



Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets, 2015 Japan's Legislation for Peace and Security and the North Korea issue—Ten years of national security and crisis management under three prime ministers

Kitamura Shigeru, former Secretary General of the National Security Secretariat

Kitamura Shigeru served as Secretary General of the National Security Secretariat before stepping down for health reasons in July 2021. Committed to developing Japan's national security system and information organizations, Kitamura handled various situations while serving under three prime ministers after assuming the Director of Cabinet Intelligence post to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) Administration in 2011. On the publication of his book *Joho to Kokka* (Intelligence and the state) by Chuo Koron Shinsha in September, *Chuo Koron* magazine asked Mr. Kitamura about Japan's national security and what makes an excellent bureaucrat.

The Abe Cabinet Improved the System

—Japan's security and intelligence systems were improved considerably during the seven years and eight months of the Abe Shinzo Cabinet.

That's right. The Abe Cabinet, inaugurated in December 2012, introduced groundbreaking reforms across the whole national security organization. The new National Security Council (NSC) was inaugurated in December 2013. The Abe Cabinet also established the [Protection of Specially Designated Secrets Act](#) to govern information security, a prerequisite for information exchanges with other countries. In January 2014, the National Security Secretariat (NSS) was established as the NSC Secretariat and the NSC command tower for diplomacy and defense. Then, in September 2015, Japan's [Legislation for Peace and Security](#), which partially approves the right of collective self-defense, was established, making Japan a bit more like other countries. In addition, [Counter-Terrorism Unit Japan \(CTU-J\)](#) was established in December 2015 after a period of reflection on Japan's ISIS hostage crisis in Syria in 2015 and the Algeria hostage crisis in 2013, where Japanese nationals were killed when a natural gas plant came under attack.



Mr. Kitamura Shigeru

Lasting seven years and eight months, the Abe Cabinet was a long-term administration. Still, security and information protection policies do not necessarily bring in the votes in elections, nor do they contribute to cabinet approval ratings. You may call it populism, but I don't think the Abe administration could have achieved this if they had only cared about approval ratings. In that sense, I believe solid political leadership by the Abe Cabinet reinforced the national security organization. I would not say that Japan's security and intelligence organizations are perfect, but I think it is safe to say that the organizations have been fairly well managed.

—Did these system improvements have an impact on the relationship with the United States?

Yes, they did. There has been a remarkable improvement in the quality and quantity of intelligence exchange between Japan and the United States. Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide, as Chief Cabinet Secretary, made statements to that effect in the Diet, and former Prime Minister Abe always said the same. In addition, from the perspective of operations by the Self Defense Force and the US Army, I think it is safe to say that we are moving closer to an alliance of equals due to Japan's Legislation for Peace and Security of 2015.

—What about relations with Europe and other countries than the United States?

Relations with Europe are also important, but the United States as an allied nation is far more important in security and intelligence. Quasi-alliance might not be the best description, but our strong security relations with geopolitically important Australia grow closer.

Specifying Purpose to Intelligence Organizations

—How do you view the current situation for intelligence in Japan?

I cannot say anything about the content, but the information-gathering system, including advances with high technologies, has been strengthened. Many harmful effects of compartmentalized administration have been eliminated thanks to political initiatives. I believe it is significant that we can now clearly present our information requirements to the intelligence community by establishing the NSC and NSS.

If an intelligence agency is left to its own devices without any established purpose, it will only operate for its purposes. On the other hand, the parties at each agency do not necessarily know which direction to go when gathering information. That's why it is necessary to guide the direction of information gathering based on various aspects. Depending on the international situation, we communicate Japan's perspective on what information should be collected. Each agency carries out information-gathering activities based on its strengths and weaknesses. It is possible to carry out information-gathering activities that are more coordinated and effective if the agencies are told what kind of information decision-makers need.

But, I would have to say that the national security and intelligence system is far from fully developed. This may sound a little paradoxical, but few democratic nations have intelligence organizations whose buildings are imposing. I am not going to mention any countries, but I think Japan is highly democratic in this sense.

—Would you say that the series of reforms implemented during the Abe Cabinet era were partially due to the character of the Prime Minister?

I think it had the most impact. As I mentioned a moment ago, legislation related to security and information never leads to higher cabinet approval ratings. Around the time of the Act on the

Protection of Specially Designated Secrets and Japan's Legislation for Peace and Security of 2015, the approval ratings fell by around ten points.

—At the time of the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets and Japan's Legislation for Peace and Security of 2015, opposition groups expanded their demonstrations in the vicinity of the Diet buildings. Was there a sense of crisis?

Yes, the human chain. I was primarily responsible for the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets Act, which was passed during an extraordinary Diet session. Still, if the bill hadn't passed during that session, I think I would have had to accept responsibility and resign. I would not have been comfortable with my position if the bill had not passed, in addition to the drop of nearly ten points in the cabinet approval rating.

Three Prime Ministers Each with Their Style

—You assumed the post of Director of Cabinet Intelligence in December 2011 when Noda Yoshihiko of the DPJ was Prime Minister.

For me, it came as a bolt out of the blue. I had served in the first Abe administration as executive secretary to the prime minister. Former Prime Minister Noda was well aware of this, and still, he made someone who had been right at the heart of the Abe Cabinet his Director of Cabinet Intelligence. In that sense, I think he made pretty good use of me.

—People say that the appointment responded to the lack of information on the death of former General Secretary Kim Jong Il of North Korea in the Prime Minister's Office.

They do say that, but I had received the unofficial offer before that affair. So, the truth is that there was no direct connection between that affair and my appointment.

When the DPJ passed the reins of government to the Liberal Democratic Party, you remained in the Director of Cabinet Intelligence post under the second Abe administration, which was inaugurated in December 2012.

The Director of Cabinet Intelligence is a political appointee. Therefore, I still feel nothing but gratitude to former Prime Minister Abe and Prime Minister Suga for retaining someone who had served one year under the DPJ administration. The first Secretary General of the National Security Secretariat, [Yachi Shotaro](#), has said the same, but security requires continuity. I think it is discerning to maintain a certain degree of continuity in security-related systems even when political changes occur.

—You have worked as Director of Cabinet Intelligence and Secretary General of the National Security Secretariat under three prime ministers. Would you please tell us how you viewed each prime minister?

It would be very presumptuous of me to talk about the personality of each prime minister, but I can tell you what my job was like at the time.

I mentioned former Prime Minister Noda a moment ago. Even though he was fully aware that I had served as Executive Secretary to the Prime Minister under the first Abe administration, he promoted me to Director of Cabinet Intelligence. For this, I am grateful. I was pretty tense because I was a political appointee of the DPJ administration after working as a political appointee under the first Abe Cabinet. At the time, the Prime Minister was briefed once a week. I paid a lot of attention to allocating my time within the stipulated time frame of thirty minutes once a week. I recall that Prime Minister Noda listened thoughtfully to what I had to say. Rather than asking questions, he listened attentively to what I said without losing his concentration.

Prime Minister Abe was highly interested in security, and he was also very knowledgeable and had firm ideas of his own. I often broke out in a cold sweat when he asked quite pointed questions based on his knowledge. My job as a director changed because the number of briefings increased from once to twice a week, and it was a hectic time. Another point of note is that he took a strong position on listening to information from various sources. So I tried to create opportunities for each agency in the intelligence community to brief the Prime Minister directly rather than through me.

—Did you anticipate that his administration would be so long-lived?

This may sound a little rude, but I didn't expect it at all in the beginning, perhaps because I had been executive secretary to the first Abe Cabinet, which lasted only one year. I thought it would be a significant challenge to last even one day longer than his first cabinet.

—You worked together with Prime Minister Suga since his time as Chief Cabinet Secretary.

In terms of my briefings, Prime Minister Suga is swift off the mark. After becoming prime minister, I served as Secretary General of the National Security Secretariat, but he was highly focused on security policy. I cannot give any concrete examples, but when he had to make decisions about security-related policies, he took it very seriously, thought deeply about the issues, and asked his subordinates' opinions. That was the Prime Minister's thinking, and that was my thinking. Once he had made a decision, he never wavered. Then he would implement it. That's the style of Prime Minister Suga.

Prime Minister Abe Chose Moderation

—Much happened during the long administration of the Abe Cabinet. Is there anything that you find particularly memorable?

The North Korea issue. We were very tense during the missile crisis in 2016 and 2017. North Korea launched ballistic missiles with intercontinental capabilities (ICBM), which caused considerable concern in the United States. Crisis management was one of the main pillars of the Abe Cabinet, and then Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga also showed strong leadership. It did little to deter the North Korean launches, but at least the responses to the North Korean missile launches were exceptionally swift. Once, the Chief Cabinet Secretary even held a press conference before the missile landed. It was essential to inform the nation without delay.

Another difficult moment was the [Statement on the 70th Anniversary of World War II](#) in 2015. How to confront historical problems was a significant challenge for the Abe administration. Prime

Minister Abe himself listened to opinions from experts and many other channels, and he chose moderation while persisting in his own beliefs. I am aware that the Statement expresses various views, but the Abe Cabinet took a middle-of-the-road line when dealing with this Statement and other historical issues.

—Can we say that the [meeting between Prime Minister Abe and President-Elect Donald Trump](#) in 2016 was a foreign diplomacy success?

In terms of diplomatic practice, it is unusual to meet before the inauguration, and I think there was opposition in some quarters. Then Chief Executive Secretary Imai Takaya and I said that it would be best to hold the meeting as soon as possible. One of the features of foreign diplomacy under a Republican Administration in the United States is a kind of unpredictability, demonstrated by the prudence of former President Nixon, who went over Japan's head. A personal relationship of trust between heads of state is most important to avoid such issues. In the end, I think the meeting demonstrated Prime Minister Abe's interpersonal skills.

The Nature of Political Leadership

—The Abe Cabinet has been criticized for weakening the power of ministries and agencies by concentrating authority at the Prime Minister's Office.

Political initiatives are one stream of democracy, and this is something successive cabinets have engaged with. The same was true of the DPJ. I think it is impossible to reverse this stream and to return to a bureaucracy-led system. People who become bureaucrats probably make the same assumption. In the greater scheme of things, politicians, who represent the voters, should make policy decisions. I don't think people without legitimacy based on elections will be making decisions on their own anymore. Bureaucratic initiatives may have been appropriate at a time when perspectives and directions were set in stone. But this is not such a time. I think that political initiatives must be decided by the politicians who represent the people.

—You started as a career civil servant at the National Police Agency, so you have spent your whole career as a bureaucrat. Why did you choose the National Police Agency?

I decided after making the rounds of several ministries and agencies at the time I was hired. I think it was because I had a sense that I could serve the people and the nation.

—How did you envision your future when you joined the National Police Agency?

The reality for bureaucrats is that nothing turns out the way you imagine. In truth, encounters and luck are probably the most important things. I also tell this to young people, but ministries are set up so that anyone in the top third would make a good vice-minister. No matter who is appointed vice-minister, the organization will barely change. I think I had some good encounters and luck on my side because they let me do this for 41 years.

—In 2019, you moved from your post as Director of Cabinet Intelligence to Secretary General of the National Security Secretariat.

There's a certain level of similarity between the posts of Director of Cabinet Intelligence and Secretary General of the National Security Secretariat. In one post, you analyze information on national security, while in the other, you work on related policies. In a way, the relationship is like the pitcher and catcher in baseball. Each post requires different abilities, but you often attend the same meetings. I used to meet quite often with former Secretary General Yachi. When I took over from Mr. Yachi, I was pleased when he said, "I have never once had a bad experience while working with you, and we have had a good working relationship." Since I primarily worked behind the scenes, I was happy to move a little into the spotlight as Secretary General.

—Is information work behind-the-scenes work?

Yes, you don't intrude, and you never go on official trips overseas with the Prime Minister. When Abe was prime minister, he brought fresh information from overseas, but since I had to study the information in Japan, it was pretty hard work to keep up.

—Were you strict with your subordinates?

Both the Director and the Secretary General do much of the work on their own. Rather than delegating work to subordinates, your subordinates pass information to you, and the point is how well you can perform. It's like a one-person business, and since you have to do everything yourself, it's pointless to say this or that about your subordinates. You don't have much time either. On the contrary, I'd say that the associates were keeping an eye on me and how I work.

Two Must-Have Skills for Bureaucrats

—You have had a long career as a bureaucrat. Is there something you would like to tell the young bureaucrats working for the people of Japan?

In the context of political initiatives, the Prime Minister's Office is where decisions are made. Bureaucrats have to do two things. Firstly, point out policy options. Planning and policy planning abilities are required to present plural policies. Secondly, provide perspectives. When you look at bacteria, you need a microscope, and when you are looking at something far away, you need a telescope, don't you? When you look at writing, you need reading glasses. The ability to provide the necessary perspective to understand the facts that underpin policies is the skill of a bureaucrat.

In both cases, it is vital to have two skills to understand the situation: a long-term perspective and a perspective that transcends the boundaries between the extensive ministries.

As well as providing policy decision-makers with perspectives on things, bureaucrats also indicate the range of policy options to choose from. Mr. Imai, who served as Chief Executive Secretary and Special Adviser to the Prime Minister, was skilled at pointing out policy options. In contrast, I was the type of person who offered perspectives on things. In the future, I think bureaucrats will be asked whether they can make such presentations, and I think the work is gratifying.

I was appointed Secretary General at the end of my life as a bureaucrat, but incredibly talented young people are out there. Kasumigaseki is not a waste of space. In the sense that they are responsible for national security, they may be the elite of the elite. Still, many young people are thinking seriously about national policies that transcend the boundaries between ministries. During the last two years, I thought about how fortunate I am to have become a government official and to be able to work with such talented young people. I have been a civil servant for 41 years, but my final two years as Secretary General of the National Security Secretariat were both the most satisfying and the most fun. If it weren't for my health, I would have liked to continue for a while longer because the next ordinary Diet session will probably deal with specific policies on economic security. I would have wanted to accomplish something like that.

—You must have sacrificed much for your work.

Well, yes, but that's true of all political appointees. I think that my counterparts in other countries also worked twenty-four hours at a stretch. The main reason for the timing of my resignation is that having surgery means a long absence from essential responsibilities. Perhaps it's old-fashioned to think this way. Still, the Secretary General of the National Security Secretariat must fight twenty-four hours a day and be constantly ready to respond to a crisis. The nation should have a Secretary General who is always watchful.

I may have sacrificed some things, but my family has been very understanding. I apologized for not being a perfect father when I retired, but the whole family congratulated me. It felt good, and I was so happy.

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Born in Tokyo in 1956. Graduated from the Faculty of Law at the University of Tokyo. Joined the National Police Agency (NPA) in 1980. Studied abroad at École nationale d'administration (ENA). After serving as Director of the NPA Security Division and Foreign Affairs and Intelligence Division, Executive Secretary to the Prime Minister (the first Abe Cabinet), and Senior Counselor at the NPA Commissioner General's Secretariat, Kitamura joined the Noda Cabinet as Director of Cabinet Intelligence. He remained in the post from the second to the fourth Abe Cabinets. In 2019, he was appointed Secretary General of the National Security Secretariat. Kitamura remained in the position under the Suga Cabinet until his resignation in July 2021.