

THE LIMITED ROLE OF THE JAPANESE MILITARY: THE 2003 IRAQ WAR AND THE WAR ON THE ISLAMIC STATE¹

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Abstract: What determines Japan's willingness to flex its limited military muscle abroad? While analysts and scholars closely watched Japanese "militarization" under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2012-2020), Japan had already deployed its military overseas over a decade ago in support of U.S. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. By contrast, in 2014, Japan was unwilling to support U.S.-led operations against the Islamic State (ISIL) in Iraq and Syria. This presents a puzzle, as the fight against ISIL offered the kind of international legitimacy that the 2003 Iraq invasion lacked, and Japan traditionally seeks. Moreover, ISIL had killed Japanese citizens. This paper explains Japan's varying policies in Iraq in 2003 and 2014, thereby shedding light on the determinants of Japanese national security policy more generally. Our argument focuses on domestic political factors (especially the pluralist foreign policymaking) and strategic thinking rooted in realism. We argue that Japanese policies are driven by domestic politics, profound suspicions about the utility of military force and fears of becoming entangled in a seemingly never-ending conflict. While Koizumi may have had more room to manoeuvre despite long-standing public opposition to overseas military deployments when he dispatched the SDF to Iraq in 2003, it is precisely such deeply-entrenched popular anathema that many blame for the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) historic and devastating loss in the 2009 election. Abe was unwilling to repeat such a risky venture in 2014. We also highlight the role of realist calculations on both Japanese elites and the public, who by 2014 had come to see China rather than state or non-state actors in the Middle East as a primary security threat. We thus confirm Midford's finding that "defensive realism" tends to drive Japanese foreign policy thinking. Japanese citizens are not pacifists, as conventional wisdom might hold. Instead, Japanese public opinion supports the use of minimum military force when and if Japan is attacked to defend Japan's national sovereignty and territory but is much more suspicious of such power when it comes to deployments and the pursuit of other foreign policy goals.

Keywords: Japanese foreign policy, Japanese military, public opinion, Iraq War, ISIL

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INTRODUCTION

What determines Japan's willingness to flex its limited military muscle abroad? While Japan contributed to the U.S. war in Afghanistan in 2001 and the controversial invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, why didn't Tokyo join the international coalition to counter the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIL) that was formed under U.S. leadership in 2014?

While analysts, scholars, and Japan's Asian neighbors closely watched the "normalization" of the Japanese military under the conservative and nationalist government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan deployed its Self Defense Forces (SDF) overseas over a decade ago in support of U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan under then-Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. By contrast, Japan did not provide SDF support in U.S.-led operations against ISIL. This presents a puzzle, as the fight against ISIL offers the kind of international legitimacy that the 2003 Iraq invasion lacked and Japanese foreign policymakers (and the Japanese public) traditionally seek.⁵ On 20 November 2015 the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2249, which calls upon "member States that have the capacity to do so to take all necessary measures," in compliance with international law, international human rights, and refugee and humanitarian law, "to redouble and coordinate their efforts to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by ISIL . . ."⁶ Furthermore, ISIL presents a threat to states around the world that is by some measures more serious than that the regime of Saddam Hussein posed in 2003.⁷ Finally, multiple Japanese citizens have been among ISIL's victims. In January 2015, two Japanese were beheaded by ISIL in a gruesome display the terrorist group broadcast to the world, while on 1 July 2016 seven Japanese aid workers (along with 13 others) were killed in a terror attack by ISIL-affiliated terrorists in Dhaka, Bangladesh. These factors and the efforts by former Prime Minister Abe to "normalize" Japan's military,⁸ including a constitutional reinterpretation permitting collective self-defense,⁹ would seem to point to a greater willingness to deploy Japanese forces in support of the counter-ISIL coalition. Yet, after ISIL fighters swept through large swathes of Iraq and Syria in 2014, Japan was unwilling to put its Self Defense Forces in even the logistical support roles they assumed during the previous Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts.

This paper explains the divergence in Japan's policy responses to conflict in the Middle East in 2003 and 2014, thereby shedding light on the determinants of Japanese national security policy more generally. We focus on both domestic political factors related to public opinion and elite strategic thinking rooted in realism.

We challenge the notion that the Japanese state is a rational, unitary actor, arguing that Japanese foreign policies are driven by domestic politics, especially public opinion. The Japanese public harbors deep suspicions about the utility of military force and fears becoming entangled (or "entrapped") in a seemingly never-ending conflict, recalling its alliance with the U.S. during the early parts of the Cold War. Public opinion in Japan also does not see threats emanating from the Middle East as central to the country's security. Following Midford,¹⁰ we focus on public opinion as an enabler and limiter of Japanese foreign policy. While Koizumi may have seen an opening in 2003 despite long-standing public opposition to overseas military deployment when he sent the SDF to Iraq in 2003, it is precisely such deeply-entrenched popular antipathy to deployments and the resulting backlash that many blame for the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) historic and devastating loss in the 2009 election. Simply put, Koizumi's party colleague, Abe, was unwilling to repeat such a risky venture in 2014.

⁵ Phillip C. Saunders, "The United States and East Asia after Iraq," *Survival* 49, no. 1, (2007): 14-152.

⁶ *United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2249*. Resolution adopted by the United Nations Security Council at its 7565th meeting, 20 November 2015, *UN Digital Library*, http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2249.pdf

⁷ This is especially true with the benefit of hindsight, in that the Saddam Hussein regime was ultimately found not to possess weapons of mass destruction (WMD), limiting the threat his regime posed. By contrast, ISIL has proven its will and capacity to direct terrorist attacks around the world.

⁸ Prime Minister Abe promoted legislation, which passed on 19 September 2015, to allow the country's military to participate in foreign conflicts.

⁹ Adam P. Liff, "Japan's Defense Policy: Abe the Evolutionary," *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2, (2015): 79-99.

¹⁰ Paul Midford, *Rethinking Japanese Public Opinion and Security: From Pacifism to Realism?* (Palo Alto, CA, Stanford University Press, 2011), 56.

Our argument also takes into account the role of realist calculations on the part of Japanese policymakers, who, according to evolving defense strategy papers, by 2014 came to see China, rather than state or non-state actors in the Middle East, as the primary security threat to Japan. In this sense, in 2014 there was a synergy between Japanese public opinion and its enduring suspicion of using military force on one hand, and ever-growing *realpolitik* concerns about China on the other. This is in line with Midford's elucidation of "defensive realism" in Japanese foreign policy thinking, which argues that Japanese citizens are not pacifist, as conventional wisdom might hold.¹¹ Rather, Japanese public opinion supports military power to defend Japan's national sovereignty and territory, but much more suspicious of such power when it comes to deployments and the pursuit of other foreign policy goals. This is supported by Le, who argues that Japanese security discourse should be understood in terms of "multiple militarisms," which can legitimate the use of the military in particular contexts.¹²

In Section II, we highlight international relations theories and the existing scholarship on Japanese foreign policy and consider their utility and limits in helping us to understand the policy divergence that is the subject of this study. We apply these theories to identify and explore the determinants of Japanese foreign policy. In Section III, we describe the context surrounding Japan's participation in the 2003 Iraq invasion and occupation, and in Section IV, analyze how Abe's "proactive pacifism" led Tokyo to opt out of active participation in the anti-ISIL coalition formed in 2014. In Section V, we summarize our findings and argument and broaden the discussion about Japanese security interests and identities. We offer a brief conclusion in the final section.

EXPLAINING JAPANESE FOREIGN POLICY: THEORIES AND LITERATURE

What determines Japan's willingness to flex its limited military muscle abroad? While Japan contributed to the U.S. war in Afghanistan in 2001 and the controversial invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, why didn't Tokyo join the international coalition to counter the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIL) that was formed under U.S. leadership in 2014?

Realist Scholarship

Existing scholarship on Japan's foreign policy often relies on theories rooted in the realist paradigm of international relations.¹³ Though these arguments have alternately described Japan's foreign policy using terms such as "reluctant realism"¹⁴ and "resentful realism",¹⁵ they all have in common the premise that the best way to account for Japanese foreign policy is the view that Japan pursues a security-minded, *realpolitik* foreign policy.

Over the past two decades, Japan has found itself in an increasingly insecure position on the edge of the Asian continent. Since the 1990s, a major security concern has been North Korea, which has developed a weaponized nuclear program and tested ballistic missiles which could deliver a nuclear strike anywhere in Japan. Some DPRK missile tests have had flight paths over Japanese territory into the Pacific Ocean, which is a frightening prospect given the frequent failure of the North Korean tests.

Over time, China has developed into a daunting security challenge. China's surging economy over the past 25 years and its accompanying rise in military spending have occurred simultaneously with Japan's two

¹¹ Paul Midford, *Rethinking Japanese Public Opinion and Security: From Pacifism to Realism?* (2011), 78-82.

¹² Tom Phuong Le, *Japan's Aging Peace: Pacificism and Militarism in the Twenty-First Century*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2021), 12.

¹³ See Michael J. Green, *Japan's Reluctant Realism: Foreign Policy Challenges in an Era of Uncertain Power*, (New York, Palgrave, 2001); Bjorn Gronning "Japan's Shifting Military Priorities Counterbalancing China's Rise," *Asian Security* 10, no. 1, (2014): 1-21; Jeffrey Hornung "Japan's Growing Hard Hedge Against China" *Asian Security* 10, no 2, (2014): 97-122; Christopher Hughes, *Japan's Foreign and Security Policy Under the 'Abe Doctrine': New Dynamism or New Dead End?* (New York, Palgrave, 2015); Giulio Pugliese and Aurelio Insisa, *Sino-Japanese Power Politics*, (New York, Palgrave, 2017).

¹⁴ Michael J. Green, *Japan's Reluctant Realism: Foreign Policy Challenges in an Era of Uncertain Power*, (2001), 5-12.

¹⁵ Christopher Hughes, *Japan's Foreign and Security Policy Under the 'Abe Doctrine': New Dynamism or New Dead End?* (2015), 25-45.

decades of economic stagnation. Japan's relative decline compared to China has also coincided with the intensification of historical controversies over Japan's imperial past and its perceived failure to properly atone for that past. Most importantly, the long-standing territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has become more dangerous since 2010, reaching its most dangerous point when Chinese military units locked their missile fire-control radar onto a Japanese helicopter and destroyer in two incidents in January 2013. Smith highlighted how much of Japan's threat perception focuses on an increasingly assertive China.¹⁶

Prompted by a changing security environment, according to realist arguments, Japan has embarked on a path of action that aims to build up its security anew. The realist approach is captured well by Gronning, who argues that Japan's evolving national and alliance defense posture represents traditional or hard balancing behavior as a response to the confluence of two factors: 1) Japanese perceptions of Beijing's aggressive behavior, in particular in the maritime domain; and 2) the shifting distribution of military and economic capabilities in China's favor. Together, these factors are both necessary and sufficient in terms of explaining Japan's counterbalancing response.¹⁷

According to the realist interpretation, it is possible that Japan did not commit resources to the war against ISIL in 2014 because it does not see the terror group as a serious security threat, while China, Russia, and North Korea are much more immediate security concerns. As we will discuss below, these three states, all of which could be typified as Japan's regional rivals, draw the most attention in Japan defense planning.¹⁸ But realism would have a harder time accounting for Koizumi's determination to deploy the SDF to Iraq in 2003, and keep Japanese troops there until 2006 if we accept that Iraq was not a central threat to Japanese security.

Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

Two approaches have characterized the study of public opinion and its influence on foreign policy. The elitist approach argues that public attitudes on foreign policy are inherently uninformed, incoherent, and unstable, and thus both irrelevant to explaining foreign policy outcomes and subject to easy manipulation at the hands of foreign policy elites.¹⁹ The pluralist approach, by contrast, sees public opinion as stable and composed of rational and coherent foreign policy views.²⁰ While individual opinions may suffer from the deficiencies noted by elitists, collectively the public tends to reach a kind of equilibrium that is more coherent. In the pluralist view, public opinion shapes and sets the parameters for elite foreign policy behavior as much as elites (and the media) can control what the public believes. Yet, as Midford observes, the elitist view has dominated both Japanese and Western studies of public opinion and foreign policy.²¹ And, as Midford points out, elites dismiss the very notion that they should be attuned to public opinion as a kind of "mobocracy."²²

Midford's empirically grounded contributions to the discussion of Japanese foreign policy has set itself apart from others through its presentation of public opinion research on Japanese security matters.²³ In his 2011 book, Midford's chapters cover public opinion on 9/11, the U.S.-led Global War on Terror (GWOT), the deployment of JSDF troops to Afghanistan and Iraq, and the post-2006 withdrawal from Iraq and show that the Japanese public was deeply distrustful of the efficacy of military power and the U.S.-led action in Iraq. Midford's argument is that Japan's defensive posture has in large part been shaped by Japanese public opinion, which has in general been distrustful in the postwar period of the state's ability to control the military. Though

¹⁶ Sheila Smith, *Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power*, (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2019), 36-78.

¹⁷ Bjorn Gronning, "Japan's Shifting Military Priorities Counterbalancing China's Rise," (2014): 2.

¹⁸ See the "Japan Ministry of Defense Annual White Papers for years 2005-2016," *Defense of Japan (Annual White Paper)*, available at www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper.

¹⁹ Examples of the elitist approach include Gabriel Abraham Almond, *The American People and Foreign Policy*, (New York, Harcourt Brace, 1950); Michael Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governmentality of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*, (New York, New York University Press, 1975).

²⁰ Examples of studies employing the pluralist approach include Oli R. Holsti, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippman Consensus Merzhon Series: Research Programs and Debates," *International Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4, (1992): 439-466; Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public: Post-Vietnam American Opinion and the Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1992): 49-73.

²¹ Paul Midford, "The Influence of Public Opinion on Foreign Policy in Asia: The Case of Japan," (2017): 4.

²² Paul Midford *Ibid.*, (2017): 4.

²³ Paul Midford, *Rethinking Japanese Public Opinion and Security: From Pacifism to Realism?* (2011); Paul Midford, "The Influence of Public Opinion on Foreign Policy in Asia: The Case of Japan," (2017).

Japanese public opinion does evolve in some respects, overall it is quite stable and remains opposed to the deployment of the JSDF for combat operations.²⁴ This has restrained policymakers, who are careful to avoid provoking opposition to its policies.²⁵

Yet, Midford also argues that Japanese public opinion has never fully embraced pacifism. It has also, according to Midford, contained significant elements of realism insofar as it has come to terms with using military power to defend territory and sovereignty. So, public opinion is more likely to support using the military in Japan's immediate vicinity, or especially in defense of Japanese territory. However, Midford shows that Japanese public opinion views offensive military force as undesirable for achieving objectives such as counterterrorism or democracy in foreign lands. Midford lays out some of the specific conditions in which Japanese public opinion affects foreign policy outcomes: when there are large and stable opinion majorities, when there is the presence of political competition among parties or party factions, when there is united opposition in the Diet, when a new policy is proposed or an old one has perceptible costs, among other conditions.²⁶

While the public was initially favorable to Japan's response to 9/11, its support of Koizumi's policies sank quickly thereafter.²⁷ This could provide one possible explanation for the inconsistency of Japanese policy on overseas military deployment. Koizumi thought he had a rare window of opportunity with which he could send the military to participate in the Middle East after 9/11, but as that policy took a nose-dive in public opinion, the action was brought to an end. In this view, Japan's anti-militaristic security identity, described above, could momentarily be overcome. Still, bringing the SDF operations in Iraq to an end took over four years, whereas public support dissipated quite quickly. But, one could take Midford's position to argue that the content of the mission—highly limited involvement in a non-combat zone of Iraq—reflected public opposition to a more extensive role. Moreover, the public opinion argument would go far in explaining why Shinzo Abe, acutely aware of public opposition, does not support any participation of Japanese forces in the anti-ISIL coalition. Separately, but also importantly, Abe also was never able to secure constitutional revisions to Japan's constitution in order to expand the circumstances under which Japan's SDF could legally be deployed in combat missions abroad. Nevertheless, public opinion alone does not emerge as a satisfying explanation of the divergence.

Constructivists have also contributed to the discussion on public opinion and foreign policy through their work on the formation of Japan's security identity.²⁸ Oros's work is helpful in the constructivist discussion as well – his book, *Japan's Security Renaissance*, applies a two-pronged theoretical approach, using realism and constructivism to complement each other in explaining Japan's security policies and identity.²⁹ In an earlier article, Oros addresses almost the same question as the present paper. He asks, "Why does a conservative government with high levels of popular support not pursue policies more in line with views widely reported to be central to its values and outlook?"³⁰ For Oros, the answer "lies in Japan's long-standing security identity of domestic antimilitarism...one that thoroughly pervades both the framing of Japan's national security debates and the institutions of Japan's postwar security policy-making process".³¹ In this view, Abe's hawkish inclinations are constrained by a public with a security identity that would oppose most uses of the military

²⁴ Paul Midford, *Rethinking Japanese Public Opinion and Security: From Pacifism to Realism?* (2011): 2-3.

²⁵ Paul Midford *Ibid.*, (2011): 26.

²⁶ Paul Midford, "The Influence of Public Opinion on Foreign Policy in Asia: The Case of Japan," (2017).

²⁷ Paul Midford, *Rethinking Japanese Public Opinion and Security: From Pacifism to Realism?*, (2011): 117.

²⁸ Examples include Bjorn Jerden and Linus Hagstrom, "Rethinking Japan's China Policy: Japan as an Accommodator in the Rise of China, 1978–2011," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 12, (2012): 212-250; Gustafsson, Karl, "Memory Politics and Ontological Security in Sino-Japanese Relations," *Asian Studies Review* 38, no. 1, (2014): 71-86; Linus Hagstrom, "The 'Abnormal' State: Identity, Norm/Exception and Japan," *European Journal of International Relations* 21, no. 1, (2015): 122–145. Linus Hagstrom and Karl Gustafsson, "Japan and Identity Change: Why It Matters in International Relations," *The Pacific Review* 28, no. 1, (2015): 1-22; Tom Phuong Le, *Japan's Aging Peace: Pacifism and Militarism in the Twenty-First Century*, (2021); Shogo Suzuki, "The rise of the Chinese 'Other' in Japan's Construction of Identity: Is China a Focal Point of Japanese Nationalism?," *The Pacific Review* 28, no. 1, (2015): 95-116.

²⁹ Andrew Oros, *Japan's Security Renaissance: New Policies and Politics for the Twenty-First Century*, (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2017), 29.

³⁰ Andrew Oros, "International and Domestic Challenges to Japan's Postwar Security Identity: 'Norm Constructivism' and Japan's New 'Proactive Pacifism'," *The Pacific Review* 28, no. 1, (2015): 139.

³¹ Andrew Oros, "International and Domestic Challenges to Japan's Postwar Security Identity: 'Norm Constructivism' and Japan's New 'Proactive Pacifism'," (2015): 140.

overseas. As Oros argues, this anti-militarist identity is under siege in debates over security, but long-standing identities are not so easily jettisoned. Le extends Oros' arguments to demographic factors, showing how an aging population and gender inequality have shaped Japan's security identity.³²

In the pluralist view of foreign policy-making, Japanese political elites are intensely afraid of the electoral repercussions of public opinion if Japanese troops were to be killed overseas fighting ISIL specifically, or engaging in the broader war on terror more generally. Alternatively, Japanese elites fear that involving the country in anti-terror operations will make Japanese citizens in Japan and around the world targets of terrorist organizations. In other words, Japan did not commit to the war against ISIL because Japanese public opinion has been consistently against interventions outside of its immediate vicinity that put Japanese lives at risk.³³ While this does not explain why Koizumi deployed the SDF in 2003, the LDP might have subsequently learned from the consequences of ignoring public opinion and opposed participation in the anti-ISIL coalition, thereby lending credence to the hypothesis.

JAPAN AND THE 2003 IRAQ WAR

On 24 July 2003 Japan departed from half a century of pacifism when the Diet approved the dispatch of troops to support the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. Then-Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi overrode opposition, a no-confidence motion, and a late-night filibuster to ensure the passage of the legislation, which led to the country's biggest military deployment since the Second World War.³⁴ Japan's support for the Iraq War in 2003 was a bold move that surprised and shocked not only many Japanese citizens, but indeed many around the world, especially given that some key Western allies of the United States such as Germany, France, and Canada refused to participate in the U.S. invasion. In fact, Koizumi had pledged Japan's support for U.S. President George W. Bush's "Global War on Terror" as early as February 2002. The Bush Administration maintained that invading Iraq was a necessary part of the international campaign against Islamic terrorists. Koizumi promised Japanese backing with the consciousness that doing so was likely hurt his standing among a Japanese public sceptical of military interventions. But perhaps he calculated that public opinion would matter less in the long run.

The U.S.-led coalition attacked Iraq in March 2003. Koizumi voiced his strong support, and his disapproval rating quickly leaped to 49 percent.³⁵ He was arguably under strong pressure from Washington and aware of Japan's need to show solidarity with the U.S., both because of U.S. security commitments to Japan and because of lingering shame about Japan's "checkbook diplomacy" during the first Gulf War.³⁶ However, acutely aware of public sentiment, Koizumi sought a way to allow Tokyo to maintain its official pacifism without actually exposing Japanese civilians or military personnel to any real danger. At the May 2003 U.S.-Japan summit, Koizumi assured Bush that "Japan wished to make a contribution [to the reconstruction of Iraq] commensurate with its national power and standing."³⁷

While small numbers of Japanese troops had participated in UN peacekeeping operations since 1989, never before had Tokyo sent forces overseas without a UN mandate. Even then, no Japanese soldier had fired a weapon or been killed in action since the 1940s. Polls at the time showed that the deployment was opposed by more than half of the Japanese public, a number which only grew as the situation on the ground in Iraq deteriorated.³⁸ After months of debate about the nature of the Japanese role in Iraq, in early January 2004 a Japan Self-Defense Forces Iraq Reconstruction and Support Unit (*Jietai Iraku Fukkou Shiengun*) consisting of 600 soldiers was sent to Samawah, in British-occupied southern Iraq. The location was chosen in large part because it was not an active combat zone, and on top of that Australian troops were dispatched to protect their Japanese counterparts. The operation was legalized by a "Humanitarian Relief and Iraqi Reconstruction Special

³² Tom Phuong Le, *Japan's Aging Peace: Pacificism and Militarism in the Twenty-First Century*, (2021), 72.

³³ Paul Midford, *Rethinking Japanese Public Opinion and Security: From Pacifism to Realism?* (2011), 16.

³⁴ Jonathan Watts, "End of an Era as Japan enters Iraq." *The Guardian*, 25 July 2003.

³⁵ Tomohito Shinoda, "Japan's Top-Down Policy Process to Dispatch the SDF to Iraq," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 7, no. 1, (2006): 71–91.

³⁶ On Japan's policy debates at this time, see Gerald Curtis, *Japan's Foreign Policy After the Cold War: Coping with Change: Coping with Change*, (New York, Routledge, 2016).

³⁷ See the "Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs report on the 2003 summit ("Overview of Japan-US Summit Meeting)," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/pmv0305/overview.html>

³⁸ Jonathan Watts, "End of an era as Japan enters Iraq." *The Guardian*, 25 July 2003.

Measures Law” (*Iraku Jindo Fukko Shien Tokubetsu Sochi Ho*) passed on 9 December 2003 in the Diet without support from the opposition. Rhetorically, Tokyo described the participation in terms that emphasized Japan’s support for Iraq and the Iraqi people, and said little about the U.S. military and the controversial invasion.

Meanwhile, public support for the deployment continued to fall as the situation in Iraq deteriorated. In August 2003, Japanese public opinion was shocked at the massive bomb attack against the United Nations compound in Baghdad, which killed 22 UN employees, including the Secretary General’s Special Representative.³⁹ On 29 November 2003, two Japanese diplomats were shot and killed near Tikrit, Iraq while preparations for the deployment were in their final stages. In April 2004, several Japanese journalists and aid workers were kidnapped but released several days later, with the kidnappers threatening to burn the hostages if Japanese troops were not removed from Iraq within three days. In a statement released on 20 July 2004, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi warned Japan, Poland and Bulgaria to withdraw their troops, threatening further attacks on Japanese citizens. And in October 2004, the body of a Japanese backpacker was found in Baghdad.

All of this had a direct effect on already hostile public opinion, putting significant pressure on Koizumi to withdraw the SDF. Nevertheless, Koizumi decided in December 2005 to renew the contingent’s mandate for another year, *despite* a poll by the Asahi newspaper which found that 69% of respondents were against renewing the mandate, up from 55% in January 2005.⁴⁰ Though Japanese camps in Samawah came under mortar and rocket fire several times, there was no damage or injuries to Japanese personnel. It was only in July 2006, bowing to public pressure and opposition from within his own party, that Koizumi withdrew its GSDF from Iraq, though Japan maintained a small Air Self-Defense Forces unit (ASDF) in the region until December 2008.

Even after withdrawal, however, the battle over Koizumi’s highly unpopular Iraq policy continued not only in the court of public opinion, but also in the actual judicial system. In April 2008, the Nagoya High Court declared that the Air Self-Defense Forces (ASDF) airlifting of coalition troops (which Japanese forces engaged in beyond their reconstruction role in Samawah) was unconstitutional, violating both Article 9 and the hastily written law that provided justification for the SDF dispatch on condition that Japanese forces would operate only in “noncombat” areas.⁴¹ “In modern warfare, the transport of personnel and supplies constitutes a key part of combat,” concluded Judge Aoyama Kunio. “The airlift of multinational forces to Baghdad . . . plays a part in the use of force by other countries.” The ruling LDP rejected this ruling, continuing to insist that Baghdad was not actually a combat zone.⁴² Nonetheless, the damage was done, and public resentment only deepened. Perhaps Koizumi thought he could count on a reservoir of post-9/11 sympathy of Japanese toward the U.S. and thereby overcome deeply-rooted public resistance to Japanese military actions overseas. If so, he gravely miscalculated.

There is a realist interpretation of Koizumi’s determination to back Bush’s war in Iraq. Perhaps North Korea’s continuing belligerence convinced at least some part of the elite and public that supporting the U.S. in Iraq was a way to guarantee Washington’s protection against Pyongyang. Alternatively, some analysts have pointed out that an anti-Saddam stance was very much in line with Japan’s post-Cold War policy in the Persian Gulf.⁴³ According to this view, Japan’s relations with Baghdad had deteriorated sharply in the 1990s, and Tokyo had turned to other sources, such as Iran and Kuwait, to meet its energy needs. Moreover, Japanese elites began to see Saddam as a serious obstacle to much-needed stability in the region. This realpolitik view compelled Koizumi to challenge both dominant public opposition and the lack of a UN endorsement of military action in Iraq. On the other hand, Tokyo maintained diplomatic relations with Baghdad throughout the period of international sanctions, right up to the March 2003 U.S. invasion. Finally, there was significant shame and regret over Japan’s failure to assist the coalition that ousted Saddam from Kuwait in 1991. Tokyo’s financial support in 1990 increased to \$13 billion (from an initial offer of \$10 million) only after the U.S. Congress began threatening to withdraw U.S. troops from Japan.⁴⁴

³⁹ See Craig Thompson, “Japan in August 2003” *The Japan Institute of International Affairs*, 2003, <http://www2.jiia.or.jp/research/kikou/08thompson.html>

⁴⁰ Cited in Robert Catley and David Mosler, *The American Challenge: The World resists US Liberalism*, (New York, Routledge, 2007), 148.

⁴¹ David McNeill, “Secrets and Lies: Ampo, Japan’s Role in the Iraq War and the Constitution.” *Japan Focus* 8, no. 7, (2010), <https://apjif.org/-David-McNeill/3305/article.html>

⁴² David McNeill, “Secrets and Lies: Ampo, Japan’s Role in the Iraq War and the Constitution,” (2010).

⁴³ Shirzad Azad, “Japan’s Gulf Policy and Response to the Iraq War,” *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* 12, no. 2, (June 2008): 52-64.

⁴⁴ Hiroshi Nakanishi, “The Gulf War and Japanese Diplomacy,” *Nippon.com*, 12 June 2011, <http://www.nippon.com/en/features/c00202/>

These factors may help explain Koizumi's push for Japanese involvement, but the degree to which he was put on the defensive soon afterward, and the intensity of public opposition to the Iraq entanglement, already had a direct and determining effect on the LDP's electoral fortunes in the 2004 Upper House election, when the party lost many seats. Although Koizumi withdrew the SDF from southern Iraq in the summer of 2006, the unpopularity of that mission and a continuing Marine SDF refueling mission in the southern Indian Ocean negatively impacted the popularity of Koizumi's successor, none other than Shinzo Abe in his first stint as prime minister. Yet, Abe continued to call for SDF deployments, and as a result the LDP was punished severely in the 2007 Upper House election, losing their majority. This, as Midford observes, "paved the way for the LDP to be voted out of power for the first time ever in the August 2009 lower house election."⁴⁵ The DPJ actively played to public opinion in 2009, pledging to end all SDF deployments, including the Indian Ocean refueling mission.⁴⁶ Future LDP leaders, including Abe himself in his second iteration as premier, seemed to readily absorb the lesson that public opinion intensely opposed military deployment to distant conflicts.

JAPAN, ISIL AND ABE'S PROACTIVE PACIFISM

In August 2014, then-U.S. President Barack Obama initiated an air campaign against ISIL targets in Iraq following rapid territorial losses on the part of the Iraqi government to the terrorist organization, which included the fall of Iraq's second largest city of Mosul. However, unlike in 2003, when George W. Bush proved unable to muster support from even key allies, Obama was able to secure wide international backing for the war against ISIL. In an effort to muster international support for the war effort, on September 10, 2014, the U.S. announced the creation of a multi-national coalition to defeat ISIL.⁴⁷ And as of December 2014, the time of this coalition's first official gathering, the U.S. led anti-ISIL coalition contained 60 states, including Japan, that had joined the coalition through the provision of either military, logistical and financial support. In November 2015, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2249 that authorized member states to take all necessary measures against ISIL, and by 2016, the number of states in the US-led multinational coalition had grown to 66. However, while Japan signed on to the broad multi-national coalition to defeat ISIL, it did not contribute the military-logistical component of this mission, which was joined by only 27 states.

In the autumn of 2014, as President Obama was assembling his U.S.-led anti-ISIL coalition, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was engaged in crafting a new Middle East policy for Japan. At the time, there was much speculation that Abe's security doctrine of proactive pacifism, which sought to recast Japan's role overseas into one that would take more responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, could be tested in the Middle East.⁴⁸ Yet, at the same time Evron cautioned that one should not expect too much from Japan's deepening involvement in the Middle East noting, "Japan lacks crucial tools to shape Middle Eastern processes or to compete with other world powers attempting to exercise their power influence in that region."⁴⁹ Nonetheless, Prime Minister Abe's January 2015 six-day tour of the Middle East was meant to showcase Japan as a regionally relevant power and Japan's security doctrine of proactive pacifism at work.⁵⁰ Indeed, in January 2015, it appeared Japan was moving toward greater participation in the US-led multi-national coalition. With Abe's pledge of \$2.5 billion in regional humanitarian and development assistance, which included \$200 million in non-military assistance to support the war effort against the Islamic State, Abe sent a strong message that Japan was committed to playing an active role in contributing to regional peace and security.

However, the subsequent beheadings of two Japanese citizens, Haruna Yukawa and Kenji Goto, carried out by ISIL in an apparent response to Abe's pledge, cast a dark shadow over Abe's visit to the region, and his broader Middle East agenda. Indeed, commentators in Japan argued in the aftermath of Yukawa and Goto's killings and an additional attack in Bangladesh which left Japanese nationals dead, that Abe's proactive pacifist

45 Paul Midford, "The Influence of Public Opinion on Foreign Policy in Asia: The Case of Japan" (2017).

46 Paul Midford *Ibid.*, (2017).

47 US Department of State, "The Global Coalition to Counter ISIS", 2014. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/s/seci/>

48 Tomoko Otake and Shusuke Murai, "Proactive Pacificism' makes Japan a Target for Islamic Terrorists: Experts," *The Japan Times*, 16 November 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/11/16/national/proactive-pacifism-makes-japan-target-islamic-terrorists-experts/#.WRv5m9wlG70>

49 Yoram Evron, "China-Japan Interaction in the Middle East: A Battleground of Japan's Remilitarization" *Pacific Review* 30, no. 2, (2017): 191.

50 *Asahi Shimbun*, "Shusho, chuto e shuppatsu tai 'isuramu kuni' de shien kyochō e" 16 January 2015, www.asahi.com/articles/ASH1J35D8H1JUTFK001.html

doctrine had made Japan, and Japanese nationals, more vulnerable to terrorist attacks.⁵¹ Thus, despite Abe's immediate pledge to make ISIL "pay the price" for the beheading of two Japanese nationals, within months of ISIL's atrocity, Abe quickly reassured the Japanese public that Japan would not be embarking on any military adventures against ISIL.

Abe's Middle East policy was initially envisioned to strengthen Japan's existing bilateral relations with states in the region. In the past, it was Japan's oil dependency that led Tokyo to take an ambivalent stance toward the region's political tensions, which simmered during the first half of the Cold War. However, this early mix of neutrality and ambivalence, which quickly came to define Japan-Middle East relations, proved untenable as the 1973 oil embargo, the 1979 Islamist revolution in Iran, the first Gulf War in 1991 and the U.S. led global war on terrorism launched in the aftermath of 9/11, confronted Japan with the jarring contradiction between its attempt to avoid costly political entanglements in the Middle East, while also attempting to maintain its important relationship with the United States.

In addition, Abe's Middle East policy emphasized Japan's exceptional role in the region by drawing an implicit contrast between Japan's policies toward the Middle East and those of Europe and the United States.⁵² However, Abe's unequivocal support for the Egyptian government's "efforts to bring about stability," delivered in his address to the Egypt-Japan Business Committee during his January 2015 visit to Egypt,⁵³ stand in sharp contrast to the more muted stance taken toward Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's Egypt by Europe and the United States (at least until U.S. President Trump's embrace of al-Sisi in 2017).

In contrast to the Middle East, Japan's security-minded focus on its regional rivals has only grown with each year in the 2000s, especially with regard to China. In November 2004, a Chinese nuclear-powered submarine made an incursion in Japanese territorial waters near Ishigaki Island in Okinawa Prefecture, which the Chinese expressed regret for, but which nevertheless heightened the sense of threat. In 2005, Foreign Minister Taro Aso characterized China as being on course to becoming a considerable threat,⁵⁴ and then DPJ leader Seiji Maehara called China's military buildup a "realistic threat" to Japan.⁵⁵ According to a report in the *Asahi Shimbun*, the SDF has studied a military response to several contingencies involving China in the East China Sea and Taiwan.⁵⁶ In September 2010, amidst the controversy over the detention of the Chinese fishing boat captain, then-Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara again drew attention to China's double-digit increases in military spending. Tensions increased since 2010 over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, with Chinese protests increasing and China's PLA Navy and fishing fleet acting more aggressively in the vicinity of the islands. In September 2010, the Japanese Coast Guard arrested the crew and captain of a Chinese fishing boat after it collided with a coast guard vessel. The crew was released soon after but the captain was held and was going to be tried until China's boycott of rare earth mineral exports to Japan caused Tokyo to release the captain. The Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute sunk to a low in January and February 2013, when two Chinese frigates locked their missile guidance systems onto Japanese forces, and in November 2013, when China announced an expansion of their air defense identification zone to include the East China Sea, including the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. While Chinese naval incursions into the Senkaku territorial waters have dropped dramatically since October

⁵¹ Tomoko Otake and Shusuke Murai, "Proactive Pacificism' makes Japan a target for Islamic terrorists: experts," *The Japan Times*.

⁵² Christopher Lamont, "Japan's Evolving Security Ties," *Asia Society Policy Institute*, 2020, <https://asiasociety.org/asias-new-pivot/japan>; Christopher Lamont, "Japan-MENA Relations: Understanding Japan's Strategic Priorities in the Region," *Mediterranean Dialogue Series* 37, 2021, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/poldimed/single-title/-/content/japan-mena-relations-understanding-japan-s-strategic-priorities-in-the-region>.

⁵³ Japan Cabinet Office, "Keynote Speech by Prime Minister Abe at the Joint Meeting of the Japan-Egypt Business Committee," 17 January 2015. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201501/17egypt.html.

⁵⁴ Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Press Conference by Foreign Minister Taro Aso," 22 December 2005, https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/fm_press/2005/12/1222.html

⁵⁵ Mike Mochizuki, "Dealing with a Rising China," in Thomas Berger *et al.*, eds. *Japan in International Politics*, (Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner, 2007): 240.

⁵⁶ *Asahi Shimbun*, "Chūgoku no shinkō' mo sotei," 26 September 2006, 1; Mike Mochizuki, "Dealing with a Rising China," (2007): 248.

2013,⁵⁷ air intrusions by Chinese aircraft that have been intercepted by Japan's Air SDF have increased to record numbers in 2015.⁵⁸

Japan's annual white papers issued by the Defense Ministry have long highlighted China, Russia, and North Korea as central threats to Japanese security. In the section entitled, "Security Environment Surrounding Japan," the 2005 white paper devoted 3½ pages out of 16½ total to China's double digit military spending and growth and its relations with Taiwan and North Korea, with two pages on North Korea and a half page on Russia. By 2006, the coverage of China grew to 11 pages, expanding to coverage of China's military posture, defense spending, missile capabilities, relations with other states, internal security, disputes with Japan in the East China Sea, and recent incursions in Japanese territorial waters and air space; with 8 pages devoted to Russia and North Korea each in the 2006 white paper.⁵⁹

The July 2015 white paper lays out the issue of why Japan considers China to be its greatest threat most clearly. Focusing on China's unilateral declaration of an Air Defense Zone in the East China Sea, its frequent incursions into Japanese air space and territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands, and military buildup, the paper states that China "continues to act in an assertive manner, including coercive attempts at changing the status quo, and is poised to fulfill its unilateral demands without compromise. China's actions include dangerous acts that may invite unintended consequences, raising concerns over China's future direction".⁶⁰ The fact that the paper's release was delayed because Japan PM Abe's Cabinet "demanded mention of additional examples of China's 'one-sided' maritime activities, such as undersea gas and oil development in the East China Sea"⁶¹ could be construed as supporting the argument that these leaders perceive China to Japan's greatest threat, and that they wanted the Defense Ministry to show that in the report.

The Japanese public's views of China dovetail with these findings. According to Japanese Cabinet Office polls, Japanese public opinion over the last 17 years shows a decreasing favorability rating of China (from around 50% in 2000 to the teens by 2016) and a consistently low rating for Russia (always hovering around the teens for the same years). The Middle East as a whole is consistently viewed unfavorably as well, when it is included in the questions.⁶² In contrast, the U.S. has consistently high ratings in the 70s during the Bush years and in the 80s during the Obama years. Table 1 presents these favorability ratings for the years 2000-2016.

⁵⁷ Taylor Fravel and Alastair Iain Johnston, "Chinese signaling in the East China Sea?" *Washington Post*, 12 April 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/04/12/chinese-signaling-in-the-east-china-sea/?utm_term=.97d0bf826aef

⁵⁸ *The Japan Times*, "ASDF scrambles against China Planes at Record Number," 19 October 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/10/19/national/politics-diplomacy/asdf-scramble-china-planes-record-number/>

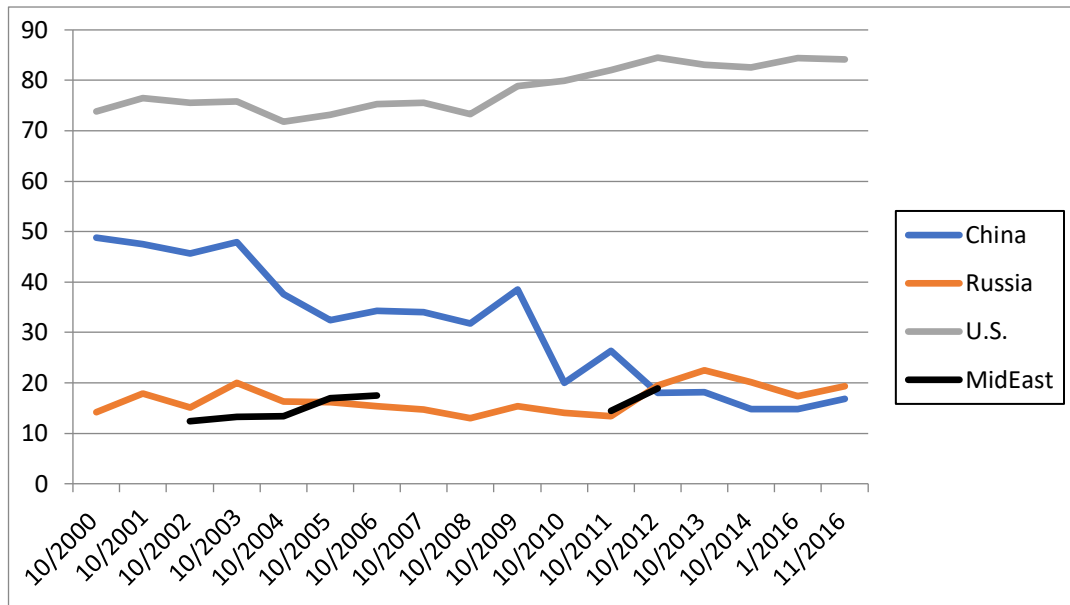
⁵⁹ Japan Ministry of Defense, "Defense of Japan 2005," http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/2005.html; Japan Ministry of Defense, "Defense of Japan 2006," http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/2006.html

⁶⁰ Japan Ministry of Defense, "Defense of Japan 2005," Section 3, China: 1 http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/2005.html;

⁶¹ *Guardian (UK)*, "Japan Defence Paper warns on China and Pushes for Stronger Military Role," 21 July 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/21/japan-defence-paper-warns-on-china-and-pushes-for-stronger-military-role>.

⁶² Japan Cabinet Office, "Public opinion polls on diplomacy," 26 December 2016, <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/index-gai.html>.

TABLE 1 – CABINET OFFICE FAVORABILITY POLLS, 2000-2016⁶³



These favourability ratings could be seen as a proxy for the security fears that the public feels. China’s ratings for instance begin a bigger slide after the September 2010 fishing boat incident escalated the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

Other public opinion data expresses consistent opposition to collective self-defense, which encompasses any form of military intervention in the fight against ISIL. Asahi Shimbun polls conducted in 2014, while the collective self-defense legislation was being debated, showed opposition by a majority of respondents. An *Asahi Shimbun* poll from 23 June 2014 had the following results,

The right to collective self-defense is the right to fight with the Japanese close allies, such as the U.S., if those allies are attacked even if Japan itself is not under attack. So far, the Japanese Government had interpreted the Constitution of Japan to not allow Japan to carry on the right to collective self-defense, but the Abe Administration plans to reinterpret the Constitution of Japan so that Japan can exercise the right to collective self-defense. Are you for or against for allowing the use of collective self-defense by changing the interpretation of the Constitution? (Yes: 28%; No: 56%).⁶⁴

Another poll was conducted after Abe explicitly connected collective self-defense to the fight against ISIL in February 2015 after the beheadings of the two Japanese hostages.⁶⁵ A 19 May 2015, *Asahi Shimbun* poll had the following results,

In the case of an international situation that threatens Japanese peace and security, the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) may support U.S. forces as they diminish the situation. However, the SDF may only provide support within Japan’s immediate geographical vicinity. Do you support the bill that would extend the geographical reach of foreign military support? (Yes: 29%; No: 53%).

⁶³ Japan Cabinet Office, “Public Opinion Polls on Diplomacy,” 26 December 2016, <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/index-gai.html>.

⁶⁴ Mansfield Foundation, “Asahi Shimbun Regular Public Opinion Poll (06/23/14)” 2016a, <http://mansfieldfdn.org/program/research-education-and-communication/asian-opinion-poll-database/asahi-shimbun-regular-public-opinion-poll-062314/>

⁶⁵ Martin Fackler, “Abe Is Said to Have Plans to Revise Pacifist Charter,” *New York Times*, 5 February 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/02/06/world/asia/abe-wants-to-revise-pacifist-constitution-as-early-as-2016-ally-says.html.

We will now ask about SDF deployment, in case of international conflicts that do not threaten to Japanese peace and security. At the present time, the Diet is required to pass a new law each time they wish to deploy the SDF in these circumstances. The new bill would allow the government to deploy SDF forces abroad without passing a new law each time. Do you support this bill? (Yes: 30%; No: 54%).⁶⁶

These polls clearly show that a majority of Japanese do not favor any type of military intervention outside of the immediate vicinity of Japan, including in the fight against ISIL, despite the violence committed against Japanese citizens.

The strategic focus on China helps to explain why Abe carefully distanced himself from embracing the US-led military coalition against ISIS both so as not to mobilize greater opposition to his proposed legislative agenda at home and to not distract from perceived threats closer to home, especially China. Thus, in contrast to 2003, realpolitik thinking may have been a more central consideration, and yet public opinion also loomed large. Rather than generate public support for military involvement in the anti-ISIL military campaign, Abe's provision of humanitarian assistance to the war effort was blamed for having made Japan, and Japanese nationals, more vulnerable to acts of terrorism. Furthermore, given the public opinion backlash against involvement in the 2003 Iraq war that was suffered by Koizumi, and polling numbers on constitutional changes that suggested a deeply divided public, Abe could not risk allowing his constitutional reform agenda being hijacked by involvement in a domestically unpopular military campaign in the Middle East.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The contrast between Japan's decision to contribute to the controversial invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, and its decision not to contribute to the military-logistical component of the U.S.-led international military coalition that was formed in 2014 to reverse ISIL's gains in Iraq and Syria, helps to shed light on the determinants of Japanese foreign policy and highlight the limits of Abe's much touted proactive pacifism and the "normalization" of Japan as a security actor on the global stage.

This paper put forward competing explanations of both Japan's decision to intervene in 2003, and decision not to intervene in 2014. The first posed Japan did not partake in the 2014 military campaign against Iraq and Syria because Japanese elites do not see ISIL as a serious security threat to Japan. Rather, Japan's defense planning, as highlighted in successive defense ministry white papers highlighted above, increasingly focuses on regional rivals, especially China. We found credence in this explanation, rooted in realist conceptions of international relations. In short, Japanese strategic planners were much more worried about China in 2014 than 2003 and did not want to expend valuable political capital and limited defense resources on a Middle East conflict that appeared distant to Japanese security concerns. But realism cannot account for the 2003 deployment and its length.

A second explanation suggests that Japan will act in way that balances its regional and other concerns with the U.S. alliance. Certainly, Koizumi's contribution to Iraq—ultimately more symbolic than substantive, despite its controversial nature—gives weight to this. Koizumi sought to satisfy U.S. requests for assistance while doing so in such a way that minimized the risk, including the risk that Japanese SDF deployment would be seen as militaristic by Tokyo's Asian neighbors. From this perspective, the deployment was largely symbolic as it came at little financial or human cost to the Koizumi administration, had a negligible effect on the strategic situation in Iraq, and instead was simply aimed at currying favor with the U.S. administration. However, it does not account for why Abe would not seek to lend credibility to his desire for "normalization" by making at least a symbolic contribution to the campaign against ISIL. This may be because the U.S., which strongly supported and applauded Abe's constitutional revisions, recognized that it would not be useful to push Abe any further, especially any Japanese contribution would be unlikely to make much difference on the Iraqi and Syrian battlefields. In other words, in the eyes of Washington policymakers, Japan was already making a major concession to the U.S.

⁶⁶ Mansfield Foundation, "Asahi Shimbun Regular Public Opinion Poll (05/19/2015)" 2016b, <http://mansfieldfdn.org/program/research-education-and-communication/asian-opinion-poll-database/asahi-shimbun-regular-public-opinion-poll-05192015/>.

A third explanation posited that Japanese elites are unlikely to deploy troops to far-flung areas that the “defensive realist”-minded Japanese public does not see as central to Japan’s security. Japan’s political elites feared the domestic repercussions of Japanese troops being killed in fighting in wars in the Middle East, or Japanese citizens becoming the target of ISIL. Both the 2003 Iraq war and the 2014 war against ISIL highlighted how successive Japanese governments were confronted with the task of balancing public opinion, hostile to involvement in open-ended military commitments in the Middle East, the maintenance of access to energy resources, and “hedging” the U.S. Japan alliance with other imperatives. In 2003, a reservoir of Japanese public sympathy for America in the wake of 9/11, a high watermark of popular support for the bilateral alliance, existing anti-Saddam policy repertoires, and a China that still did not present the threat it would a decade later, helped Koizumi to take the unprecedented step of deploying the SDF to Iraq. In contrast, by 2014, Japan under Prime Minister Abe was seeking to sell domestic public opinion on deeply polarizing constitutional reforms as part of Abe’s proactive peace agenda. Involvement in another war in the Middle East would have only weakened Abe’s hand, especially since the Japanese public (and parts of the judicial system) had already judged the Iraq deployment harshly and more generally disdained foreign military adventures and feared “entrapment.” However, public opinion alone does not provide a satisfactory explanation of why Koizumi would take the risk he did in 2003 while Abe would not do more to fight ISIL considering the significant toll that the group had inflicted on Japanese lives.

Other factors may have made the 2003 deployment an extraordinary moment of Japanese foreign policymaking. Many details of what compelled Koizumi to deploy the SDF to Iraq remain unknown and a tantalizing subject for future research, especially as documents pertaining to that period are declassified. Perhaps we will learn that strong U.S. pressure exerted by the George W. Bush personally, and the close relationship he reportedly enjoyed with the Japanese premier, made a difference. By contrast, Obama’s allegedly cooler relationship with Abe may have reduced Washington’s leverage over Tokyo. Finally, Koizumi and Japanese elites likely had strong memories of Japan’s shaming by the George H.W. Bush administration owing to Tokyo’s failure to initially contribute to the 1990-1991 Gulf War.

Our findings suggest support for both the defensive realist and public opinion hypotheses. Perhaps this should not be surprising given Midford’s finding that Japanese public opinion reflects defensive realist views.⁶⁷ In fact, at key junctures the two are mutually reinforcing. While conventional views might see public opinion as a challenge to realist understandings of foreign policy behavior, we saw that in the 2000s Japanese public opinion became the driver of realism, effectively pushing elites, and especially the LDP, back to a realist equilibrium—that is, back to a focus on immediate, regional threats rather than counter-terror or nation-building operations in the Middle East. In this view, Koizumi, whether he was hedging or acting in a neoliberal way by supporting the U.S. mission in Iraq, a more realist public ultimately forced his hand, leading to the withdrawal of the SDF from Maysan Province by 2006. By 2014, elites and public opinion were acting in a mutually reinforcing way based on realpolitik motives to produce a non-interventionist outcome. While Abe may have rhetorically supported greater involvement in collective self-defense, he never actually acted by deploying the SDF to the Middle East.

To be clear, we are not saying that Japanese public opinion is driven by purely realist motivations. Anti-militarism and various stripes of pacifism continue to play a role in Japanese security identities. But in a way, this does not matter, insofar as public opinion and elite realpolitik calculations became virtually indistinguishable in the 2010s, especially with the rise of a Chinese threat. Having said, we also saw that public opinion had independent exploratory power at key junctures, especially around the time of the 2009 elections, when LDP leaders, chastened by their defeat at the polls, resisted any impulses to continue supporting U.S. counterterror efforts around the world.

Our conclusions largely support Midford’s finding that Japanese foreign policy is driven by defensive realism, in which strategic calculations are shaped by a public that is simultaneously supportive of defending Japanese territory and sovereignty but suspicious of risky overseas military adventures with dubious goals. Elites and the public in Japan saw America’s post-9/11 wars as being in Washington’s narrow interest, one that was not shared by the Japanese. Japan’s policy repertoires in the Middle East, after all, had traditionally emphasized neutrality, access to energy resources, and a lack of any civilizational quarrel with Islam of the sort with which Western states must contend. Moreover, Abe and the ruling party were acutely conscious of how the LDP was punished by voters in the 2009 election, in no small part due to Koizumi’s decision to deploy the SDF to Samawah. A vivid illustration of this is Abe’s unwillingness to relaunch even the Indian Ocean refueling

⁶⁷ Paul Midford, *Rethinking Japanese Public Opinion and Security: From Pacifism to Realism?* (2011): 6.

mission—even though the LDP had introduced a bill to do just that during the brief period of DPJ rule. In both cases, then, we must consider how security interests rooted in realism dovetail with public opinion, which remains a powerful domestic constrainer and enabler of elite action on Japanese foreign policy.

Realist threat perceptions on the part of Japanese elites and long-held security identities expressed in the form of public opinion acted in a mutually reinforcing way to preempt any Japanese participation in the coalition the U.S. launched in 2014 to fight ISIL. Public antipathy toward military deployment overseas holds fast to this day. Polls taken in recent years by *Asahi Shimbun* and noted above suggest that there is little appetite among the public for any further deployments, and instead a healthy dose of suspicion about Abe's muscular policy initiatives. Polls also show that an overwhelming majority of Japanese believe that any deployment of the SDF will inevitably lead to undesired entanglements in combat situations. Such attitudes underpinned the SDF's recent withdrawal from South Sudan, ending the last Japanese involvement in a UN peacekeeping mission. Evidence also suggests that elites have little to no appetite for further deployments. In short, Japanese do not see using military force to support counterterrorism operations overseas as relevant to their security interests. By contrast, the Japanese public has a measurably growing fear of China, as we showed above. It is clear that China's rise will be at the top of the Japanese national security policy-making agenda, and public concern, for the foreseeable future. Given the fact that the U.S. under both the Trump and Biden administrations has increasingly framed its own foreign policy around great-power competition with China while reducing its footprint in the Middle East, Washington is happy to have its allies in Tokyo on the same page.

From such a perspective, Japanese participation in the Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s may have been an entirely *sui generis* cases of Japanese military involvement overseas, never to be repeated. Japan's deployment in 2020 of a MDSF naval cruiser to the Gulf of Aden in support of a multilateral intelligence gathering mission does not necessarily challenge this finding. The deployment was limited to a single ship and two reconnaissance aircraft and the Japanese government was at pains to communicate to the domestic public that maritime security was vital to the maintenance of Japan's energy supplies.⁶⁸ Indeed, the extent to which Tokyo sought to allay domestic fears over such a limited deployment highlights the fact that any future decision to deploy Japan's military overseas would have to overcome significant public apathy towards Japanese military deployments outside the region.

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⁶⁸ Christopher Lamont, "Japan's Evolving Security Ties," *Asia Society Policy Institute*, 2020, <https://asiasociety.org/asias-new-pivot/japan>.

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