

On the afternoon of Wednesday, March 10, 2021, the Security Studies Unit of the Institute for Future Initiatives (IFI) at the University of Tokyo (UTokyo) held an online workshop involving three panelists, entitled “The Functions and Policies of the Japanese National Security Council.” The three panelists were Nobushige Takamizawa, former Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary (Deputy Secretary General of the National Security Secretariat) and Visiting Professor at UTokyo’s Graduate School of Public Policy; Yasuhiro Matsuda, Professor at UTokyo’s Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia; and Masayasu Tsuzuki, former Deputy Counsellor of the National Security Secretariat and Project Researcher at IFI. As the workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule, the summary of the discussion below does not specify which speakers made particular comments.

This workshop was held as part of a research project subsidized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan entitled US-China Competition and Securitization of Critical and Emerging Technologies: Evaluating Policy-making Process and Impacts on Globalized Economy.

1. Background to Establishment of the Japanese National Security Council (NSC)

When the partial amendment of the Act for Establishment of the Security Council of Japan was approved in December 2013, it was the second attempt following an earlier attempt in 2006. The main differences between the situations in 2006 and 2013 were that it had become clearer than ever that Japan faced an extremely challenging national security environment, while from a domestic point of view, the experience of the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011, had prompted nonpartisan groups to recognize the need for a “national control tower” that would function during emergencies. Within this context, another difference was a new recognition at the working level that it would be advantageous if the relevant government ministries and agencies gathered together to share information and collaborate under the Cabinet Secretariat, which fulfills the function of overall policy coordination.

Personnel from a range of government ministries and agencies related to national security were temporarily assigned to form a unit charged with preparing for the establishment of the NSC in December 2013. This unit commenced work that also prepared for the period after the NSC’s establishment. The National Security Secretariat, which serves as the executive office for the NSC, was established in January 2014, and this secretariat appears to have ensured a smooth start once the NSC was launched, most notably by enabling Japan’s National Security Strategy and National Defense Program Guidelines to be formulated promptly.

2. The NSC's Operations and Results Achieved

The NSC is made up of three consultation bodies: the first is the “Nine Ministers’ Meeting,” through which it retains the civilian control that was a function of its predecessor agency, the Security Council. Meanwhile, to enable the government to respond more flexibly to changes in Japan’s national security environment, the Nine Ministers’ Meeting is supplemented by the “Four Ministers’ Meeting”—a consultative body for practical discussions related to diplomatic and defense policymaking comprising the relevant cabinet ministers—and the “Emergency Ministers’ Meeting.” Strategic use is made of each of the consultation bodies by senior government officials. When necessary, the Four Ministers’ Meeting holds expanded meetings including other relevant cabinet ministers. It is expected that even greater use will be made of the Four Ministers’ Meeting henceforth, depending on what policy objectives are set.

Based on the meetings it has held thus far, the NSC can be said to have responded promptly to manage crises including North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile tests, the situation in the Ukraine, the murders of Japanese citizens in Syria, and the decision to supply ammunition to South Korean troops engaged in UN peacekeeping operations when the situation in South Sudan deteriorated. Alongside dealing with a succession of crisis situations, moreover, it has also formulated medium- to long-term policies. In this regard, it formulated the National Security Strategy, created a framework in line with this strategy (e.g., the three principles on transfer of defense equipment and technology), and established the Advisory Panel on Reconstruction of the Legal Basis for Security, which enabled the drafting of bills relating to Japan’s “legislation for peace and security” (new legislation approved in 2015 that extended the role of the Self Defense Force). In addition, the NSC has made progress in conducting wide-ranging discussions of policies from a medium- to long-term perspective with regard to national security-related issues in the marine, cyberspace, and energy domains, among others. In the international peace cooperation sphere, policies are required to convert from quantity to quality in light of the changes in the national security environment. In terms of the response to the novel coronavirus, meanwhile, the Emergency Ministers’ Meeting has started to meet for the first time, while meetings of the Four Ministers’ Meeting are also being held to address this topic.

At the working level, meetings among ministries and agencies related to national security now take place across various ranks of seniority on a regular basis and function effectively, making use of the Cabinet Secretariat’s capacity for overall policy coordination. A feeling of

solidarity is being fostered that includes the personnel temporarily assigned to the National Security Secretariat from individual ministries and agencies, and there genuinely appears to be steady progress in forming a policymaking community within the national security policy domain. Furthermore, the National Security Secretariat is making clear and specific requests for information to the relevant ministries and agencies, which has enabled advances in terms of timely information sharing. With regard to strategic communications, meanwhile, information sharing and policy coordination are making headway among the relevant ministries and agencies, one focus being to establish the types of communications that contribute to deterrent capability.

3. Future Challenges and Outlook

To start with the issue of economic security, this is qualitatively somewhat different from the topics addressed by the NSC to date, which have related mainly to the relationship between politics and military affairs. This being the case, how will economic security be handled by the NSC henceforth? National economies have conventionally been discussed in terms of comparative advantage within the context of market economics, but recent years have witnessed increasing recognition of economic security as an issue that is directly related to national security itself, as exemplified by the increasingly intense rivalry between the United States and China over supply chains for emerging technologies. Under such circumstances, the government needs to clearly articulate what objectives it will be working to achieve, and the NSC is likely to be used for that purpose. The cases of Taiwan could also be instructive in certain regards; it would be advisable for Japan to observe Taiwan's response closely.

Turning to cybersecurity, the current situation is such that cybertechnologies pose a genuine threat to national security. The issues now extend beyond defense technologies alone to encompass the civilian domain, making it difficult to separate the two. How should the NSC handle cybersecurity under such circumstances? The answer is that it needs to incorporate previously separate space- and cyber-related policies into the National Security Strategy in order to address the issue of how Japan as a nation can make its technologies more powerful. Further debate is needed from both the technical and operational perspectives to determine not only how Japan should prevent misuse of cyberspace, but also how it should establish a dominant position within cyberspace.

When there are expanding policy issues relating to national security, how do we go about setting priorities? Surely, we need to not merely try to keep pace with the changing risks, but also to actually take the initiative through the newly formed NSC. And should we leave this

up to political leadership, or should it be pursued at the working level? In addition to the increasingly obvious threats right in front of us, we also need to respond to the invisible threats; accordingly, perspectives on how to spot and deal with such threats are essential. This will require us to fully mobilize the power of the private sector too, in order to conduct a national security-related assessment for the entire Japanese nation. In addition, it will be important to give full rein to the imagination to envisage multiple scenarios in which priorities in terms of national security policy might change with the times, and prepare the necessary remedies in advance so that they can be put forward as needed. This is another area in which the NSC could be put to use.