimin.jp/election/results/sen\\_shu49/political\\_promise/search/](https://www.jimin.jp/election/results/sen_shu49/political_promise/search/), last accessed 16 May 2023.

<sup>76</sup> "Sōsaisen bōeihi kakuji de kisou" [Competing over increased defense budget in leadership race], *Nikkei shimbun*, 14 September 2021.

<sup>77</sup> "Takaichi kōyaku' no giwaku wa sono tōri de gozaimasu Takaichi seichōkaichō" [True it is 'Takaichi manifesto' says Chairperson of Policy Research Council Takaichi], *Asahi shimbun*, 28 October 2021, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASPBX6JLYPBXUTFK01D.html>.

<sup>78</sup> "Jimintō reiwa yonendo sangiin senkyo kōyaku" [LDP's manifesto for FY2024 House of Concillors general election], LDP, June 2022, [https://storage.jimin.jp/pdf/pamphlet/202206\\_manifest.pdf](https://storage.jimin.jp/pdf/pamphlet/202206_manifest.pdf); "Kyōryoku na bukkadaka taisaku" [Strong measures against inflation], *Yomiuri shimbun*, 17 June 2022.

policy, *Abenomics*.<sup>79</sup> Abe justified the choice to burden future generations with debt by saying, “The defense budget is for passing our Motherland onto the next generation.”<sup>80</sup>

Abe’s influence over the Kishida government’s thinking toward defense spending was most conspicuous in the process of formulating the “Basic Policy on Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform” in June 2022—a month before his passing. Unlike the party manifesto, this was an official cabinet policy document outlining the fiscal strategy for the following year, over which the party usually has limited influence. Yet Abe and his supporters pushed for inserting the five-year timeline for increasing defense capabilities and reference to the two-percent pledge by NATO countries. One senior Lower House member even recalled hearing that Abe had directly called Kishida to press this issue.<sup>81</sup> Ultimately, the Kishida cabinet was forced to accommodate their demands in finalizing this document.<sup>82</sup>

Nonetheless, Kishida’s position critically differed from Abe’s on fiscal discipline, especially on his willingness to consider tax hikes. Positioned closer to the Ministry of Finance (MOF) and more supportive of fiscal discipline than Abe, Kishida pushed back against blindly following any GDP percentage target. In a *Yomiuri* interview, he emphasized that the issue must be considered from three aspects—1) What do we need? 2) How much money do we need? and 3) How do we finance it?<sup>83</sup> Abe, however, had ridiculed lawmakers who used this argument by saying, “They sound like MOF officials,” a group he particularly detested.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, Kishida held onto his three-set argument.<sup>85</sup>

While the idea of tax hikes floated, Kishida took the step to establish an experts’ advisory council in September.<sup>86</sup> Convened in a rushed manner and having had few substantive discussions, the utility of the board and its report are widely speculated as a political cover for Kishida to proceed with tax

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<sup>79</sup> “Bōeihi saitei roku chō 1700 okuen” [Defense budget will be minimum ¥6.17 trillion], *Sankei shimbun*, 22 April 2022.

<sup>80</sup> “Bōeihizō zaigen no kōbō” [Battles over financing defense spending], *Yomiuri shimbun*, 26 July 2022.

<sup>81</sup> L, interview by authors, 6 June 2023.

<sup>82</sup> Cabinet Office, Japan, “Basic Policy on Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform 2022,” 7 July 2022, [https://www5.cao.go.jp/keizai-shimon/kaigi/cabinet/honebuto/2022/2022\\_basicpolicies\\_en.pdf](https://www5.cao.go.jp/keizai-shimon/kaigi/cabinet/honebuto/2022/2022_basicpolicies_en.pdf); “Abe shi zaigen anpo de hasshin” [Abe speaks out on finance and security], *Yomiuri shimbun*, 27 May 2022; “Honebuto no hōshin’ shushō ni shiren” [“Basic Policy on Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform” presents challenges for PM], *Yomiuri shimbun*, 8 June 2022; T, interview by authors, 13 June 2023.

<sup>83</sup> “Shushō NPT kaigi shusseki e” [PM attends NPT conference], *Yomiuri shimbun*, 21 June 2022.

<sup>84</sup> “Bōeihi saitei roku chō 1700 okuen”; Abe Shinzō, *Abe Shinzō kaikoroku* [Memoir of Abe Shinzō] (Tokyo: Chūō kōron shinsha, 2023).

<sup>85</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, Japan, “Kishida naikaku sōri daijin kisha kaiken” [Press conference by Prime Minister Kishida], 14 July 2022, [https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/101\\_kishida/statement/2022/0714kaiken.html](https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/101_kishida/statement/2022/0714kaiken.html).

<sup>86</sup> Cabinet Secretariat, Japan, “Kokuryoku to shite no bōei ryoku o sōgōteki ni kangaeru yūshikisha kaigi” [The advisory panel to comprehensively discuss defense capabilities as national strength], [https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/seisaku/boueiryoku\\_kaigi/index.html](https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/seisaku/boueiryoku_kaigi/index.html), last accessed 17 May 2023.



hikes. According to the *Asahi shimbun*, the launch of this council was the compromise between the MOF's desire to firmly ground a path for tax hikes for defense spending and the National Security Secretariat (NSS)'s hesitance to open the door for public debates.<sup>87</sup> The fact that this advisory council was run by Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary Fujii Takeshi, a former MOF and National Tax Agency chief, not the NSS, is most telling. In mid-November, the board's report expectedly recommended tax hikes for Japan's increased security needs.<sup>88</sup>

*Kishida's adaptation of the two-percent goal*

In early December, Kishida finally decided to allocate the MOD ¥43 trillion over the next five years and announced that out of the additional ¥4 trillion in the annual defense budget, at least ¥1 trillion must be covered by new tax hikes.<sup>89</sup> Combining the MOD budget with other security-related budgets, this number ensured that the total defense-related budget would reach the two-percent target in FY2027. The consultative processes within the LDP and between the LDP and its coalition partner, Komeito, played a central role in finalizing most details of the new strategy documents before they went to Kishida for final assessment.<sup>90</sup> While the final number reflected a compromise between the MOD and the MOF, it was Kishida who ultimately chose the budget amount in favour of the MOD.<sup>91</sup>

Nonetheless, due to fierce objections by members of the Abe faction and the public, Kishida postponed deciding when to execute the tax hikes.<sup>92</sup> Even after Abe's passing, his agenda and thinking, including his distaste for tax hikes, continued to shape the positions of the Abe faction members, triggering their oppositions.<sup>93</sup> Consequently, the cabinet decision in December 2022 noted that the corporate tax, income tax, and tobacco tax would be raised to account for the increased defense-related budget, but such measures would be "executed at an appropriate time after FY2024."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> "Tekikichi kōgeki bōeihizō..." [Strike capabilities and increased defense spending...], *Asahi shimbun*, 5 March 2023.

<sup>88</sup> Cabinet Secretariat, Japan, "Kokuryoku to shite no bōei ryoku o sōgōteki ni kangaeru yūshikisha kaigi hōkokusho" [The report by the advisory panel to comprehensively discuss defense capabilities as national strength], 22 November 2022, [https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/seisaku/boueiryoku\\_kaigi/pdf/20221122\\_houkokusyo.pdf](https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/seisaku/boueiryoku_kaigi/pdf/20221122_houkokusyo.pdf).

<sup>89</sup> "Dare mo mamottekurenai" [Nobody to protect me], *Sankei shimbun*, 25 December 2022.

<sup>90</sup> "Tekikichi kōgeki bōeihizō..."; "Bōei zaimushō '43 chōen antō'" [MOF and MOD fight over "¥43 trillion"], *Sankei shimbun*, 19 December 2022.

<sup>91</sup> "Kishida yosan ninenme no shiren" [Kishida budget faces challenge in 2nd year], *Nikkei shimbun*, 13 December 2022; Q, R and T, interviews by authors, various dates.

<sup>92</sup> "Abe san ni kaomuke dekinu" [Can't look Mr. Abe in his face], *Sankei shimbun*, 20 December 2022.

<sup>93</sup> "Abe-ha' no kanban orosanu wake" [Reason not to take down "Abe faction" sign], *Nikkei shimbun*, 3 February 2023.

<sup>94</sup> Ministry of Finance, Japan, "Reiwa gonendo zeiseikaisei no taikō" [Outline for Tax Reform for FY2023], 23 December 2022, [https://www.mof.go.jp/tax\\_policy/tax\\_reform/outline/fy2023/20221223taikou.pdf](https://www.mof.go.jp/tax_policy/tax_reform/outline/fy2023/20221223taikou.pdf), 109.



The timeline of this execution has now been extended to FY2025 and thereafter.<sup>95</sup>

In summary, Kishida incorporated the two-percent goal after receiving a strong push from Abe and his affiliates. The counterfactuals—whether, in the absence of those pressures, Kishida would have chosen the two percent—are hard to prove. Yet, enough evidence suggests that Kishida was initially forced to incorporate such goals in his government’s policy when he was not yet ready.<sup>96</sup> At the same time, he did not relent when it came to fiscal discipline and opened the path to tax hikes. Had Abe or his followers with greater hesitation to raise tax been in power, the two-percent target would have been more difficult to achieve and the rate of increased defense spending might have been more moderate.

### ***Counterstrike Capabilities***

#### *Background*

Japan historically refrained from acquiring “offensive” capabilities, including long-range missiles that could hit enemy bases and assets. Acquisition of strike capabilities was not constitutionally prohibited, yet the successive Japanese governments long maintained a *policy choice* not to possess them.<sup>97</sup> Over the last decade, however, there have been three waves of Japanese discourse pushing for acquiring strike capabilities.

The first came in 2013, soon after Abe returned to power and as the Japanese government prepared for the pending update of the National Defense Program Guidelines and the US-Japan defense guidelines.<sup>98</sup> At this time, the LDP’s National Defense Division took the lead in advocating for the acquisition of “enemy-base strike” capabilities, yet the discussion did not materialize into policy.<sup>99</sup> The second wave came in 2017 following relentless missile tests by North Korea and the advent of President Trump, who led the United States to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and to resume the development of medium-range missiles. In February 2017, Prime Minister Abe reportedly shared his desire to acquire such capabilities with Secretary of Defense James Mattis.<sup>100</sup> The LDP proposal,

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<sup>95</sup> Cabinet Office, Japan, “Keizai zaisei un’ei to kaikaku no kihon hōshin 2023” [Basic Policy on Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform 2023], 16 June 2023, [https://www5.cao.go.jp/keizai-shimon/kaigi/cabinet/honebuto/2023/2023\\_basicpolicies\\_ja.pdf](https://www5.cao.go.jp/keizai-shimon/kaigi/cabinet/honebuto/2023/2023_basicpolicies_ja.pdf).

<sup>96</sup> T, interview by authors, 13 June 2023.

<sup>97</sup> “Tate’ to ‘hoko’ yakuwari minaoshi.”

<sup>98</sup> “Exclusive: Japan, U.S. Discussing Offensive Military Capability for Tokyo,” *Reuters*, 10 September 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-usa-military-idUSKBN0H500B20140910>.

<sup>99</sup> “Shin ‘bōei keikaku no taikō’ sakutei ni kakawaru teigen” [Proposal with regards to formulating new National Defense Program Guidelines], LDP, 4 June 2013, [https://www.jimin.jp/policy/policy\\_topics/pdf/pdf106\\_2\\_1.pdf](https://www.jimin.jp/policy/policy_topics/pdf/pdf106_2_1.pdf).

<sup>100</sup> “Gekiron no sue tomahōku dōnyū” [Decision to introduce Tomahawks after fierce debate], *Mainichi shinbun*, 12 April 2023.

under the auspices of the Policy Research Council, now advocated for introducing “enemy-base counterstrike” capabilities.<sup>101</sup>

The most recent wave came in June 2020 when the planned deployment of the Aegis Ashore was suddenly canceled due to safety issues. Immediately following the cancellation announcement, Abe convened Four Ministers' National Security Council meetings to consider new measures, including strike capabilities.<sup>102</sup> Within a few months, the LDP's Policy Research Council, National Defense Division, and Research Commission on Security together submitted the report recommending the acquisition of “capabilities to obstruct missiles in enemy territories” in August 2020.<sup>103</sup> Two years later, as the Kishida government prepared to update Japan's strategy documents, the LDP issued a whole-of-party proposal calling for acquiring “counterstrike” capabilities.<sup>104</sup>

*Kishida's evolving attitude*

In March 2021, Kishida suddenly announced his support for introducing strike capabilities in a Twitter (now X) post as he prepared to re-run for the LDP leadership.<sup>105</sup> His announcement surprised many as Kishida initially seemed like the least likely supporter of such a hawkish defense posture. In fact, when the LDP report was drafted in August 2020, Kishida was even reluctant to sign off on the proposal under his name as the LDP's Policy Research Council chairperson.<sup>106</sup> Although he eventually relented, he did not advocate for strike capabilities in his failed bid in the LDP race in 2020.

Like the debate over defense spending, the exigencies of political survival as a minority faction leader best explain Kishida's transformation. Abe had long advocated for this issue, first as chief cabinet secretary in 2006 and later as prime minister from 2012 to 2020.<sup>107</sup> Just days before stepping down from office, Abe also issued a departing statement in which he warned against the risks of solely relying on ballistic missile defense systems in the face of rising

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<sup>101</sup> LDP Policy Research Council, “Dandō misairu bōei no jinsoku katsu bapponteki na kyōka ni kansuru Teigen” [Proposal for prompt and fundamental enhancement of ballistic missile defense], 30 March 2017, [https://storage.jimin.jp/pdf/news/policy/134586\\_1.pdf](https://storage.jimin.jp/pdf/news/policy/134586_1.pdf).

<sup>102</sup> Prime Minister's Office, Japan, “Abe naikaku sōri daijin kishakaiken” [Press conference by Prime Minister Abe], 18 June 2020, [https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/98\\_abe/statement/2020/0618kaiken.html](https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/98_abe/statement/2020/0618kaiken.html); Prime Minister's Office, Japan, “Kokkai anzenhoshō kaigi kaisai jōkyō” [Status of National Security Council meetings], <https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/anzenhosyoukaigi/kaisai.html>.

<sup>103</sup> LDP Policy Research Council, “Kokumin o mamoru tameno yokushiryoku kōjō ni kansuru teigen” [Proposal to enhance deterrence to protect our people], 4 August 2022, [https://storage.jimin.jp/pdf/news/policy/200442\\_1.pdf](https://storage.jimin.jp/pdf/news/policy/200442_1.pdf).

<sup>104</sup> LDP, “Aratana kokka anzenhoshō senryaku tō no sakutei ni muketa teigen” [Proposal for devising new national security strategy and other documents], 26 April 2022, [https://storage.jimin.jp/pdf/news/policy/203401\\_1.pdf](https://storage.jimin.jp/pdf/news/policy/203401_1.pdf).

<sup>105</sup> Kishida Fumio, Twitter post, 26 March 2021, 7:00 p.m., <https://twitter.com/kishida230/status/1375387168927936512>.

<sup>106</sup> C, interview by authors, 29 March 2023.

<sup>107</sup> “Shushō ‘Tekikichi kōgeki nōryoku’ kentō hyōmei” [PM expresses intent to consider “enemy-base strike capabilities”], *Mainichi shinbun*, 20 June 2020.

missile threats by hostile neighbours.<sup>108</sup> Abe's immediate successor, Suga, had shelved the issue, and Kishida sought opportunities to signal his fitness to carry "the Abe Administration's baton," especially to Abe and Abe's supporters.<sup>109</sup>

According to Tsuji, who was in charge of formulating candidate Kishida's policy proposals on foreign policy and defense during this time, his main concern was "what in particular [Kishida] should *say* in order to get approval from other factions."<sup>110</sup> Tsuji said, because "the traditional Kōchikai diplomacy is incompatible with Abe's diplomacy," he thought "it was critically important to free [Kishida] from Kōchikai's image."<sup>111</sup> Endorsement of strike capabilities was one way for him to do so. Reportedly, those close to Abe also impressed upon Kishida the importance of strike capabilities.<sup>112</sup>

Voicing unexpected support was also Kishida's public engagement strategy. After losing the race against Suga, he was assigned no senior positions within the party and consequently lost opportunities to maintain his public presence. Kishida then only ranked fifth in the list of the most favourable candidates for the next prime minister in public opinion polls.<sup>113</sup> Kishida expected that his public support for strike capabilities "would surprise people,"<sup>114</sup> reportedly rationalizing the move as a way to enhance his public outreach.<sup>115</sup>

In the LDP leadership election six months later, candidate Kishida described the acquisition of strike capabilities as "a promising option."<sup>116</sup> While other rival candidates remained more cautious, Kishida aligned with Abe-backed Takaichi in taking affirmative positions. Once in office, Kishida maintained that his government would "explore all possible options, including the so-called strike capabilities to attack enemy bases."<sup>117</sup>

In the final months of the decision in 2022, the ruling coalition held extensive consultations and agreed on various aspects of introducing what Kishida ultimately labeled as "counterstrike" capabilities.<sup>118</sup> Komeito, which

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<sup>108</sup> Prime Minister's Office, Japan, "Naikaku sōri daijin no danwa" [Statement by Prime Minister], 11 September 2020, [https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/98\\_abe/discourse/20200911danwa.html](https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/98_abe/discourse/20200911danwa.html).

<sup>109</sup> Tsuji Kiyoto, interview by authors, Tokyo, 8 June 2023.

<sup>110</sup> Tsuji Kiyoto, interview by authors, 8 June 2023.

<sup>111</sup> Tsuji Kiyoto, interview by authors, 8 June 2023.

<sup>112</sup> "Tekikichi kōgeki nōryoku kenpō kyūjō kaisei, maemuki ni" [Forward looking on issues of enemy-base strike capabilities and revision of Article Nine], *Asahi shimbun Digital*, 13 October 2021, [https://digital.asahi.com/articles/DA3S15074163.html?iref=pc\\_ss\\_date\\_article](https://digital.asahi.com/articles/DA3S15074163.html?iref=pc_ss_date_article).

<sup>113</sup> "Sugaryū seiji kenshō hantoshi (7)" [The first six months of Suga-style politics examined (7)], *Yomiuri shimbun*, 25 March 2021.

<sup>114</sup> Tsuji Kiyoto, interview by authors, 8 June 2023.

<sup>115</sup> "Tekikichi kōgeki nōryoku kenpō kyūjō kaisei, maemuki ni."

<sup>116</sup> "Sōsaisen bōeihi kakujū de kisou"; Kishida Fumio, The Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan, 12 September 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/live/oB\\_L2wOBqng?feature=share](https://www.youtube.com/live/oB_L2wOBqng?feature=share).

<sup>117</sup> "Shushō tekikichi kōgeki nōryoku no kentō meigen" [PM announces his intent to consider enemy-base strike capabilities], *Nikkei shimbun*, 19 October 2021; Prime Minister's Office, Japan, "Dai 208 kai kokkai ni okeru Kishida naikaku sōri daijin shisei hōshin enzetsu" [PM Kishida's policy speech in the 208th Diet session], 17 January 2022, [https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/101\\_kishida/statement/2022/0117shiseihoshin.html](https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/101_kishida/statement/2022/0117shiseihoshin.html).

<sup>118</sup> O, interview by authors, 7 June 2023.

self-identifies as the “peace party,” historically served as a constructive “stopper” on security issues in the ruling coalition with the LDP.<sup>119</sup> Their main concern with strike capabilities was the consistency of their use with Japan’s exclusively defensive-defense, including three requirements for the use of force.<sup>120</sup> Hesitant to describe China as a threat, Komeito members also considered pressing for a geographical limit of such use, for example, only to target North Korea.<sup>121</sup> Yet ultimately, Komeito agreed to allow much ambiguity over what targets and in what situations Japan could use counterstrike capabilities as long as the cabinet upheld the existing exclusively defensive-defense posture. This was largely due to the party’s high receptivity to shifting public opinion on defense,<sup>122</sup> and also ostensibly because they prioritized other bargains with the LDP, such as the expansion of childcare support and increase in Komeito-affiliated candidates, in the future national election given the change in electoral districts.

In the final decision, Japan chose to invest in indigenous ground-launched cruise missiles by extending their current range and developing other variants while also purchasing four hundred Tomahawk cruise missiles from the United States. The US approval of Tomahawk sales and the drastic increase in defense budget allowed the pursuit of both options, allowing Japan to prepare for a possible Taiwan contingency before the modified version of the Mitsubishi-Heavy Industries’ Type 12 surface-to-ship missiles become operational.<sup>123</sup>

### **Conclusion: Policy Implications and Future Research Agenda**

As the empirical evidence in this article shows, changes in Japan’s security policy occurred rapidly under Kishida due to imperatives for domestic political survival. Issues such as the defense budget increase and introducing strike capabilities had long been debated before Kishida came to power, often led by more ideologically committed statesmen like Abe. Kishida’s first loss in the LDP leadership election not only intensified his awareness of the necessity of securing support from other factions but also his efforts to position Kōchikai favourably to receive such support. Talking Abe into endorsing Kishida for the prime minister’s seat, Asō referred to the utility of Kishida’s lack of a hawkish image, thereby counter-intuitively paving the way for Abe’s unfinished agenda. After taking office, Kishida followed the philosophy of ellipse and updated Japan’s security policy in the shadow of

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<sup>119</sup> Adam P. Liff and Kō Maeda, “Electoral Incentives, Policy Compromise, and Coalition Durability: Japan’s LDP–Komeito Government in a Mixed Electoral System,” *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 20, no. 1 (2019): 53–73.

<sup>120</sup> “Anpo jikō ni hedatari” [LDP and Komeito divided on security], *Asahi shimbun*, 19 October 2022.

<sup>121</sup> Q, interview by authors, 8 June 2023.

<sup>122</sup> Q and S, interviews by authors, 8 and 9 June 2023.

<sup>123</sup> Onodera Itsunori and O, interviews by authors, 7 June 2023.

Abe, both by increasing the defense-related budget and acquiring counterstrike capabilities. For Abe and Asō, who together led Japan for eight years, the advent of a Kishida government that would succeed their policy visions may have presented itself as a path to achieving “pseudo-leadership change,” extending the lifespan of their administration in practice while changing only its physical appearance.

However, Kishida’s incentives for political survival did not mean he accepted all Abe wished. In both defense spending and strike capabilities, Kishida ensured the relevance of his role by acting against Abe’s desires in some elements of the policies, such as tax hikes. Yet, because Kishida accommodated the broader direction of policies advocated by Abe, he essentially pre-empted deeper resistance by Abe’s followers. Kishida’s strategy of domestic political survival as a minority faction leader, his image as a dove, and his support for fiscal discipline enabled Japan’s military “big bang.”

These findings present a few policy implications and future avenues for research. First, Abe’s enormous influence over the Kishida government’s decisions on security provides a scholarly opportunity to re-evaluate Abe’s legacy.<sup>124</sup> While many former Japanese prime ministers remain as parliamentary members after their tenure, including some who aim for a second chance like Abe, Abe’s post-tenure influence may be exceptional. One senior Lower House member even said that Japan’s new strategy papers—adopted two and half years after Abe resigned—were “the culmination of the Abe government.”<sup>125</sup> Abe’s behind-the-scenes influence also drew criticism as “too much intervention” by a former prime minister and by those who saw it as a “distorted” form of power.<sup>126</sup> A comparative study of former prime ministers and their influence is one avenue for future research.

Second, this article clearly shows that Japan’s political environment is consolidating further to the right, with broader domestic support for robust defense policies in response to its worsening security environment. Against such a backdrop, leaders’ foreign policy preferences seem to matter little as they are also forced to seek political survival. If anything, Kishida insisted on maintaining the exclusively defensive-defense posture in line with Komeito’s position.<sup>127</sup> Yet even such leaders who are both liberal-leaning *and* supporters of fiscal discipline like Kishida decided to invest heavily in defense. The arms race in Asia will likely continue in the years ahead.

Third and relatedly, the study has shown that leaders with more dovish images may do better in promoting agendas on the right than those strongly identified with the issues. At least, this was the perception shared by many

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<sup>124</sup> Tobias Harris, *The Iconoclast: Shinzo Abe and the New Japan* (London: Hurst, 2020); James Brown, Guibom Delamotte, and Robert Dujarric, eds., *The Abe Legacy: How Japan Has Been Shaped by Abe Shinzo* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2021).

<sup>125</sup> O, interview by authors, 7 June 2023.

<sup>126</sup> L, interview by authors, 6 June 2023.

<sup>127</sup> T, interview by authors, 13 June 2023.

key LDP members, Asō and Abe prominent among them, who helped elect Kishida to the prime minister's office. This may be a phenomenon in countries where the public and opposition parties share liberal foreign policy preferences, where they become less alert about the intent of liberal-leaning leaders. It is worth investigating the “Nixon-goes-to-China Reverse” effect with comparative case studies.<sup>128</sup>

Fourth, to the extent his domestic political environment allows, Kishida will likely continue pursuing Abe's unfinished business, including the revision of the Peace Constitution. One Cabinet member recalled how profoundly Abe's killing impacted Kishida on personal and emotional levels, further intensifying his sense of responsibility.<sup>129</sup> Though Kishida must strike a delicate balance in managing various competing domestic forces, a Lower House member also described how Kishida was firmly committed to accomplishing constitutional revision during his term and believed that only he could achieve it by leveraging his “liberal” image.<sup>130</sup> A political journalist suspected that Kishida might go even further to the right than Abe since Kishida did not anticipate liberal backlash as Abe keenly did.<sup>131</sup>

Fifth, the new strategy documents left unanswered whether Japan would entirely depend on the US kill chain or develop its own for operationalizing its newly acquired strike capabilities.<sup>132</sup> On a separate track, Japan has decided to invest in creating a satellite constellation, and some acknowledge that, once successfully developed, it will be used to operate counterstrike capabilities.<sup>133</sup> While the significance of Japan's independent targeting system for the future of the alliance and the level of its integration with the US satellite system remain to be seen, this will be a crucial area to watch to understand the future dynamics of the US-Japan alliance.

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University of Tokyo, Japan, January 2024*

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<sup>128</sup> Ayumi Teraoka and Ryo Sahashi, Working paper.

<sup>129</sup> N, interview by authors, 7 June 2023.

<sup>130</sup> P, interview by authors, 8 June 2023.

<sup>131</sup> J, interview by authors, 2 June 2023.

<sup>132</sup> Jeffrey W. Hornung and Christopher Johnstone, “Japan's Strategic Shift Is Significant, but Implementation Hurdles Await,” *War on the Rocks*, 27 January 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/01/japans-strategic-shift-is-significant-but-implementation-hurdles-await/>.

<sup>133</sup> “Defense Buildup Plan,” 5; “Kogata eisei 50 ki de kōgeki mokuhyō o tokutei” [Identifying targets to attack with 50 small satellite constellations], *Yomiuri shimbun*, 28 November 2022, <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/20221127-OYT1T50260/>; O, interview by authors, 7 June 2023; K, communication with authors, Tokyo, 5 June 2023.

*Appendix*  
*List of Anonymous and Autonym Interviews*

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	<b>Date</b> <b>(mm/dd/yy)</b>	<b>Interviewee affiliation</b>
A	3/24/23	Major Newspaper Company A
B	3/24/23	Major Newspaper Company A
C	3/30/23	Major Newspaper Company B
D	3/30/23	MOFA, Japan
E	3/31/23	MOD, Japan
F	3/31/23	MOFA, Japan
G	5/30/23	LDP; Lower House
H	5/30/23	Major Newspaper Company B
I	6/2/23	Major Newspaper Company B
J	6/2/23	Major Newspaper Company B
K	6/5/23	Major Japanese National University
L	6/6/23	LDP; Lower House
M	6/7/23	LDP; Lower House
N	6/7/23	Kishida Cabinet; LDP; Lower House
O	6/7/23	LDP; Lower House
P	6/8/23	LDP; Lower House
Q	6/8/23	Komeito
R	6/8/23	MOFA, Japan
S	6/9/23	Major Newspaper Company A
T	6/13/23	Kishida Cabinet; LDP; Lower House
	6/7/23	Onodera Itsunori, LDP
	6/8/23	Tsuji Kiyoto, LDP

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*Note:* All interviews were conducted in Japanese.