

## A New God, a New Identity, a New Japan

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“Now is the time to make a start on carving out a new era beyond the ‘postwar’ era. We will take on the challenge of building up our nation anew.”

-Shinzo Abe, January 2017<sup>1</sup>

Since the end of World War II, global affairs have been mainly shaped by free trade and a rule-based liberal international order backed by strong international institutions. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, many proclaimed the “end of history.” Yet, once again the pillars of liberal international order are challenged by the rise of nationalist politics. Emerging powerful states are beginning to advance their own ideas and agendas for global order. China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea and Russia’s expansionism are prime examples of such efforts. In the past five years, strong populist leaders have emerged in Russia, China, Turkey, Egypt, India, and even in the U.S. and Japan—the two strongest champions of the liberal world order.

Prime Minister Abe, who once boasted that Japan is “Asia’s most experienced and biggest leader of democracy,”<sup>2</sup> is relentlessly pursuing a “normal” Japan.

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<sup>1</sup> In his speech to the Diet, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 193rd Session of the Diet,” Jan, 2017, [http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97\\_abe/statement/201701/1221105\\_11567.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201701/1221105_11567.html).

<sup>2</sup> In his speech at CSIS, “Japan is Back”, Feb. 22, 2013, [http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96\\_abe/statement/201302/22speech\\_e.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201302/22speech_e.html)

Yet this normality has striking similarities to Imperial Japan of the 1930s. The Japan Abe envisions is a country where Japanese citizens have a patriotic sense of their “uniqueness,” and are headed by a strong parliamentary monarchy rooted in Shintoism. This image of Japan becomes clear when one assesses Abe’s political backing (*Nippon Kaigi*), the ideological foundations based on national polity (*Kokutai*), and the draconian bills passed during his tenure.

### **Nippon Kaigi, Kokutai, and Japanese Politics**

Abe’s political backing comes from an ultra-right organization group named the *Nippon Kaigi*, or the Japan Conference. Little is known about this organization in the West. It was unknown even in Japan until Tamotsu Sugano’s bestseller, *Nippon Kaigi No Kenkyu* exposed its existence.<sup>3</sup> Founded in 1997, this powerful lobby group seeks to bring back Japan’s past glory by reinstating the Emperor as a deity-incarnate, revising history books to inculcate patriotism among students, amending the Japanese constitution to expand the role of the Japanese Self Defense Force, and reestablishing the traditional Shinto religion.

But before delving into the group’s ideological roots, it is first important to understand the reason why this group of monarchists has gained so much traction in Japanese politics. *Nippon Kaigi* developed during the 1990s, the very decade known as “the lost decade of Japan.” During this decade, Japan not only faced economic stagnation, but was also subjected to severe international criticism over its failure to confront its postwar legacy. The maturation of human rights discourse, especially feminism, led to dozens of lawsuits

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<sup>3</sup> Ironically, this book became a best-seller after word spread that the *Nippon Kaigi* attempted to ban its publication.

demanding formal apologies and compensation by former “comfort women” and other victims of Japanese imperialism.<sup>4</sup> In response to growing criticism, Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama issued the Murayama Statement (1995), an official apology for Japan’s actions during WWII. Economic stagnation and a tarnished international reputation exacerbated Japan’s wounded national pride.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Japan’s growing anxiety and shaken confidence fueled the rise of *Nippon Kaigi*. Powerful leaders who shared their revisionist narrative flocked to the obscure group.

Currently, the group boasts a membership of over 38,000 and has 240 chapters across Japan. But more importantly, the organization is able to exert an inordinate amount of influence on Japanese politics because of its direct connections with powerful lawmakers. Two hundred eighty nine active lawmakers—almost 40 percent of the entire Japanese Parliament—are members of the Parliamentary League for Nippon Kaigi (*Kokkai giin kondankai*). As the group’s “special advisor,”<sup>6</sup> Abe is the most ardent champion of the group. Sixteen out of Abe’s 20 cabinet members are also affiliated with this group.<sup>7</sup>

Even more worrisome is that the group’s influence over Japanese politics is likely to continue even after Abe. Three potential prime minister candidates—Defense Minister Inada Tomomi, Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko, and

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<sup>4</sup> Sachie Mizohata, “Nippon Kaigi: Empire, Contradiction, and Japan’s Future,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Nov. 1, 2016, <http://apjif.org/2016/21/Mizohata.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Abe’s exact role in the organization is unknown, but he has been spotted speaking at events hosted by the Nippon Kaigi on numerous occasions.

<sup>7</sup> Sixteen out of 20 cabinet members are affiliated with this group as of today. [http://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik16/2016-09-07/2016090701\\_03\\_1.html](http://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik16/2016-09-07/2016090701_03_1.html) (in Japanese)

Agriculture and Forestry Division Director Shinjiro Koizumi<sup>8</sup>—are also affiliated with this group. As there are no notable candidates from the opposition party, the *Nippon Kaigi* agenda is likely to advance under the LDP's rule.

### ***Kokutai***

At first glance, the group's objectives seem honorable. The six objectives outlined on the group's website<sup>9</sup> are:

1. A beautiful tradition of the national character for Japan's future
2. A new constitution suitable for the new era
3. Politics that protect the country's reputation and the people's lives
4. Creating education that fosters Japanese sensibility
5. Contributing to world peace by enhancing national security
6. Friendship with the world tied up with a spirit of co-existence and co-prosperity

Although these goals ostensibly seem noble, the group's ideological foundation based on the concept of *kokutai* (or national polity) helps shed a different light. The essential concept of *Kokutai No Hongi*<sup>10</sup> centers around what it means to be Japanese and what role Japan must play in the world. The conclusion: ***Japanese are a unique and superior race (Yamato) that are destined to rule***

<sup>8</sup> Shinjiro Koizumi is the son of former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who is also a strong supporter of this group.

<sup>9</sup> The group's website is: <http://www.nipponkaigi.org/>.

<sup>10</sup> In 1937, the Japanese government published *Kokutai No Hongi* to indoctrinate the Japanese youth, propagate myth about the divine origin of the imperial family, and outline the duties of the loyal subject toward his ruler as expounded in the philosophy of Shintoism. The text was widely used in Japanese schools to promote the ultranationalist views of the Japanese leaders. It explained why Western culture and institutions, based on individualism, were inferior and ill-suited for Japan. For the English translation of *Kokutai No Hongi* read, Robert King Hall and John Owen Gauntlett, *Kokutai No Hongi: Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1949), Print.

*others under the August grace of the Emperor.*

According to *Kokutai No Hongi*, Japan's uniqueness stems from the premise that the Emperor is holy. The doctrine argues that the Emperor comes from an unbroken line of descendants from the sun goddess Amaterasu and that he alone is worthy to reign and govern Japan.

The ominous implication of this pseudo-religious faith is the assertion that the Japanese are a superior race. The text is clear on this point of racial superiority: "The Land of Japan stands high above the other nations of the world, and her people excel the peoples of the world." Then the text takes this notion to the extreme arguing that the beauty of Japan is so overwhelming and pure that when Chinese and Koreans are exposed to this beauty, their hearts turn "Yamato," or Japanese. This claim of Japanese uniqueness/superiority results in a messianic message—it is Japan's duty to liberate "backward" people. In this worldview, war is not about destruction, or the overpowering and subjugation of others, but a necessary evil to bring about co-existence, co-prosperity, and harmony.

This line of argument was used to justify Japanese imperialism and led to the creation of the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." There is no need to expound upon Japanese atrocities, but it is worthy to point out that the Japanese call for co-existence and co-prosperity under the banner of "Asia for Asiatics" resulted in devastation and exploitation of millions of Asians. Under this very banner, the Japanese extracted raw materials from its colonies and enslaved millions of men, women, and children—all in the name of Asian liberation.

Thus, when viewed through the lens of *kokutai*, the seemingly honorable goals of *Nippon Kaigi* reveal their true intent: 1) reinstate the Emperor as a deity and a political figurehead, 2) replace the “occupation” constitution with a constitution that emphasizes the group over the individual and permits a standing army, 3) stop apologizing to neighboring countries and pay homage to those who served the country at Shinto shrines, 4) make teaching patriotism and “Japanese identity” compulsory, 5) develop the military/self-defense force to assume global leadership while counterbalancing threats posed by China and North Korea, 6) use force when necessary to promote regional prosperity. This is the direction in which Abe is steering Japan.

### **Abe’s Pursuit of a New Japan**

Abe is on a mission to restore a Japanese identity based on the historical roots of Shintoism and cultural patriotism. By instilling a spirit of nationalism, Abe is hoping to arouse self-confidence and patriotism among the Japanese public. In his own words, he is seeking a “departure from the postwar regime” by “bringing back Japan.”<sup>11</sup>

Abe has intensified his efforts to instill patriotism particularly among the youth. In January 2014, his administration revised the textbook screening guidelines to give Japanese children a more “balanced” take on modern Japanese history. The

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<sup>11</sup> According to Takahashi, many Japanese believe Abe meant that he wants bring back a militarily, diplomatically, and economically strong Japan from the political and economic abyss of the past decades, and perhaps in the long term from the U.S. itself. Kosuke Takahashi, “Shinzo Abe’s Nationalist Strategy,” *The Diplomat*, February 13, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/02/shinzo-abes-nationalist-strategy/>.

new guidelines argue that the death toll of the Nanking Massacre was greatly exaggerated, deny government involvement in the “comfort women” issue, and describe Dokdo/Takeshima and Senkaku/Diaoyu as Japanese territory.

In April 2017, the Abe administration passed the Imperial Rescript on Education,<sup>12</sup> a short, three-page document in which Emperor Meiji exhorts his subjects to practice morality associated with the five human relations of Confucianism stated by Mencius: to be filial to parents, affectionate to siblings, true to friends, harmonious as spouses, and loyal to rulers.<sup>13</sup> However, the Rescript also teaches citizen-subjects to offer their lives for the Emperor in times of emergency. This imperial order was banned in 1948 when American occupation authorities deemed it as one of the foundational ideological doctrine of Japanese imperialism.<sup>14</sup>

Abe also passed two draconian bills that curtail the press and allows the government inordinate surveillance capabilities. On December 6, 2013, the Abe administration pushed the vague and hastily drafted State Secrets bill that prohibited leaks of classified information on defense, diplomacy, counter-terrorism, and counter-espionage. It is undeniable that certain state secrets must remain classified. But critics were quick to point out that the government has complete latitude and discretion over what is considered a “state secret.” A

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<sup>12</sup> The full text can be found at, <https://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic1392009.files/THE%20IMPERIAL%20RESCRIPT%20ON%20EDUCATION.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Shaun O’Dwyer, “What’s so Bad about the Imperial Rescript Anyway,” *The Japan Times*, March 19, 2017, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/03/19/commentary/japan-commentary/whats-bad-imperial-rescript-education-anyway/#.WUnjH2iGM2w>.

<sup>14</sup> The Rescript also inexplicitly talks about Kokutai and was one of the foundational blocks of *Kokutai No Hongi*.

supervisory committee and panel were set up to oversee the classification process, but their independence is questionable, as both bodies are composed of current government officials. There is no outside agency to determine whether the classification is appropriate.<sup>15</sup> This lack of proper oversight mechanisms significantly decreases transparency, making the bill a potential tool for the government to cover up whatever they deem necessary.<sup>16</sup> Many fear that the unrestricted power that the government can exercise will inexorably undermine freedom of the press.

Signs of such abuse are already evident. Since passing the bill, the Abe administration successfully tightened its grip on media outlets. In March 2016, three of Japan's most outspoken television anchors were removed from three different networks.<sup>17</sup> The threat of revoking broadcasting licenses for televising programs critical of the administration has become a common phenomenon.<sup>18</sup> Thus, self-censorship among the media quickly spread, as the prospect of losing jobs and access to sources loomed larger.

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<sup>15</sup> Mina Pollmann, "Japan's Troubling State Secrets Law Takes Effect," *The Diplomat*, Dec. 18, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/12/japans-troubling-state-secrets-law-takes-effect/>

<sup>16</sup> The Abe administration has been criticized for attempting to hide the nuclear spillover of the Fukushima nuclear reactor.

<sup>17</sup> Ichiro Furutachi (Hodo Station), Hiroko Kuniya (TBS Network), and Shigetada Kishii (NHK) were fired from their stations for criticizing the Abe administration.

<sup>18</sup> Since Abe's second-term, the prime minister's office has threatened TV stations on numerous occasions that they would be on close watch on how they share their views on the Abe administration. Internal Affairs Minister Sanae Takaichi, who under the broadcast laws have power to suspend broadcasting, sent a clear message to media organizations. Broadcasters that repeatedly failed to show "fairness" in their political coverage, despite official warnings, could be taken off the air, she told MPs. The special panel held in April 17, 2015 by the LDP is a prime example of such threats. The LDP summoned executives of both TV Asahi and NHK to discuss two TV programs the party thought had been critical of the administration. For more details read, Shigeaki Koga, "The Threat to Press Freedom in Japan," the *New York Times*, May 20, 2015, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/21/opinion/the-threat-to-press-freedom-in-japan.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/21/opinion/the-threat-to-press-freedom-in-japan.html?_r=0)



On March 20, 2017, Prime Minister Abe once again pushed through a highly controversial anti-conspiracy bill. This bill gives the government broad surveillance powers over all Japanese citizens and provides the authority to crack down on specific individuals and organizations that may conspire to engage in any of the 277 “serious crimes” designated by the government. Under the new bill, unlicensed bike racing, copyright infringement, sit-in protests, and stealing plants from forest preserves—actions that have nothing to do with terrorism—are deemed a “serious crime.” Thus, many have questioned whether this bill is just another excuse to extend government surveillance of its own citizens. Many critics compare the bill to Imperial Japan’s “thought police,” who, before and during WWII, had the authority to arbitrarily investigate political groups that were considered threats to the public order.

### **Conclusion: Understanding the True Nature of Japan’s New Identity**

Abe’s dream of creating a strong “normal” Japan is not that far removed. Two years ago, Abe passed the highly controversial security bill that opened the way for Japan’s Self-Defense Force to carry out overseas military operations. Now, the Prime Minister has his eyes set on amending the Peace Constitution by 2020. In his video message delivered at the celebration of 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Constitution, Abe proposed to enshrine the status of the self-defense force, which is not currently recognized as a standing military. The amendment will mark the first change to Japan’s constitution in over 70 years and will likely be the first step to eventually replacing Article 9 to pave the way for a full-fledged military.

In March 2017, the LDP changed its internal rule to extend the tenure of its president from six to nine years.<sup>19</sup> Thus, theoretically Abe can remain in power until 2021. In last June's General Election, the LDP and its coalitions gained two-thirds majority in both houses of the Diet. The ruling coalition now has the political votes to undertake a constitutional revision with little opposition. The only remaining hurdle to this process is the national referendum. Despite the LDP's wide popularity, a recent poll conducted by *Asahi Shinbun* indicates that 50% of the population remains opposed to any constitutional revision, while 41% supports it.<sup>20</sup> But once we see a majority support the revision, we will witness the rise of a new Japan.

There are those who argue that, despite these developments, the U.S.-Japan alliance in the end will be able to curtail Japan's military assertiveness. But President Trump's skepticism about the benefits yielded by its East Asian alliances may eventually lead to a gradual disengagement of the U.S. from the Asia-Pacific region. In that new international order, Japan may no longer want to remain U.S.' sidekick. Japan may finally decide to go at it alone. History proves that Japan armed with a dangerous ideology and a strong military is a recipe for disaster.

\* This study was supervised by Dr. Kim Jinwoo, Director, Office of Strategy and Analysis.

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<sup>19</sup> In Japanese politics, the president of the Ruling Party is usually nominated as the prime minister.

<sup>20</sup> The poll can be viewed at:

<http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201705020045.html>