

The Three-Layered Structure of Japan's Conservative Political Shift

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Abstract | This article claims that Japanese politics reveals a greater conservative shift than before in three regards. First, in the domain of inter-party competition, liberal or progressive political parties are on the wane, while conservative political parties have become more resilient. The advent of the Japan Restoration Party attests to this case. Second, in the intra-party space, conservative liberals or moderate conservatives have been either divided or weakened while conservative hawks are on the rise. Even within the Democratic Party of Japan, a major opposition party, conservative politicians stand out while progressives have lost their seats. Third, as we analyze Diet members' study groups after the mid-1990s, the number of meetings of conservative hawks has been continually increasing with bipartisan membership.

Keywords | conservative shift, liberal conservatism, right-wing conservatism, centrist conservatism

Japan's Conservative Political Shift

Since the inauguration of the Second Abe cabinet, the Korean media has been flooded with articles that express alarming concerns over Japan's 'right-wing tilt'. Terms such as 'right-wing surge,' 'militarization,' and 'military superpower' have often been used to describe the characteristics of the Abe cabinet.¹ Abe's Japan is simultaneously perceived with possessing an accelerating trend toward political 'rightward tilt (*ukeika*)'. On the other hand, the Japanese intellectuals often

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1. Reflecting on the first-year of the Abe administration, Korea's *Yonhap News* (*Yŏnhap nyusŭ*) put together a feature story entitled "Breakaway from the Postwar Regime and Rightward Tilt" (*Yŏnhap nyusŭ*, December 13, 2013). The title of *The Korea Times* (*Han'guk ilbo*)'s editorial on November 28, 2013 was "Accelerating Rightward Tilt and the Passing of Special Security Law" (*Han'guk ilbo*, November 28, 2013). These were only the tip of the iceberg.

express repudiation against the term ‘rightward-tilt’ itself. They insist that political conservatives should not be equated with ultra-nationalistic social groups that march through the city streets, claiming that conscientious conservatives exist within Japan as well.²

On the one hand, it is true that the Korean media largely fails to distinguish Japan’s conservatism from its growing ultra-nationalism. Yet on the other hand, the Japanese intellectuals often overlook the fact that Japan is indeed going through fundamental changes. To say the least, the moves and symptoms of conservative shifts that have become apparent since the inauguration of the Second Abe cabinet in 2012 are distinct from those of the past.

On October 17, 2013, 157 Diet members visited the Yasukuni Shrine. This was preceded by the visit of 168 Diet members, including four cabinet members, for the Spring Festival on April 22. Even though such numbers cannot be interpreted as absolute indicators in measuring the degree of Japan’s conservative swing, at least it shows that there is little tendency among the Japanese politicians to refrain from visiting the Yasukuni Shrine. This phenomenon stands in contrast to the trends during the three-year rule by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). The DPJ instituted the party policy of cabinet members abstaining from visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, which was observed throughout their three years in power.

Prime Minister Abe once again carried the banner of constitutional revision during his campaign for party presidency. Once he was elected, his advocacy of revision concentrated on Article 96, a clause which stipulates that any constitutional revision requires two-thirds majority in both houses of the Diet before a national referendum; his aim was to scale down this requirement to a simple majority in both houses. However, after the Upper House election in July 2013 made it clear that constitutional revision could take more time, Prime Minister Abe moved on to the pursuit of lifting the restraints on the exercise of the right of collective self-defense. To break off from the stipulated restrictions on Japan’s use of military force, he instituted the National Security Council (NSC) to establish a crisis-management system as well as to extend geographic reach of the Self-Defense Forces’ activities. This act was followed by a rather forceful passing of the Special Security Law, the aim of which was to secure national intelligence on diplomacy, security, and defense. On December 17, 2013, the Japanese Ministry of Defense introduced a new concept for active

2. At a special lecture entitled “The True Status of Japan’s Rightward Tilt and Korea-Japan Relations” (Seoul: Institute for Japanese Studies, Seoul National University, June 14, 2013) former chief editor for *The Asahi Newspaper* (*Asahi shinbun*) Wakamiya Yoshibumi claimed that “ordinary Japanese citizens are not becoming rightists” (*Yōnhap nyūsū*, June 14, 2013).

defense, called 'integrated dynamic defense (*tōgō kidō bōei*)', which would allow further flexibility in terms of use of force than traditional 'dynamic defense (*dōteki bōei*)' (*Asahi shinbun*, December 18, 2013). While the Abe cabinet has yet to achieve the constitutional reform, it continues to press forward those agendas that have been fiercely opposed by the political liberals and progressives throughout the postwar era.

Since the autumn of 2012, the ultra-nationalist group called *Zaitokukai* has been conducting daily hate speech demonstrations in the Shinōkubo area of Tokyo, where a number of Korea-related stores and shops operate.³ For an extended period of time, their racist ranting based on insular ultra-nationalism persisted without facing opposition. Their claims such as "Koreans must leave Japan" and "Rape Korean women" became a reminder of the bashings against Koreans during the post-disaster catastrophe of the Great Kantō Earthquake. Given that until about two years ago this area had been a place where people could engage with the Korean Wave, or *Hallyu*, the current antagonism that fills this part of the city is appalling. It took more than a year for counter-demonstrations to begin to take place against the ultra-nationalist movements (*Sōul shinmun*, September 26, 2013).

Another new trend is a series of publications by the former Japanese correspondents in Korea. *Korea: Developed Country of Conflicts (Kankoku: kattō no senshinkoku)* was an acute criticism of Korea, yet it also presented a degree of reality about the society (Uchiyama 2013). Katsuhiro Kuroda's (2013) *The True Identity of Korea's Anti-Japanism (Kankoku han-Nichi kanjō no shōtai)* was only the beginning; Takabumi Suzuoki's (2013) *Japan Challenges China, Korea Follows China (Chūgoku ni tachimukau Nihon, tsukishitagau Kankoku)* became a best-seller, while Katsumi Murotani's (2013) *Theory of Atrocious Korea (Ak-Kanron)*, an extension of *Theory of Anti-Koreanism (Ken-Kanryū)*, hit bookstore shelves. *The Weekly Bunshun (Shūkan Bunshun)* as well as *The Evening Fuji (Yūkan Fuji)* stand at the forefront of the Korea-bashings, as the front cover of *The Weekly Bunshun* published on August 29, 2013 vividly indicates.⁴

This conservative swing of political forces, as well as the rightward-tilt of

3. *Zaitokukai* is the abbreviation for *Zainichi Tokken o Yurusanai Shimin no Kai* (Association of Citizens against the Special Privileges of the Zainichi). It is a right-wing civil organization that protests against the 'special privileges' of the Korean residents in Japan.

4. *The Weekly Bunshun* published on August 29, 2013, featured a special story entitled "How to Make Annoying Neighbor, Korea, Quiet," in which they argued that "Japan must pay Korea back double," and claimed that Abe must visit the Yasukuni Shrine in October, Korean lobbyists must be banished, and Japan should not allow Korean singers who are known to have expressed anti-Japanese sentiments to hold concerts in Japan (*Shūkan Bunshun*, August 29, 2013).

social groups, are the indicators that expose the integrated inversion of Japanese society as a whole.⁵ Japan's conservative shift is relativistic on two grounds. On the one hand, the weakening of the leftist progressive forces induced the expansion of the conservative camp, while on the other hand the conservative social forces are beginning to overwhelm those that have traditionally stood on progressive ideologies. While the former represents the shifting power balance within a political framework, the latter sheds light on that of the social paradigm.

Unlike the case of Europe, no right-wing political party existed in Japan under the 1955 system. But around the 2012 Lower House election, the Japanese political market saw the birth of a right-wing political party.⁶ Not all representatives of the Japan Restoration Party (*Nihon Ishin no Kai*, JRP) are so-called 'right-wingers,' yet there are many who often express such a propensity. While there have been right-wing symptoms in certain areas of Japanese society throughout the postwar period, the right-wing camp as a political entity was nonexistent.⁷ Yet the opposite reasoning can be applied to current circumstances. The power and presence of the Japanese progressives and liberals have diminished to the point where they can only be political 'symptoms' and have lost their significance within the political system. Today, the conservatives, not the liberals or progressives, possess a higher possibility of taking control of the Japanese system. In other words, while it is unlikely that the rightist forces would gain control of the political system, there is decreasing chance that the liberal political groups could occupy the core of the political game. From such a perspective, it is not entirely unrealistic to argue that Japan is undergoing a certain degree of conservative shift in that the ideological axis is shifting towards a more conservative and rightist spectrum.

In discussing Japan's conservative shift, it is important to point out several

5. In the Japanese term, such a social atmosphere is called *kūki*, which literally means 'air.' In other words, like the air, these changes have the aspects of being momentary or temporary.

6. At a seminar held among Japanese and Korean intellectuals, Funabashi Yōichi, former chief editor of *The Asahi Newspaper*, have described the JRP as "the first right-wing political party that ever existed in postwar Japan." *Conversations between Korean and Japanese Intellectuals* (Tokyo: The Japan-Korea Cultural Foundation, December 2012).

7. Professor Soeya Yoshihide at Keiō University has long argued that the right wing can only exist as a symptom but never as a system. He refutes against the claim that Japan is experiencing rightward tilt, and as to the possibility of Japanese nationalism turning into imperialism, he argues that "it is impossible, because today's nationalism comes from the dissatisfaction with the past as well as the present, not from strategic thinking toward the future. Current nationalism has no substantial context. Government policies themselves are not tinged by right-wing nationalism, and the Japanese people do not wish to return to the imperialistic state system" (From the interview published in *The JoongAng Sunday* [*Chung'ang sŏndei*] on August 25, 2013).

provisions in order to avoid hasty generalizations. First, when we talk about Japan's 'conservative shift' and the acceleration of ideological rightward tilt, it points to the relative expansion of the conservative forces, and it does not imply that the entire Japanese society is uniformly progressing towards conservatism; in other words, such phenomenon can only be described in relative terms. Second, the surge of the rightist movement does not imply that Japan is turning into a non-democratic society where only the voices of conservatives are recognized and those of opposing voices are ignored. Japan is a democracy in which the power of the conservatives is on the rise, but it is not the case that the democratic values within the Japanese society are being rejected; that is to say, it is a partial, rather than holistic, conservative shift. Third, Japan's conservative shift does not mean that it is returning to the prewar state. While it is true that some political groups do not hesitate to glorify the wartime misdeeds of Japanese militarism, those expressions do not represent the return of prewar state system. It is appropriate to describe the conservative shift as 'co-opted' symptoms, rather than as 'restorative.' Fourth, the expansion of conservative forces in Japanese society today is by no means irreversible. Depending on the changes in external environments and social climate, there is a possibility that the opposing political forces would put the brakes on the excessive conservative trends. In other words, Japan's conservative shift is a 'reversible' phenomenon.

Why, then, should we discuss Japan's conservative shift?

In Korea, there is a tendency to interpret Japan's conservative shift as the final victory of the rightist forces, who are leading the entire society to achieve the ultimate social and political transformation. They believe that Japan is not only tilting toward the right but also attempting to become a military superpower and return to the aggressive state of the prewar period. Such understanding of Japanese society comes from Korea's bitter experience as a colonized state, as well as from the fact that Korean society often fails to distinguish pre- and post-war Japanese systems. However, today's conservative shift in Japan should be understood as a consequence of the failure of the leftists, rather than as the triumph of the rightists. It would be misleading to overestimate the degree of cohesiveness among the conservative forces. The reason why the voices of the conservatives are becoming louder, despite the existence of pluralistic social forces, is rooted in the weakening of the organizational power of the progressive forces.

However, it is questionable whether a conservative shift in Japan is nonexistent—as Japanese intellectuals suggest—and it is necessary to reevaluate whether Japan is, except for a small number of boisterous social organizations, a 'normal' state with respect for common rules. The lack of resilient counterarguments

by the opposition forces within Japan stands in contrast to the growing conservative propensity to illuminate the dearth of a sense of solidarity among the liberals and progressives. While Japan's conservative forces are enforcing collective actions in organizing their own agendas, the dispersed progressives are silenced or contest merely occasionally. In terms of political contestations, Japanese progressives are exposed to defeatism, barely qualified as opposition forces (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Japan's conservative shift is never the result of totalitarian oppression, yet it is revealed to be a reality rather than an illusion.

This paper argues that Japan is undergoing a conservative shift on three levels. First, in terms of inter-party relations, the progressive political parties are weakened, while the conservative parties are exercising leading power within the political system. The political power struggles between the conservatives or between the conservatives and right wings are taking over the traditional rivalry between the conservatives and progressives. Second, in intra-party dynamism, it can also be argued that, within the ruling party, as well as other primary parties, the significance of the progressive and liberal groups are diminishing while the conservative forces are gradually increasing their power. This tendency can be found not only within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), but also within the primary opposition party, the DPJ. Third, the number of conservative or right-wing associations formed by the Diet members is visibly increasing, while that of liberal or progressive associations is decreasing. The latter is largely fragmented and its organizational cohesiveness is weakening, while in the case of conservative/right-wing associations, a small number of core political actors organize multiple associations, which take on bipartisan characteristics.

Japan's Conservative Shift from the Perspective of Inter-party Competition: Surge of Conservative Parties

A macroscopic and diachronic analysis of Japanese politics would reveal that it is indeed undergoing conservative shifts. Rather than looking at individual elections in discussing the changes in Japanese politics, it would be helpful to borrow the concept of 'critical election,' after which the society enters an extensive phase of power shifting.

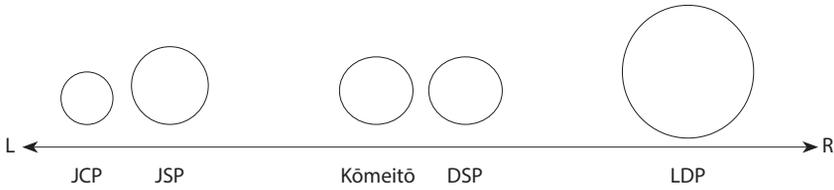
The Japanese party system has gone through a variety of changes since 1955. Yet it can be argued that there have been four phases of inter-party competitions.

The first phase began in 1955 with the emergence of Japan Socialist Party (JSP) and the establishment of the LDP that followed. The so-called 1955 system

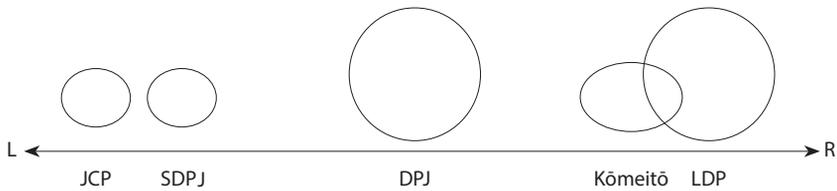
was brought about by the amalgamation of the leftists and rightists of the socialist parties, as well as of the two conservative parties divided into the Liberal Party and Democratic Party. Under this system, except for the presence of the Japan Communist Party (JCP), Japan's party politics was characterized by two-party system in which a conservative party—LDP—and a progressive party—JSP—were the major competitors. From the ideological perspective, the two parties were placed within a competitive framework where the two ideologies, namely conservatism and socialism, were competing against each other. Simply put, the conservative LDP was competing against progressive parties consisting of the JSP and the JCP (Curtis 1988).



The second phase of political reconfiguration was triggered by the *Anpo* (Security Treaty) Struggle of 1960. The right-wing group within the JSP formed a new party, Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), and also Kōmeitō (Clean Government Party) was formed in 1964 whose support base was a religious organization, the Value Creation Society (*Sōka Gakkai*). These two new-born parties advocated political centrism, and the party competition turned into a rivalry between the conservatives and progressives mediated by moderate parties. While the power of the LDP was maintained owing to the divided nature of opposition forces, the conservative-progressive paradigm persevered while the progressive JSP and JCP and the moderate DSP and Kōmeitō continued to challenge the LDP. Unlike the late 1950s, during which time the JSP functioned as the only opponent against the LDP, the inter-party competition during this phase can be characterized as multi-party competition, in which divided opposition forces consisting of progressive and moderate parties challenged the LDP. Until this period, progressive and liberal political forces had been formidable challengers. While no single party was strong enough to impose meaningful threat to the LDP, the opposition alliance was able to check and balance the domination by the conservative ruling party.



The third phase of political realignment was initiated by the split of the LDP in 1993. Ozawa Ichirō, who called himself a reformist within the LDP, left the party with other LDP members to join together with moderate parties, namely the DSP and the Kōmeitō, which he hoped would become the second moderate conservative party. At first, the JSP's actions seemed to suggest that the party would join Ozawa and other non-LDP parties, yet as the intra-party struggle resulted in a party-split, the remaining socialists found themselves in an alliance with the LDP. Ozawa's attempt for uniting the opposition ended up in failure, yet the Japanese party system went through two important experiences. First, two moderate parties, the DSP and the Kōmeitō, recognized the possibility of making an alliance with the LDP. The DSP later joined a moderate conservative party, Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), while the Kōmeitō formed an alliance with the LDP in 1999 and established itself as supporter to the ruling LDP. In other words, through the dissolutions and realignment of moderate parties that were formed in the 1960s, the Japanese political market saw the expansion of the conservative camp centered on the LDP, with the exception of the JCP, which remained strongly progressivist. Second, by forming an alliance with its archenemy, the LDP, the JSP eventually surrendered its significance as the strongest opposition party, and the divided JSP ended up becoming a mere minor party. In other words, Japan underwent a major political realignment in the 1990s, a phase that can be characterized by the fall of progressive and moderate forces. The 1990s can be identified with the political changes that were brought about by the decline of progressive political forces. In this context, the DPJ was formed by non-LDP conservative and moderate politicians as well as other defectors from minor parties, and from the beginning, it started out as a moderate conservative party which included former progressives. At the same time, it is also true that the DPJ became heavily tinged with conservative color after the Liberal Party, led by Ozawa, joined it in 2003.



The 2012 general election marked the beginning of the fourth phase of Japan's political realignment. The intra-party struggle within the DPJ, epitomized by the exit of the Ozawa group, accelerated the division of this moderate conservative party. Those who became dissatisfied with the DPJ's political management gathered under the Japan Restoration Party (JRP), which was largely recognized as a right-wing party under the leadership of then Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō and Osaka City Mayor Hashimoto Tōru. In the 2012 Lower House election, the LDP returned to power by winning 294 seats, while the divided DPJ was only able to secure 57. Furthermore, the JSP barely won two seats, while the JCP won eight seats; decline of progressive forces who had once stood as the potent opposition against the conservative camp became ever more unequivocal. The mere fact that, among twelve parties that fielded their candidates in this election, most party leaders—except for the Kōmeitō, DPJ, JCP, and JSP—were ex-LDP representatives, illuminates the expansion of the conservatives. Watanabe Yoshimi, the party leader of Your Party (*Minna no Tō*) had left the LDP, and Ishihara Shintarō, the co-leader of JRP was also an LDP member before he became the Governor of Tokyo, and during his governorship he continued to receive party support from the LDP. The Tomorrow Party of Japan (*Nihon Mirai no Tō*) was led by Kada Yukiko, a local politician from Shiga Prefecture, but it was Ozawa Ichirō who had the real power within the party. Both Jimi Shōzaburō, the party leader of the People's New Party (*Kokumin Shintō*) and Masuzoe Yōichi of the New Renaissance Party (*Shintō Kaikaku*) had served in the Diet as LDP members, and Suzuki Muneo, the founder and leader of the New Party Daichi (*Shintō Daichi*) was the deputy chief cabinet secretary during the Obuchi cabinet. Given that Tanaka Yasuo, the leader of the New Party Nippon (*Shintō Nippon*), also had close ties with the LDP, it shows not only that a majority of opposition parties were led by ex-LDP representatives, but it also sheds light on the expansion of conservative forces within Japan's party system. In addition, the Kōmeitō, which was one of major opposition parties under the 1955 system, has firmly established itself as a coalition partner with the LDP since 1999. From the perspective of inter-party competition, the conservative parties have continued to weed out progressive parties.

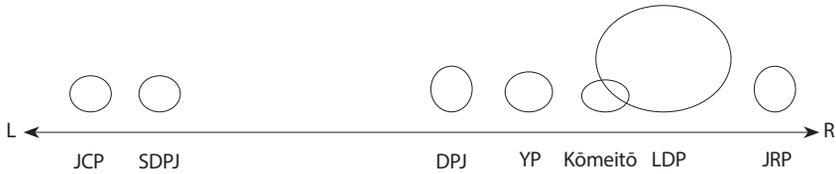


Table 1 indicates that, in the 2012 election, the LDP won a landslide victory by winning 294 seats, and the right-wing JRP secured 54 seats, nearly as same as the DPJ did. Of three major opposition parties, the JRP and Your Party, both of which are led by former LDP representatives, are a lot closer to the LDP in terms of ideological inclinations than to the DPJ. Even though the opposition remains divided, it is difficult to deny that the conservative political parties are taking control of the political power game, driving out other moderate and progressive forces.

In sum, during the early stage of the 1955 system, conservative-progressive paradigm centering on the LDP and the JSP remained dominant throughout the 1950s. From the 60s to the early 90s, the competition between the ruling LDP and the opposition, divided between the moderates and progressives, gradually became fierce. However, this conservative-progressive power structure underwent a fundamental transformation in the 1990s, during which time the influence of

Table 1. Number of Seats by Parties after the 2012 General Election

	Single-Member Districts	Proportional Representation	Total Number of Diet Seats	Number of Seats before the Election
LDP	237	57	294	118
DPJ	27	30	57	230
JRP	14	40	54	11
Kōmeitō	9	22	31	21
Your Party	4	14	18	8
Tomorrow Party of Japan	2	7	9	62
JCP	0	8	8	9
SDPJ	1	1	2	5
PNP	1	0	1	2
DAICHI	0	1	1	3
NRP	0	0	0	0
NPN	0	0	0	1
Other	0	0	0	0
Non-Affiliated	5	0	5	9
Total	300	180	480	479

the progressive camp grew increasingly weak, inducing the conservative changes among the moderate parties (Park Cheol Hee 2011a).⁸ In 2012, the conservative parties occupied most of the Diet seats, while the progressive parties became even more isolated as a consequence of the new political realignment. Without question, these developments of inter-party relations have manifested conservative shifts in Japan's party competition.⁹

Conservative Shift from the Perspective of Intra-party Dynamics: Weakening of Liberals in the Parties

Japan's political conservative shift can also be observed through the changes in the intra-party power dynamics within major parties.

Traditionally, it has been well established that, within the LDP, the Fukuda and Nakasone factions represented the conservative hawks, while Ōhira and Miki factions were generally known as liberalist, and the Tanaka faction, the largest among the five, was characterized as center-right (Wakamiya 1995).¹⁰ Considering that the Tanaka faction had collaborated with the Ōhira faction for a long time in leading political affairs, it is not exaggerating to say that, under the 1955 system, the central power within the party rested with the moderate-conservatives. From the early 1970s throughout the early 1990s, party leadership was given to those supported by the Tanaka faction, with few exceptions, such as the Fukuda administration. The prime ministership of Miki, who took over Tanaka Kakuei himself, came to an end when the Tanaka faction worked together to take him out. The expansion of the Fukuda faction disrupted the dominance by the Tanaka faction, yet it came back to power once again after it sided with the Ōhira faction. After Ōhira died while he was still the prime minister, Suzuki Zenko, also a member of Ōhira faction, became the prime

8. Park Cheol Hee (2011a) argued that competitive structure between the conservatives and the progressives has transformed into competitions among conservative forces over time.

9. Yet there is a possibility that the structure of the inter-party competition may change in the future. It is necessary to consider the fact that the inter-party relations are open-ended, and the possibility of the revival of the centrist forces cannot be ignored.

10. For more details on the LDP factions, refer to Wakamiya (1995). The conservative right stresses the importance of the alliance with the US while they place importance on Japan's dignity when it comes to historical issues. On the other hand, conservative liberals argue that the alliance with the US must be preserved, while sustaining a sense of regret towards Japan's past deeds. Centrist-conservatives attempt to find a balance between the two. In other words, the paramount difference between the conservative right and the conservative liberals lies in their views on historical issues and Japan's relationship with Asian countries.

minister with Tanaka's support. After Suzuki, Nakasone Yasuhiro became the prime minister with Tanaka's approval, and he carried the slogan of 'all-faction mainstream system' while maintaining his power through cooperation with the Takeshita faction, the successor of Tanaka faction (Park Cheol Hee 2011a).¹¹ In other words, the Tanaka faction functioned as the linchpin of the LDP's long-term dominance. The policy lines of Fukuda and Nakasone, who were recognized as conservative right, did not step over the basic framework set forth by the Tanaka faction.

However, the power of the Tanaka faction gradually began to diminish in the early to mid-1990s when the Ozawa group left the party after factional struggle within the Takeshita faction, causing intra-factional rivalry between Obuchi and Kajiyama. Similarly, the Miyazawa faction, the successor of the Ōhira faction, underwent internal division between Katō Kōichi and Kōno Yōhei, and after the Kōno group left the faction to form a new one, the power of the Miyazawa faction significantly declined. Yet prior to the factional split, the Miyazawa administration released the Kōno Statement, which strongly exposed liberal understanding of Japan's past, indicating that the latent power of the liberals was still effectively exercised within the government at this time. Katō, as he assumed the positions of chairman of the policy research council and chief cabinet secretary, played a crucial role in successfully preserving the power of conservative liberals by leading the coalition negotiation with the JSP. He led the negotiation process between the LDP and the JSP, and while exploiting the split within the Takeshita faction to push Hashimoto for the position of prime minister, he successfully sustained the power of liberal-conservatives for a significant period of time. He did this by maintaining close ties with faction leaders such as Yamazaki Taku and Koizumi Junichirō—or so-called YKK—who were next in line to the position of prime minister. However, with Hashimoto's resignation, as well as the downfall of the JSP, the influence of conservative liberals grew increasingly weak. Obuchi Keizō, who succeeded Hashimoto, sought out coalition alliance with the Kōmeitō, and when Mori Yoshirō took over Obuchi after his death, it was time for the conservative right to expand its power within the LDP.

It is ironic that the emergence of liberalistic momentum orchestrated by the coalition between the LDP and the JSP caused the strengthening of bonds among the rightists. Prime Minister Murayama, who was a socialist, promoted historical reconciliations through Peace Resolution (*fusen ketsugi*), the Murayama Statement, and the founding of Asian Women's Fund, against which

11. For more details on the power relations among LDP factions and the making of prime ministers, refer to Park Cheol Hee (2011a, Ch. 3).

Table 2. Number of Diet Members by Factions after 2012 and 2013 Elections

Faction	Leader	Lower House	Upper House	Total
Seiwakai	Machimura	52	24	76
Heiseiken	Nukaga	28	18	46
Kōchikai	Kishida	30	8	38
Ikōkai	Asō	25	4	29
Shisuikai	Nikai	21	4	25
Kinmirai	Ishihara	11	0	11
Banchōseiken	Ōshima	7	3	10
Non-Affiliated		15	21	36

Source | Nihon Seikei Shinbunsha (2013, 414-17).

some young politicians within the LDP, including Abe Shinzō, gathered together to form hardline rightist groups. Their positions stood even further right from the traditional conservative right.

It was not a coincidence that the hardline rightist groups within the LDP expanded after Koizumi Junichirō assumed prime ministership in 2000. With Mori's ascendance to party presidency, the surge of former Fukuda faction, which occurred concurrently with the decline of the Takeshita faction, became an opportunity for the rightist group to bolster its influence within the party. The fact that three prime ministers after Mori—Koizumi, Abe, and Fukuda—were the members of the Mori faction illuminates its influence.¹² Abe's return to party presidency in 2012 is indicative of the continuing significance of the rightists within the power relations among the LDP factions. Considering that the young LDP Diet members who have not identified themselves with any particular faction tend to possess conservative propensities, it appears that the Machimura faction, successor of the Mori faction, stands at the center of party management within the LDP. The Machimura faction has expanded its ground by its success in the 2012 Lower House and 2013 Upper House elections. Not all Diet members of the Machimura faction are so-called hardline rightists, yet it plays a central role in supporting Abe's policy lines and promoting the conservative agendas.

The establishment of the DPJ in 1996 coincided with the reunions of conservative groups within the LDP, and the DPJ aspired to become a moderate party emulating the social democratic model in Europe. At its initial stage, the DPJ, which consisted of defectors from the LDP, the JSP, and the DSP, quite strongly worked towards realizing European social democracy (Park Cheol Hee 2006, 279-99).

12. The Fukuda faction was carried on to Koizumi, Mori, and Machimura factions.

However, having graduated from the Matsushita Institute of Government and Management, many young members of the DPJ who entered national politics through general elections in 2000 and 2003 tended to prefer more conservative policies to their predecessors. The power of the conservatives within the DPJ also intensified after Ozawa's Liberal Party joined the DPJ in 2003. Originally, the conservative group within the DPJ was led by Hatoyama, which was balanced by the Kan-led liberal group; Ozawa, however, emerged as a new balancer within the party.

The party management by the three political leaders—Hatoyama, Kan, and Ozawa—became the basis for the DPJ's successful victories in 2007 Upper House and 2009 Lower House elections, in which the DPJ defeated the LDP and became the ruling party. Soon, however, the DPJ's intra-party competition among three groups was intensified, which eventually led to the departure of the Ozawa group (Shim Mi Jung 2013). On the surface, it seemed that Kan-led liberal group brought two other conservative groups under its control, but in reality, it was Noda and his group, mostly consisting of graduates of the Matsushita Institute, who came to hold power within the party. It was this group of young Diet members who ousted the older generation of politicians, and the conservative shift within the DPJ also began to evolve rapidly.

When the DPJ faced catastrophic defeat in the 2012 general election, the party witnessed an accentuated inflation of the conservatives. Most liberals within the DPJ lost their elections, and those who are recognized as conservatives managed to secure their victories. Hatoyama was forced to retire while Kan barely survived in the proportional representation tier. Even Sengoku Yoshito, who was revered by the young DPJ politicians, lost in this election, while Ozawa left the party to form a new one. In other words, the DPJ was left to the hands of young politicians with propensities for conservative policy lines.¹³

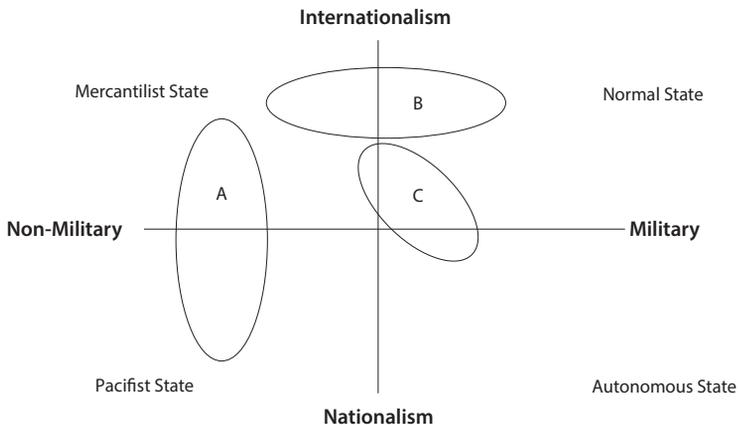
Conservative Shift Found in Diet Members' Associations: Surge of Right-Wing Diet Members' Associations

Along with the advancement of conservative political parties in inter-party relations and of conservative groups within the party, the surge of right-wing Diet members' associations also exposes an aspect of Japan's political conservative shift. Within Japan's political structure, those voices that advocate pacifism have extremely weakened, and so have those who promoted the global mercantilist

13. Currently, the management body of the DPJ is mostly left in charge of young conservative politicians such as Noda, Maehara, Genba, Furukawa, Hosono, Nagashima, etc.

approach whose primary objectives are the stability and safety of people's lives. Instead, proponents of becoming a 'normal' state have gained attention. Normal country orientation has become a 'mainstream' agenda regarding Japan's future. Moreover, some politicians have begun advocating rightist policies that go beyond the 'normal country' debate, such as that Japan should seek to establish itself once again as autonomous state (Yi Myōng-ch'an 2005; Samuels 2007; Park Cheol Hee 2007, 169-96). Under the 1955 system, the supporters of 'normal country' and 'autonomous state' discourses were minorities whose voices were hardly acknowledged; the recent surge of these debates shed light on the fact that the Japanese politics is undergoing a conservative shift.

The 1955 system was characterized by the competition between the pacifist and the mercantilist states (axis A), and from the 1990s on, the competition was between those who advocated mercantilism and those who aspired for turning Japan into a 'normal state' (axis B). After Koizumi became the prime minister in the 2000s, 'normal state' framework became widely established among the political actors, and some began advocating for Japan as an autonomous state (axis C) (Park Cheol Hee 2002). It appeared as if the conservatives' propositions grew weak during the DPJ administration, yet with the return of Abe as the prime minister, it resurfaced and regained significance. While the 'normal state' debate stands at the center of the nation's strategic agenda, advocates in pursuit of 'autonomous state' policies are also mixed in today's political debate in Japan.



Under the 1955 system, the conservatives pushed for constitutional revision while the progressives were determined to preserve the so-called 'peace constitution.' It was one of the reasons why the JSP had been recognized into

pro-constitutional forces within the political arena. From the mid-1990s on, however, the bipartisan understanding toward constitutional revision has been on the rise among the Diet members, which implies the expansion of conservative discourse regarding the issue. According to a survey conducted after the general election in December 2012, 72 percent of elected Diet members supported the revision of Article 9. The same survey revealed that 79 percent showed a positive attitude towards exercising of the right of collective self-defense (*Mainichi shinbun*, December 18, 2012). In other words, more than two-thirds of the national representatives agreed to the revision of Article 9, the symbol of pacifist Japan in the postwar era. Additionally, when Abe stated that he would revise the Murayama Statement, which expressed apology and regrets toward the wartime ‘comfort women,’ only a handful of Diet members from the JSP and the DPJ showed strong opposition to the idea.

Since the mid-1990s, Diet members’ associations of the right-wingers began assuming bipartisan characteristics. While under the 1955 system, the Diet members only associated themselves with members of the same party, since the mid-1990s, some began organizing bipartisan associations. This trend was initiated as a countermeasure against the strong influence of the JSP and liberalist policy lines, with whom the LDP formed an alliance in order to retain the ruling power after it was ousted by the opposition forces in 1993. Even the non-LDP Diet members, including ex-LDP members or those who have close ties with the LDP members, often share similar ideological inclinations and work together in these associations’ activities, regardless of party affiliations. In the process of diverse party realignments, politicians face the necessity of adapting to the ever unstable and capricious power game within the political market—and it is this context in which the rightist Diet members’ associations have become active.

One representative example would be Diet Members’ Association for the Visiting of Yasukuni Shrine (*Minna de Yasukuni Jinza ni Sanpaisuru Kokkai Giin no Kai*). Originally, this association was divided among Diet members of the LDP and the New Frontier Party (NFP), but it was integrated into one in 1997. They shared a sense of resistance against the highly exclusive pacifist political ideology of the JSP. A total of 169 Diet members, most of them being members of this association, including four cabinet members, visited the Yasukuni Shrine for the spring festival in 2013, and 159 Diet members visited for the fall festival. Otsuji Hidehisa is the chairman of the association, and other members include Abe Shinzō, along with his cabinet members Amari Akira, Shindō Yoshitaka, and Takaichi Sanae, who is the deputy chairperson of the policy research council. The membership extends to the DPJ politicians, including Matsubara

Hitoshi, Haraguchi Kazuhiro, and Ryū Hirofumi.

Another example of the rightist Diet members' association is the Diet Members' Association of Japan Conference (*Nihon Kaigi Kokkai Giin Kondankai*). This association was established on May 29, 1997, with the merging of the Association for the Protection of Japan (*Nihon o Mamoru Kai*) and People's Assembly for the Protection of Japan (*Nihon o Mamoru Kokumin Kaigi*). This Diet members' association holds close relations with the conservative grassroots social organization called Japan Conference, or *Nihon Kaigi*, which has developed initiatives for the revering of the Imperial House, constitutional reforms, patriotic education, protection of territories, visiting of the Yasukuni Shrine, and the opposition to suffrage for foreigners. As of 2013, it has 252 bipartisan members, who share the same aspiration for those rightist policies. The chairman of this Diet Members' association is Congressman Hiranuma Takeo, a former JRP representative, and the vice chairman is Furuya Keiji, who was also the chairman of the National Public Safety Commission under the Abe cabinet; and the Minister of Education Shimomura Hakubun assumes the position of secretary-general. Vice Prime Minister Aso Taro is listed as Special Adviser to the Diet Members' Association of Japan Conference.

After a Chinese activist made an attempt to land on the Senkaku Islands in 2004, 60 Diet representatives from the LDP and the DPJ envisaged the establishment of the Diet Members' Association to Take Actions for the Protection of Japanese Territory (*Nihon no Ryōdo o Mamoru Tame ni Kōdōsuru Giin Renmei*). With Hiranuma Takeo as the supreme advisor, the association is significant in that the management body is run mostly by the DPJ members, including Haraguchi Kazuhiro (vice chairman), Matsubara Hitoshi (executive director), and Watanabe Shū (administrative manager). They organized the first event for the observance of Takeshima Day in Tokyo in 2012.

The Diet Members' Association to Corroborate the Truth about Wartime Comfort Women and Nanjing Massacre (*Ianfu Mondai to Nankin Jiken no Shinjitsu o Kenshōsuru Kai*) was first established by the DPJ members in 2007, including Watanabe Shū, Nagashima Akihisa, and Matsubara Hitoshi, yet currently it contains members of other parties, including the LDP, the JRP, and People's Life Party.

One exemplary rightist Diet members' association within the LDP is the Committee for the Re-examination of History (*Rekishu Kentō Iinkai*). It was established on August 23, 1993, with the joining of three separate groups—Diet Members' Association for Visiting of Yasukuni Shrine, Diet Members' Conference for Bereaved Families (*Ikazoku Giin Kyōgikai*), and Diet Members' Conference for Answering the Spirit of the War Dead (*Eirei ni Kotaeru Giin Kyōgikai*). It was

a reactionary mobilization of the conservative groups against Prime Minister Hosokawa's remark made on August 10, 1993, in which he stated that "World War II was a war of aggression and a wrong war." They argued that such a "masochistic view of history" was strongly one-sided and "unacceptable," and they demanded a reconsideration for the correct understanding of history (Park Cheol Hee 2011b, 176). In the beginning, the membership of 105 was led by Representative Yamanaka, and after having held 20 meetings, they published a book titled *A General Overview of the Greater East Asian War (Dai Tōa Sensō sōkatsu)* on August 15, 1995. They were the first to express opposition against the Peace Resolution promoted by Prime Minister Murayama in August 1995.

Another association was established around the same time by the young generation of LDP representatives who had been elected less than four times, called the Young Congressmen's Association for History Education and Future Path of Japan (*Nihon no Zento to Rekishi Kyōiku o Kangaeru Wakate Giin no Kai*). With Nakagawa Shōichi as the chairman and Abe as the executive director, supporters of Abe such as Shimomura Hakubun and Yamamoto Ichita were listed as core members. The central agenda of the association was to reevaluate the accounts on wartime 'comfort women' and the Nanjing Massacre in history textbooks.

In the 2000s, the establishment of right-wing associations continued among those who, in support of Abe Shinzō, were determined to promote rightist agendas. The association for Creating Righteous Japan (*Tadashii Nihon o Tsukuru Kai*), established shortly before Abe became the prime minister in 2006, was run by Hiranuma (chairman), Furuya (executive director), Shimomura, and Inada, among others, whose objective was to nurture 'healthy conservatism' that was distinct from progressivism. Specifically, they promoted agendas that are highly rightist in nature, such as the formulation of an autonomous constitution, early revision of the Basic Law on Education, and support for Yasukuni visit by the prime ministers, while opposing the revision of the Imperial House Act, normalization of diplomatic relations with North Korea without resolving the abductee issues, government measures on the law of human rights protections, dual surnames for married couples, structural reform, and granting suffrage for alien residents.

The surge of right-wingers' associations in the Japanese Diet convey the following characteristics.

First, the rightist associations began forming between 1995 and 1997, and their activities became aggressive between 2000 and 2007 under the administrations of Koizumi and Abe. This can be characterized as a reactionary counter movement against liberal political agendas, including the Kōno

Table 3. List of Conservative Diet Members' Associations

	Date of Establishment	Name	Purpose and Characteristics
1	1985.10.25	Diet Members' Association Regarding Textbook Issues (<i>Kyōkasho Mondai o Kangaeru Giin Renmei</i>)	Diet members' association consists of LDP representatives who engage in critical evaluations on current textbooks, claiming that, "Textbooks for social studies and Japanese language include negative accounts our nation's history and traditions, causing the children to lose their self-esteem as a member of the state"
2	1990.04.13	The Diet Celebration League of His Majesty The Emperor's Accession to the Throne (<i>Tennō Heika Gosokui Hōshuku Kokkai Giin Renmei</i>)	Established in order to prepare for the celebratory rituals for the enthronement of the new emperor scheduled in January, 1990
3	1993.08.23	Committee for the Re-examination of History (<i>Rekishi Kentō Inikai</i>)	Re-examination of the Pacific War; consist of LDP Diet members who were especially critical towards Hosokawa's remarks on the Pacific War as "aggressive warfare"
4	1995.01.31	Diet Members' Association for the 50th Anniversary of the End of the War (<i>Shūsen 50-shūnen Kokkai Giin Renmei</i>)	LDP members' association established to oppose against Peace Resolution which included statements of "regrets" and "apology" for the 50th anniversary of the end of the WWII
5	1995.02.21	Diet Members' Association for the Passing Down of Correct History (<i>Tadashii Rekishi o Tsutaeru Kokkai Giin Renmei</i>)	NFP members' association established to oppose against Peace Resolution which included statements of "regrets" and "apology" for the 50th anniversary of the end of the WWII
6	1996.06.04	Diet Members' Association of Bright Japan (<i>Akarui Nihon Kokkai Giin Renmei</i>)	Re-evaluation of history education and opposition against including accounts on 'comfort women' to junior high school history textbooks

Table 3. (continued)

	Date of Establishment	Name	Purpose and Characteristics
7	1997.02.27	Young Congressmen's Association for History Education and the Future Path of Japan (<i>Nihon no Zento to Rekishi Kyōiku o Kangaeru Wakate Giin no Kai</i>)	Consists of young Diet members who had been elected less than five times; to discuss ideal history education and accounts in history textbooks to be included in order to nurture pride and identity as Japanese citizens
8	1997.04.02	Diet Members' Association for the Visiting of Yasukuni Shrine (<i>Minna de Yasukuni Jinja ni Sanpaisuru Kokkai Giin no Kai</i>)	Bipartisan Diet members' association initiated by the LDP and NFP to encourage visits to Yasukuni Shrine
9	1997.04.15	Diet Members' Association to Rescue Japanese Abductees in North Korea (<i>Kitachōsen Rachi Giwaku Nihonjin Kyūen Giin Renmei</i>)	Bipartisan membership; to resolve the issue of Japanese abductees by North Korean agents
10	1997.05.22	Diet Members' Association for the Promotion of Constitutional System Investigation Committee (<i>Kenpō Seido Chōsa Inkkai Setchi Suishin Giin Renmei</i>)	Bipartisan Diet members' association; to establish permanent investigation committee for constitutional debates and research
11	2000.09.21	Diet Members' Association for Careful Examination of the Suffrage for Foreign Residents (<i>Gaikokujin Sanseiken no Shinchō na Toriatsukai o Yōkyūsuru Kokkai Giin no Kai</i>)	LDP Diet members' association which opposes granting suffrage to permanent foreign residents
12	2001.06.27	Association for History Textbook Issues (<i>Rekishi Kyōkasho Mondai o Kangaeru Kai</i>)	Bipartisan membership; demands reviews and adoption processes of history textbooks
13	2002.04.25	Diet Members' Association to Take Actions for the Early Rescue of Abducted Japanese in North Korea (<i>Kitachōsen ni Rachisareta Nihonjin o Sōki ni Kyūshutsusuru Tame ni Kōdōsuru Giin Dōmei</i>)	New bipartisan Diet members' association for the rescue of Japanese abductees in North Korea

Table 3. (continued)

	Date of Establishment	Name	Purpose and Characteristics
14	2002.10.03	League for Establishing Territorial Rights of Takeshima (<i>Takeshima Ryōdoken Kakuritsu Kengikai Giin Renmei</i>)	Established in Shimane prefecture in order to resolve territorial issues of Tokto/Takeshima
15	2004.02.25	Committee for the Promotion of the Revision of Basic Law on Education (<i>Kyōiku Kihonhō Kaisei Sokushin Inkai</i>)	Bipartisan association for the revision of Basic Law on Education
16	2004.04.07	Diet Members' Association to Take Actions for the Protection of Japanese Territory (<i>Nihon no Ryōdo o Mamoru Tame ni Kōdōsuru Giin Renmei</i>)	Bipartisan association established after the illegal landing incident on Senkaku Islands by a Chinese activist
17	2005.06.25	Young Congressmen's League to Support Yasukuni Visits in Consideration of Peace and True National Interests (<i>Heiwa o Negai Shin no Kokueki o Kangaeru Yasukuni Sanpai o Shijisuru Wakate Kokkai Giin no Kai</i>)	Young Diet members' association rallied behind Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni, in opposition against voluntary restraints among the LDP representatives
18	2006.04.19	Association for Creating Righteous Japan (<i>Tadashii Nion o Tsukuru Kai</i>)	Diet members' association in order to love and take responsibility for Japan's future, and to establish true conservative politics that preserves nation's dignity
19	2007.03.10	Diet Members' Association to Corroborate the Truth about Wartime Comfort Women and Nanjing Massacre (<i>Ianfu Mondai to Nankin Jiken no Shinjitsu o Kenshōsuru Kai</i>)	DPJ members' association established after the passing of Resolution 121 in the US House of Representatives which criticized Japan's handling of 'comfort women' issues
20	2007.04.05	Diet Members' Association for the Institution of a New Constitution (<i>Shin Kenpō Seitei Giin Dōmei</i>)	Diet members' association for constitutional revision

Table 3. (continued)

	Date of Establishment	Name	Purpose and Characteristics
21	2007.05.17	Congressmen's Society for Promoting Value Diplomacy (<i>Kachikan Gaikō o Suishinsuru Giin no Kai</i>)	The membership in support of Abe's 'value diplomacy'
22	2007.06.13	Diet Members' Association to Demand the Removal of Injurious Pictures from Museum of the War of Chinese People's Resistance against Japanese Aggression (<i>Chūgoku no Kō-Nichi Kinenkan kara Futō na Shashin no Tetkyo o Motomeru Kokkai Giin no Kai</i>)	Diet members' association which demand the early removal of injurious pictures hung at Museum of the War of Chinese People's Resistance against Japanese Aggression, a place known as the mecca of China's nationalist movement
23	2007.07.13	Society for Demanding Historical Truth of 'Comfort Women' Issue (<i>Ianfu Mondai no Rekishiteki Shinjitsu o Motomeru Kai</i>)	Association of Diet members as well as the intellectuals, who oppose against the passing of the US House of Representatives resolution that demanded an apology from Abe in regards to the 'comfort women' issue
24	2008.05.22	League for Promoting Cautious Diplomacy with North Korea (<i>Kitachōsen Gaikō o Shinchō ni Susumeru Kai</i>)	Bipartisan association established in order to oppose the Diet members' association which promoted normalization of diplomatic relations with North Korea
25	2008.10.16	The Diet Celebration League of the 20th Anniversary of His Majesty the Emperor's Accession to the Throne (<i>Tennō Heika Gosokui 20-nen Hōshuku Kokkai Giin Renmei</i>)	Diet members' association established in order to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the enthronement of the Emperor
26	2010.10.15	Diet Members' Association to Take Actions for the Protection of National Sovereignty and Interests (<i>Kokka Shuken to Kokueki o Mamoru Tame ni Kōdōsuru Giin Renmei</i>)	Established after the collision incident near Senkaku Islands by a Chinese fishing boat

Table 3. (continued)

	Date of Establishment	Name	Purpose and Characteristics
27	2011.06.07	Diet Members' League for Realizing the Revision of Article 96 of the Japanese Constitution (<i>Kenpō 96-jō Kaisei o Mezasu Giin Renmei</i>)	Bipartisan membership; among other constitutional reforms, prioritization is given to the revision of Article 96

Source | Koo Yoo Jin (2014, 82-84).

Statement (1993), in which the Japanese government admitted the coercive mobilization of 'comfort women,' Prime Minister Hosokawa's admittance of the aggressive nature of wartime deeds in 1993, and the Peace Resolution and Asian Women's Fund promoted by Prime Minister Murayama in 1995. In other words, the rightist Diet members' associations emerged as a counteraction against political measures taken by the progressive forces, and it can be characterized as a 'backlash' movement by the right-wing conservatives. The fact that the organizational movement among the right-wing conservatives accelerated after the mid-1990s can be interpreted as the collective effort to construct an antithesis against the progressive forces.

Second, it is worth paying attention to the fact that these trends are expanding beyond the LDP circle to other party members, including the DPJ. This phenomenon is owed to the intensive political realignment since the mid-1990s. But it is also related to the fact that, with the end of the Cold War, Japan's conservative politicians began sharing ideological inclinations regardless of their party affiliations. In addition, in these bipartisan associations, a group of core elites whose names are listed in several different associations play a crucial role in promoting the right-wing agendas. The leading examples are Hiranuma and Abe, and others, including Furuya, Shimomura, Aso, Yamatani, Takaichi, Inada, and Shindō can be found in almost all of these associations. Further, from the DPJ, Watanabe, Matsubara, and Haraguchi are often listed as core activists. It should be noted that it is the rightist politicians within the LDP who play the leading role in the pursuit of conservative agendas, even within bipartisan associations.

Third, it is noteworthy that the rightist associations of the Diet members similarly share the same types of agendas, regardless of the names or the time of establishment. Right-wing representatives essentially deny illegality of state actions under Imperial Japan, including the aggressive nature of the war or the

coercive mobilization of the wartime ‘comfort women’ during the colonial period. In this context, they remain consistent in opposing the account of ‘comfort system’ or the Nanjing Massacre in history textbooks, as well as in supporting the visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. In addition, in opposition to the ‘masochistic view of history,’ they promote the teaching of Japanese history of which the people can be proud, which goes simultaneously with the revering of the Imperial House. They are also in agreement when it comes to the protection of territorial integrity as well as the opposition to enfranchisement of foreign residents. Finally, they share the common goal of ultimately revising the Japanese constitution.

Fourth, the core issues the right-wingers promote stand at precisely the opposite of what the progressive forces—with the JSP at its center—have pursued throughout the postwar period; pro-constitutionalism, apology for war and colonialism, opposition against Yasukuni visit, strengthening of Asian diplomacy, opposition to strengthening of Self-Defense Forces, etc. It has become clear that the conservatives are undermining the progressive forces by refusing their propositions. Especially issues including ‘comfort women,’ Yasukuni Shrine visits, history textbooks, and territorial disputes are directly linked to Japan’s diplomacy toward Asia, and by exacerbating the relationships with China and South Korea, Japan’s anti-Asian diplomacy has been substantially intensified. These tendencies are indicative of the differences in the perspectives among the conservative groups within Japan, in terms of how to deal with East Asia (Park Cheol Hee 2011b, 159-88).

The activities of right-wing associations shed light on the fact that, since the mid-1990s, a significant degree of conservative shift has been taking place among the young generation of politicians, especially within the LDP.

Assessments on Japan’s Conservative Political Shift

The expansion of conservative political forces in inter-party dynamics, the corrosion of progressive forces within party competitions, and the surge of right-wing associations are all indicative of indisputable conservative shift of the Japanese politics.

The conservative shift which is taking place under the Abe cabinet after 2012 is distinct from a series of conservative movements that have developed rapidly since the 1990s. First, in terms of inter-party dynamics, the influence of the progressive and leftist parties have rapidly diminished, to the point where their political presence is facing a critical predicament. On the other hand, the

right-wing party, JRP, is not only leading the conservative forces but also playing a crucial role in preventing the assembly or re-emergence of the leftists. Second, in terms of intra-party power relations, the liberal and moderate conservative factions within the LDP are either weakening or divided, while the closely-united, conservative Machimura faction is expanding its sphere of influence. Even within the DPJ, the liberalists who are supported by the labor unions are shrinking in number, while the conservatives are increasingly becoming dominant. Same thing can be said with regard to the recent trends in the formation of Diet members' associations, and the rightist agendas which are presented more frequently in the Diet.

While it is possible to observe the conservative shift in Japanese politics, it seems that, in reality, it would be difficult for the right-wing groups to take control of Japan's political system as a whole. First, in terms of national security agenda, Japan's actions are limited by restrictions imposed by the US-Japan alliance. Facing the rise of China, Japan appears to be taking voluntary measures to upgrade its own defense capabilities. Yet in reality this is occurring simultaneously with the strengthening of the alliance with the US. This approach is distinct from the autonomous state strategy which the rightists claim to pursue. They argue that Japan must be psychologically liberated from the US and the 'imposed' constitution. Yet Japan is able to broaden its strategic choices only through the strengthening of the security alliance. The ultimate measurement of discerning the conservatives from the rightists is that the former attempts to strengthen the alliance with the US while the latter prefers to be independent when constructing security agendas. While one can find many conservative politicians who do not hesitate to express anti-Asian slogans, it is rare to find those who are explicitly anti-American in their policy proposals. In other words, Japan is not ready to fundamentally separate itself from the US. It also implies that Japan's full-scale rightward tilt will begin when the US-Japan alliance somehow comes to an end. To put it another way, as long as Japan continues to rely on the US for its national security, its conservative shift would not reach the point where Japan is truly able to make autonomous decisions. The conservatives within Japan are vigorous in their pursuit of their right-wing agenda only toward other Asian states, to whom Japan's conservative shift has grown to prominence.

Japan is likely to sustain its recent conservative turn for some time. Yet it is immature to interpret such tendency as an attempt to return to its prewar militarism. Japan's recent behavior is not rooted in nostalgia for the past. But rather it is political antagonism against the structural predicament which has forced Japan to develop the diplomacy of apology toward its neighboring states.

Needless to say, some political agendas, such as Yasukuni Shrine visits, glorification of the war, and aggressive appeals over certain territories, suggest the rise of historical revisionism that fails to recognize the immorality of past actions. From the perspectives of East Asian nations, these are the reasons why recent movements within Japan remind them of Imperial Japan. And yet, it is also true that only a handful of those right-wing activists believe that Japan could go back to how it was in the past; their demands for the reconfiguration of Japan's postwar inertia are too unrealistic to be integrated, given today's structural constraints. This phenomenon is somewhat similar to the relations between pro-constitutional civil society and the LDP under the 1955 system; the progressive forces functioned as the check against the ruling LDP, rather than as an independent alternative. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish the ultra-nationalists from the conservative political forces whose purpose lies in protecting Japan's self-esteem and sovereignty. The ultra-nationalists in Japan have a tendency to stand on anti-American ideology and anti-Asian psyche. Yet such isolationism or exclusionism conflicts with internationalist Japan. In other words, while the right-wing movements as a symptom may persevere, it is unlikely for them to be established as a system.

It is more precise to interpret Japan's conservative shift as the consequence of liberals' defeat than as the overall victory of the conservatives. Liberals' lack of cohesiveness as well as their failure in constructing alternative agendas brought about the expansion of political conservatives. When the window of political opportunity opened up, the Japanese conservatives systematically and ideologically drove the progressives out of center stage. The institutionalization of the rightist forces as well as the diffusion of rightist ideologies that has taken place since the mid-1990s underwent organizational dispersion as a result of political reconfiguration; the liberals, on the other hand, remained merely defensive in protecting their ideological predilection. Without the revival of the liberals' organizational and ideological integrity, Japan's conservative shift is likely to proceed at increasing speeds in the future.

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