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## Japan's Perspective of the International Order and Foreign Policy Adjustments in the Context of COVID-19

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated transformation of the international order. In Japan, views on the future of the international order are diverse, which are manifested most clearly among senior government officials, economic experts, think tank elites, and scholars. In order to adapt to the changing international order, Japan has adjusted its foreign policy surrounding the Japan–US relations. In a bid to maximize its own interests, Japan is trying to improve preparedness for the future of the international order with the premise that Japan–US alliance will be strengthened. Japan's policy toward China has been deeply impacted by the pandemic, as evidenced by the significant volatility during the pandemic. Faced with the adjustments in Japan's foreign policy and the growth of its intention to contain China's development, China should respond with an open, rational, and confident attitude.

**Keywords:** international changes, COVID-19 pandemic, Japan–US alliance, China–Japanese relations

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has been ravaging the globe, has not only severely damaged human life and the global public health system, but has also greatly accelerated changes in the international political structure that are likely to have a lasting impact. In addition to using the COVID-19 pandemic to shift responsibility to China and suppress Chinese businesses, the Trump administration also interfered in a myriad of China's internal affairs, including issues such as the South China Sea, Taiwan, Xinjiang,

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and Hong Kong, with an attempt to undermine China's political capacity at home and abroad. As an important East Asian country and a strategic ally of the United States, Japan pays close attention to changes in the international power structure that are related to China–US competition. With a clear understanding of the United States' strategy toward China, Japan has been gradually adopting corresponding countermeasures. Japan's recent policy attitude toward China is partly due to American pressure and the effects radiating outward from internal power struggles within the top ranks of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Moreover, Japan's measures also constitute a strategic attempt to actively cope with the changing international situation. How Japan responds to international changes will not only influence Japan's national interests; it will also have a considerable impact on China–Japanese relations.

## I

Due to tradition and culture, Japanese people have a strong sense of crisis. Although the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan is not as dire as in the United States, Japan is sensitive to signs of change brought about by the pandemic in international politics, world economy, regional patterns, and global governance. Some political leaders, diplomatic elites, mainstream scholars, and journalists have expressed their views and opinions on relevant issues. Focusing on changes to the international order in the so-called “post-COVID-19 era,” Shinzo Abe's cabinet established the New International Order Creation Strategy Headquarters, which was headed by Fumio Kishida, then secretary general of the LDP. With the intensification of China–US strategic competition, U.S. pressure on Japan is increasing. As a result, concern about the changing international order among Japanese people—from political elites to everyday people—is increasing; this is a clear indication that Japan is worried about the future international order.

First, the Japanese government advocates building a new order based on “shared values” and maintaining the Japan–US alliance. Abe's cabinet established Japan's stance on the international order under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the LDP leaders are in general agreement regarding the need to take initiative to respond to the changing international landscape.

Indeed, they have stated that, “in view of the long-term struggle against the pandemic, the LDP must think about its political responsibility.”<sup>1</sup> This “political responsibility” is based on a dual consideration of Japan’s internal and external conditions, including the consolidation of the ruling position of the LDP in the context of the changing international landscape caused by the pandemic, and the orientation of Japan’s foreign strategy. Former Japanese Prime Minister Abe delivered a speech to Congress, clearly laying out the stance of his administration. He said that Japan needs to collaborate with countries that hold shared values in order to establish a new international order, given that the country that dominates the international order is being plagued by internal problems.<sup>2</sup> Abe’s phrase “the country that dominates the international order” is an obvious reference to the United States. As an ally of the United States, Abe decided not to explicitly criticize the United States’ declining ability to act as a world leader. However, his words do indicate that in Japan’s view, the United States has been overwhelmed by the pandemic; this is a clear acknowledgment that the United States is falling short of expectations as a world leader. In the meantime, the “countries that hold shared values” that Abe would like to build a new order with exclude China and imply that China is deemed as a potential enemy to the new order. After World War II, the “shared values” advocated by the LDP hold specific connotations, connecting the core ideologies of the discourse systems of Japan—which include the concepts of freedom, democracy, human rights, and rule of law—and the Western camp. Japan utilizes these values as “political symbols” and “value advantage” that can distinguish it from China. During Abe’s second tenure as prime minister, he put emphasis on “value diplomacy” in Japan’s foreign policy strategy as the basis for defining strategic partnerships. Although he stated that the country that dominates the world order is being plagued by internal problems, he remained resolved that Japan must strengthen its cooperation with this “dominating” country in order to construct a new world order. Although he identified partners,

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<sup>1</sup> 時事通信: 「コロナ後国家像で主導権争い岸田・稲田氏ら、ポスト安倍にらみ自民」, accessed July 10, 2020, <http://jiji.com/jc/article?k=2020060401069&g=pol>.

<sup>2</sup> 竹本能文: 「普遍的価値観共有する国々と連携、新たな国際秩序構築必要」, 『朝日新聞デジタル』, June 9, 2020.

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he also showed compulsion and helplessness.

Compared with the United States' ineffective COVID-19 response and recent riots caused by racial issues, what concerns Japan more is that excessive internal friction in the United States will result in the decline of its strength and its ability to keep security commitments to its allies. If the current situation continues, it will negatively affect a strong Japan–US alliance; this further highlights China's influence. In mid-May 2020, Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi attended a video conference proposed by the United States. The conference was attended by foreign ministers of the United States, Japan, Australia, Brazil, and India. During the conference, Motegi suggested that all countries work together to combat the pandemic. He also stressed the need to consider the proper state of the international order in the post-COVID-19 era.<sup>1</sup> In April 2020, the Japanese government published an article in the online edition of *The American Interest* in the name of “Y·A.” The article argued that although the Trump administration had many problems, its China strategy was undoubtedly valid and worthy of recognition. The article openly encouraged the United States to adopt a confrontational posture toward China, stating that instead of continuing its vague strategy toward China, the United States should pursue an audacious strategy. Indeed, the article expressed Japan's belief that a tough stance toward China was paramount.<sup>2</sup> Upon publication, the article attracted considerable attention from scholars as well as political elites in Japan and elsewhere. The article was seen as opposing Abe's previous public statements and a clear signal that the Japanese government supported Trump in the United States general election. More importantly, it reflected Abe's desire to check China's power with the United States.

In contrast to Abe's approach and the covert tactics of the Foreign Ministry, the Japanese Ministry of Defense has openly pointed a finger at China. When the Chinese naval aircraft carrier Liaoning conducted offshore training in the Miyako Strait in April 2020, Taro Kono, then Defense Minister of Japan, held telephone discussions with his counterparts of the United States, India,

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<sup>1</sup> “The New Type of Rice Country Urges the Heart to Meet Abroad,” accessed July 5, 2020, [mofa.go.jp/mofai/press/release/press4\\_008434.html](https://mofa.go.jp/mofai/press/release/press4_008434.html).

<sup>2</sup> 「注目集めるYA論文、対中強硬路線を評価、日本はトランプ再選支持?」、『世界日報』, June 29, 2020.

Australia, Britain, and France. Accusing China of trying to use its strength to change the status quo during the pandemic, he advocated that the countries in the Indo-Pacific region strengthen their collective unity and guarantee a free and open international order.<sup>1</sup> It can be said that high-ranking, anti-Chinese, right-wing politicians in Japan have weaponized anti-Chinese language in order to pursue political power. These politicians also seek to establish political consensus among countries that have conflicts with China and maintain the current system with the United States as the core hegemony.

Except for the Ministry of Defense, the Japanese government's understanding of the changing international order is relatively rational and pragmatic. However, they all regard China's rise as a challenge and stigmatize China's commitment to international responsibilities as an attempt to establish geopolitical influence through the pandemic and fill the power vacuum left by the United States. Such views reflect Japan's biased understanding of the current international order. In fact, the Japanese government holds a nuanced view of the future international landscape. On the one hand, it is reluctant to accept changes to the existing international order led by the United States, as they fear that this will fundamentally destabilize the foundation of the Japan-US alliance, which in turn will eliminate the "cornerstone" of Japanese diplomacy. On the other hand, Japan does not want China to enjoy greater power and play an increased role in international affairs. Japan is also unwilling to participate in an international order dominated by China, fearing that this would mean a loss of its existing power and status.

Second, scholars at Japanese think tanks have considered changes to the international landscape from the perspective of constructivism, expecting that a confrontation between the United States and China will continue alongside the global pandemic and increase instability in the Asia-Pacific region. In early April 2020, the Japanese Foreign Ministry released a list of key research topics in the field of diplomatic security. Arguments advanced by several core think tanks offer a glimpse into the fundamental position of Japanese think tank elites concerning international issues. The Japan Institute of International Studies,

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<sup>1</sup> 「河野氏安保外交に注力、コロナ後にらみ、中国けん制」、『読売新聞』, May 18, 2020.

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a research institution affiliated with the Foreign Ministry, has described the current era as an era of great power competition, stating that the international order is in a period of adjustment and that globalization and regional orders are changing. Amidst China's rise, the rule-based liberal international order is facing challenges, and the United States, Europe, and Japan, which support the existing international order, are in varying shapes of transitions. As an important region of the world economy where the interests of many global powers intersect, the Indo-Pacific region has a strong impact on the peace and prosperity of Japan and the development of the international order. Japan is the core country in the Indo-Pacific region for building a new order.<sup>1</sup>

The Japan Forum on International Relations, which is also an important think tank that influences diplomatic thinking, believes that existing globalization based on liberalism is being challenged by the illiberal globalization of China. Moreover, they have argued that the “geo-economic foreign strategies” of the major countries that are pursuing geopolitical goals through economic means have diversified. China's overseas expansion has destabilized the existing maritime order. As China's economic strength increases, the international order is shifting from the “rule of the United States” to the “rule of China.” The Nakasone Peace Institute (NPI) also believes that Japan's security environment is unstable, and the open maritime order governing the Indo-Pacific region is being challenged by China.

Japan's core think tanks have conceived of the changing international order as primarily shaped by the conflict between international orders structured by two different ideologies. As such, these think tanks perceive “dealing with China” as a central concern, and see this task as the central strategic fulcrum for building an international order. Moreover, these think tanks also highlight Japan's role in building this new order. The views of Japanese think tanks significantly inform which projects the Foreign Ministry approves; moreover, the views of think tanks undoubtedly support the official stance of the Japanese government.

Third, economic experts have analyzed changes in the international

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<sup>1</sup> 令和2年度「外交安全保障調査研究事業費補助金」に関する審査結果, accessed June 10, 2020, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/fp/pp/page25\\_001962.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/fp/pp/page25_001962.html).

landscape in light of COVID-19's impact on production and lifestyles. These experts advocate cooperating with China. Japanese economic experts' understandings of changes in the international landscape resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic do not blindly cater to the interests of the government or the media; instead, they adopt a more open and pragmatic outlook that is based on actual economic interests.

Their analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on international relations mainly focuses on two points:

One is the impact of the pandemic itself. Kengo Sakurada, Chairman of the Japan Association of Corporate Executives, believes that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is profound and far-reaching, affecting everything from personal lives, values, labor practices, business, and relationships between people and society to the composition of the international order. He advocates that Japanese economic experts strengthen their shared awareness of issues such as how humans can coexist with the coronavirus and what environmental responses to adopt after the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Mitsumaru Kumagai, chief economist of the Daiwa Institute of Research, believes that the COVID-19 pandemic will lead to a series of structural changes, including the intensification of the China–US confrontation, which will in turn lead to struggles between capitalism and communism for hegemonic dominance. The division of the world's nations into two camps will increase economic and geopolitical risks.<sup>2</sup> In addition, editorials in some Japanese journals have pointed out that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the international economy and finance have undergone the most significant change since the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944. In the future, global economic and financial hegemony will shift, and the hegemony of the United States dollar will end.

The other concerns the strategic competition between China and the United States in the context of the pandemic. In response to the stigmatization of China by the United States throughout the pandemic, Hiroaki Nakanishi, president of Nippon Keizai Dantai Rengōkai, has pointed out that China is not

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<sup>1</sup> コロナ後の課題解決に新組織、経済同友会、多様な働き方など議論, accessed July 10, 2020, [sankeibiz.jp/macro/news/200605/mca2006050500002-n1.htm](https://sankeibiz.jp/macro/news/200605/mca2006050500002-n1.htm).

<sup>2</sup> 熊谷亮丸: 「グローバルな構造変化と日本経済の未来」、『潮』(July 2020): 69.

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an enemy and that China's status and role in multilateral mechanisms should not be denied for the sake of global economic recovery. Recently, Chinese and Japanese entrepreneurs held an online conference and agreed to cooperate on multiple bilateral economic and trade initiatives meant to offset the effects of the pandemic. Both sides have expressed a commitment to playing a leading role in regional and world economic recovery.

Overall, Japanese people hold diverse understandings of the changes to the international landscape. The general public believes that under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, changes to the international order will originate from increased strategic competition between the United States and China. It is widely agreed that the "China factor" poses a challenge to the existing international order, and that the world is in a period of "American decline."<sup>1</sup> Japan must adapt to the changing international landscape and exert its influence as a major power.

## II

Japan's policy adjustments in response to changes in the international order resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic mainly focus on Japan-US relations. In an effort to strengthen the Japan-US alliance, Japan seeks to increase benefits and avoid losses, maximizing its own interests. Discussions over how to respond to China-US competition and optimize Japan's national strategy in the context of the changing international landscape—which began shortly after Donald Trump took office—originated in Japanese academia. However, at that time, Japan was focused on Trump's status as a non-traditional politician and businessperson as well as his populist style of governance. With the escalation of the China-US trade war and the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan has begun considering new issues, especially China's successful response to the pandemic, which was enabled by its high level of national cohesion and ability to mobilize citizens. Indeed, Japan has come to re-evaluate the advantages of China's institutional system and is becoming increasingly concerned with the

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<sup>1</sup> 「特別リポート コロナ後激変の世界秩序——米中自滅でゼロ極の時代」、『選択』(May 2020): 6.

future decline of the United States-led liberal democratic order. Comparing the COVID-19 pandemic with the two world wars, the Cold War, the September 11 attacks, and other major historical events, Professor Hosoya Yuichi at Keio University in Japan states that the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a monumental event in human history. He criticizes the inaction of the Trump administration regarding the prevention and control of the pandemic and the administration's constant international provocations, which have aggravated global turmoil. He argues that the United States has lost its international credibility and ability to act as a moral leader in the post-COVID-19 era. In this context, he notes that the decline of the liberal world order is accelerating.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Takashi Shiraishi, the former President of the Institute of Developing Economies, believes that strategic competition between China and the United States in the post-pandemic era will greatly change international relations in Asia and the world. This competition and confrontation will expand from the spheres of trade and geopolitics to include fields such as science and technology, data circulation, and communication. The intensification of this confrontation has strengthened the network of allies led by the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Despite many changes in attitudes in Japan regarding the value of maintaining Japan-US relations, the governments of Japan and the United States have maintained a closely coordinated relationship during the COVID-19 pandemic. Guided by its own interests, Japan has strengthened coordination with the United States on issues ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic and regional security to containing China; Japan has also confronted China on issues such as the South China Sea and Hong Kong. However, due to the mutual aid and support provided by Chinese and Japanese people during the early stage of the pandemic, citizens of both countries held high opinions of each other. This, in turn, stopped the Japanese government from siding with the United States from the beginning. Indeed, it took some time for Japan to align its interests with those of the United States. There are two factors that led to this change. First, the Trump administration blamed the pandemic in the United

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<sup>1</sup> 細谷雄一：「コロナ後の世界秩序加速するリベラルの後退」、『Wedge』(May 2020): 16.

<sup>2</sup> 白石隆：「米中対立時代、日本の生存戦略」、『中央公論』(May 2020) : 79.

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States on China, and Trump's actions catered to the political demands of pro-America, anti-China forces in Japan. Second, China has successfully dealt with the pandemic; its manufacturing sector has returned to work and its economy is growing again. Influenced by international anti-China sentiment and the worsening pandemic in Japan, Japanese public opinion toward China turned negative. The belief that China should take responsibility for the COVID-19 pandemic constantly undermines positive interactions between the two peoples that occurred during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, shifting public opinion in Japan has pushed the government to align its foreign policy stance with the interests of the United States.

Japan's policy adjustments in response to the changing international order have never broken away from the basic framework of the trilateral relations between China, the United States, and Japan. Japan regards the rise of China and the fluctuating relative strengths of China, the United States, and Japan as both a symptom of and basis for assessing the changes to the international landscape. This not only reflects the narrowness of Japan's strategic vision regarding international changes, but also the subordination of Japan to the United States when devising policies.

First, in order to counteract the pandemic, Japan has actively managed bilateral disputes and divisions with the United States. According to Section 2, Article 9 of the Administrative Agreement with the United States, which was signed in the early 1950s, United States military officers, soldiers, and their families are exempt from all procedures related to public health and epidemic prevention when entering Japan. Moreover, the Japanese government must allow American troops stationed in Japan and their families to enter Japan. According to the agreement, when members of the United States military and army civilians enter military bases in Japan, they are exempt from nucleic acid tests. Furthermore, the United States also asked the Japanese government not to disclose information about COVID-19 infections among United States troops and related personnel stationed in Okinawa, citing security concerns and confidentiality. As the number of infections in the United States military increased, the Japanese side began demanding that members of the United States military and army civilians submit to nucleic acid tests upon entering Japan. At first, the United States did not comply; however, following repeated

requests from the Japanese, the United States military finally agreed to take tests and inform Japanese authorities of the number of infections. In addition, Japan strongly advised the United States against withdrawing from the World Health Organization (WHO). In May 2020, the United States blamed the WHO for failing to fulfill its basic obligations, and criticized it for a lack of transparency and adopting a biased attitude toward China. The United States demanded that the WHO reform its practices and threatened to withdraw. Japan maintained many covert lines of communication with the United States. Together with other members of the Group of Seven (G7), Japan expressed its support for reforming the WHO while actively working with the United States to ensure the dominance of developed countries in the field of world health and prevent the WHO from falling prey to Chinese manipulation. In their words and actions, the Japanese clearly favor the United States.

Second, Japan hopes to further strengthen its alliance and overall cooperation with the United States and exert pressure on China on issues such as identifying the origins of the coronavirus as well as the South China Sea and Hong Kong. The Trump administration stigmatized China as the origin of the COVID-19 crisis; subsequently, some countries have followed suit. At first, Japan did not follow the approach of the United States; instead, it maintained a certain degree of autonomy. However, the United States continued to exert pressure on Japan, and conservative Japanese forces continued to raise the issue of the Diaoyu Islands. As a result, disputes and tensions in China–Japanese relations have increased markedly. Japan has changed its previously restrained stance regarding the pandemic and has begun to align itself with the rhetoric of Western nations. For example, Abe even declared that China spread the coronavirus to the world.<sup>1</sup> In late May 2020, after the National People’s Congress of China approved the Hong Kong national security law, some Japanese politicians, echoing the opinions of the United States, expressed “concern” regarding Hong Kong’s democracy and human rights violations. When the law officially came into effect, the Japanese government expressed “regret” and ignored China’s legitimate right to safeguard its national

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<sup>1</sup> 高田正幸: 「中国首相発言に不快感、発生源を政治問題化」、『朝日新聞』, May 26, 2020.

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security. In addition, during the pandemic, Japan has strengthened its strategic coordination with the United States, Australia, and India and consolidated the quadrilateral security dialogue between the four countries in a bid to form an “Asian NATO” that could exert military pressure on China. The United States and Japan frequently hold military exercises in the South China Sea, stoking regional tensions in the name of safeguarding freedom of navigation in the Indo–Pacific region. The joint US–Japanese military exercise is a reflection of Japan’s China strategy, which, by creating conflicts between China and the United States, diverts domestic attention away from the pandemic and reduces pandemic-related social tension.

Third, Japan seeks to achieve a balance between China and the United States while carefully calculating its own strategic interests. Japan is caught between China and the United States. It keeps a close eye on the competition between China and the United States, while also striving to maintain a level of distance between the two countries, thereby granting Japan a certain amount of leeway when crafting policy maneuvers.<sup>1</sup> Japan’s pragmatic approach to China–US strategic competition is largely based on a concern for its own practical interests. By carefully calculating advantages and disadvantages, Japan has devised a strategy that combines opportunism with pragmatism. Kitaoka Shinichi, President of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and former Deputy Permanent Representative of Japan to the United Nations, stressed that Japan should avoid confrontation with China if possible; otherwise, Japan will pay huge costs. China is unlikely to accept a shift in Japan’s policy from anti-China to pro-China; in contrast, the United States can flexibly adjust its policy toward China. Due to geopolitical constraints, Japan cannot adopt the same approach as the United States; rather, it can only seek to strike a balance between China and the United States.<sup>2</sup> Pragmatic thinking has been adopted as the basic policy of Japan following the Second World War. Japan does not simply adhere to a set belief or principle, especially when the

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<sup>1</sup> Yuan Peng, “COVID-19 and Centennial Changes,” (in Chinese) *Contemporary International Relations* (May 2020): 3.

<sup>2</sup> 北岡伸一：「新政権に求められる継続のなかの改革」、『中央公論』(November 2020): 27.

international situation is unclear; rather, it adjusts the direction of its policies in light of trends, specific interests, and actual conditions.

In the cases of past major geopolitical events, such as the Gulf War, the September 11 attacks, and the Iraq War, Japan has always chosen to strategically align itself with the United States. Although it occasionally does some independent posturing or even keeps a certain distance from the United States, Japan has never deviated from its overall strategy. Trump's insistence that Japan share the cost of American military bases in Japan and his high-handed policy on bilateral trade with Japan did make Japan doubt the mutually beneficial nature of the Japan–US alliance. Howsoever, Japan has chosen to stand firmly with the United States on major issues related to the shifting international situation. Even after Yoshihide Suga's cabinet assumed power in September 2020, Japan's diplomatic relations with the United States have remained unchanged. That is, the Japan–US alliance continues to serve as the cornerstone of its foreign policy. Moreover, on this basis, Japan has expanded and cultivated its security partners and quasi-alliance relations, and strengthened the Japan–US core value system while expressing commitment to the values of democracy, human rights, and rule of law. In a policy address to the National Diet of Japan in January 2021, Yoshihide Suga stated that Japan would further promote Japan–US military cooperation and play a leading role in the construction of a new international order in the post-pandemic era.<sup>1</sup>

### III

During the pandemic, Japan's main foreign policy objective was to target China. Japan's basic policy is to cooperate with China and curb China's power without undermining the core interests of the Japan–US alliance. In late January 2020, following the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, China put forth a monumental effort to stop the spread of the virus, which aroused great concern from the international community, especially Japan. As a close neighbor of China, Japan responded quickly. The Japanese Embassy in China established

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<sup>1</sup> 「菅首相施政方針演説全文」、『読売新聞』, January 19, 2021.

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a COVID-19 Pandemic Response Headquarters tasked with administering a survey of Japanese nationals in the Hubei province. The Japanese Foreign Ministry also issued a Class III Infectious Disease Warning for tourists planning to travel to Hubei and sent charter flights to Wuhan to retrieve nationals living there. All of China participated in a large-scale campaign to help Hubei fight the pandemic; however, it still provided special convenience for the Japanese charter flights. Japanese planes, in turn, delivered pandemic supplies to China. In addition to cooperation between Chinese and Japanese governments, the ruling LDP of Japan also supported China's fight against the pandemic. Parliamentarians of the LDP organized donations of money and materials for Wuhan. Subsequently, Japanese people of different occupations actively provided various forms of support and assistance for Wuhan residents struggling from the pandemic; such cooperation is uncommon in the history of China–Japanese relations.

The China–Japanese interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic have clearly demonstrated the distinct volatility of Japan's policy toward China. At the beginning of the pandemic, China helped Japan evacuate Japanese nationals and Japan supported Wuhan's fight against the pandemic. However, as the pandemic spread around the globe, Western countries, led by the United States, began attacking China and recklessly politicizing the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, Japan adjusted its policy stance, and its remarks toward China turned increasingly negative. As the pandemic has worsened in Japan, it has become increasingly unclear whether Tokyo will host the Olympic Games. The domestic economy of Japan has also severely suffered. All of these factors are negatively influencing Japan's public opinion of China. This change shows that whereas the Japanese government was initially pragmatic in its response to the pandemic, it later began to side with the United States, adopting a new policy stance toward China.

First, Japan wishes to maintain the current state of bilateral relations with China. In the final period of the Abe administration, he intended to maintain China–Japanese relations and resolve his diplomatic dilemma in East Asia. However, the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the plans of Abe's administration. In August 2020, Abe decided to resign for health reasons, ending an era of political stability in Japan. His successor, Yoshihide

Suga, has put emphasis on resolving the aforementioned issues.<sup>1</sup> The current administration has shown strength inadequacy in dealing with China. After Yoshihide Suga took office as Japanese Prime Minister, the leaders of China and Japan talked on the phone. Yoshihide Suga expressed that he valued Japan's relationship with China, wished to maintain close communication with China, and stayed committed to strengthening economic cooperation and trade between the two countries. He also expressed a desire to deepen people-to-people and cultural exchanges and bring China-Japanese relations to a new level. In addition, Yoshihide Suga advocated that China and Japan should work together to deal with common problems facing the international community.<sup>2</sup> Although this cooperation exists within a multilateral framework, it shows that China and Japan share common interests at the bilateral level and can also effectively cooperate within a multilateral framework. The Japanese government hopes to continue to improve relations between the two countries.

Second, Japan is increasingly criticizing and denigrating China. At the beginning of the pandemic when Japan had still not been affected, Japan displayed a positive and friendly attitude toward China and helped China. This was partly because the leaders of the two countries stressed bilateral relations, and partly because of the approach of the Japanese government to internal affairs at the time. After China successfully contained the pandemic and took the lead in resuming production, China showed a willingness to cooperate with Japan. However, Japan followed the lead of the United States, increasing strategic coordination with the United States and intervening in the internal affairs of China while also moving to censure China. Japan views the potential changes to the future international order to be a direct consequence of strategic competition between China and the United States. Therefore, Japan is taking the initiative to adjust its relations with China and the United States, using this as an opportunity to adapt to international changes, and utilizing different policies to form a front against China on contentious issues with other countries. Several reasons explain this phenomenon. First, the opinions of the LDP cater

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<sup>1</sup> China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, *Strategic and Security Review 2020–2021* (in Chinese) (Beijing: Current Affairs Press, December 2020), 104.

<sup>2</sup> 「菅首相施政方針演説全文」、『読売新聞』, January 19, 2021.

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to mainstream Japanese society and represent the opinions of the vast majority of the Japanese public. Its policy measures conform to the political demands of nationalism and conservative forces in Japan. Second, Japan's approach aligns with the basic American strategy toward Japan. The breaking away from the post-war system pursued by Abe's cabinet and major shifts in Japan's security policy not only catered to the strategic interests of the United States in East Asia, but also met the desire of the United States to keep China in check via Japan.

Third, Japan's economic dependence on China is increasing. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, many countries are experiencing a shortage of medical supplies, and international supply chains have become blocked. The West led by the United States has exploited the issue by engaging in so-called "de-Sinicization," trying to block economic and trade relations between China and the rest of the world. Under such circumstances, Abe's administration prodded firms to shift production out of China in order to diversify risks. However, from the perspective of national strategy, geopolitics, and practical interests, Japan's attempt to reduce its dependence on China-dominated supply chains is more symbolic than real. The close economic cooperation and trade ties between China and Japan mean that it would be difficult for Japan to give up its economic interests in China to pursue the hegemonic interests with the United States. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted China-Japanese economic relations and trade, it has also highlighted the fact that in the face of major natural disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic, only unity and cooperation between the two countries will guarantee a way out of the crisis.<sup>1</sup> Particularly concerning economy and trade, China and Japan rely on each other, as they have close industrial ties and partake in frequent exchanges. Japan cannot turn away from Asia toward Europe and cut off its economic ties with China. Meanwhile, China's huge market and development space are attractive to Japan and can satisfy Japan's long-term interests. These are factors that the Japanese government must consider in response to the changing international landscape. With the official promulgation of China's 14th Five-Year Plan,

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<sup>1</sup> 「第6回日中企業家及び元政府高官対話共同声明」, 経団連ホームページ, accessed January 15, 2021, <http://www.keidanren.or.jp/policy/2020/119.html>.

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China's economy will continue to grow. Some Japanese entrepreneurs with long-term visions are optimistic about post-pandemic economic cooperation and trade between China and Japan; these entrepreneurs are actively preparing to expand investment in China.

Currently, the international order is in a transitional period that is plagued by uncertainty. It is not an appropriate time for Japan to make any substantive strategic choices. However, Japan may frequently adopt some tactical measures in handling its relations with China. Senior Japanese officials, think tank elites, and scholars have expressed clear opinions regarding this point. They suggest that the government should immediately set up a comprehensive coordination mechanism regarding strategy toward China that integrates trade, investment, technical cooperation, and security. Such a mechanism would allow for the formulation of an overall strategy toward China and establish concrete measures for cooperation and struggle with China.<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that Yukio Takeuchi, former undersecretary of the Foreign Ministry, stated that although China and Japan are economically interdependent, Japan cannot partner with China to create a new international order.<sup>2</sup> Such an opinion is commonplace in Japan, showing that Japan has adopted a dual-track approach in its relations with China in a bid to enjoy the benefits of economic cooperation and trade while treating China as a competitor that must be expelled.

## IV

At present, the pandemic in Japan is still very serious, with more than 400,000 recorded infections and 6,000 recorded deaths. The outlook is not good. Immediately following New Year's Day 2021, the Yoshihide Suga administration declared another state of emergency that covered 11 prefectures and counties. They also announced that foreigners were prohibited from entering Japan. The state of emergency was extended by one month recently.

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<sup>1</sup> 佐藤武嗣：「（米中争覇）神保謙氏とエリック・セイヤーズ氏に聞く」、『朝日新聞』デジタル (June 12, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> 園田耕司：「日米同盟基軸でも他国にへっじをかける日本」、『論座オンライン』, June 18, 2020, accessed July 10, 2020, <http://webronza.asahi.com/politics/articles/2020052400009.html?page=1>.

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic unseen in a century has revealed Japan's deep-rooted political, economic, and social vulnerabilities as well as the drawbacks of its institutional model, which Japan has been proud of. This social reality has also functioned to constrain the promotion and implementation of the foreign policy strategy of Yoshihide Suga's cabinet.

The pandemic will aggravate social division and political introversion in Japan. At the beginning of the pandemic in Japan, the Japanese government did not pay enough attention. At that time, Japanese political parties were discussing a series of scandals related to Abe's cabinet instead of dealing with the pandemic. The ruling and opposition parties attacked each other, and considerable time was wasted on endless political quarrels. When the pandemic eased, some politicians were eager to brag about the success of Japan's pandemic response. Abe also talked a lot about Japan's experience, believing that Japan had the lowest COVID-19 death toll out of all of the G7 countries. Indeed, he touted this as a political achievement. Abe not only failed to prepare for the resurgence of the pandemic, but he also aligned himself strategically with the United States, focusing on Trump's re-election and planning the future of Japan-US relations during Trump's potential second term. The Japanese government has continually expressed its desire to hold the Tokyo Olympic Games and the Tokyo Paralympic Games, which have been postponed for one year. However, the Japanese people are not enthusiastic: 80 percent of the Japanese people surveyed were against hosting these events. The Japanese government wants to raise its status as a major power by hosting the Olympic Games, in turn promoting its economic recovery and injecting vitality into Japanese society. However, everyday people lack confidence in the government's ability to cope with the pandemic. Faced with the tremendous pressure of the pandemic, the Japanese people feel that the Olympic Games have little to do with their own interests. Therefore, Yoshihide Suga's cabinet needs to effectively control the pandemic and restore national confidence as soon as possible. On the other hand, it needs to prepare for the Olympic Games as planned. Despite divided public opinion, it must carry forward and prioritize internal issues.

In this context, Japan's China policy has been carefully devised. The pandemic is raging in the United States, plunging its internal affairs and

diplomacy into a state of complete chaos. As a result, populist politics have gained traction. In sharp contrast to the United States, China has taken initiative as a responsible major power, being the first country worldwide to bring COVID-19 under control and resume work and production, thus ensuring that the world's major economies did not collapse. This has won the world some time for dealing with the pandemic. At the same time, China has actively assisted other countries in fighting the pandemic and provided large quantities of medical supplies to the rest of the world. This indicates that in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, China will take a leading role in the new international order. Japanese foreign strategy experts have expressed clear opinions regarding this point. How to understand and manage the trilateral relations between China, the United States, and Japan constitutes the top priority in the foreign strategy of Japan in the future. Thus far, Japanese experts have reached a basic consensus regarding the future direction of the trilateral relations between the three countries. Growing United States pressure on China as well as China's strategic demand to stabilize China–Japanese relations will not only enhance the role of China–Japanese relations in China's foreign strategy, but also promote Japan's status in the trilateral relations between the three countries. Therefore, to a certain extent, cooperating with the United States to curb China's power and maintaining tension between China and the United States will enhance Japan's diplomatic leverage against China, which coincides with Japan's short-term interests. However, in the long run, Japan does not want China–US relations to break down, as this would compromise Japan's diplomatic maneuverability. Japan is even more concerned about passively getting involved in China–US conflicts or wars, and hopes that the relationship between China and the United States does not completely disintegrate. Of course, Japan does not want to see a close relationship between China and the United States, as this could lead Japan to become a marginalized vassal of a major power. As the weakest party among the three countries, Japan is unable to side with either party. Therefore, Japan must consider strategic trade-offs when dealing with the United States and China.

Under the current pandemic situation, Japan needs to maintain the Japan–US alliance and highlight its friendship with the United States. At the same time, it is trying to improve preparedness for the future of the international

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order in a bid to maximize its own national interests. During his tenure as prime minister, Nobusuke Kishi stated that politicians should concentrate on politics and diplomacy, and that economic development should be left to bureaucrats. Abe was prime minister for two terms and left a lasting impact on the history of Japanese politics, diplomacy, and security. His achievements were just as remarkable as those of his grandfather.<sup>1</sup> From a neutral perspective, it can be stated that no matter whether his achievements were good or bad, a basic political roadmap was established during the seven years and eight months that Abe was in office. Moreover, it is difficult for his successors to completely break away from the political structure established by Abe and establish another structure. Japan and the United States will have maintained an alliance for 70 years as of September 2021, making it the longest alliance in Japan's modern history. The value of the Japan–US alliance has been revealed during every change of the international landscape. Japan is the biggest beneficiary of its alliance with the United States. However, disagreement will further increase alongside cooperation between the two allies, as Japan strives for the status of a great power and the United States attempts to maintain its global hegemony. China should adopt a more open, rational, and confident diplomatic attitude; clarify its core interests; and take the initiative to respond to Japan's policy adjustments.

*(edited by Chen Qingyi)*

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<sup>1</sup> Nobusuke Kishi is the maternal grandfather of Shinzo Abe.