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The Long-Term Impact of Japan's Hostage Crisis

The recent murder of Japanese hostages by ISIS has renewed debates about the country's role in the world. As John Hemmings sees it, the event 1) strengthened the country's resolve to 'normalize' itself, 2) illustrated the weaknesses of the pacifist Left, and 3) enabled Shinzo Abe to demonstrate his use of 'Kantei Diplomacy'.

By John Hemmings for ISN

The kidnapping, attempted ransoming, and murder of two Japanese hostages by ISIS in Syria this January led to an intense debate in Tokyo and in the bureaucratic corridors of power in Kasumigaseki, Tokyo's version of Whitehall. There have since been a number of attempts to understand the significance of the event for Japanese security and foreign policy-making. The conclusions, however, seem clear: first, the security policy that supposedly 'set off' the hostage crisis is not a recent phenomenon, and trying to frame the event as the immediate result of Abe's nationalist or so-called militaristic agenda is simply wrong. Second, the crisis has seen a long-term shift to the right in Japanese domestic politics that has all but neutered the once-strong pacifist-oriented left. Third, and finally, the crisis showed that Kantei Diplomacy is alive and well, and that, although the fledgling National Security Council has added to the growing strength of executive power, it was unable to play a large role in the crisis due to a lack of intelligence-gathering capabilities.

A long policy trajectory

For those who would pin the blame for the crisis on Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his recent shift towards a nationalist agenda, the reality is that Abe is simply the latest in a line of LDP figures who have pulled Japan out of the Yoshida Doctrine – Japan's Cold War policy of economic neo-mercantilism – bringing it closer to the US and into a more global posture. While the taking of the hostages was directly linked to Abe's commitment of [\\$200 million](#) in non-military aid to the fight against ISIS, the policy direction it represented long preceded his tenure in office. In fact, Japan's foreign policy shift towards the Middle East dates back to the early 2000's. In the days following the September 11th attacks, when most global leaders were still trying to comprehend the import of what had taken place, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi pledged Japan's full support to the United States. He was among the first to do so, along with NATO's Secretary General Lord Robertson and the UK's Prime Minister Tony Blair. With Koizumi's personal blessing, the Japanese government passed legislation that allowed Japanese forces to lend logistical support to maritime forces around Afghanistan and to commit the proverbial 'boots on the ground' in Samawah Province, Iraq, where Japan's SDF would carry out

reconstruction work. At that time, another Japanese citizen – Shosei Koda – was beheaded by Al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2004.

There are many inside and outside Japan who believe that this policy direction sets a dangerous [precedent](#). After all, as the 70th anniversary of the Second World War approaches, many in the region still remember the atrocities committed by Japanese troops and see the changes as a return to militarism. This is far from the case, however, as Japan's shift has been driven by regional insecurity rather than nationalism or expansionism (though nationalism has been a personal motivation for Abe and those close to him). In fact, two of Japan's harshest critics over this 'normalization', North Korea and China, have themselves built two of the region's largest military forces, with China doubling its defence spending since 2008 and now spending more than four times as much as Japan. Anti-Japanese sentiment in China, fostered since the early 1990s, has also been utilized by Beijing to justify its salami-slicing expansionism towards Japan's southwestern maritime corridor. As a result of this, LDP leaders have hewed closer to the United States and sought greater inter-operability with its and other allied forces, including those of Australia, NATO and South Korea. To some extent, Japan's nationalists have also benefitted politically from this Chinese creeping expansion. While a number of senior bureaucrats and members of the LDP see this 'normalization' in nationalist terms, this may represent a 'peak', with some anticipating a return to liberal internationalism post-Abe.

The weakness of the left

The second result of the hostage crisis was to highlight the gradual loss of power and influence in Tokyo's policy-making sphere of Japan's pacifist left. This long-term decline has occurred for a number of reasons. The first is linked to the above-mentioned changes in Japan's immediate region. Many say that the 2010 Fishing Boat crisis in the Senkaku Islands fostered [a shift in Japanese public opinion](#), after Beijing was perceived to have acted heavy-handedly towards Japan over the arrest of a Chinese fishing boat captain who rammed a Japanese Coast Guard cutter in Japanese waters. The belief that Chinese military power has grown may have led to more domestic support for Abe, though it is true that his election campaign was fought over the economy first and foremost.

Another more straight-forward reason that Japan's pacifist left is weakening is that many of its members and constituents are simply growing old. Historically, the movement was the strongest immediately after the Second World War, when Japan's devastated cities were a visible reminder of the case for peace. As Richard Lloyd Perry – a long-term resident in Japan and the *London Times* Asia Editor – remarked, "one inescapable fact of the weakening of the pacifist left is that many are simply dying out. You can also see it in the ages represented at the rallies." These rallies are increasingly marked by low attendance rates, with an April 2014 gathering attracting [only 3,000 people](#). On the other hand, a poll conducted by the left-of-centre *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper indicated that 64% of Japanese citizens remain opposed to re-interpreting the Constitution, indicating their reluctance to completely abandon the status quo. That said, the Japanese public was initially skeptical of its first forays into peacekeeping in the 1990s, and polls have shown that support has only grown.

The strength of 'Team Abe'

Third and finally, the crisis was marked by strong leadership by the Prime Minister and his aides. Indeed, Abe was aware that the hostages had been taken when he committed aid to the fight against ISIS, showing remarkable determination and confidence. That confidence is down to Abe himself, but it is also the result of having a strong team in place. 'Team Abe,' as it might be called, has benefitted significantly from '*Kantei Diplomacy*', or the rise of the office of Prime Minister and the cabinet secretariat in a landscape traditionally dominated by the bureaucracy and by political parties. First used by a Japanese academic, Tomohito Shinoda, in his [book on the subject](#), *Kantei Diplomacy* has seen the powers of the Prime Minister and the size of his team increase. This larger secretariat –

which can provide expert advice independently of the ministries – has enabled the Prime Minister to draft legislation and to manage crises more confidently. While the three DPJ Prime Ministers who followed Koizumi were ultimately unable to harness the power of the Kantei, Abe has been more successful in doing so, largely through his choice of key bureaucrats and politicians in positions of power around him. For instance, many in the bureaucracy believe that choosing LDP strongman Yoshihide Suga as cabinet secretary has been key to Abe's success. Because Suga does not want the premiership, Abe has been able to entrust his deputy with considerable power. This has enabled the no-nonsense Suga to manage and discipline the bureaucracy quite effectively, often by reassigning recalcitrant bureaucrats to less glamorous posts. Abe has also managed to harness the power of the MOD and MOFA by filling the National Security Council from among their ranks. Shotaro Yachi and Nobutsuke Kanehara are two senior NSC staff members from MOFA, while the MOD has been represented by Nobushige Takamizawa.

Overall, the hostage crisis revealed a Japanese leadership more willing to take risks in the field of security policy and more hardened to changing domestic fortunes. While the death of the two journalists was a shock for the Japanese public, the Prime Minister's foreign policy agenda was not widely blamed. Indeed, as one diplomat stated, it is as if everyone came out of the crisis more convinced of the rightfulness of its direction. This has included the pacifist wing (though they seem to have little influence on decision-making). Finally, it must be said that while the Prime Minister was able to handle the crisis from within the cabinet, it is notable that the National Security Council did not play a large role during the 18 day crisis. Most of the action took place in the basement of the Kantei, as the NSC's inability to provide raw intelligence prevented it from being the locus of activity. Doubtless, the creation of a unified [framework for Japan's intelligence community](#), safely regulated as befits a liberal democracy, is the next step in Japan's evolution towards normal statehood.

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