

**NEW NORMAL:
PROACTIVE JAPAN AND TRANSFORMED
DOMESTIC POLITICS**

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Introduction

The second Abe administration has been stable and entered the eighth year of rule. On the domestic front, it has implemented a number of important policies. To name a few examples, it has implemented a reduction of the corporate tax rate, the liberalization of the electricity market, more foreign visitor invitations, corporate governance reform, consumption tax rate hikes, workstyle reform, and free preschool education and child care. One major characteristic of policy formulation under the Abe administration is that Prime Minister Abe exercises strong leadership in major policies.

The administration also designed a number of important external policies. The second Abe administration has showed more leadership in the Indo-Pacific region than had past administrations. It designs much more coherent, proactive, and inventive external policies.

The administration joined the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiation in July 2013. In the negotiations, it combined concessions and demands across different areas, a strategy rarely adopted by past administrations. It played a leading role in resuming Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) negotiations in June 2017 after the United States left the TPP agreement in January 2017. Again, past administrations seldom played a dominant role in international negotiations.

In August 2016, the administration advocated the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision, which brought together a series of security and economic policies. Since the war, past administrations have not combined security and economic policies in proposing a diplomatic initiative.

It is possible to ascribe such characteristics in these external policies to the personal disposition of Prime Minister Abe. Yet, it is the contention of this paper that it is a new “normal” for Japan to play more leadership in international scenes, presenting proactive and innovative external policies. The expansion of the institutional power of the Japanese prime minister in the last two decades has made this possible.

The Japanese prime minister’s power has expanded as a result of a series of political reforms. These expanded capacities have made it possible for the Japanese government to design more strategic, positive, and innovative external policies.

This paper first traces how the power of the Japanese prime minister has grown since the 1990s. Then it demonstrates how the expansion of the prime minister’s power played an important role in the strategy adopted and initiatives taken by the Abe administration in the TPP and CPTPP negotiations as well as in the proposal of a new diplomatic initiative, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision.

Expansion of the Prime Minister's Power

Political Reform of 1994

The power of the Japanese prime minister increased as a result of a series of political reforms that have taken place since the 1990s.¹ The first important reform was the political reform of 1994, which replaced the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) with a system combining a plurality system and a proportional representation system. It heightened the power of the prime minister to discipline the party and the cabinet in the process of policy formulation.

First, the change of the electoral system diminished the powers of LDP backbenchers as well as the factions, which projected significant political influence within the LDP and over the prime minister. Before the reform it was relatively easy for LDP backbenchers to be elected as independents under the SNTV system. In the LDP, the party leadership has the formal power of endorsing candidates. The LDP president, as a leader of the party, projects influence over these decisions. Yet, under the former electoral system, it was difficult for the prime minister to discipline backbenchers with a possible withdrawal of endorsement.

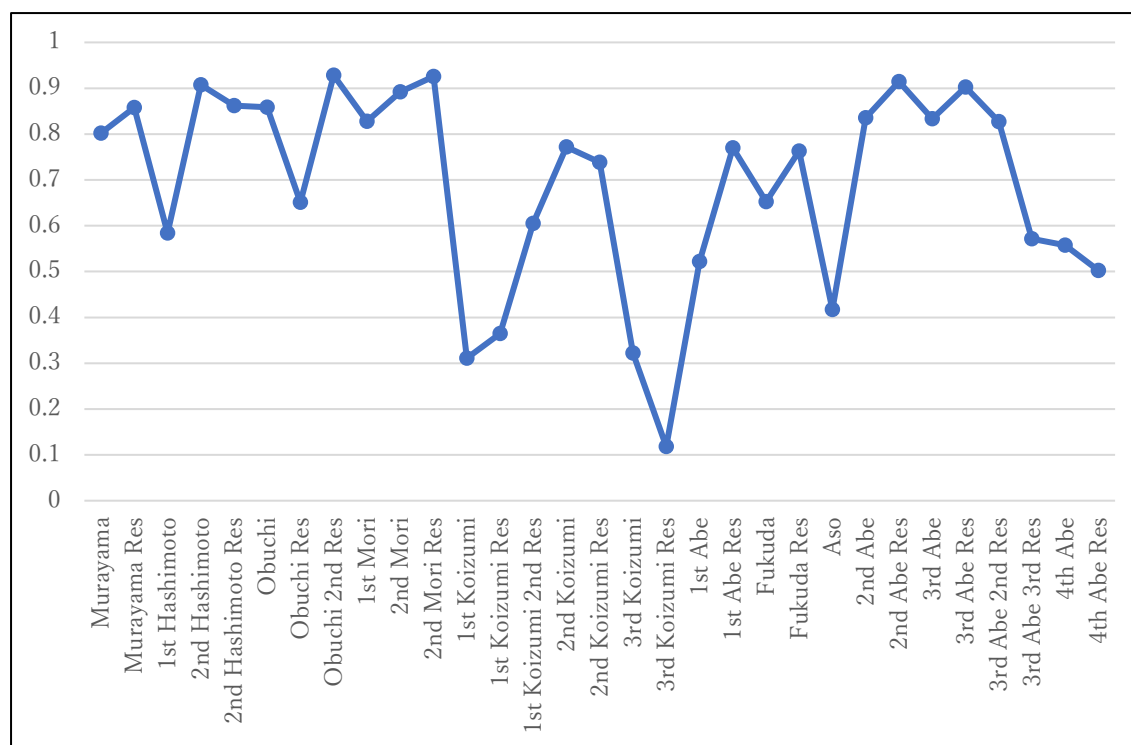
After the reform it was difficult to be elected as an independent. It had become vital for the backbenchers to receive party endorsement to be re-elected. As a result, when the LDP is in power, the prime minister—as the LDP president—is able to discipline backbenchers more effectively, and it has become easier to receive support for the policies he pursues.

As for the factions, they now had to ask the LDP president to endorse their members as LDP candidates. Before the reform, the factions could exercise significant political power not only in the process of policy formulation but also in the formation of cabinets and how the prime minister chooses his ministers.

Second, the prime minister's power to appoint ministers rose, which meant his power to make the cabinet more cohesive expanded as well.

Before the reform, the prime minister distributed ministerial portfolios according to the size of factions and appointed ministers on the basis of recommendations from the factions. This custom does not hold any longer. When Koizumi Junichiro became the prime minister in April 2001, he appointed all ministers according to his own preference, except ministers assigned to the LDP politicians of the House of Councillors. Since then, the LDP prime ministers have more or less freely chosen their ministers. Since the reform, the relative size of factions within the LDP and the ratio of ministerial positions allocated to each faction to the total number of ministers has gradually become uncorrelated.

Figure 1. Correlation between size of factions and ministerial appointments

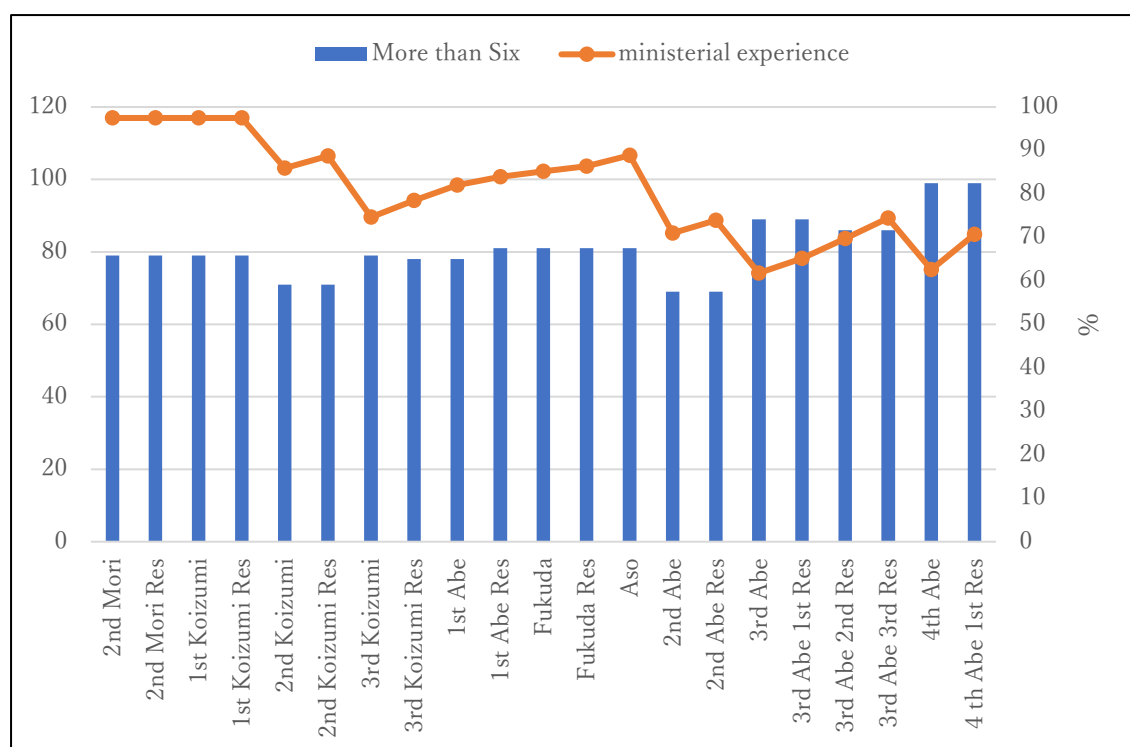


Growth of the prime ministerial power has also been demonstrated by the gradual waning of the respect for seniority in making ministerial appointments, as has been found by Nakakita Koji.² In the past, most LDP politicians who had been elected at least six times in the Lower House elections were normally appointed ministers at least once. Nakakita calculates the ratio of the LDP politicians who have not become ministers despite being elected at least more than six times to the total number of LDP politicians who were elected at least more than six times, and demonstrates that this number rises.

We have collected data for appointments for all cabinets after 2001 and calculated the ratio of LDP politicians who have been elected at least more than six times who became ministers to the total number of LDP politicians who have been elected more than six times. This number used to be more than 90 percent, implying that LDP politicians could almost certainly expect to become ministers if they could get elected at least more than six times. This number, however, continues to decline. Under the current Abe administration, it now fluctuates between 60 percent and 70 percent.

These pieces of evidence demonstrate that the LDP began to take on the character of a cohesive party. As a result, the cabinet also had become more cohesive, with the prime minister having sufficient power over ministers. This has important implications for policy formulation. The prime minister can use such power to initiate policies and co-ordinate policies among different ministers so that government policies become coherent and effective.

Figure 2. Ministerial experience



Administrative Reform of 2001

Another important reform was the reorganization of the government institutions carried out in 2001. It enhanced the prime minister’s capabilities to formulate and co-ordinate policies.

The reform provided the prime minister with the authority to initiate policies in which he was interested even when there were ministers who had jurisdiction over such policies. Before the reform, the Japanese prime minister did not have formal power to initiate policies. This reform expanded the prime minister’s power to co-ordinate policies among different ministries.

The reform has also provided the Cabinet Secretariat, which supports the prime minister, with formal power to design policies and draft legislations. Before the reform, the Cabinet Secretariat only had authority to co-ordinate. It strengthened the organization of the Cabinet Secretariat as well. In addition, it eliminated the ineffective Prime Minister’s Office and created the Cabinet Office to support the prime minister in his policy formulation and co-ordination.

Since the reform, the Cabinet Secretariat has steadily enlarged its functions and its role in policy formulation and co-ordination.³ First, there has been a constant increase in the number of officials in the Cabinet Secretariat. In 2000, before the reform, there were 822 civil servants including those who hold positions in other ministries. It grew under the Koizumi cabinet from 1,054 in 2001 to 1,438 in 2006. Again, it expanded under the current Abe administration from 2,331 in 2012 to 2,971 in 2018. Further, the number of sections under the

Cabinet Affairs Officer and the Assistant Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretaries increased from 10 in 2001 to 39 in 2017. These sections formulate and co-ordinate policies that the administration deems important.

Figure 3. Number of officers in the Cabinet Secretariat

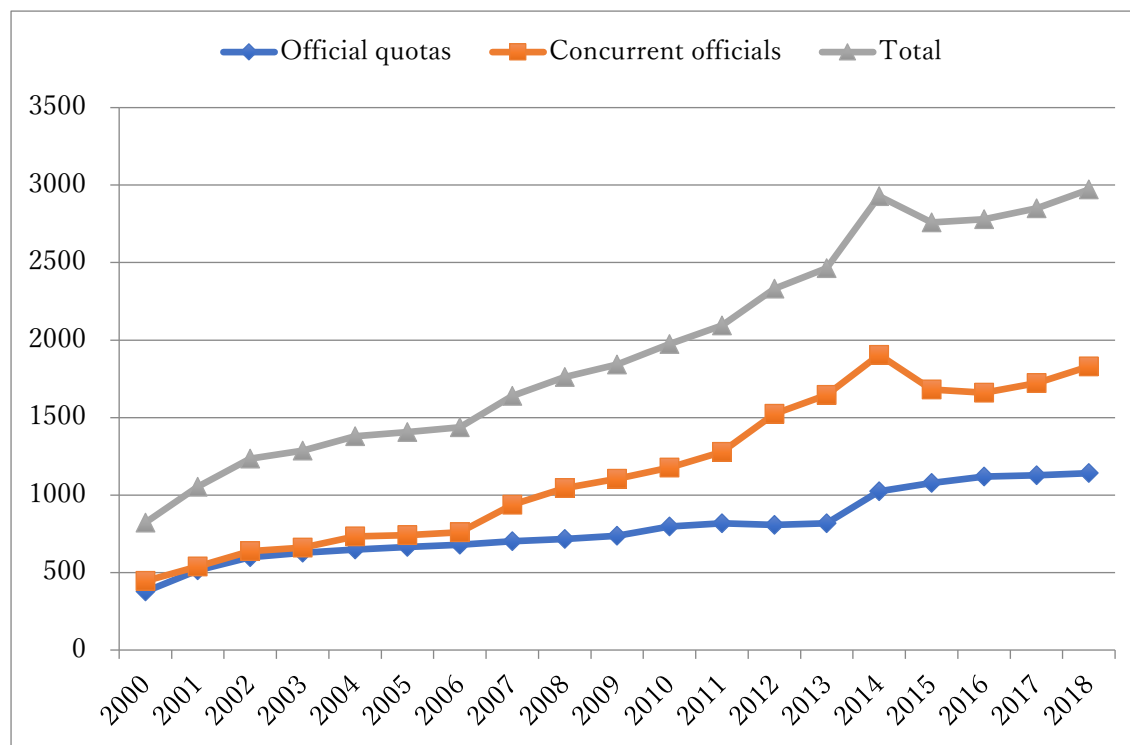
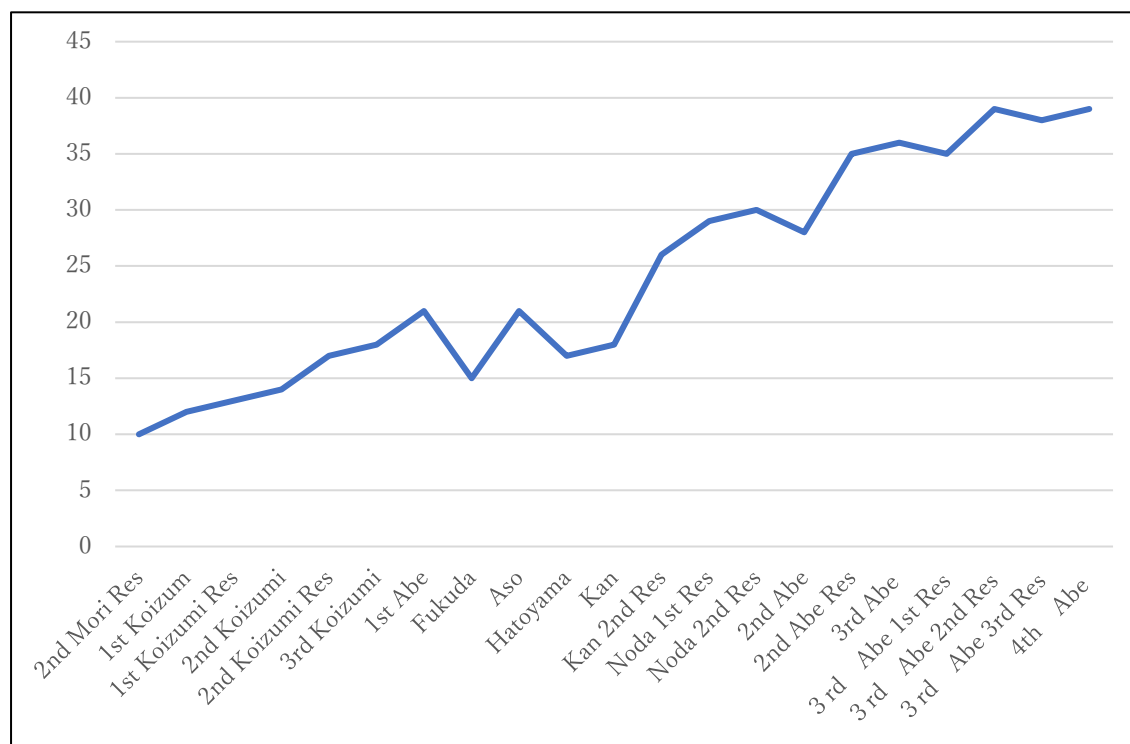
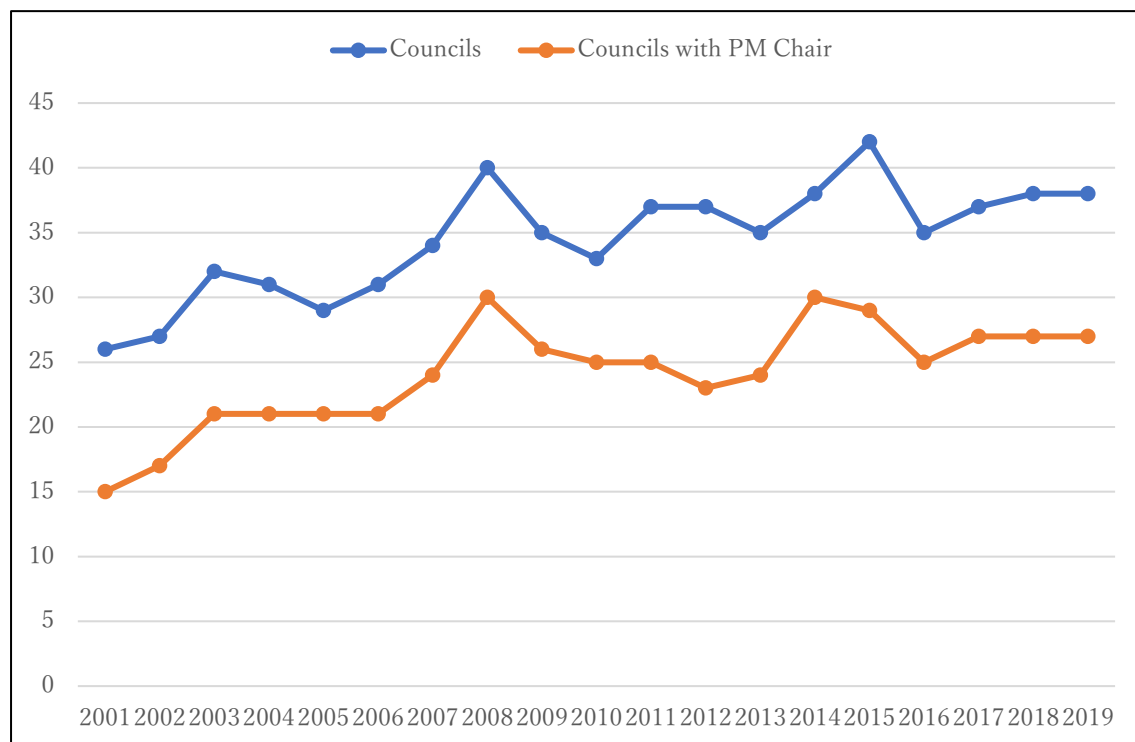


Figure 4. Special policy units in the Cabinet Secretariat



Also, the number of councils set up by either a law or a cabinet decision increased, and councils chaired by the prime minister grew steadily. There are some fluctuations as the number of councils were reduced following transfer of power from LDP to DPJ in 2009 and DPJ to LDP in 2012, but the overall trend is a gradual increase. The number of councils chaired by the prime minister expanded from 15 in 2001 to 27 in 2019. Note that the Cabinet Secretariat or the Cabinet Office serves as the secretariats for most of these councils.

Figure 5. Number of councils under the cabinet



Cabinet Secretariat and Security Policy

In recent years, the role of the Cabinet Secretariat in the formation of external and security policies drastically changed with the introduction of the National Security Council (NSC) in 2013 and the National Security Secretariat (NSS) in 2014.

The second Abe cabinet succeeded in legislating the bills to introduce the NSC in November 2013. It renamed the existing Security Council the National Security Council. There are three committees in the NSC: Four Ministers Meeting, Nine Ministers Meeting, and Emergency Situation Meeting.⁴ The Four Ministers Meeting gives deliberations on the principles and important issues of the foreign and defence policy related to the national security. The prime minister appoints a National Security Advisor who attends meetings of the NSC. The NSC has the NSS as a permanent secretariat in the Cabinet Secretariat.

The Four Ministers Meeting has met more than 100 times since the formation of the NSC—two or three times a month. The meetings have covered situations in Ukraine, situations in the Indo-Pacific, the North Korea ballistic missile tests, North Korea’s nuclear test, the

legislation of the security-related bills that made it possible for Japan to exercise the right of collective defence, and other issues.

The introduction of the Four Ministers Meeting marks a watershed in the history of Japanese security policy formulation for two reasons. First, it has enhanced the capacity of the prime minister to formulate security policies, as the Four Ministers Meetings are regularly held and the NSS was created in the Cabinet Secretariat. Second, by assigning the Assistant Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary for External Affairs and Security Affairs and Crisis as the Deputy Secretary-Generals of the National Security Bureau, co-ordination of security policy between the foreign ministry and the defence ministry is likely much more efficient. Before the reform, the co-ordination by the Cabinet Secretariat was ineffective, and co-ordination between the two ministries normally required a significant amount of time.

TPP, CPTPP, and FOIP

TPP and CPTPP

The expansion of powers held by the Japanese prime minister has made it possible for the Abe administration to take a more proactive role in negotiations.

In past trade negotiations, individual ministries such as the Ministry of Economy and Industry or the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries had strong autonomy over their jurisdictions. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was often in charge of negotiating with other countries, but the co-ordination by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was ineffective. In effect, each ministry dealt individually with its corresponding ministry in international economic negotiations.

This weakened the bargaining power of Japan as a whole. This was because it was difficult for past administrations to design coherent negotiations strategies—they were unable to make concessions to the countries with which Japan negotiated trade under the jurisdiction of one ministry, in return for concessions in some other area under the responsibility of another ministry.

There were several reasons why it was difficult for the past administrations to make a coherent negotiating strategy. First, even though the LDP formed a single party government between 1955 and 1993, it was virtually a coalition government consisting of different factions. The prime minister did not have much discretion in making ministerial appointments, and as a result did not have much influence over ministers other than those from his own faction. Thus, most ministers remained autonomous. In trade negotiations, if a minister resisted making concessions, it was very difficult for the prime minister to overcome such resistance.

Second, LDP backbenchers were also autonomous. As it was easy to be elected as an independent, they did not have to worry about their endorsement being withdrawn in response to rebelling against government policies. For Japan, the reduction of tariffs over agricultural products was always a major issue. Many LDP backbenchers received votes from

the farmers who were mostly opposed to opening agricultural markets to foreign countries, and thus many LDP backbenchers were opposed to reducing these tariffs. The prime minister did not have many tools to discipline such backbenchers.

Thus, it was very difficult for past administrations to make concessions on agricultural products in return for concessions in other fields.

Now, as a result of the reforms in the 1990s, the prime minister has much more power over ministers, and it is more difficult for individual ministers to resist if the prime minister considers concessions in some areas necessary to enhance Japanese interests in another area. Further, thanks to the reform of 2001, the prime minister can now rely on the Cabinet Secretariat to formulate trade and economic policies and appoint a special minister to formulate and co-ordinate policies for economic negotiations, like the TPP negotiation. Likewise, the prime minister now has sufficient political clout to overcome resistance from LDP backbenchers.

Before the Abe administration joined the TPP negotiations in July 2013, it set up a headquarters to formulate policies for the TPP in the Cabinet Secretariat in April. By July, more than 100 officials worked in this division.⁵ With effective co-ordination between ministries, it became possible for the Abe administration to decide that 95 percent of all commodities would be fully liberalized soon after entering the negotiations.

The negotiation over market access with the United States composed a major part of the TPP negotiations. It became possible for the Abe administration to link the tariff reduction on automobiles and parts with the tariff reduction on agricultural products, in particular, on beef and pork. In the past negotiations with the United States, it was very difficult to adopt such a strategy, as individual ministries dealt with the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) separately. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries had to negotiate opening up the Japanese market for agricultural products with the USTR individually, and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry was engaged separately with the USTR on products such as automobiles and semi-conductors. Past administrations could not link the negotiation over agricultural products with the negotiation over manufacturing products.

After the United States left the TPP, the Abe administration exercised leadership in resuming negotiations in June 2017 among all remaining countries and succeeded in bringing the negotiation to an agreement by January 2018. The administration reactivated the headquarters for the TPP in the Cabinet Secretariat to prepare for the resumed negotiations.

For the agricultural interest group, there was no interest in restarting negotiations, given the concessions they had to make. In other words, they could receive benefits from the TPP agreement not coming into effect. Yet, the Minister of Agriculture and LDP backbenchers sympathetic to the agricultural interest groups did not make any significant resistance against the Abe administration's decision to stick to the essence of the TPP agreement. Lack of resistance made it possible for the Abe administration to quickly respond to the withdrawal. Thus, the Abe administration could swiftly call upon other countries to resume negotiations.

It is possible to interpret such political developments as a result of the strengthened power of the prime minister to make a coherent external policy.

Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision

The Abe administration launched the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision in August 2016. It declared that “Japan bears the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making it prosperous.”⁶

Figure 6. Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision⁷



The Abe administration upholds three goals in FOIP, which consist of overarching political values and two more particular policy objectives in the areas of economy and security:

1. Promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade, etc.;
2. Pursuit of economic prosperity through the development of infrastructure aimed at enhancing connectivity in the region and the promotion of free trade agreements (FTAs); and
3. Commitment for peace and stability through capacity building of the coast guards in countries in the Indo-Pacific for enforcing maritime security and strengthening co-operation between the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and the armed forces of countries in the region.

In particular, Japan attaches importance to development of the two corridors: the east-west corridor and the southern corridor connecting Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and

Vietnam. It also promotes various projects in South Asia, such as the development of the bullet train in India between Ahmedabad and Mumbai, increasing connectivity in the northeastern provinces of India, and the development of the Bengal Bay area in Bangladesh. In addition, it looks at developing the northern corridor in East Africa connecting Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and DRC.

There are two pillars in the field of security policies:

1. Co-operation in enhancing capacities of maritime enforcement of various countries in the region through provision of vessels and trainings; and
2. The expansion of co-operation between Japan's SDF and the armed forces of various countries in the region. The co-operation consists of three elements:
 - The so-called "strategic calls at ports." That is, vessels of the Maritime SDF visit the ports of several countries, such as Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Oman;
 - Interactions between the SDF and the armed forces of various countries, including joint exercises. The SDF has been carrying out a number of exercises with such countries as Australia and India. It has also conducted joint exercises with the armed forces of countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. The Abe administration has confirmed with Australia, India, and the Philippines that it will continue to hold joint exercises with those countries; and
 - Co-operation with various countries in Asia to enhance the capacities of their armed forces in diverse areas such as disaster relief, search and rescue operations, and peacekeeping operations.

FOIP is a diplomatic vision aimed at enhancing co-operation between Japan and countries in a specific region. This is not the first time that a Japanese administration has advocated a political vision with regional elements. After World War II, some Japanese administrations also proposed regional visions aimed at fostering economic co-operation.⁸ The Kishi cabinet advocated the introduction of the South East Foundation to make investment and concessionary loans in Southeast Asia. The Ohira cabinet proposed a pan-Pacific vision to promote co-operation in the Pacific Rim, as well as a proposal aimed at enhancing political and security dialogues in the region. The Miyazawa cabinet proposed to use ASEAN Post Ministerial Conferences to discuss political and security issues in the region.

What sets FOIP apart from these visions is that it is more comprehensive—it covers both economic and security issues. The first Abe administration put forward the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" vision, which aimed to connect newly emerging democratic countries and promote democracy and economic prosperity in these areas. Although this vision included both economic and political features, it demonstrated only key ideas and did not accompany concrete policies. The Hatoyama cabinet proposed an East Asia Community Vision, which contained both economic and security elements, but did not develop the vision into a concrete set of policies. On the contrary, as this paper has already demonstrated, FOIP consists of a wide range of concrete policies in the field of economy and security.

Various divisions in the Cabinet Secretariat form different policies pursued under the banner of FOIP. For example, the council for infrastructure export for which the Cabinet Secretariat serves as secretariat examines various infrastructure plans in the Indo-Pacific region. The NSS plays an important role in designing plans for strategic port visits by the Maritime SDF. The initiation of FOIP has become possible as a result of the expanded capabilities of the Japanese prime minister after the institutional reforms that have been taking place since the 1990s.

Concluding Remarks

Under the Abe administration, Japan exercises more leadership in the international scene. This can be ascribed to the expanded institutional power and capacities of the prime minister. The domestic institutional setting likely allows Japan to play a larger role in the international community even under other administrations. This is Japan's new normal.

Notes

¹ Margarita Estevez-Abe, “Japan’s Shift toward a Westminster System: A Structural Analysis of the 2005 Lower House Election and Its Aftermath,” *Asian Survey* 46, no. 4 (2006): 632–51; Satoshi Machidori, *Shushō Seiji no Seido Bunseki* [Institutional Analysis of Prime Minister Politics] (Tokyo: Chikura Shobō, 2012); Aurelia George Mulgan, *The Abe Administration and the Rise of the Prime Ministerial Executive* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2018); Koji Nakakita, *Jimintō* [Liberal Democratic Party] (Tokyo: Chūkō Shinsho, 2017); Frances McCall Rosenbluth and Mike F. Thies, *Japan Transformed* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Tomohiko Shinoda, *Koizumi Diplomacy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007); Tomohiko Shinoda, *Contemporary Japanese Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Harukata Takenaka, *Shushō Shihai* [Dominance of the Prime Minister] (Tokyo: Chūkō Shinsho, 2006); Harukata Takenaka, “Expansion of the Japanese Prime Minister’s Power in the Japanese Parliamentary System: Transformation of Japanese Politics and the Institutional Reforms,” *Asian Survey* 59, no. 5 (September/October 2019), 844–65.

² Nakakita, *Jiminto*, 66.

³ The newly created Cabinet Office has also played important role in policy formulation, especially under the Koizumi administration. Due to space limitations, this paper concentrates on the expansion of the Cabinet Secretariat.

⁴ *Yomiuri Shimbun* (December 12, 2013).

⁵ *Asahi Shimbun* (August 24, 2013).

⁶ Address by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development in Nairobi, Kenya, August 16, 2016, https://www.mofa.go.jp/afr/af2/page4e_000496.html.

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, “Towards Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (November 2019), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000407643.pdf>.

⁸ For various past Japanese visions on regional co-operation in Asia and Pacific, Hiroyuki Hoshiro, *Ajia Chiki Shugi Gaiko no Yukue 1952–1966* [Asian Regionalism Diplomacy: 1952–1966], (Tokyo: Bokutakusha, 2008); Mie Oba, “Chikishugi to Nihon no Sentaku [Regionalism and Japan’s Choice],” in *Ajia Seiji Keizairon* [Political Economy of Asia], eds. Susumu Yamakage and Akira Suehiro (Tokyo: NTT Shuppan, 2001): 259–88; Mie Oba, “Gendai Nihon Gaiko no Sanjyu nen [Thirty Years of Contemporary Japanese Diplomacy],” *Kokusai Seiji* [International Politics] 196 (2019): 97–115.