Explaining Japan’s Shift to Foreign Policy Activism:
Security Challenges and Perverse Political Accountability*

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The paper examines the root causes of Japan’s rapid shift to foreign policy activism. To explain the causes, I develop the so-called “perverse political accountability” approach. Specifically, the approach claims that a growing security challenge from China and North Korea, and US policy favoring Japan’s foreign policy activism structure. Japan’s domestic political condition that the majority of Japanese people become more conservative and nationalistic. Such shift in the Japanese people’s preference has been both creating and reinforcing a perverse accountability by which the leaders or parties willing to adopt hard-line foreign policies are better off electorally while the leaders or parties remaining soft-line on foreign affairs are worse off. The perverse accountability not only leads to a severe partisan imbalance between the conservative parties and the leftist parties, but also gives the most conservative party, e.g., the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), a greater chance of coming to office and of pursuing assertive foreign policy they favor. Thus, the perverse accountability is at the center of current Japan’s turn to foreign policy activism. This finding contributes to an enhanced understanding for Japan’s shift to assertive foreign policy.

Keywords: Japan, foreign policy activism, China, North Korea, the US, perverse political accountability

Puzzle

The world has wondered why Japan is moving so rapidly into foreign policy activism. Japan, whose foreign policy was quite peaceful and generous in development aid, disaster relief and peacekeeping, has grown increasingly hawkish in recent decades. Japan’s foreign policy leaders, regardless of their partisan differences, have not hesitated to show their growing commitments to a series of assertive foreign policies, such as proactively responding to growing threats from China in the East and South China Sea, preventing North Korea’s missile threats, exercising the right of collective self-defense, making it easier for the Diet to propose revisions to the war-renouncing Article 9 of the Constitution, increasing a more proactive role for the Self-Defense Force (SDF) overseas, and downplaying its World-War II (WWII) era crimes.1

Japan’s shift to foreign policy activism raises grave security concerns not only to neighboring countries,

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1 Japan’s foreign policy activism is defined as a set of assertive foreign policies distinguished from its postwar pacifist posture. It includes the policy of: (1) proactively containing China and North Korea; (2) revising the Peace Constitution; (3) exercising the right of collective self-defense; (4) increasing pro-active role of the Self-Defense Force (SDF) overseas; and (5) downplaying the atrocities of its WWII-era crimes.
such as China and North Korea, but also to the world at large. Given that the enmity and antipathy, which Japan’s colonial expansionism generated and consolidated during WWII, still remain vivid in Asian people’s mind, its recent turn to foreign policy activism is provoking fears of renewed Japanese militarism in the world. Thus, the relationships between Japan and its neighbors are increasingly strained, with dangerous implications for international security.

Despite the growing concerns on Japan’s foreign policy activism, however, the existing studies on the postwar Japanese politics have a great trouble in accounting for the causes of the activism. Realist theories, for example, have some difficulty in explaining why Japan is rapidly shifting to foreign policy activism in spite of the US unwavering security commitment. Both liberal and constructivist theories, which emphasize the pacifying effect of democratic institutions and norm in Japan, also are puzzled as to why Japan, which has been the one of the oldest democracies in Asia, is suddenly shifting to assertive foreign policy.

To explain the reasons why Japan is rapidly turning to assertive foreign policy, this paper develops the so-called “perverse political accountability” approach. The approach claims that the structural change symbolized by the growing security challenge from adjacent rivals, notably China and North Korea, and US policy for proactive Japan structures Japan’s domestic political condition such that the majority of Japanese people become more conservative and nationalistic. Such shift in Japanese people’s preference is creating a “perverse accountability” by which the leaders or parties willing to adopt hard-line foreign policies are better off electorally while the leaders or parties remaining soft-line on foreign affairs are worse off. The perverse accountability contributes to Japan’s rapid turn to foreign policy activism in two ways: (1) it leads to a severe partisan imbalance between the conservative parties, e.g., the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), and two leftist parties, e.g., the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDP) and the Japan’s Communist Party (CP); (2) it helps a more hawkish player, i.e., the LDP, to come to office more often than the DPJ does and to have a greater chance of adopting the hard-line policy that it favors. Thus, I argue that the perverse accountability is the center of current Japan’s turn to foreign policy activism.

The remainder of this article is divided into four sections. In the first section, I review critically existing studies of Japan’s foreign policy. The second section develops a theoretical framework, e.g., perverse political accountability approach. The third section provides evidence showing that the accountability leads to Japan’s rapid shift to foreign policy activism. In the concluding section, I discuss the results of the analysis and its implications for further research on Japan’s foreign policy.

Prior Studies of Japan’s Foreign Policy

The scholars of various stripes of realism argue that the current Japan’s turn to foreign policy activism is the result of growing security challenge from the rising China and wayward North Korea (Mastanduno, 2002; Christensen, 1999; Calder, 2006; Arase, 2007; Hughes, 2004; 2007; 2009; Twomey, 2000). The challenge is worsening Japan’s threat perception and, as a result, it is moving toward foreign policy activism to hedge against the threat. But such realist view has some difficulty explaining why Japan, which is still under the US strong security guarantee, is moving into the hawkish direction. Despite some controversies about the role of the US as a stabilizer in East Asia, it still provides a strong military commitment to protecting Japan from outside threats. Given the heavy presence of the US military in Japan, therefore, realists have little to say about why Japan under a strong US security guarantee shifts to foreign policy activism.
Japan’s rapid right turn is more puzzling to neo-liberal scholars. Since their theoretical argument is firmly built upon the logic of Kantian triangle, there is no strong reason to doubt that Japan, which has long been constrained by the three axes of the Kantian triangle, e.g., democracy, economic interdependence, and inter-governmental organization, is moving toward more hawkish direction (Acharya, 2003/2004; Wu, 2008; Koo, 2009). From the neo-liberals’ perspective, therefore, the current move toward foreign policy activism is a just passing trend and Japan will remain committed to the pacifism in the future.

Constructivists have remained largely optimistic about Japan’s pacifist posture in foreign policy. They’ve argued that the institutional legacy of Hiroshima and defeat in World War II led to the consolidation of anti-militarist norm and democratic institutions. Stressing the tightened civilian control of civilian leadership on military and the culture of anti-militarism, the scholars also have predicted that there should be no dramatic changes in Japan’s pacifist stance (Berger, 1993; Katzenstien, 1993; Katzenstein & Okawara, 2001-2002; Katzenstein, 1996). But the approach dismisses the possibility that a radical shift in security environment may lead to the switch of Japanese public’s preference from passive pacifism to foreign policy activism, and that the switch may propel the Japan’s civilian politicians and public not only to break away from the postwar antimilitarist norm, but also to move toward foreign policy activism.

In what follows, I develop a more nuanced approach to Japan’s shift to foreign policy activism. The approach makes it clear that Japan’s nationalist turn in foreign policy is not a just passing trend but a reality that a radical change in security landscape is creating, and that a perverse political accountability, which the change has both created and consolidated at home, is at the center of Japan’s turn to foreign policy activism.

**Theoretical Framework: “Perverse” Political Accountability**

To construct a theoretical framework for understanding Japan’s rapid shift to foreign policy activism, I synthesize and twist key theoretical insights from the literature on international rivalries and democratic peace. The rich literature in international rivalries has claimed that rivalry dyads, compared to non-rivalry ones, maintain much more hostile relationships. Traumatic war, colonial experience, and territorial dispute all push rivals to be caught up in enduring hostility for decades (Goertz & Diehl, 1993, 1995; Diehl & Goertz, 2000; Bennett, 1997, 1998). Applied to Japan’s foreign relations, it seems clear that Japan’s active foreign policy exclusively targets such enduring rivals as China and North Korea rather than the world at large.

Although Japan’s current turn to the right is primarily driven by the worsening relationships with these rivals, a question still remains to be answered. Japan have allegedly been one of the oldest democracies in Asia and served as a cornerstone of the postwar pacifism in the region (Katzenstein & Okawara, 2001-2002). Thus, many scholars of Japanese politics have argued that democratic institutions and the norm of anti-militarism have pervaded Japan and played a pivotal role in preventing Japan form returning to assertive prewar posture (Berger, 1993; Katzenstein, 1998; Katzenstein & Okawara, 2001-2002). What we are witnessing right now, however, is that Japan is rapidly backsliding into assertive foreign policy whose ideological background is highly nationalistic and conservative (Matthews, 2003; Fukuyama, 2005; Nye, 2012; Takahashi, 2010). Why is Japan, which has long been remained peaceful in its foreign policy posture, rapidly turning aggressive?

To explain democratic Japan’s shift to assertive foreign policy, I develop a “perverse political accountability” approach partly by twisting the insight from democratic peace theory and partly by applying it to the rivalry relationship between Japan (allied with the US) and two major adversaries-i.e., China and North
Korea. The rich literature in democratic peace has consistently argued that \textit{ex post} political accountability embedded in democratic regimes makes foreign policy leaders highly peace-prone by allowing risk-averse public to punish the leaders if they adopt costly hard-line policies such as military conflict and war (Kinsella & Russett, 2002; Oneal & Russett, 1997; Russell & Oneal, 2002).

Contrary to this conventional account, however, I make a counter-argument that in the context of international rivalries, the \textit{ex post} accountability in democracies can be “distorted” such that the leaders willing to adopt more conflictual policies are better off while the leaders adopting soft-line policies are worse off (Colaresi, 2004, 2005; Vasquez, 1993; Nincic, 1989; Huth & Allee, 2002b; McGinnis & Williams, 2001). This is because public’s preferences in the rivalries tend to be skewed in favor of confrontation over cooperation. The public in the rivalries has long been influenced by “rivalry-as-prison effect”. They have systematically been educated and brainwashed so as to consider their perceived rivals as real enemies and threats. Under this circumstance, domestic politics in the rivalries produces a biased structure of political rewards that favors confrontation over conciliation and cooperation (Nincic, 1989). Such biased political rewards are more likely to be activated and strengthened when the public experiences aggressive behaviors from the rivals (Colaresi, 2004, 2005).

The threats from rivals may take various kinds of forms from expansive use of military power, verbal threats and threats to use military force by the rivals (Colaresi, 2004). Built upon the entrenched hostilities consolidated over an extended period of time, the public in rivalries may consolidate its hard-line belief and preference towards the rivals if the threats materialize into real military actions. Consequently, the domestic political setting in the rivalries is structured such that though diplomatic and military policies would be politically popular and quite defensible against soft-line opponents of the government. This is what I call “perverse political accountability”.

Once the accountability set in motion, the relationships between rivals may be hostage to a biased structure of political reward favoring confrontation. Keenly aware of the reward system structured in favor of confrontation, the hard-line leaders in democratic rivals become more willing to inflate the threats from the rivals and to use them for shoring up their legitimacy (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005; Nincie, 1989; Colaresi, 2004). So democratic leaders may be much more hawkish than democratic peace theorists might have expected and become a major driver of hard-line foreign policies (Huth, 1996; Huth & Allee, 2002b).

In what follows, I test my argument that perverse accountability is a major cause of Japan’s shift to foreign policy activism. First, the paper identifies kinds of security challenges that might contribute to worsening threat perception of Japanese public. Second, the paper examines the process by which the challenges lead to the emergence and consolidation of perverse political accountability in Japan. Finally, the paper demonstrates the accountability prompts Japanese leaders’ hawkish turn in foreign policies.

\textbf{Security Challenge and Japanese People’s Turn to the Right}

Many scholars in international rivalries have argued that external conflict and threats affect the domestic political alignment within a rival state. Hostility from a rival, in the form of verbal threats or military actions, 

\footnote{Rivalry as prison effect can occur if a significant proportion of the attentive public in the states engaged in international rivalries perceives its rival states as a severe threat to national security. Under this circumstance, any policy that leaves the states vulnerable to the rivals would be resisted by significant segments of the populations as would policies that seem dangerously bellicose. For the details on the effect (McGinnis & Williams, 2001).}
increases the insecurity of the population of the threatened state (Vasquez, 1993, Colaresi, 2004, 2005; Thompson, 2006). As the level of hostility increases from a foreign rival, the population in the threatened state is more likely to feel insecure and to become hostile toward the rival.

**Rising China and Increased Security Awareness of Japanese People**

In the context of Japan, it is the rise of China and its ever-growing assertive foreign policy that are prompting the Japanese people’s support of active foreign policies (Hughes, 2009; Matthews, 2003; Calder, 2006; Fukuyama, 2005; He, 2007). Since the Cold War ended, China has rapidly been rising in both economic and military realms. China has already passed Japan as the second-largest economy (Nye, 2012). Based on the dazzling economic growth, China has not only modernized its nuclear capabilities, but also increased military budget by double-digit rates for 17 consecutive years (Calder, 2006).

A simple military growth of China, however, has not led to an increased awareness of security among Japanese people. Against the backdrop of its enhanced military standing, China has intentionally created a number of military conflicts with Japan over contested territories, notably the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. Table 1 provides a thumbnail sketch on the militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) between the two rivals and the levels of hostility in the disputes over the past five decades.

![Figure 1. Militarized dispute and its hostility between Japan and China, 1960-2012. Source: COW MID data set (v 4.0.) and author’s calculation.](image)

As Figure 1 shows, the relationships between two rivals were relatively calm and peaceful during the Cold War. From the mid-1990s onward, however, the two rivals’ relations have turned sour. The militarized disputes between China and Japan made a comeback around the mid-1990s and have been recurring until very recently. The levels of hostility in the disputes have grown increasingly severe such that the two rivals have become
more willing to resort to military threats against each other.³

At the center of the disputes is the two rivals’ contested territorial claims on the Senkau/Diaoyu islands. Based upon its rapidly growing military capabilities, China has grown bolder in asserting its claims by making unilateral declarations about control of airspace and sending fishing boats and other vessels into the waters around islands to test Japan’s resolve to defend the islands. Responding to Japan’s complaint about Chinese vessels’ intrusion into the waters, China has infuriated Japan by simply reiterating that the “islands are historically an integral part of China” (Hughes, 2009).

China’s military activities have also been very aggressive in the South China Sea. Under their claim of “nine-dotted lines”, China declared almost 90% of the South China Sea as their own. But the South China Sea is vital to the security of Japan. The South China Sea is not only key sea lanes Japan needs to import crude oil but also key sea line of communications between the Middle East and Northeast Asia (Nagao, 2013). But current China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea provokes Japanese fear that it may undermine a stability in the Sea such that Japanese access to the Sea is denied by China. All these China’s assertiveness thus are giving the Japan’s public a strong reason to become more conservative and nationalistic by increasing its security awareness (Hornung, 2012).

![Figure 2. Militarized dispute and its hostility between Japan and North Korea, 1960-2012.](image)

Source: COW MID data set (v 4.0.) and author’s calculation

Japanese fear of aggressive China has coincided with the United States’ growing concern about the growth of Chinese power. Against rising China, the 1995 Nye initiatives placed new emphasis on maintaining and strengthening the security alliance between the US and Japan. Based on the initiative, the US and Japan revised

³ According to the coding rule of MIDs data set, a value “0” indicates that no militarized action occurred; (2) a value of “1” indicates that no militarized response to an initiation by another state occurred; (3) a value of “2” indicates that the states in a dispute threatened to use force; (4) a value of “3” indicates that the states in a dispute displayed force; (5) a value of “4” indicates that the states in a dispute used force; (6) a value of “5” indicates that the states in a dispute went to war.
a defense guideline in which Japan’s new military roles constitutes a key part of a revitalized alliance between two states (Christensen, 1999). The guideline in which US has consistently supported for Japan’s pro-active role in East Asia specifically targeted rising China (Christensen, 2006). Keenly aware of the security implications of rising China in East Asia, the US has made determined efforts to increase Japanese assertiveness in its foreign policy. Chinese threat, coupled with the US effort to counter it by consolidating US-Japan alliance, thus provides a fertile ground for Japanese people to voice nationalist sentiment against China.

**Nuclear North Korea and Japanese Paranoia**

The growing security challenge from wayward North Korea is another factor that is rapidly worsening the threat perception of the Japan’s public. From the mid 1990s onward, North Korea has been taking a highly aggressive stance towards Japan, as symbolized by multiple long-range missile launches into the East Sea/the Sea of Japan and secret nuclear tests. Figure 2 illustrates how the relationships between Japan and North Korea have systematically been worsening by a series of militarized disputes mediated by missile launches and nuclear tests since the mid-1990s.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the two rivals had engaged in almost eight militarized disputes since the mid-1990s and most disputes were associated with North Korea’s long-range missile launches into the East Sea/the Sea of Japan. The May 1993 test launch of a Nodong-1 in the Sea of Japan, for example, encouraged Japanese people to realize that a significant part of Japanese territory may be exposed to missile attack from North Korea. The Japanese people’s paranoia about the possible missile attack by North Korea reached its peak when it launched Taepodong-I missile in August 1998 over Japanese airspace (Matthews, 2003). The Japan’s public also feels more insecure by the North’s constant bid for nuclear weapons. In particular, the public fears that North Korea will use its enhanced nuclear positions to exert nuclear blackmail on Japan (Hughes, 2009).

The US also played a critical role in increased awareness of security among Japanese people. Faced with the North’s missile launches and surprising nuclear tests, for instance, the US pushed Japan to demonstrate considerable alliance solidarity in their UN diplomacy. The two allies not only defined North Korea as a major security threat in East Asia, but also worked together to pass the 2006 resolutions 1695 and 1718 condemning the missile and nuclear tests and imposing economic sanctions (Hughes, 2009). Backed by the US strong commitment to non-proliferation, Japan was able to take an increasing assertive attitude toward North Korea, thereby creating a broad domestic political condition in which Japanese population has considered North Korea as an “Axis of Evil”.

**Rise of Conservative Japanese Constituencies**

The security challenge presented by both China and DPRK have played a crucial role in heightening the levels of threat perception among the Japanese people. The heightened threat perceptions in turn encourage the people to turn to patriotism and nationalism (Hironori, 2006; Izumikawa, 2010; Hornung, 2012). Specifically, the expansive use of military power by rising China and its assertive territorial claims, combined with North Korea’s highly provocative foreign and security policies have paved the way for the rise of conservative constituencies in Japan (Hughes, 2009). The US also played a key role in the consolidation of such conservative preference among Japanese people by exaggerating hostile intentions from the two rivals.
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(Christensen, 2006).

A poll, which was conducted by the Asahi Shimbun in 2010, for example, reports that 29% of respondents pointed out that the biggest military threat to Japan is from North Korea while 55% of respondents said that the biggest military threat to Japan is from China. In total, the two rivals were identified a major security threat to Japan by 84% of the respondents. Regarding the factors that the respondents are concerned about in threatening the peace in East Asia, 38% of the respondents pointed out the Korean peninsula while 48% of the respondent were worried about Chinese military power.

The Japanese perception of the risk of war involving Japan also has been gradually increasing. The Cabinet Office poll shows that the percentage of survey respondents who said that Japan faces a risk of war has increased from 21% in 1997 to 45% in 2006. The number of respondents worrying about the risk of war involving Japan has nearly doubled in ten years.

With the rapid deterioration of its threat perception, the Japan’s public has begun to raise a voice that Japan must develop active foreign policies that help better defend Japan from outside threats (Hornung, 2012). The evidence showing that the preference of the Japan’s public is shifting from the postwar pacifism to new foreign policy activism abounds. In regards to the revision of the “Peace Constitution”, for example, the 2013 survey by the Asahi Shimbun and University of Tokyo research team showed that 50% of voters were in favor of revising the constitution, up from 41% in 2009 (Sieg, 2013). According to the Cabinet Office’s poll, the Japanese people’s support for an increase in defense capabilities of the SDF has increased 15.5% in 1997 to 24.8% in 2012 (Public Relations Office, Cabinet Office, 2012). In regards to the SDF’s effort to support overseas operation, the people’s approval rating has increased 43.6% in 2009 to 48.8% in 2012 (Public Relations Office, Cabinet Office, 2012).

It is also interesting to notice that the public’s support for active foreign policy is synchronized with the change in its understandings of the past War crime. The 2013 Asahi Shimbun’s poll showed that with regard to visits to the Yaskuni Shrine, in which many WWII criminals are enshrined, by three Cabinet ministers on August 25 when WWII ended, 41% of those polled approved the visit. This result stands in a contrast to the results in the 2004 poll conducted by the Asahi Shimbun in which only 38% of those polled endorsed Koizumi cabinet’s visit to the shrine. The poll also showed that concerning both China’s and ROK’s criticism that Prime Minister Abe, unlike the past 20 years, did not mention that Japan has done harm to the Asian countries, 52% of the respondents said that the Abe administration doesn’t need to pay special attention to the criticism while 34% said that it should take criticism seriously.

In short, the growing security challenge from both China and North Korea towards Japan and US exaggeration of the challenge have been leading to an increased awareness of security among the Japanese people. Such an increased awareness has prompted the rise of hard-line constituencies in Japan’s politics.
which might be led to both the rise and the consolidation of a biased structure of political rewards that favors conservative foreign and security policies. That is, the conservative public has served as the “backbone” of Japan’s shift to foreign policy activism.

“Perverse” Political Accountability in Democratic Japan

In the context of international rivalries, the conservative public tends both to create and to consolidate the so-called “perverse” political accountability. The perverse accountability refers to the political reward mechanism through which conservative domestic audience rewards the political leaders willing to adopt tough foreign policy action toward foreign enemies while punishing the leaders, who appear to be conciliatory and weak in dealing with them. Many studies in international rivalries have shown that such distorted accountability prevails in the rivalries (Nincic, 1989; Vasquez, 1993; Colaresi, 2004, 2005; McGinnis & Williams, 2001; Hensel, 1999). The paper claims that the accountability has already been activated and in place in Japan.

Figure 3. Change in the electoral fortunes of Japan’s major parties.

Source: Asahi Shimbun, the Lower House election results, various years; each line represents the share of seats the parties obtain against a total seat in the House; percentage is based on author’s calculations.

Democratic Japan and a Biased Structure of Political Rewards

The states in international rivalries often become a hostage of a biased structure of political rewards that favor confrontation over conciliation. Democratic countries cannot be an exception. When a democratic country faces a threat from international rival who in past conflicts has demonstrated the willingness to use military force and to oppose a negotiated solution, this rival is likely to be portrayed as a dangerous adversary or far enemy at home. More important, foreign relations with the rival will have a higher level of domestic
political saliency within the democratic polity than within the authoritarian polity. In this context of heightened domestic political attention, the *ex post* political accountability in democratic polity tends to become “perverse” such that the leaders adopting hard-line policies toward the rival are better off electorally while the leaders remaining soft-line on the rivals are worse off (Huth, 1996; Huth & Allee, 2002a).

Such perverse accountability has come into full play in Japan as its public has become more conservative and nationalistic with the rise of the security challenges from China and North Korea. From the mid-1990s onward, therefore, Japanese constituencies have begun to favor conservative parties and to punish the leftist-and pacifist parties. Since the 1996 general election, for instance, the conservative parties, such as the LDP and DPJ, which have shown strong commitments to acting tough in dealing with the threats from the two adversaries, have been systematically better off in elections. By contrast, two major leftist parties, e.g., the SDP and Japanese CP, which have consistently been soft-line in dealing with the threats, have suffered severe setbacks in the elections (Hiwatari, 2005; Fukuyama, 2005; Calder, 2006; Arase, 2007). Figure 3 vividly shows how the perverse accountability has been rewarding the conservative parties while punishing the leftist parties in Japan since the mid-1990s.

Several points are immediately apparent in Figure 3. From the mid 1990s on, the two conservative parties, e.g., the LDP and DPJ, have increased their vote share and acted as dominant parties in Japanese politics. The DPJ, a relatively new political force, for example, has garnered constant support from the Japanese people since the mid-1990s and prevailed in the 2009 election, which allowed it to rule Japan until 2012 when it experienced a severe setback. The LDP, which had monopolized its control of Japan’s politics since 1946, lost its hold on power in 1993, but has gradually regained its influence until it was defeated by the DPJ in the 2009 election. In the 2012 election, however, the LDP achieved a landslide victory and came back to power.

Compared to the two conservative parties, the Japan’s leftist parties have suffered significant losses in a series of the elections. The pacifist SDP, for example, served a part of the ruling coalition in 1995, 1996, and 2009 respectively but its veto power was highly limited because of the rapid decline of its share of seats in the Lower House. It experienced a great debacle in the 1996 general election in which its portion of the seats in the Lower House decreased from “13.7%” to just “3%”. Since then, its electoral fortune has never been reversed. The Japanese CP, another key pacifist veto player, has constantly failed to obtain sizable support from the Japan’s public since the early 1990s. Its portion of the seats in the Lower House decreased from “5.2%” in 1996 to just “1.67%” in 2012. Like the SDP, therefore, the CP has been systematically marginalized in Japan’s electoral politics.

To be sure, there are many other factors that might have affected the electoral fortunes of these competing parties in Japan. What seems the most clear from the above-mentioned evidence, however, is that the parties willing to adjust themselves to new security challenge have been better off while parties remaining passive in dealing with the challenge have been worse off. The Japan’s constituencies, which becomes more conservative

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9 Although not clearly addressed here, it is of note that the Japan’s electoral rule change in 1994 also has exerted strong effects on the rise of a dominant two-party system. The electoral rule change not only promoted more efficient inter-party competition for single member district or party list seats to take a stance on policies, domestic and international, but also pushed the parties to woo voters on a basis of issues to a great extent, such as economic recovery and national security. As a result, the two major conservative parties, e.g., the LDP and the DPJ, which successfully wooed the Japan’s voters by taking a clear stance on national issues such as economic reform and active foreign policy, have become dominant forces in Japan and alternated in power. For the details on the effect of the change in electoral rule on the rise of a two-party system in Japan (Rosenbluth, Saito, & Zinn, 2007, pp. 1-28; Lipsky & Schneider, 2012)
and nationalist due to their increased awareness of security have both created and consolidated the perverse accountability such that only the parties willing to respond proactively to the challenge have been better off electorally.

**Fallen Leftists, Rising Hawks and Japan’s Shift to Foreign Policy Activism**

The perverse accountability has structured the domestic political condition in Japan such that the two conservative parties, e.g., the LDP and the DPJ, to thrive while the two leftist parties, e.g., the SDP and CP, to shrink. The dominance of the two conservative parties deprived Japan of the chance that its foreign policy may be the result of the compromise between the conservative and leftist parties. As widely discussed, the two leftist parties, e.g., the SDP and the CP, have consistently represented the most pacifist voice in the postwar Japan. They played a key role in both the consolidation of anti-militarist opinion and were the dogged opponents to the revision of the peace constitution. The parties also consistently supported for “unarmed neutrality” in Japan’s foreign policy by leading massive anti-war campaigns (Sasada, 2006; Calder, 2006).

Unfortunately, however, the parties have constantly failed to adjust themselves to trying international conditions symbolized by the security challenge from China and North Korea. They have continued to show a blind sympathy towards the communist parties of the two adversaries and even argued that the Japanese government had fabricated its allegations of Japanese nationals being abducted by North Koreans (Sassda, 2006). The two parties have not only opposed the Japanese government’ effort to contain rising China, but also undermined its effort to impose economic sanctions on North Korea (Hiwatari, 2005). Such naïve pacifist attitude encouraged the conservative public to turn their back on the parties, which resulted in the rapid decline of the parties’ influence in Japanese politics.

The decline of the leftist parties has made pacifist voice disappear in most foreign policy debates in the Diet. The LDP and DPJ have monopolized the debates and converged in their willingness to actively respond to the security challenge by bypassing constitutional restraints. An overwhelming majority of the two parties feel that Tokyo’s response thus far to the challenge has been too passive and that it’s time to develop more active foreign policy before the challenge materializes into a real security threat (Hughes, 2007). Despite some disagreement on the details, therefore, the LDP and DPJ reached a broad consensus that Japan should not only break away from past behavior, e.g., over-dependence on the US, but also restore its autonomy in foreign policy by interpreting the Peace Constitution in a more flexible way (Hagström, 2010). The consensus has materialized into a number of active foreign policies, such as the dispatch of the SDF to Iraq, the campaign to revise the Peace Constitution, the nationalization of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, a close security cooperation with India to deter China in the South China Sea and the consolidation of the right of collective self-defense.

Most important, the perverse accountability has contributed to Japan’s right turn by allowing the LDP, which is the most conservative political force in Japan, both to come to office more often than the DPJ does and to adopt the hard-line policies it favors in a consistent manner. With the systematic consolidation of the perverse accountability, the LDP has prevailed in five general elections (1996, 2000, 2003, 2005, and 2012). That is, the LDP won almost every general election since 1996 except for period of 2009 and has monopolized control of Japan’s foreign policy during each time period. While in office, the LDP has produced five prime ministers, which are the member of the ultra-nationalist factions such as the Machimura faction, the Ibuki faction, and the Aso faction.
Allegedly, these factions have a highly hawkish preference with a particular emphasis on “national pride”. They not only place the highest priority both on the elimination of the old shackles, which is characterized by the war-renouncing constitution, but also persistently seek Japan’s return to “Futsu no kuni”, e.g., normal state. Built upon a simple black-and-white conception of “idealized pre-war Japan” and “denounced post-war Japan”, the leaders in the factions have aggressively sought Japan’s shift to foreign policy activism (Takahashi, 2010). Specifically, the leaders have portrayed China and North Korea as “trying to denying Japan’s idealized past” and used the threats from the two rivals for the justification of their assertive foreign policy (Hughes, 2009).

**Power Play of Hard-Liners**

The example that the hard-line LDP leaders, which came to office due to the perverse accountability, have been driving Japan’s shift to foreign policy activism against growing threats from China and North Korea abounds. Prime Minister Koizumi, who came to office in 2000, for example, constantly portrayed himself as a “kizen” or “fearless leader” in the elections and pledged a series of hard-line policies, such as “standing tall against China”, “making annual visit the Yaskuni Shrine”, and “engaging North Korea”, which eventually helped him to take power. While serving as Prime Minister, he persistently carried out the pledged hard-line policies. He visited the Yaskuni Shrine five times in four years, which incensed both China and South Korea (Hiwatari, 2005). He also approved the revision of controversial school history textbook in which Japan’s culpability for the war-time crimes are significantly downplayed, thereby provoking major anti-Japanese demonstrations in Beijing and Shanghai (Calder, 2006). Faced with the issue of the abductees, Koizumi imposed harsh economic sanctions on North Korea partly by stopping cash transfers from Japan to the North and partly by setting up an embargo on North Korean ships (Hiwatari, 2005). He also took increasingly assertive attitude in dealing with the nuclear threats from the North, which resulted in Japan’s involvement in the US-led missile defense system. Koizumi finally dispatched the SDP to Iraq. This was the first time that the SDF had been dispatched to a war zone since the end of WWII (Izumikawa, 2010).

Koizumi’s successors like Yasuo Fukuda and Taro Aso both continued and even strengthen such hard-line approach in foreign policies. Prime Minister Taro Aso in particular reinforced Japan’s hawkish position towards China and North Korea. As foreign minister from 2005 to 2007, Mr. Aso soured relations with China and raised tensions throughout the region, praising the achievements of prewar Japanese colonialism, justifying wartime atrocities and portraying China as a dangerous military threat (Masters, 2008). While serving as Prime Minister, he also unduly magnified the threat from North Korea. Despite the deep skepticism on the North’s nuclear capabilities, Aso reiterated that “it will eventually look to combine its long-range missile capabilities with its newly acquired nuclear weapons technology”, thereby provoking the fear of the North’s attack on Japan. Aso also took a staunch approach to the abduction issue against North Korea and sought US pledges not to abandon Japan on the issue (Hughes, 2009).

The perverse accountability eventually allowed Shinzo Abe, the most hard-line of the hard-liners, to return to power in 2012. The Abe’s campaign pledge was full of nationalist commitments such as “proactively responding to dangers from China and North Korea, “exercising the right of collective self-defense”, “making it easier for the Diet to propose revisions to the war-renouncing Article 9 of the Constitution”, and “re-branding the Self-Defense Forces as the National Defense Force” (Yoshida & Ayako, 2012).

With a strong mandate gained through a strong election victory in 2012, Abe and his LDP have
determined efforts to accomplish those pledges. Abe’s LDP, for instance, becomes more willing to contain China. Capitalizing on China’s increasing military spending, Abe decided to increase Japan’s defense budget for the first time in 11 years (Abe, 2013). He also is worsening the tension in the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands by approving a plan to shoot down Chinese surveillance planes flying above the islands.

To deter China’s assertiveness, Abe is trying to expand security and defense cooperation with India (AFP-Jiji, 2014). Regarding North Korea, Abe defines himself as a “staunch” anti-Pyongyang hard-liner and vowed to keep up pressure over the abduction issue. He also refused to join other participants in the six-party talks on North Korea’s nuclear weapon program.

Based on the exaggeration of the threats from China and North Korea, Abe has taken a big step forward toward a strong Japan-building effort. He has never hidden his intention that the Peace Constitution, which limits Japan’s military to self-defense, could be revised in the foreseeable future (Hayashi, 2014). Abe also has hinted that his cabinet would ease long-standing restrictions on military activities outside Japanese territory, which means Japan’s Self-Defense Force could come to the aid of allies such as the US even if Japan itself isn’t attacked (Martin & Toko, 2014).

In short, Japan’s nationalist turn in foreign policy is the result of the perverse political accountability that the Japan’s public, which becomes more conservative and nationalistic across time, has been consolidating. The radical changes in the security environment featured by the growing security challenge from rising China, wayward North Korea and US policy for proactive Japan, have both created and reinforced such distorted accountability by which the political party, which appears to be the most hard-line in dealing with the challenge, has been systemically better off electorally. Accordingly, the LDP has come to office most of the time and hawkish LDP leaders have been given a chance to use the threats from the two foreign rivals as a cover for justifying their shift to foreign policy activism.

**Conclusion and Avenue for Future Research**

My paper examines the causes of Japan’s shift to foreign policy activism. Japan, which has long been a symbol of post-war pacifism in Asia, is rapidly backsliding into nationalistic foreign and security policies. To explain the causes, I develop the so-called “perverse political accountability” approach. The approach claims that the growing security challenge from China, threats from North Korea and US policy for proactive Japan create a domestic condition under which the majority of Japanese people, which have lived in a democracy, become more conservative and nationalistic. Such shift in Japanese people’s preference is creating a perverse or distorted political accountability in which the leaders or parties willing to adopt hard-line foreign policies towards the two rivals are better off electorally while the leaders or parties remaining soft-line on them are worse off. Consequently, the accountability allows only the conservative parties such as the LDP and the DPJ to come to office and to pursue assertive foreign policies in a consistent manner. Empirical findings from a detailed case study on current Japanese politics provide a strong support for my argument of perverse accountability.

The major contribution of this study to extant scholarship on Japanese politics is two-fold. First, I develop a novel approach to the causes of Japan’s shift to assertive foreign policy. The prior studies of Japan’s foreign policy, across the schools of thought, provide overly optimistic accounts of Japan’s foreign policy behavior partly by focusing on the US security guarantee and partly by focusing on democratic institutions and
anti-militarist norm, which have been assumed to be embedded in postwar Japanese society. But the studies tend to ignore the fact that a radical alternation in security environment, which is characterized by the rising China, wayward North Korea and interventionist US, might make the preference of Japanese voters realigned in ways consistent with assertive foreign policy and prompts Japan’s nationalist turn. My study develops a new argument that such structure-induce preference change in the Japanese public is already underway and it is at the center of Japan’s shift to foreign policy activism by reinforcing a perverse political accountability rewarding hard-line political groups.

Second, I provide strong evidence fully commensurate with the perverse accountability approach. The thumbnail sketch on the change in Japan’s security environment is striking. A series of militarized disputes between Japan and China and between Japan and North Korea have occurred since the mid-1990s. In response to the disputes, the US has encouraged Japan to play a proactive role in foreign and security policy. Such change in security environment has both created and reinforced the perverse political accountability in which hard-line political parties, compared to their soft-line counterparts, have systematically been better off. A close examination on the electoral performance of competing political parties confirms that with the radical change in the security landscape, Japanese constituencies have continued rewarding two conservative parties—i.e., the LDP and DPJ—while punishing the two pacifist parties, notably SDP and the CP. It also reveals that compared to the DPJ, the LDP, which is the most hawkish component in Japan, has came to office most of the time and has been given a greater chance to adopt the hard-line policies that they favor.

The results of this study, however, provide only a partial answer to the problem of Japan’s shift to foreign policy activism. In particular, the study says little about the impact of Japan’s decades-long economic stagnation on its turn to right-wing foreign policies. Several experts and scholars have already hinted that Japan’s prolonged economic slump might have exerted a strong influence on its shift to foreign policy activism (Matthews, 2003; Nye, 2012; Inoguchi, 2014). So a useful line of future inquiry may involving test how the economic stagnation might affect Japan’s foreign policy activism and how the stagnation may be intertwined with the changes in security landscape to prompt Japan’s shift to foreign policy activism.

The main policy implication that the study provides is that analysts must pay greater attention to Japan’s changing domestic political condition for the understanding of its rapid shift to foreign policy activism. The study makes it clear that external pressures characterized by rising China, threatening North Korea and interventionist US are restructuring Japan’s domestic politics so that it becomes more willing to break away from the postwar pacifist constraints. Specifically, the study illustrates that the so-called perverse accountability operates in a democratic Japan and it continues to allow Japan’s conservative parties to come to office and to consistently pursue hard-line policies. So, the neighboring states, which have grown increasingly worried about Japan’s return to foreign policy assertiveness, need to devise ways to assuage the tension with Japan. As for North Korea, it is highly required that it restrain itself from testing more long-range missile in the East Sea/the Sea of Japan. China also needs to be devise a bilateral forum in which the solution to the disputes in the East and South China Sea are discussed with Japan in an open-ended manner. Finally, the US has to be restrained from using the security challenges from China and North Korea as a cover for bolstering Japan’s proactive foreign policies.
EXPLAINING JAPAN’S SHIFT TO FOREIGN POLICY ACTIVISM

References


