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THE ROLE OF JAPAN'S NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

Yuichi Hosoya

In 2013 Shinzo Abe's administration presented the Diet with a bill to revise the National Security Council (NSC) Establishment Act (officially titled the "Bill for the Partial Amendment of the Act for Establishment of the Security Council of Japan and Other Acts"), and the bill was passed into law by both the House of Representatives and the House of Councilors in November. Accordingly, Japan's National Security Council was created on December 4, with the expectation that it will serve as a "control tower" enabling the government to adopt a more comprehensive approach in addressing various security issues.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

Until then, inter-ministerial rivalries had been so notorious that the Japanese government could not make important political decisions. As current security problems cannot be solved by any single ministry, it has been repeatedly pointed out that a Japanese version of the US' National Security Council was needed. Though this NSC, it is expected that the ministries concerned can more effectively collaborate with one another to tackle difficult security issues.

The National Security Secretariat was established on January 7, with Shotaro Yachi, Special Advisor to the Cabinet and Prime Minister Abe's diplomatic strategist, named the Secretary General of the NSS and National Security Advisor. Appointed as Deputy Secretary Generals were Assistant Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobukatsu Kanehara from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Assistant Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobushige Takamizawa from the Ministry of Defense, giving the National Security Bureau a strong lineup from the start. The scale of the secretariat is likely to grow as its initial staff of 67 is steadily increased.


Japan's NSC comprises two organizations. The first is the National Security Council, a consultation forum for relevant ministers. At the heart of the Council are the core "Four Ministers' Group" (the Prime Minister, the Chief Cabinet Secretary, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Defense) and the broader "Nine Ministers' Group" (including the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications, the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry, the Minister of Land, Infrastructure and Transportation, and the Chairman of the National Public Safety Commission). The second organization is the National Security Secretariat, organized into six teams: the Coordination Team, Policy Team No.1, Policy Team No.2, Policy Team No.3, the Strategic Planning Team, and the Intelligence Team? under the Secretary General, the two Deputy Secretary Generals and three Councilors. The Secretariat is staffed primarily by personnel seconded from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense, and private-sector hires beyond the two personnel currently on staff are expected to increase in future.

What is the NSC's current status approximately six months since its start? East Asia is regarded as one of the most concerning regions worldwide, plagued as it is with frequent crises. Even as the NSC Establishment Bill was being discussed in the Diet, regional tensions heightened temporarily following China's unilateral declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea. The National Security Council was established on December 4, and on the agenda for the first meeting of the Four Ministers' Group were issues pertaining to this ADIZ. Reports in that same month that Kim Jong-un's uncle Jang Sung-taek, considered second only to the Supreme Leader as Vice Chairman of North Korea's National Defense Commission, had fallen out of favor and been sentenced to death and executed led to a greater sense of uncertainty about circumstances in North Korea. There is great significance in being able to discuss such major security concerns relevant to multiple ministries/agencies within the NSC's Four Ministers' Group. Meeting every other week or so, this Group offers briefings for the prime minister and other relevant cabinet officials on intelligence submitted by multiple ministries/agencies that allow them to gain an even deeper understanding of urgent security issues.

How is the NSC functioning now after nearly six months in operation? On May 15, 2014, the Advisory Panel on Reconstruction of the Legal Basis for Security submitted a report offering recommendations on such issues as those surrounding the exercise of the right of collective defense, and the NSC served as the secretariat for the discussions on these issues. As these issues concern both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense, it is of great significance that they were examined across ministries/agencies within the context of the NSC. With government officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense and other organs working on the same teams on a day-to-day basis, it is quite probable that a perspective will be fostered within the government that focuses on national interests and national security rather than the interests of individual ministries/agencies. In addition, government officials returning to their respective ministries/agencies and assuming high-ranking positions after a stint in the NSC can be expected to be able to examine policies from a more comprehensive standpoint.

It is often said that Japan does not have any long-term national strategy. This has been largely true. Prime ministers have been too weak to lead the whole government as their personal staffs are just a handful of bureaucrats temporarily seconded to the Prime Minister's Office. Nevertheless, with the establishment of Japan's NSC, it now can be expected that personnel working in the Secretariat will adopt a long-term strategic perspective. Furthermore, the prime minister and other relevant ministers will regularly receive essential briefings from the Secretariat. This will enhance their understanding of complicated security issues.

However, a long time will be needed for an organizational culture to develop. The US' NSC organization took many decades of trial-and-error to secure an unshakable status within the government. In this sense, Japan's own NSC must also be evaluated over an extended period of ten to twenty years, and there are concerns that it could become a mere facade if future administrations and prime ministers do not recognize the importance of utilizing the NSC. Whether the NSC will be able to establish a firm position within Japan's security policy-making framework is thus an unknown quantity at present.

That said, the creation of the NSC would seem to offer an opportunity to establish a new perspective incorporating a "whole of government approach" and long-term strategic planning, a perspective that has been sorely lacking in Japanese organizational culture. The NSC should help alleviate the intense disputes that have arisen between ministries/agencies, prompt re-examinations of crisis-response security policies, and encourage the establishment of more strategic and more comprehensive security policies. 

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