

Video Transcript for "Overview of Japanese Politics"

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Japanese politics, just like the politics of any other country, is complicated and multi-faceted. So to begin with the very basic features of Japanese politics, Japan is a constitutional monarchy, and the head of state is the emperor, currently Akihito, and the head of the government is the prime minister, currently Shinzo Abe. The distinction between a head of state and a head of government is that the head of state serves mostly in a ceremonial role as essentially somebody who encapsulates the spirit of the country, but the head of government is really the person who administers the government and implements policy.

The Japanese Constitution, which has been in place since directly after the end of World War II, was drafted by the United States, essentially the Allied Occupation authorities, and it represented a major transformation of the Japanese political system from the pre-war period. And to give you one example, the Constitution was considered very progressive for the time, and one reason for this is a 22-year-old person named Beate Sirota Gordon was able to essentially unilaterally (in collaboration with other members of the U.S. Occupation authorities who were drafting the Constitution) include an equal protection clause and a marriage equality clause in the Constitution. And so this represented a very significant departure from Japanese cultural norms as well as the pre-war Constitution. The Constitution can be amended or changed, but this requires a two-thirds majority in each House of the Diet, which I'll talk about shortly, as well as a majority in a public referendum. So it's a relatively high bar, but not too high compared to the bar in other countries.

Article Nine is a very important article in the Constitution. Article Nine, and I'll read the text in full since it's quite important. So the first clause of Article Nine is, "Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation, and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes." And the second clause is, "In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces as well as other war potential will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized." So this is a fairly strong clause that renounces a country's right to war as well as the country's right to possess military forces.

But if you look at Japan's actual military spending, and this is a chart of military spending of Japan, the United Kingdom, and France from 1900 to 2007, or actually 2006,

military expenditures spiked during World War I and World War II. And after the war, you see the blue line, which is Japan being very low, but you see a gradual increase over time. And, today, Japan spends in absolute terms a roughly similar amount on its military as the United Kingdom and France, which we typically think of as robust military powers.

And so, you know, a natural question is how is this consistent with Article Nine, which seemingly renounces the right of countries to hold military capabilities. And the answer to this is the Self Defense Forces. So the SDF was established in 1954 with the intensification of the Cold War, and it basically reflected a shift in the U.S. position from essentially the post-World War II immediate aim, which was to try to demilitarize Japan and make sure Japan would not become an international threat again, to basically trying to lift up Japan as a bulwark against Communism in the intensifying Cold War.

So the SDF was created, and it's a credible military force, but it differs in important respects from military forces in other countries. For example, it has no offensive capabilities, and this includes things like bombers, aircraft carriers, and long-range missiles. So the SDF doesn't have these types of weapons that are seen as inherently offensive, and the SDF, however, has gradually increased its capabilities through reinterpretations of Article Nine. The SDF came into existence partly through a reinterpretation of Article Nine.

But recently [in 2015], an important piece of legislation was passed that allows the SDF to engage in what's called collective self-defense. So before the SDF could not engaged in military operations unless there was a direct attack on Japan or a very important Japanese interest. And so, for example, the SDF couldn't come to the aid of another country's military forces, even if Japan had sent the SDF on an overseas peacekeeping operation. So if they were jointly operating with a French force, and the French came under fire, Japan could not help them essentially. And so this was resolved with a reinterpretation in 2015, and so this is just one example of how Japan's relationship with its military has evolved over time.

If you look at military spending as a share of GDP, what's very clear, (and this is a comparison of how much countries spend on their military as a share of their economic size) is Japan, the blue line, has always hovered right around one percent, which is an informal target that the government has tended to hold up. And if you compare this to other countries that are seen as great powers or major military powers in the international system, Japan is quite a bit lower at one percent compared to the United States, for example, which typically spends about three to five percent of its economy on the military. And other countries like Israel and Saudi Arabia have gone as high as ten percent. So compared to other countries, Japan is still, spends far less on its military in relative terms, and has a very special military that is designed for defense, not for offense.

Another important feature of Japan since the end of World War II is democratic government. So since the end of the U.S.-Allied occupation in 1952, Japan has remained a very, very stable democracy, and if you look within Asia, this is somewhat unique. India is a partial exception, but most countries in Asia since the end of World War II have experienced some type of instability in its democratic institutions or has spent a fair deal of time being non-democratic. And so Japan's very stable democracy stands out in this respect. And in recent years, Japan has been joined by many other democracies in Asia, but Japan got a head start partly because of the Constitution that the United States created, but other factors mattered as well, like the negative experience with militarism in the 1930s that made people very hesitant to go back from its democratic institutions.

Japan's remaining democratic was not a foregone conclusion. Many U.S. allies, including South Korea and the Philippines, despite support from the United States, were not able to remain stable democracies during most of this period. And it's clear that Japan's democracy reflects both structural and Japan-specific factors. So when political scientists study democracy, they think of things like how developed a country is economically, and is there a large middle class that supports democracy. And so Japan, if you looked at both the pre-war period and coming after the war, despite the devastation caused by the war, you had very high levels of education, high literacy rates, and these kinds of factors are typically associated with democratic institutions. But like I mentioned, I think the Japan-specific factors, like the experience with militarism in the 1930s and some democratic experimentation that took place in the 1920s, also made it possible for Japan to consolidate democracy and remain a democracy for the post-war period.

When we talk about democracy, there are several types of democracy, and we often distinguish presidential systems and parliamentary systems. The U.S. system is presidential. There is a president who is directly elected as well as a Congress that comes from local areas, whether it be a state or a district within a state. The Japanese system is a parliamentary system, and that means that basically the prime minister is not elected directly but, instead, Japanese citizens elect Diet members from within small constituencies, and then those Diet members, in turn, choose who among them will be the prime minister.

Japan has two houses in the parliament, the Lower House, the House of Representatives, has currently 475 members with four-year terms. However, because the Lower House can be dissolved by the prime minister, generally speaking, it's very unusual for the full four years to be taken up by Lower House members. The Upper House, the House of Counselors, has somewhat less—242 members—with six-year terms, and every three years, half of the membership of the Upper House is up for re-election.

The houses are relatively co-equal, and so unlike other systems where the Lower House is much stronger, in Japan, the Lower House and Upper House are relatively equal in

their abilities with some tilt towards the Lower House. The Lower House, for example, can override the Upper House with a two-thirds majority, but a two-thirds majority is generally difficult to maintain. So as a practical matter, in most cases, both the Lower House and the Upper House would need to approve the legislation in order to get it passed. The prime minister is generally a member of the Lower House by convention.

So I will close by describing two general eras in Japanese politics during the post-war period. The first is the so-called "1955 system" that started with the consolidation of Japanese political parties around the Liberal Democratic Party and the Socialists in 1955, and this was a very stable system that essentially remained in place until about 1993. There are a few important characteristics of this system. For example, it was very much dominated by the Liberal Democratic Party, the LDP, and the LDP generally was able to govern without having to consider coalitions with other parties, and in election after election, the LDP was able to secure victories.

The basic philosophy during this period was to rely on the United States and the security relationship with the United States to maintain Japanese security and instead focus on economic growth as the core national goal of Japan, and this had a unifying effect on the domestic population that was also very interested in expanding Japan's economic role in the world as well as bettering their own lives. And especially if you think about the post-war devastation, you can understand why the economic development aspect of national development was considered very crucial, because Japan had truly been devastated by the war.

There was very close cooperation during this period between the leading political party, the LDP, the bureaucracy, and the private sector, particularly rural farmers and large and small businesses. The nature of policy was multi-faceted, but one general feature of this period is what political scientists call clientalism, or the idea that the LDP would use government resources to help support specific interest groups that, in turn, delivered votes for the LDP and kept them in power. And so some of the major beneficiaries of this were farmers and small and medium businesses that were not internationally competitive but received subsidies and various protections so that they could remain viable, essentially, in Japan.

The main opposition party during this period was the Socialists, and the political cleavage between the LDP and the Socialists largely revolved around foreign policy issues. Essentially, should Japan maintain its alliance relationship with the United States, and should Japan keep the Self-Defense Forces? And so if the Socialists had come to power, it would have represented a major shift in Japan's international policy, but part of the reason why the Socialists were unable to capture a majority in the Diet is probably because there wasn't a national consensus against these foreign policies that were maintained by the LDP.

So since 1993, there have been many important changes to the Japanese political system that have fundamentally altered how Japanese politics works. So one obvious factor is the end of LDP one-party dominance, first taking place in 1993. The LDP was no longer in power, and so this was something that hadn't happened for decades in Japan, and subsequent to this, the LDP has come back to power, but it has done so largely as a member of a coalition government with other parties. So even when it's in power, the LDP doesn't quite have the same type of ability to dominate the political system as it did in the 1955 system. The LDP has been out of power in 1993-94, and perhaps more importantly during 2009 and 2012 when the Democratic Party of Japan ousted the LDP in both Upper House and Lower House elections.

There have been many political reforms since the 1990s. Among the most important are changes to the electoral system, which is how politicians are elected into office, and political scientists would generally say that the changes to the electoral system have made the political parties more responsive to the demands of the general public as opposed to specific interest groups. There has been a shift of authority from the bureaucracy, which used to be very, very important in Japanese politics, and still is to a lesser degree, to the prime minister's office. So there's a shift from the bureaucracy to politicians, but also among politicians a shift towards the leadership of the prime minister. So we can typically think of Japanese politics as being more dominated by the prime minister than it used to be under the 1955 system. There have been numerous economic reforms to try to improve Japan's economic performance, which has not been quite as good since the 1990s.

There still remains very strong support for Japan's alliance with the United States. And, in fact, in some respects, the support is now stronger, because unlike the 1955 system where the principal opposition party thought that the U.S.-Japan alliance was illegitimate or not of the best interest of Japan, most of the major opposition parties today are supportive of the U.S.-Japan alliance in principle. So, arguably, the U.S.-Japan relationship is now on much stronger foundations than it was even during the Cold War, but a major question that remains, and one that will most likely be adjudicated in elections for years to come, is whether the Japanese Constitution should be amended, and if so, in what specific way.

So, currently, the LDP has large majorities in the Lower House, and in 2016, if the LDP is able to win a two-thirds majority in the Upper House, it would be able to start passing constitutional amendments. These would still need to be approved in a popular referendum. So there's some talk of, for the first time in post-war history, will Japan try to initiate reforms to its Constitution? And so this raises questions about will Article Nine, for example, be reformed, which would represent a significant break from Japan's post-war past. So this is probably the most important ongoing question about Japanese politics today.