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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The fault in Japan's stars: Shinzo Abe, North Korea, and the quest for a new Japanese constitution

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Abstract

In the wake of North Korea's progressive missile testing that set even the usually stoic Japanese people into a panic mode, Japan has found itself at the mercy of its former enemies. In an ironic twist of fate, Tokyo's security outlooks seem to have become hostage to the strategic calculations of its fiercest nemesis in the past. This paper asks whether Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's desire for constitutional change is precipitated mainly by the resurgence of Japanese nationalist sentiments as what many of his critics claim, or if there are genuinely rational justifications for revising the country's 72-year old Constitution. And if so, why has it been so elusive for many Japanese leaders? Using neoclassical realism theory, I analyze the structural contexts and domestic intervening variables that simultaneously drive and prevent the realization of constitutional change in Japan. I argue that state leaders like Abe and those who have come before him have always been prone to acquiring flawed and inaccurate perceptions of the systemic stimuli; susceptible to making irrational and unsound decisions; and ineffective at mobilizing the national resources demanded by their preferred policies and strategies. Thus, despite having rational justifications, the quest for constitutional change has remained elusive for many Japanese leaders. Success will require Abe to carefully harmonize domestic and international expectations; prudently balance Japan's benign security intentions and hawkish military strategies; and shift away from his pragmatic–ambivalent style of domestic politics.

Keywords Japanese constitution · Neoclassical realism · Japan · Foreign policy · North Korea

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Introduction

Shinzo Abe's landslide and fifth-straight victory in the October 2017 national elections has given him a fresh mandate and extended lease on power. Although the prime minister's bold election gamble was in large part influenced by the general disarray and confusion within the opposition party, nevertheless, he publicly justified this tactic by exploiting the national crisis precipitated by North Korea's (Democratic People's Republic of Korea or DPRK) series of weapons tests, claiming that he needed an affirmation of public support for his handling of the security threat. Fortunately for Abe, his gamble has hugely paid off when the ruling coalition of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komeito secured two-thirds majority of the Lower House (Osaki 2017). When asked about his views on the election outcomes, the prime minister noted that the 'results reflected the voters' preference for a solid political foundation and their expectations for us to push policies forward and achieve results' (Blair 2017). Indeed, throughout the campaign trail, Abe won this argument by portraying himself as a man of resolve and the voice of consistency in troubled times.

It is worth noting, however, that the prime minister has not always been popular with the Japanese voters. Two months prior to the 2017 election, Abe's poll numbers were even lower than those of President Donald Trump of the USA, prompting some political observers to comment that he makes the latter 'look good,' and that he 'needs a miracle to return from the zone of no return' (Fifield 2017a). The series of corruption scandals that implicated his wife and several of his parliament members have also contributed to growing voters' fatigue and distrust over the Abe administration (Hurst 2017; Soble 2017). Nevertheless, things took a positive turn for the embattled prime minister when North Korea's supreme leader Kim Jong-Un decided to fire ballistic missiles that flew over the Japanese territory in the early mornings of August 28 and September 15, 2017.

By adeptly framing Kim's provocations as a matter of life and death, Abe has successfully resuscitated his political prospects back to life. The way that the prime minister had put it, the existential threats emanating from the DPRK crisis could only be resolved by giving the ruling coalition a more solid political footing via a snap election. To do so, he had persuasively shown why the newly formed opposition parties led by unstable leaders were neither prepared nor qualified to replace him. A change in government leadership during such crucial times would not only be irrational but could also be tantamount to a collective *seppuku*. Abe's long track record of managing issues with the North, including his visit to Pyongyang in 2002 to participate in negotiations, certainly gave his party an advantage over its rivals. The more threatening Kim's nuclear activities have become, the more that his hawkish stance on national security issues has made sense to the Japanese voters.

With a newly established parliament, the question now is how will Abe and his political coalition use this new mandate and likely protracted lease on power? While many critics have blamed the re-emergence of proposals for constitutional change on the nationalist tendencies and aspirations of the prime minister and his

party members, in this paper, I am investigating the more rational justifications for pursuing this rather elusive goal of normalizing Japan's security capabilities. To do this, I am analyzing the structural and domestic factors that simultaneously strengthen and weaken the quest for constitutional revision by some of its most ardent political supporters, specifically in the context of North Korean nuclear threat.

To be clear, it is not my claim that Pyongayan's ballistic missles are the only or the most important stimuli that are driving the efforts toward revising Japan's pacifist constitution. As a host of scholars and experts on East Asian international politics have convincingly argued, the serious and escalating threat to Japan's sovereignty and security posed by a reawakening revisionist China (and which in turn leads to Washington's constant arm-twisting of Tokyo officials to introduce reforms that will facilitate a more balance, reciprocal, and sustainable alliance) is one of the most significant precursors for constitutional revision. Nevertheless, the persistence and direction of North Korean existential threat provides Abe and supporters a concretely resonant security frame for demonstrating the urgent need to revise constitution. Although the ordinary Japanese citizens do recognize the possible security implications of Beijing's behavior in East and Southeast on its future, Pyongyang's aggressive actions toward Japan itself make the North Korean threat look more real, urgent, and important and which in fact, they are. Put differently, the very nature and direction of the North Korean threat (compared to that of the China threat) provides a faster and more convenient vehicle for pushing forward and selling the agenda of constitutional revision to the Japanese public and even to the international audience.

The paper proceeds as follows. I begin by examining the origin, limitations, and implications of Japan's post-war Constitution designed by the American-led Supreme Command for the Allied Powers (SCAP) to better understand the nature and extent of the problem. I then provide an in-depth discussion of neoclassical realism theory which I use to identify and explain the systemic stimuli and domestic intervening variables that influence and shape the views, perceptions, and strategies of present and past Japanese leaders who have endorsed constitutional change. With the establishment of a theoretical framework, I proceed to investigate the system-level and domestic-level contexts that have shaped Abe and other former Japanese ministers' respective approaches to constitutional revision. This will help determine whether these proposals have been based purely on the leaders' nationalist biases, or can be viewed as rational responses to the incentives and pressures, both internally and externally.

Once these aspects of the issue are elucidated, I analyze three major challenges that influence the current prime minister's campaign for constitutional change: the tension between domestic and regional/international expectations; the tension between benign security interests and hawkish military strategies; and the tension between Japan's long-term prospects and Abe's short-term prospects. Finally, I summarize my key findings and bring the paper to its logical conclusion by arguing that although there are rational justifications for revising the Constitution, however, the fact that state leaders have always been prone to acquiring flawed perceptions of the systemic stimuli, making unsound and irrational decisions, and ineffective at mobilizing national resources, has presented significant hurdles to the cause. To succeed,

the prime minister and his coalition government must learn how to harmonize domestic and international expectations, and balance Japan's benign security intentions and hawkish military strategies more shrewdly. Equally important, Abe must demonstrate a credible commitment to making Japan a 'normal' sovereign state, which will require a departure from his time-tested pragmatic–ambivalent politics that has won him five national elections.

The creation, limitations, and implications of Article 9

Historical creation

The constitutionality of Japan's existing Self-Defense Forces (SDF) has been at the crux of long-standing debates aimed at revising the country's post-war Constitution and overhauling the strategic culture that has been built around it. The circumstances surrounding the creation, promulgation, and eventual adoption of this document have often been used as a justification for constitutional revision by those who held the view that it did not accurately reflect the real sentiments of many Japanese (Kataoka 1991; Berkofsky 2012; Winkler 2011). Based on available historical accounts and evidences, Japan's current Constitution was drafted within seven days by the Government Section of the SCAP after the initial revisions proposed by the Japanese to their pre-war constitution were rejected (Kataoka 1991; Dower 2000). Tasked with handling the US-directed post-war occupation of Japan, the SCAP recognized the importance of maintaining the imperial system to effectively control the territory (Kataoka 1991; Dower 2000). This was reflected in Article 1 of the Constitution which retained the emperor as a mere symbol of the state, stripped of his divine status. However, a condition for this provision in Article 1 was the inclusion of the so-called peace clause in Article 9 of the Constitution which reads as follows:

> (1) Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.
> (2) In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.[1]

Hence, the main logic behind the insertion of Article 9 was to transform Japan's post-Second World War identity as a pacifist and democratic member of the international society by demonstrating its commitment to preventing past mistakes that resulted in militarism and imperialism of the early Showa from ever happening again. Earlier versions of the said article not only precluded Japan from launching an offensive warfare but also prohibited the development of military forces for national defense to appease other allies who were worried about the implications of retaining

[1] See, 1947 Japanese Constitution, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html.

the emperor (Hook and McCormack 2001; Hughes 2004, 2006). Nevertheless, the final draft approved by the SCAP provided an opening for Japan's rearmament for the purpose of self-preservation (Hughes 2006; Itoh 2001). During the Diet's deliberation on the passage of the Constitution, Hitoshi Ashida introduced amendments to Article 9 which resulted in the inclusion of the line, 'in order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph' (Itoh 2001). The insertion of this line inspired competing interpretations concerning the proper scope and limit of the Constitution's peace clause, but ultimately enabled Japan to maintain 'non-aggressive' and 'non-offensive' military forces to preserve its own security (Dower 2000; Kataoka 1991).

In his desire to end the US-led occupation of Japan during his first term as prime minister (1946–1947), Shigeru Yoshida provided the original interpretation of Article 9 that prohibited the country's right to offensive war and self-defense (Hook and McCormack 2001). Having deprived Japan of its militarist credentials, Washington took control of, and responsibility for Japan's national defense. A few years later, the Communist triumph brought by the Chinese Revolution in 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, underscored Japan's vulnerabilities as a US ally (Berkofsky 2012; Winkler 2011). In response to these events, the USA pressured Japan to sign a security treaty to bolster its capability to combat the spread of communist ideologies in East Asia, beginning with the creation of National Police Reserves (NPR) in 1950 (Berkofsky 2012; Hughes 2004, 2006).

Constitutional limitation

As the Cold War intensified and the threat of communism escalated, the NPR was expanded and transformed into the National Security Forces (NSF) in 1952. Two years later, the Self-Defense Forces Act was passed and replaced the National Security Board with the Defense Agency. This paved the way for the reorganization of the NSF as the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (de facto post-war Japanese Army), the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (de facto post-war Japanese Navy), and the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (de facto post-war Japanese Air Force) in 1954. These developments would explain Yoshida's decision to abandon his initial interpretation of Article 9 in his second term as prime minister (1948–1954), coercing him to enter into the US–Japan Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement that enabled American forces to utilize Japanese military bases.[2] It is worth mentioning that in as early as 1953, regrets over the inclusion of Article 9 had already been mounting, forcing Washington to indirectly apply pressure on Tokyo to rethink its Constitution. During his visit to Japan as then vice president, former US president Richard Nixon called the insertion of the peace clause as a 'mistake' (Hook and McCormack 2001; Hughes 2006).

Amidst the enormous public backlash precipitated by Yoshida's conflicted resolution of maintaining the SDF without modifying Japan's post-war Constitution, the LDP scrambled to reinterpret the meaning and purpose of the words written in

[2] Available online at, http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/agree0708.html.

Article 9. They argued that the Japanese renunciation of war did not forfeit the country's right to self-defense (Hughes 2004, 2006; Piotrowski 2005). Like all sovereign member states of the United Nations (UN), the LDP maintained that Article 51 of the UN Charter guaranteed Japan's right of individual national self-defense. For this purpose, the Japanese government must be permitted to establish and maintain its own self-defense forces. This expanded reading of Article 9 enabled the country to pursue what it referred to as an 'exclusively defense-oriented' policy (Berkofsky 2012; Hughes 2006).

Constitutional limitations to Japan's use of defensive military power were outlined to ensure that the SDF's capacity was kept at a minimum level necessary for self-defense (Dower 2000; Kataoka 1991). These prohibitions effectively barred Japan from participating in collective self-defense operations since the overseas deployment of the SDF was viewed by many as going beyond the country's stated goal of security maximization and, therefore, unconstitutional (Dower 2000; Kataoka 1991). A number of anti-militaristic principles inspired by the Constitution's preamble and Article 9 have constrained Japan's defensive use and implementation of military power despite their nonbinding nature. The former imperial power expressed its commitment to keeping its defensive capabilities in check by: shunning ambitions to revive its military superpower status; banning the production, possession, and introduction of nuclear weapons (Three Non-Nuclear Principles of 1967); prohibiting the export of arms and military technologies; and limiting its annual defense budget to 1 percent of GNP (Dower 2000; Hughes 2006).

Notwithstanding these self-imposed limitations, the Japanese have been able to develop substantial hard power capabilities and their network of strategic alliances continuously through their creative reinterpretation of the Constitution. A primary example of this was Yoshida's decision to retract his initial decision to ban Japan's right over self-defense. The former prime minister's voluntary surrender of Japan's right over collective self-defense was intended to help legitimize the SDF's existence by assuring the public and the international community that the troops would not be used and deployed for overseas missions (Arase 2007; Hook and McCormack 2001; Panton 2010). Moreover, Japan had not been entirely faithful to its anti-militaristic doctrines. Based on the available documents and reports, not only did the government facilitate the shipment of American nuclear artilleries via the Japanese ports, it also set aside its own prohibition on the export of weapons and arms technology to the USA (Hook and McCormack 2001; Hughes 2004, 2006).

Toward the final years of the Cold War period, Tokyo began to entangle itself into Washington's military outlook and security strategy. For example, the 1978 Defense Cooperation Agreement between Japan and the USA required the former to safeguard the sea lines of communication within the maximum distance of a thousand nautical miles from its territories.[3] The demand came in the midst of the country's robust economic growth around this time, which compelled Washington to ask Tokyo to share more of the burden by providing not only financial assistance

[3] See, Japan's Ministry of Defense document, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/anpo/19781127.html.

but also manpower (Ishikawa 1995; Hook and McCormack 2001). While critics claimed that such actions were essentially a form of collective defense activity, the Japanese government insisted that the presence of communist Soviet bloc validated the reasoning that it was simply acting on self-defense rather than collective defense (Hughes 2006: Panton 2010).

Foreign policy implications

By the end of the Cold War, Japanese leaders and policymakers started to realize that stretching the Constitution to its elastic limit could be very problematic. The existing politico-strategic conditions affecting the state's internal and external relations exposed the unnecessary problems emanating from this Japanese way of 'revising' the Constitution, specifically with respect to the SDF's legal functions and activities. Nothing could illustrate the irreconcilable dilemma created by charter better than the SDF's limited involvement in the 1991 Gulf War and the 'war on terror' that was launched in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the USA. In both occasions, the Japanese government's involvement was perceived to be too little and too late by the members of the international community, particularly the USA (Hughes 2006; Itoh 2001; Panton 2010).

During the Gulf War period, Japan had been accused of 'check book diplomacy' when it made a financial contribution of US$13 billion to compensate for its lack of manpower support (Arase 2007; Hughes 2006). The government had initially submitted a UN bill that requested for the creation and deployment of UN Peace Cooperation Corps to assist in non-combat operations but was foiled by members of political parties opposed to constitutional revision (Hughes 2006). Consequently, the government only managed to deploy six maritime SDF minesweepers to the Gulf in April 1991 (Arase 2007; Hughes 2006). This experience forced the Japanese officials to reconsider the country's role vis-à-vis the preservation of peace and security in the international society. After months of deliberation, the Act on Cooperation for United Nations Peacekeeping Operations and Other Operations was entered into force in August 1992 (in conformity with the parameters of Article 9), and officially recognized Japan's obligation to provide human resources on top of financial and material support (Itoh 2001; Hughes 2006).

Nine years later, this policy conundrum had once again beleaguered Japanese policymakers, and eventually led to the country's ambivalent response to US military operations following the events of September 11. To enable the deployment of the SDF to the Indian Ocean and facilitate the mobilization of non-combat support to American-led operations in Afghanistan, the Diet had to pass the Antiterrorism Special Measures Law in October 2001. This was followed by the ratification of the Iraqi Reconstruction Law in July 2003 to allow for the deployment of the SDF to Iraq and assist in non-combat reconstruction efforts. In justifying these actions, the government argued that as a member of the international community, the country had a duty to help preserve peace in all parts of the world as stipulated in the Constitution's preamble (Arase 2007; Panton 2010). There has been a growing consensus among Japan's most influential lawmakers that the country has both right and duty

to partake in multilateral military operations endorsed and directed by the UN. And because such actions are not supposed to be viewed as violations of the Article 9, therefore, a constitutional revision would not be necessary (Hook and McCormack 2001; Hughes 2006). Through this method, the country's pacifist Constitution has survived and remained unbroken for more than 70 years (and counting) despite the intense debates that haunted the actions taken by the previous government administrations in its name.

A neoclassical realist approach to assessing Abe's quest for constitutional revision

In neoclassical realism theory, the internal and external variables which shape the creation of foreign policy (as defined by classical and structural realism, respectively) are linked together. On the one hand, proponents of the theory are realists because they agree that a state's foreign policy is mainly a function of its relative position in the international system, specifically by its relative material power capabilities; on the other hand, they are also neoclassical because of their view that the effect of such power resources on foreign policy is neither direct nor simple given the systemic pressures that must be decoded via intervening variables found at the unit level (Lobell et al. 2009; Rose 1998; Schweller 2003). Neoclassical realists identify three key rationales behind their insistence on in-depth examinations of the contexts through which foreign policies are formulated and implemented. First, holding Thucydides' mantra that 'the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must,' neoclassical realists posit that the relative material power of the state determines the basic limits of its foreign policy (Rathbun 2008; Rose 1998). Nevertheless, they also emphasize the absence of an instantaneous transmission belt that automatically links a country's material capabilities to its foreign policy strategy and behavior (Ripsman 2011; Rose 1998). Since the decisions involving foreign policy choices are being made by actual state officials, therefore, their views and perceptions of their own relative power is as vital as their level of relative power per se (Rose 1998; Wohlforth 1993).

Second, neoclassical realists underscore the limited capacity of state leaders and elites for extracting and mobilizing national resources (Rose 1998; Taliaferro 2006). When assessing relative material power, it is imperative to take into account both the structure and strength of the state vis-a-vis its society as they also influence the amount of national resources that state officials can allocate to foreign policy. Consequently, despite the fact that countries may more or less have the same amount of capabilities, nonetheless, their behaviors and actions may still be different given the structural differences (Lobell et al. 2009; Rose 1998). And third, adherents assert that while systemic stimuli (defined in terms of incentives and pressures) shape the general pattern and course of foreign policy, the effects are not always robust nor explicit enough to uncover specific details and information about state behavior (Rathbun 2008; Rose 1998; Schweller 2003). Hence, when evaluating the impact of various systemic factors, a macroscopic rather than a microscopic approach may yield more meaningful results.

To this extent, neoclassical realism bridges pure structuralism and constructivism. Structuralism highlights that the clear-cut connection between systemic stimuli and unit-level behavior, while constructivism challenges the notion of objective systemic constraints in the international system, arguing that these so-called realities are all social constructions (Rose 1998; Wendt 1992, 1999). As far as neoclassical realism is concerned, there is indeed an objective reality of relative power which is crucial in determining the outcomes of inter-state relations; however, state actors cannot be presumed to have the capability to understand fully and precisely this reality on a day-to-day basis (Ripsman 2011; Rose 1998; Schweller 2003). By emphasizing the predominance of relative power over domestic politics, as well as stressing that the consequences of such power on foreign policymaking are neither direct nor explicit, neoclassical realism is able to differentiate itself from *Innenpolitik* and structuralism, respectively (Ripsman 2011; Rose 1998).

Neoclassical realists identify two primary intervening variables that exert influence on state responses vis-à-vis the opportunities and constraints presented by the international system, namely: the perceptions of a country's decision-makers through which systemic stimuli are filtered and processed; and the strength of a country's state machinery and its relation with the immediate society (Ripsman 2011; Rose 1998; Schweller 2003). The presence of these intervening variables suggests that 'a reliable but invisible transmission belt connecting objective material change to adaptive behavior' (Friedberg 1988: 13) does not exist contrary to what structuralists have postulated. Put differently, there is no logical reason to imply that state leaders can somehow grasp the distribution of power perfectly, and that this awareness could be converted routinely into national policy. Experience indicates that the process of translating capabilities into state responses is muddled since it is only by inducing policy leaders and elites that the distribution of power can direct a country's conduct and behavior (Lobell et al. 2009; Ripsman 2011).

Moreover, aggregate estimates of global power distribution are unsatisfactory given that state officials, as neoclassical realism suggests, do not always have full access to the country's entire material power resources (Rose 1998; Taliaferro 2006). Accordingly, government capacity for acquiring and controlling societal resources must also be accounted for. The underlying assumption here is that because foreign policy is crafted not by the whole nation but by the ruling government, what matters is state power or 'that portion of national power the government can extract for its purposes and reflects the ease with which central decision-makers can achieve their ends' (Fareed 1998: 9). Other neoclassical realists refer to this as national political power or 'the ability of state leaders to mobilize their nation's human and material resources behind security policy initiatives' (Christensen 1996: 11). Despite the slight variations in the nomenclature, the two concepts signify a major intervening variable between systemic pressures facing the country and the strategies that state managers adopt to address those pressures.

These unit-level factors underscore the neoclassical realist position that far from being perfect, the transmission belt that is supposed to instantaneously convert a state's material capability into its strategic behavior is rather defective, thus preventing states from flexibly adjusting their foreign policies along with the changing international landscape. This interpretation has several implications for foreign

policy leaders: First, they are susceptible to acquiring erroneous and inaccurate perceptions of systemic stimuli; second, they are prone to implementing faulty decision-making procedures; and third, they are not always effective in consolidating the national resources crucial for policy implementation (Lobell et al. 2009; Ripsman 2011; Rose 1998; Taliaferro 2006). Four intertwined elements help explain these limits: the leaders' images which tend to alter perceptions; the prevailing strategic culture which traditionally underpins state responses; state–society relations which determine relative state power for adopting and executing decisions; and existing domestic political institutions which either mobilize or undermine support for state officials in times of crisis (Ripsman 2011; Rose 1998; Taliaferro 2006). The point here is not that unit-level factors (as intervening variables) only produce 'noises'—misperception, misjudgment, and irrational responses—to existing structural contexts, but rather, these elements further complicate the decision-making context and process at the domestic level resulting in the substantial loss of flexibility on the part of state elites to construct and implement optimum policy responses at any given time. Government leaders have to continuously pick from a wide range of policy alternatives in order to adapt to constantly changing systemic and domestic requirements.

Finally, neoclassical realism also adds to the agent-structure debate by supporting the argument that under specific conditions, the agents also play an active role in molding and determining the impacts of dominant international structures (Rathbun 2008; Ripsman 2011; Rose 1998). In other words, the structures that are influencing agential preferences and political outcomes are also being interpreted by the agents themselves, and are responded to within domestic political institutions that accord the agents decision-making capabilities (Ripsman 2011; Rose 1998). This emphasis on the three-way linkage between clearly defined explanatory, intervening, and explained variables, suggests that neoclassical realism 'does not simply state that domestic politics matter in foreign policy, but specifies the conditions under which they matter' (Christensen 1996: 252). Overall, as Michael Foulon (2015: 635) has argued, by bridging the spatial divide between the domestic and international; the cognitive divide between matter and ideas; and the temporal divide between present and future, neoclassical realism is able to overcome the limits inherent to other approaches including Putnam's two-level game liberalism (1988), Moravcsik's liberal theory (1997), and Wendtian constructivism (1992).

Systemic stimuli, domestic intervening variables, and constitutional change in Japan

System-level context

Abe's skillful framing of the DPRK threat has given him a new platform through which he could relaunch his long-standing goal of constitutional revision. By presenting the issue as a threat to the very existence of Japan and its people, he is sending a clear message that 'if we do not tackle this problem, everything else will be irrelevant because we will not be here or will not be free to deal with it

in our own way' (Buzan et al. 1998: 24). In his statement following North Korea's launch of a ballistic missile that flew over Hokkaido on September 15, 2017, Abe (2017) claimed that: 'Here in northeast Asia, the North Korean threat has been real for more than a quarter-century. We face the threat of missiles—short and medium range—together with the possibility of chemical weapons attacks.'

In the same op-ed piece, Abe (2017) had complained about the ineffectiveness of continued dialog with Kim's regime, arguing that despite the international community's efforts at providing North Korea with sanction reliefs as 'compensation' for its pledges, Pyongyang had conveniently disregarded most of its commitments. For example, when Pyongyang announced its plan to ignore the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and withdraw from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in the early 1990s, Japan, together with South Korea and the USA, responded by engaging in a dialog with the North (Abe 2017). The parties agreed to shoulder majority of the financial costs incurred for building two light-water reactors and providing heavy fuel oil under the conditions that North Korea would freeze and eventually dismantle its nuclear program. But in 2002, North Korea expelled the inspectors from the IAEA, and in the following year, had officially walked away from the NPT (Abe 2017).

According to Abe (2017), the delivery of heavy fuel and light-water reactors facilitated the creation of Pyongyang's uranium enrichment, which then prompted Japan, South Korea, and the USA to form six-party talks with the North by bringing China and Russia to the negotiating table. During these talks, Pyongyang had once again pledged to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula. However, in 2005, instead of shutting down its nuclear program, the DPRK declared itself a nuclear power and went on to conduct a nuclear test in 2006. Thus, Abe has consistently argued that Japan and its allies needed to adopt extraordinary measures that would effectively contain the North Korean threat, rather than investing in dialogs which repeatedly proved futile. He feared that the proposals for more talks would only be interpreted by Kim as a sign of weakness and lack of resolve on the part of his opponents (Abe 2017). To a large extent, this would explain Abe's expression of full support to Trump's position that all options should be put on the table (Tachikawa 2017). Given Pyongyang's history of violating international agreements and its ongoing missile launches and nuclear tests, the Japanese leader believes 'that more dialogue with the regime would be a dead end' (Abe 2017).

The prime minister's exploitation of the North Korean threat serves a dual purpose: first, to substantiate Abe's pre-election 'national crisis' campaign thrust designed to boost the ruling party's electoral appeal by underscoring its resolute handling of the threat; and second, to drive forward Abe's post-election goal of amending the Constitution's Article 9 as an extraordinary measure for containing the existential threats to Japanese security and sovereignty. Interestingly, Abe's move seemed to have resonated well with the audience, both inside and outside of Japan. Within the country, the survey studies conducted by various agencies immediately after the escalation of the DPRK missile threat showed that the percentage of voters against constitutional amendment fell from 50 percent in May 2017 to 40 percent in October of the same year (Osaki and Kikuchi 2017). While in absolute terms the number of Japanese opposed to this

movement remains higher, nonetheless, the number of people who are being convinced otherwise is also increasing at the expense of the former (Osaki and Kikuchi 2017).

Outside of Japan, Abe's strategy has also been well received by its most important ally, the USA. During his three-day visit to Japan in November 2017, Trump expressed his intention of arming the country so that it could shoot down North Korean missiles (Colvin and Lemire 2017). The commander-in-chief of the most powerful country underscored Abe's security concerns when he accused the reclusive state of being 'a threat to the civilized world and international peace and stability,' and proclaimed that 'the era of strategic patience is over' (Colvin and Lemire 2017). Reports revealed that the US president had been baffled by Japan's decision not to strike down the two missiles that flew over its territory, asking why 'a country of samurai warriors' did not take a military action (Politi 2017). Trump lauded Abe's decision to purchase 'massive amounts of military equipment,' boasting that his country makes the 'best military equipment, by far' (Colvin and Lemire 2017). With these new weapons, the American president expressed his hope that 'warrior' Japan 'will shoot them [North Korean missiles] out of the sky' (Kua 2017).

In December 2017, Abe's warning about the North Korean threat was heightened further when he labeled Kim's activities as 'an unprecedented, significant and imminent threat against the safety of the region, including Japan' (Stewart 2017). In a resolution adopted by the upper house, the Japanese prime minister had once again protested Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs, noting that 'dialogue for the sake of dialogue is meaningless' (Yoshida 2017a). Describing the situation as 'a frontal challenge against the international community that must not be tolerated,' Abe had asserted that 'in order to press North Korea into changing its policies, we shall take a resolute attitude in our diplomacy' (Nogi 2017). To do this, he pledged to put pressure on the North until Kim changes his ways and gives up his missile and nuclear technology in a 'verifiable' and 'irreversible' method (Abe 2017).

The foregoing discussion reveals Abe's views and perceptions about the systemic constraints and opportunities that the current international system engenders. And as far as the prime minister's calculations and judgments are concerned, the only way to effectively address the existential threat presented by Pyongyang is to undertake an extraordinary measure which will require proper mobilization of national resources and full consolidation of state power: the revision of the Japanese constitution. But as will be elucidated in the succeeding discussions, contrary to what structural realists would have us believe, the mere presence and recognition of these systemic stimuli does not guarantee a straightforward path toward constitutional change as a means for Japanese leaders to address/harness the structural threats/incentives emanating from the system. In fact, the whole process of constitutional change is significantly shaped by a number of unit-level factors including the nature of Japan's domestic political regimes, strategic culture, state–society relations, and leader perceptions.

Domestic-level context

During his first press conference in 2018, Abe hinted that his New Year's resolution was to take the difficult albeit necessary steps toward revising the constitution,

a goal that remains integral to his 'Japan's rebirth' project. His administration has repeatedly argued that the current security environment 'has fundamentally changed due to changes in the power balance and the rapid development of technological breakthroughs, the threat of weapons of mass destruction and other factors' (Repeta 2015: 6). Previous attempts at addressing these existential threats led to the realization that reinterpretation is damaging the legal stability and undermining the cohesiveness of the Constitution. Hence, the LDP under the Abe administration has persistently pushed for constitutional revision and Diet legislation that would recognize the SDF as a military with an active role and responsibility in international security including collective self-defense. But prior to Abe's political resurrection, several former prime ministers and party leaders had presented their views on how the Constitution might be revised and to what end.

Notable among them were Ozawa Ichiro (House Representative since 1969 up to present), Hatoyama Yukio (prime minister from 2009 to 2010), and Nakasone Yasuhiro (prime minister from 1982 to 1987). Their proposals contained substantial similarities and disagreements, and as such, held varying implications for Japan's domestic and international security relations. Together, they reveal significant insights about the role that domestic intervening variables have continued to play in Japanese statecraft, particularly with respect to the agenda of constitutional revision. These failed proposals illustrate how state elites can be prone to acquiring flawed perceptions of the systemic stimuli; susceptible to adopting irrational decisions; and ineffective at mobilizing the necessary resources for implementing their preferred policy choices.

Ozawa's proposal and the problem of acquiring perceptions

Ozawa's main grievance with regard to the current Constitution was the view that the document was not of the Japanese people, not by the Japanese people, and certainly not for the Japanese people. Considering the historical context through which the Constitution had been put into effect, he argued that it failed to take into consideration the genuine interests and aspirations of everyone (Itoh 2001; Easley et al. 2010; Winkler 2011). Ozawa claimed that the circumstances surrounding the Constitution's creation and enforcement made it invalid and, therefore, merited a revision. For him, venerating a non-Japanese Constitution decades after the country's occupation had ended was an anomaly and a violation of the international law that needed to be rectified (Itoh 2001; Winkler 2011). In September 1999, Ozawa, then president of the LDP, unveiled what he described as a 'neo-pacifist' version of the constitution with two key features (Itoh 2001). First, instead of revising the article in question, Ozawa added a third paragraph to Article 9 that read:

> (3) The preceding second paragraph does not prevent Japan from exercising its right to self-defense and from maintaining armed forces to exercise that right.[4]

[4] Tetsuya Kataoka, *The price of a constitution: The origin of Japan's post-war politics* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1991), 13–39.

The insertion of this line was based on his interpretation that Article 9 was simply meant to restraint rather than prevent the state from exercising its 'natural right' of individual and collective self-defense (Itoh 2001; Easley et al. 2010). Just like any other 'ordinary nation,' there were no laws that could have refuted Japan's entitlement to self-preservation. The official interpretation of the Constitution with regard to this issue has been that although the country retains its rights to individual and collective self-defense, it is constrained from employing the latter because of constitutional limitations (Hook and McCormack 2001; Hagström 2010; Winkler 2011). Second, and in addition to this third paragraph, Ozawa also drafted a new article entitled 'International Peace' that directly followed Article 9 that stated:

> The Japanese people shall take the initiative in participating in international peace activities, in order to maintain and restore international peace and security from threats to peace and acts of destruction and aggression, and actively contribute to world peace, through every means including the supply of armed forces.[5]

The inclusion of this new article stemmed from Ozawa's belief that the country's membership to the UN compels it to fulfill all the obligations stipulated under its Charter (Hook and McCormack 2001; Itoh 2001). Japan's refusal to join various UN peacekeeping operations due to some constitutional restrictions was, therefore, unacceptable. Rather than using the Constitution as an excuse for its inaction, Ozawa (1999) encouraged the government to take on a much bigger role in global peacekeeping activities. He went as far as recommending the creation of a standing United Nations Force (UNF) to complement his recommended amendments to the Constitution, citing that Japan's survival was contingent on its ability to facilitate cooperation among members of the international society (Berkofsky 2012; Itoh 2001). To this end, Ozawa (1999) advised the Japanese government to persuade Washington and other great powers to pool their financial and human resources together for the development and maintenance of the UNF. Based on his prognosis of the situation, these modifications should be enough to pacify neighboring states (Berkofsky 2012; Itoh 2001; Winkler 2011). For many critics, however, Ozawa's approach to constitutional revision was largely ineffective and even deceptive as it deliberately left Article 9 virtually untouched. While on face value the document may appear progressive (to the extent it recognized the importance of self-defense and armed forces), it did little to address the important questions surrounding the imposition of the peace clause and the legitimacy of the SDF (Kataoka 1991; Hughes 2006). The third paragraph that Ozawa attached to Article 9 contradicted the essence of the two original paragraphs, thereby bringing more confusion rather than clarity.

[5] Ozawa Ichiro, 'Nihonkoku kempo kaisei shian,' *Bungei shunju*, September 1999, p. 98.

Hatoyama's proposal and the problem of making decisions

Thirty days after the release of Ozawa's proposal, Hatoyama, then president of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), revealed his own proposed amendments. What the former prime minister found particularly perplexing about Ozawa's proposal was the latter's refusal to completely rework Article 9 considering that it has remained the most polarizing issue in Japan's post-war politics (Boyd and Samuels 2005; Easley et al. 2010; Panton 2010). To settle once and for all the prolonged disputes concerning the legitimacy of the article in question and the constitutionality of the SDF, Hatoyama offered the following modifications that explicitly stated Japan's possession of armed forces:

> (1) Japan shall maintain land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential.
> (2) Japan shall neither use these forces for acts of aggression nor shall Japan employ conscription.[6]

To be successful in adopting these changes, Hatoyama (1999) conceded that significant efforts must be made on the part of the Japanese government to win back the trust and support of its former enemies in East Asia. For starters, Tokyo needed to show full recognizance and accountability for all its imperialistic actions that permanently scarred many of its immediate neighbors. Hatoyama (1999) believed that a comprehensive review of its past conducts would be a necessary step in overcoming the problems emanating from lingering Korean resentment, Chinese contempt, and American unreliability. Another aspect of Ozawa's proposal that Hatoyama took a serious issue with was the former's rather romantic and naïve view with regard to the true nature of Japan's relations with the USA and the UN as a whole (Boyd and Samuels 2005; Easley et al. 2010). He reminded Ozawa and his supporters not to ignore the fact that Washington's actions and decisions were guided by its own self-interests (Hatoyama 1999). By agreeing to Ozawa's recommendations, Hatoyama was worried that the Japanese people would unwittingly make themselves hostage to American interests which were being pursued under the pretext of UN missions (Boyd and Samuels 2005; Easley et al. 2010). Put differently, by relying too much on the USA, Japan was becoming a disposable pawn whose main role was to help promote America's shortsighted hegemonic goals in exchange for its security and strategic needs. Instead, Hatoyama (1999) envisioned a scenario in which Japan could develop its own defense capability in order to reduce its dependence on Washington. This would mean letting go of the US military bases that have been permanently stationed in various parts of the country. From Hatoyama's (1999) standpoint, the continued presence of foreign troops was diminishing the government's capacity (if not, will) to act as a fully sovereign state, particularly with respect to the USA.

But just like Ozawa's proposals, Hatoyama's propositions were not bulletproof. Sceptics have pointed out that the initial indisposition of the former prime minister toward collective self-defense undermined the overall coherence of his proposal as it negated his call for a more independent and confident Japan (Berkofsky 2012;

[6] Hatoyama Yukio, 'Jieitai o guntai to mitomeyo,' *Bungei shunju*, October 1999, pp. 262–73.

Easley et al. 2010; Winkler 2011). The DPJ did not seem to recognize the inherent conflict between their desire to close down US military bases in Japan and their disinterest toward collective self-defense strategies. In order for the country to be truly free from the clutches of American influence and avoid being entangled in US-led wars that it had nothing to do with, it would be necessary to completely abolish the US–Japan security treaty (Itoh 2001; Panton 2010). Expecting Washington to safeguard and protect Japan after demanding full sovereignty seemed rather hypocritical on the part of Hatoyama, and only underscored the incongruence between his rhetoric and action (Itoh 2001).

Nakasone's proposal and the problem of mobilizing resources

Amidst all the confusion surrounding Article 9, in April 200, former Prime Minister Nakasone of the LDP offered his own revision proposals. As one of its staunchest advocates, Nakasone (2000) emphasized the importance of developing a charter independently. Based on his personal recollection, former Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida's subscription to pacifism was merely a political maneuver given that it was the dominant ideology accepted by the public at that time. Rather than adopting a pacifist doctrine, Nakasone (2000) maintained that the Japanese government needed to take over the management of its national defense as soon as it regained its independence and must be prepared to fulfill its international duties and obligations upon its accession to the UN. He believed that the following amendments to Article 9 would make constitutional revision more palatable to the Japanese people and their Asian neighbors:

> (2) Japan shall maintain land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, for self-defense purposes.
> (3) Japan retains the right to exercise its right to collective self-defense.[7]

Based on this proposal, paragraph 2 of Article 9 was to be rewritten to clearly state the country's right to self-defense and then attach a third paragraph that would unequivocally establish Japan's claim for collective self-defense. For Nakasone, collective self-defense is not only necessary for ensuring individual self-defense but an inherent component of any security alliance (Hughes 2004; Itoh 2001). In stipulating these rights, he called for the government and all other actors that could be involved to exercise prudence and transparency to prevent the misuse and abuse of these rights (Hughes 2006). It is interesting to note here that despite Nakasone's reputation for being one of the fiercest promoters of constitutional change, his decision to keep paragraph 1 of Article 9 seemed to be more conservative when compared with Hatoyama's proposal to completely rewrite the article (Itoh 2001). Despite his personal failure to adopt his proposal during tenure as prime minister, the fact that the key figures from the country's two biggest political parties reached a common

[7] Nakasone Yasuhiro, 'Waga kaiken-ron,' *Shokun*, April 2000, pp. 55–56.

ground underscored the growing dissatisfaction shared by many Japanese political elites.

Back to square one

In April 2012, 60 years after the signing of the San Francisco Treaty, the LDP (2012) released a draft of the new constitution which they described as 'appropriate to the times and circumstances of Japan.' The members of the country's largest and most dominant party continued to be humiliated by the thought that the Japanese people are being governed under a constitution that was drafted by a group of foreign military officials. Thus, it is not surprising that among all the political parties in Japan, the LDP has been the most vocal about crafting a new constitution for post-war Japan. It is worth mentioning that the 2012 version was published at a time when the LDP was out of power and prior to Abe's return to the party's helm in September 2012. During this period, Abe delegated the task of working out its details to Isozaki and, by doing so, failed to carefully scrutinize the text (Japan Times 2016). Against this backdrop, the LDP draft contained a number of crucial amendments that would constitutionally guarantee Japan's right to not only develop a modern military but also deploy this force at home and abroad, if deemed necessary by the government. With respect to Article 9, Yosuke proposed to rewrite it as follows:

> (1) Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and will not employ the threat and use of force as a means of settling international disputes.
> (2) The provisions in the preceding paragraph shall not prevent the exercise of the right to self-defense.[8]

Based on the LDP's prescriptions, paragraph 2 of the current Article 9 which prohibits the maintenance of 'land, air and sea forces' and the renunciation of the 'right to belligerency' would be deleted. In lieu of this paragraph, Isozaki would insert a statement saying that nothing in the provision would 'prevent the exercise of the right to self-defense.' The LDP (2012) has insisted to specify clearly the actual nature and role of the SDF as a 'national defense military' and the designation of the prime minister as its 'supreme commander.' These changes would significantly broaden the scope of obligations of the Japanese military by going beyond the limited responsibility of national 'self-defense.' Indeed, one of the most derided aspects of the LDP draft has been the proposition that would allow the military to involve itself in 'internationally coordinated activities to secure the peace and safety of international society,' and 'activities that would preserve the public order or to protect the lives or freedom of the people' (Liff 2015; Repeta 2013; Sasaki 2015).

Critics have argued that such a nationalistic constitution would have a devastating effect on the provision and protection of individual rights, and substantially increase the risk of military conflict for Japan. For instance, Isokazi's version grants

[8] Liberal Democratic Party, 'Draft for the Amendment of the Constitution of Japan,' *Voyce,* April 2012.

the state a right to restrict and suspend certain elements of human rights in times of emergency. The proposal also deletes Article 97 which maintains the sanctity of basic human rights, maintaining that the Western idea of God-given human rights would clash with local Japanese traditions (Japan Times 2016; Repeta 2013). In addition, the revised version of Article 1 written by Isozaki which states that 'all of the people shall be respected as individuals,' to read '…as humans' has also been vehemently denounced by observers as an irreversible step toward totalitarianism (Repeta 2013; Sasaki 2015). Right from the very beginning, the opponents of constitutional revision from different political affiliations have been highly skeptical of the LDP's capacity to uphold the constitution's call on those in power to act with restraint. This fear has been exacerbated further by Isozaki's failure to explicitly specify how his version of Article 9 would be implemented alongside the two new articles—Article 98 and Article 99—which accord Cabinet members extraordinary powers to craft extraordinary measures in 'states of emergency' (Japan Times 2016; Repeta 2013). Should the prime minister decide to declare a state of emergency, the draft would give the Cabinet (as oppose to the Diet) the actual authority to determine the extent of military operations during preliminary stages of deployment. It would be difficult to think of a scenario in which the exercise of Japanese military force would be ineligible and inappropriate given the broadness of the term and the vagueness of its definition (Repeta 2013).

The enormous criticisms that the current LDP draft continues to receive have forced Abe to concede that his ambition is not 'schedule-oriented' (Yoshida 2017b). Despite the sense of urgency in his rhetoric, the prime minister now claims that he is not fixated on the 2020 deadline that he had initially set for himself. In October 2016, the LDP announced that it was putting a freeze on its 2012 draft, a move which the party described as an effort to reach a compromise with the opposition parties (Osaki 2016). Nevertheless, the LDP members had rejected the demand from the Democratic Party to completely scrap the draft, insisting that it would remain an official LDP document which could be used as a basis by lawmakers for developing new proposals (LDP 2012).

Lessons and challenges for Abe

On the heels of a huge political comeback, Abe is once again preparing to set in motion his long-standing ambition of revising the country's post-war constitution. Despite the shelving of LDP's 2012 draft, Abe remains unperturbed in pursuing his goal, emphasizing the fact that the draft was created when his party was out of power and when a more liberal Sadakazu Tanigaki was the president (Japan Times 2016). Some observers have noted that Abe's most recent efforts in reinterpreting the meaning of Article 9 (particularly with regard to issues concerning collective defense, gray zone aggression, and defense of the rules-based arrangement) have already helped expand SDF's scope of missions, operations, and defense. And that as a result of this, initiating actual constitutional revision has now become less urgent while also bringing national consensus closer to revision. Be that as it may, in order to enhance his chances for success, the prime minister will be wise to reflect

on the challenges faced by his predecessors and learn the lessons that these experiences offer. At stake is Abe's dream for Japan to acquire the security identity of a 'normal' sovereign state that proactively contributes to regional and international peace.

Balancing domestic and international expectations

Abe's battle for constitutional revision is being fought on several fronts—domestic, regional, and international. The prime minister's surprising change in tone when queried about his 2020 deadline highlights his lack of confidence in convincing the people to amend the constitution, and the LDP understands the extreme difficulty in mobilizing national resources and consolidating state power to implement this task. Despite the two-thirds majority held by Abe's coalition party in both parliament houses, any changes in the constitution still requires majority approval from the public via a referendum. As what the former British Prime Minister David Cameron learned from his experience with Brexit, electoral victory is not quite the same as victory in referendum. Moreover, the October 2017 elections could also be viewed as a partial success for the anti-revisionist alliance. The newly formed Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ) which rejects any changes in the constitution, has managed to become the second largest party in the parliament and beat Yuriko Koike's pro-amendment Party of Hope (McCurry 2017).

Another potential source of problem for Abe can be found within his own turf: the Komeito. The Buddhist-affiliated party has consistently questioned its partner's insistence on remilitarizing Japan mainly to appease the members of its voting machine, the Soka Gakkai (Hagström 2010; Fifield 2017b; Taylor 2017). Despite its coalition with the LDP, Komeito leaders favor the addition of new features that are responsive to the evolving security environment rather than completely overhauling the current Constitution. To this end, its members insist on retaining Article 9 while also recognizing the legitimate status of the SDF as well as its rights to act in individual self-defense and play an international role. In the words of Komeito's Kazuo Kitagawa: 'We do not really feel the need to revise Article 9 now, and we are wondering if there is any urgency…We do not consider the self-defense forces to be unconstitutional, and I think most Japanese do not either' (Fifield 2017b). Clearly, as the leader of the governing party, Abe is faced with the complicated task of bringing the Komeito and sections of the CDPJ with it, in driving forward and wining his quest for formal constitutional revision at the domestic front.

But like all other adept politicians, Abe is fully aware that politics does not stop at the water's edge. While American policymakers dreaming of a toughened alliance with Japan have been thrilled with the proposals presented by various figureheads in Tokyo, neighboring states have raised their collective voices in criticizing Abe's attempts at transforming the country's defense posture. Back in 2014 and 2015, his coalition party ratified a legislation that reinterpreted the role of the SDF and permitted its members to fight with overseas allies (Taylor 2017). The move did not only bring strong condemnation from opposition lawmakers and activists within Japan but was also fiercely denounced both in China and South Korea as a 'brutal

violation' of the government's commitment to peaceful development and a terrifying return to militarism (King 2014; Taylor 2017).

It is not difficult to understand this paranoia on the part of the Chinese and South Korean officials who prefer the 'normalization' of East Asian security relations, where Japanese military power is bound by a pacifist constitution and exercised either independently or via the mechanisms provided by the Tokyo–Washington alliance. For these neighboring countries with first-hand experience of imperialist Japan, the realization of Abe's ambition is just too risky and too difficult to live with. This level of mistrust and contempt is hardly surprising considering how the prime minister has underplayed Japan's war liabilities during the first half of the twentieth century. His reluctance to unequivocally denounce past Japanese atrocities; his frequent visits to the Yasukuni shrine where war criminals are celebrated; and his irreversible fate of having a grandfather infamously known as *Shōwa no yōkai* (the Shōwa era monster/devil) have all contributed to this impression. Interestingly, like his ultra-nationalist American counterpart, the Japanese prime minister does not seem to take foreign sentiments into much consideration. Compared to Trump's America, however, Japan is more vulnerable and exposed to the outsiders. As such, Abe will have to work harder in convincing his fellow East Asian leaders that his quest for constitutional revision will not revive Japan's previous wartime ambitions nor will it reignite its aggressive character. This means that Abe must resist the temptation of selling constitutional revision as a means for making Japan 'great again' despite his enthusiasm for Trump.

Thus, one of the biggest hurdles for the prime minister is connected to how he perceives the systemic constraints and opportunities while having to operate under a pacifist constitution. As humans, leaders like Abe often commit errors when determining their relative power and capabilities, the viable alternatives that they can pursue, and the likely effects of these decisions (Jervis 1976; Stoessinger 2005). Given the asymmetry in information, it is not difficult to imagine how leaders can be prone to misperceptions and miscalculations. History shows that most wars were fought by nations due to their leaders' underestimation of the cost of war and/or overestimation of their capacity to fight protracted battles (Stoessinger 2005). Indeed, international politics is shaped by power mainly through the perceptions of individuals who are making decisions on behalf of the state and their citizens (Wohlforth 1993). Accordingly, mistakes often arise from the leaders' inherent biases rooted in their repository of images and perceptions, which then pass through cognitive filters that process and evaluate available and incoming information (Jervis 1976). To this extent, Japan's foreign policy and strategic behavior are more closely linked to Abe's (and the rest of the LDP) character and conduct rather than the objective threats or incentives emanating from the international system.

Balancing benign security interests and pragmatic military strategies

Abe's ability to pacify his increasingly skeptical and hostile neighbors is also contingent on his effective balancing of Japan's benign security aspirations and the hawkish military apparatuses through which he wishes to secure them. Since his return to

power in December 2012, Abe's administration has already established three new institutions which now serve as the core pillars of Japanese national security: the first-ever National Security Council (NSC); the first-ever National Security Strategy (NSS); and a revised National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) (Liff 2015; Sasaki 2015). These three have been designed to accelerate the implementation of defense policy reforms which are crucial to the transformation of Japan's strategic outlook and security agenda. The NSC is responsible for consolidating decision-making processes and ensuring the fast and effective inter-agency planning and coordination of security policies and strategies constituting the NSS and the NDPG.

The organizing principle of these two documents encapsulates Abe's benevolent security goal for Japan which is to proactively contribute to the 'peace, stability and prosperity of the international community.'[9] But in spite of the supposed benignity of these liberal motives, his militarized approach to pursuing these motives has fueled substantial controversies that made him a polarizing figure. While his supporters recognize the necessity for revolutionizing the country's defense posture amidst the existential threats emanating from the new security environment, his sternest opponents see his efforts as a renunciation of Japan's post-war commitment to pacifism. In particular, critics have questioned the militaristic nature of the measures implemented by Abe in support of the NSS objectives which include the passing of a secrecy legislation that enables closer intelligence-sharing with the USA; the 'Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology' that significantly relaxes Japan's 1967 Arms Export Ban to improve inefficient defense procurement; and a new Development Cooperation Charter that allows the government to offer assistance to foreign militaries involved in nontraditional security missions (Hughes 2006; Liff 2015; Sasaki 2015).

Although these three developments have substantial security implications for Japan's foreign policy, nonetheless, it was Abe's partial lifting of the ban on collective self-defense under Article 9 that attracted the most attention. Prior to the enactment of the July 2014 cabinet resolution, the official government stance was that Japan possessed the right to collective self-defense (underwritten both by the UN Charter and the 1951 US–Japan security treaty) but that its exercise was deemed unconstitutional. Nevertheless, the traditional view had been that collective security went beyond the 1954 constitutional interpretation which limited Japan's allowable military capabilities to a minimum level required for self-defense. During the debates leading to the passage of the resolution, its proponents argued that the escalating security threats and quickly advancing military technologies in the region meant that the 'minimum level' necessary to guarantee Japan's survival had already been altered (Liff 2015; Sasaki 2015).

To justify the government's partial lifting of the ban, the resolution claimed that 'no country can secure its own peace only by itself.'[10] This enabled Abe to expand Japan's security relations with other states, particularly the USA. Based

[9] Japan's National Security Strategy 2013, https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf.

[10] Available online at, http://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page23e_000273.html.

on the prime minister's estimations, the partial lifting the ban on collective self-defense would serve two key strategic purposes: enhance Tokyo's political and operational alliance with Washington; and enhance the SDF's support for US forces engaged in protecting Japan's survival and interests. To quell the barrage of protests that ensued upon the adoption of the resolution, Abe was forced to issue strict provisions under which collective self-defense could be exercised: when Japan's survival is threatened; when all alternative solutions to addressing have been shown to be impractical or ineffective; and using minimum amount of force if Japan ever triggers collective self-defense (Liff 2015; Sasaki 2015).

In reconciling Japan's benign liberal interests and pragmatic realist strategies, Abe must demonstrate that he continues to operate within the rigid normative boundaries set by the public and other key figures in domestic politics. Compared to other major economic powers in the world, he needs to emphasize that his security repertoire remains relatively more subdued and self-contained. While Abe's recent actions have clearly pushed Article 9 to its elastic limit, the fact that it has not been entirely abolished is an indication of Japan's remarkable self-restraint over the military domain (Liff 2015; Sasaki 2015). He might even be tempted to turn the table against his neighbors and argue that by misrepresenting Tokyo's aspirations and behavior, these state leaders are unwittingly destabilizing the region. Accordingly, Abe could reject such fears as unfounded speculations that should be ignored, and reiterate his desire to proactively contribute to global peace and stability. While the debate over constitutional change certainly belongs to the Japanese people, it will be wise for the prime minister to develop a recipe for mitigating the expected backlash.

Another challenge for Abe here is convincing the audience that his proposed amendments are rational means of responding to systemic pressures and incentives. For sceptics, constitutional revision is a mere extension of the prime minister's nationalistic aspirations, and his failure to consider other available options for addressing threats and/or harnessing opportunities. For his supporters, revising the charter could be the most appropriate strategy for managing the external and internal conditions threatening Japan. Either way, it is important to note that since the international system rarely gives clear signals about threats and incentives, it might be unreasonable to expect Abe and his group to be able to find and choose the rational solutions at all times. In fact, even if the leaders are able to perceive the constraints and opportunities correctly, it does not always follow the most optimal and logical choices will be implemented (Ripsman 2011). One reason for this has to do with the cognitive limits on the leaders' capacity to process information, especially during stressful moments when the perceived risks are high and time is limited (Holsti 1979). Moreover, differences in the historical experiences, cognitive flaws, habits, or eccentricities among various leaders also affect the likelihood of irrational decisions being made (Jervis 1976; Byman and Pollack 2001). All these factors combine to muddle the process of assessing risks and threats, thereby making task of choosing the most appropriate responses even more difficult.

Balancing Japan's collective good and Abe's personal prospect

If Abe is sincere in shedding the sacrosanct quality of Japan's post-war charter, the prime minister must be ready to give his compelling and unqualified commitment to constitutional revision. Although his coalition party continues to be unrivaled in the Diet, there is still a huge possibility for his efforts to end up in a massive failure if he persists in taking popular opinion for granted. As stipulated under Article 96 of the current Constitution, any amendments would require the support of two-thirds majority in both houses of the Diet (both of which are currently controlled by the LDP and its junior partner Komeito), as well as the majority via a national referendum. Attempting to push the plan through the parliament with only the support of ruling parties can result in a national referendum that is opposite of the one that Abe has been hoping for.

The prime minister has typically responded to dropping poll figures by backpedaling on this key agenda and redirecting his attention to economic issues (Yoshida 2017b). Once he regains some political capital with the aid of populist economic policies, he then shifts back his gaze over the prospects for constitutional revision (Yoshida 2017b). This constant push and pull in Abe's priority agenda highlights the difficulty facing the LDP in rewriting the US-drafted Constitution. More importantly, it underscores Abe's pragmatic–ambivalent strategy that has defined and salvaged his political career even at the expense of his long-time pursuit for a new Japanese constitution. But who can blame the prime minister? Since 2012, there had been five national elections which all resulted in Abe's return to and greater consolidation of power. In each and every election, the administration's top policy priorities had been constantly (re)modified, based on their expected electoral costs/benefits and the prevailing political climate. In other words, with Abe, it has been half a decade of alternating policy leitmotifs (Sasaki 2015), which is rather ironic considering the relative durability of his coalition government. Understandably, many of his opponents have frequently lamented how 'staying in power itself has become the purpose, resulting in a lack of long-term perspectives and consistent programs for the entire period of governing by an administration' (Asahi Shimbun 2018).

Thus, another crucial challenge for Abe is how to effectively mobilize national resources and consolidate state power to better respond to the systemic stimuli. In an idealized context, state leaders possess enough flexibility which allows them to determine systemic incentives and pressures more accurately, which in turn gives them greater confidence to respond decisively to the constantly evolving conditions (Ripsman 2011). Unfortunately, the range of domestic constraints to decision-making processes is significantly reducing this flexibility (Tsebelis 2002). As such, regardless of how much political capital is at Abe's disposal, there is no guarantee that the pursuit and implementation of constitutional change will be free from resistance coming from different shareholders and members of the community. Yet even in the absence of highly influential oppositions, the LDP's access to Japan's material, human, and moral resources could only be restricted. This will compel Abe to constantly bargain and negotiate with various interest groups, veto players, and social cleavages for the promotion and realization of his lifelong goal.

For the anti-revisionist groups, the prime minister's ulterior motive for wanting to amend the Constitution remains a suspect, claiming that it is simply a vain means to cover up his family's controversial history and tamper it with his own indelible stamp. For the serious supporters of constitutional revision, however, Abe's efforts override the fact that he is the grandson of a Class-A war criminal. What is important for them is that the prime minister is transforming modern Japan into a normal sovereign power that it deserves to be. Regardless of which side of ideological-normative divide the Japanese people choose, the current Constitution remains an inconvenient fault that simultaneously preserves and undermines Japan's national security interests and global peacekeeping efforts. Abe's pragmatic political tactic has secured his place in Japanese history books, but his ambivalent approach in carrying out his party's *raison d'état* threatens to tarnish not only his future historical image but the future of an entire country.

Concluding remarks

The winds of change can be felt across Japan under Abe. Yet neither the wind that carries this change, nor the change that propels this wind has emerged out of a vacuum. Those who think that Japan's security transformations have been abrupt have clearly ignored the slow albeit steady evolution of the county's defense policy and posture since the end of the Cold War. Over the past several decades, Japan has progressively relinquished her passive pacifist principles in exchange for proactive pacifism, and as a consequence has been compelled to trade-off her passive stance for a more involved and responsive approach (Liff 2015; Sasaki 2015). The repetitive and recurring features of the anarchic international security environment have led to an ironic twist of fate where Japanese security interests are held hostage by its fiercest rivals from the not so distant past. Pyongyang's escalating nuclear and missile programs; Beijing's continuous military expansion and aggressive posturing; and Washington's diminishing reliability and increasing demands from its allies, have all contributed to Tokyo's skepticism toward the appropriateness and relevance of its conciliatory charter. The passive pacifism doctrine that has long dominated Japanese foreign policymaking condensed the nation's security and defense options into a 'negative list' that narrowly focused on the renunciation and exclusion of military force (Sasaki 2015). This ultimately muffled the conversations about Japan's external policy goals and the development of its hard power capabilities. Under these new security conditions, the Japanese government has constantly reinterpreted and realigned the existing guidelines in order to intensify the country's security cooperation with other states and augment its capacity for shaping regional developments.

Likewise, those who view Abe as a prophesized messiah destined to revolutionize the Constitution have certainly overlooked the transformative trends originally introduced by his predecessors, and on which his own proposals and reforms have been built. Notwithstanding his occasional resort to hyperbolic rhetoric, Japan's security reforms under the Abe administration have been substantial but restricted. The security developments which are being credited to Abe have been precipitated by the creation and growth of elite-driven consensus about the local, regional, and

global security issues confronting Japan; and the necessary methods and actions that must be adopted to effectively address these threats (Itoh 2001; Hughes 2006; Liff 2015; Sasaki 2015). Indeed, the fundamental developments in the country's defense policy strategies; the reinvention of its security institutions; and the 'mission creep' reflected in SDF operations, have already been set in motion prior to Abe's triumphant to return to power in December 2012. In effect, what Abe has done over the past few years that he has been a prime minister was to build on these elements and speed up their adoption via his quest for constitutional revision. Willfully discounting the contexts through which these reforms and developments have emerged not only results in inaccurate assessments of the driving factors, but also leads to the exaggeration of the magnitude of change underway, along with the personal significance and contribution of Abe himself (Liff 2015).

Clearly, Abe's quest for a new Japanese charter is not just about Abe himself but the many tensions that continue to make the nation's post-war constitution popular and attractive among many Japanese citizens. This is understandable because state leaders like Abe (and those prior to him) have always been prone to developing inaccurate perceptions of the systemic stimuli; susceptible to adopting unsound decisions; and ineffective in mobilizing national resources demanded by their policy preferences. Consequently, despite the availability of rational justifications for pursuing the case, constitutional change has remained elusive. This means that Abe must think carefully about how to harmonize international and domestic expectations, and balance Japan's liberal security interests and realist military preferences. Equally important, Abe must take a good hard look at his pragmatic–ambivalent approach to politics which continues to give him a reign over power at the expense of Japan's collective good. Stubbornly pushing for constitutional change without meticulously addressing both the causes and effects of these tensions can only result in a significant blow to the domestic and regional security status quo, a blow that will surely (and perhaps deservedly) be directed not only toward Abe but the entire nation. Regardless of how Japanese people align themselves vis-à-vis Abe's quest for a new charter, the current Constitution is an inconvenient fault that has both benign and malignant consequences for Japan and the rest of the world.

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