

## Review Essay: Perspectives on Japan's Intelligence and National Security Challenges

***Jōhō to kokka--kensei shijō saichō no seiken o sasaeta interijensu no genten*** [Intelligence and the State: The Origin of Intelligence that Supported the Longest Administration in Constitutional History] Kitamura Shigeru (Choukoron-Shinsha, Ltd., 2021), 516 pages, tables, figures.

***Keizai anzen hoshō igyō no taikoku, Chūgoku o chokushi seyo*** [Economic Security: Confront China, the Aberrant Superpower]

Kitamura Shigeru, with Oyabu Tsuyoshi (Choukoron-Shinsha, Ltd., 2022), 325 pages, tables, figures.

### W. Lee Radcliffe

---

Japan has made improvements in national security legislation, policy, and structure since the early 2000s, but the country has a long way to go to meet today's intelligence and national security challenges. That's the overarching message in Kitamura Shigeru's two works drawing from his four decades of public service in Japan that culminated in the positions of director of cabinet intelligence (DCI) and the national security adviser to multiple prime ministers.

Among his many roles since starting in the National Police Agency (NPA) in 1980, Kitamura served as the director of the Foreign Affairs Division of the NPA's Security Bureau Foreign Affairs Intelligence Department; as secretary to Prime Minister Abe Shinzo during his first administration; DCI and head of the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office (CIRO); and finally, during his last two years before retirement in July 2021 as secretary general of the National Security Secretariat under Prime Ministers Abe and Yoshihide Suga.

Not one to rest on his laurels, Kitamura has published two books related to intelligence and national security. The first, *Jōhō to kokka* (Intelligence and the State), examines the technical and legal frameworks that led to national security legislation and creation of the national security secretariat in the 2010s, mixed with personal thoughts and experiences during his career. The second, *Keizai anzen hoshō* (Economic Security), examines an undergirding theme of the first book: Japan, and in particular Japan's private sector, needs to further strengthen attitudes and approaches toward Japan's economic security. In both, Kitamura expresses disappointment in the state of Japan's intelligence and economic security. "It can still be

said that our country's intelligence and national security structure is underdeveloped," he laments in the foreword to *Jōhō to kokka*. (4)

### *Jōhō to kokka* (Intelligence and the State)

Rather than presenting information linearly or in a traditional memoir format, both books incorporate a loose amalgam of intelligence and national security topics and include multiple chapter-length interviews of Kitamura by editors on a variety of subjects. The interviews are the most engaging portions of the books.

From the first question in the initial interview chapter in *Jōhō to kokka*, Kitamura speaks positively of US-Japan relations. After the editors ask him about a well-worn 1980s sentiment expressed by the powerful Liberal Democratic Party politician Gotōda Masaharu that Japan overly relied on the United States for intelligence, Kitamura asserts forthrightly that because of the geopolitical significance of Japan's position in Asia "compared to Gotōda's time, Japan-US mutual complementarity has increased," as Japan "can get intelligence that the United States can't." (65)

Indeed, Kitamura's emphasis on a strong US-Japan relationship undergirds much of the interview, which includes short vignettes and impressions of events, particularly during his time in the Prime Minister's Office. Kitamura touches on engagements with Director of National Intelligence James Clapper during the Obama administration and with CIA Director Mike Pompeo and Asia-focused leadership during the early period of the Trump administration. (74, 80–81) According to Kitamura, Japan was able to provide useful intelligence

---

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

---

on North Korea's missile launches in the 2010s because it had "developed various means to collect intelligence ... unilaterally," without going into details as to how or what intelligence was collected. (74–76)

Kitamura also describes forthrightly Tokyo's genuine surprise at President Trump's election in 2016, because Japan's "Ministry of Foreign Affairs was predicting Hillary Clinton's election win." (77) Immediately after the election, according to Kitamura, PMO officials scrambled to reorient their engagement strategy to focus on a charm offensive led by Prime Minister Abe. Kitamura highlights Japan's early successes, with Abe securing the first in-person head-of-state meeting with the president-elect, and with Abe being invited to attend a high-level US briefing on North Korea with US intelligence officials months later as "a relationship of trust" had quickly formed. (77–78) The deepened level of trust meant that Abe at times acted as a "briefer" to Trump on North Korea's nuclear and missile tests and the return of abducted Japanese nationals, Kitamura claims, because the new president initially "did not have that much interest in the Asia-Pacific region." (81)

Kitamura provides only limited details of events in this and subsequent chapters, however. He only alludes to "anxiety" Tokyo felt about the "unpredictability" of the Trump administration, which "declined" with the start of the Biden administration. (85) Despite serving in intimate capacities on the North Korea issue since at least 2004, when the NPA put him in charge of a technical team at working-level talks on the abduction issue in North Korea in November that year, Kitamura provides no details of his direct engagements. On his role in negotiating with North Koreans in Vietnam in July 2018, first reported by the *Washington Post*, Kitamura replies simply: "No comment." (81) The response is perhaps fitting, since Kitamura did not inform US counterparts about the meeting either, despite "Washington's near-constant updates to Tokyo on its dealing with North Korea," according to the 2018 *Washington Post* article.<sup>a</sup>

In one of the few detailed vignettes in the section, Kitamura contrasts open-source reporting on Kim Il-sung's death in 1994—when Kitamura worked at the

Japanese Embassy in Paris—and Kim Jong-il's death in 2011. With the elder Kim's passing in 1994, France's daily *Le Monde*, citing an unnamed source, published a sensationalistic article declaring that the North Korean regime was about to collapse. Kitamura describes how the embassy asked to brief the "French authorities" on Japan's assessment, which was based on "verification from multiple sources" and was at odds with *Le Monde's* report. Kitamura never found *Le Monde's* source, whom he thought might have had ulterior motives. "When the world's influential media conveys impactful news based on information of unknown origin, and their views differ greatly from ours, we ... share accurate information with relevant authorities when necessary [following] thorough vetting," he asserts, alluding to the impact of sensationalistic reporting on policy and foreign relations. (68)

Kitamura contrasts the *Le Monde* episode with the use of methodologies of controlled media in assessing events in closed societies such as North Korea. Immediately before to Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011, in addition to other information arriving at CIRO, Kitamura used North Korean state media's uniquely somber morning announcements of a "special broadcast" to be aired later that day to ascertain that Kim had indeed died. "The background and tone of the TV broadcasts were clearly dark," he explains, adding that North Korean state media had used special terminology to announce a forthcoming broadcast only three times before. (69) In contrast with *Le Monde's* earlier coverage, the continuation of traditional state media coverage indicated a regular, if rare, transition of power, he implies.

Much of *Jōhō to kokka* focuses on long and detailed descriptions of legal frameworks since World War II in the development of the national police infrastructure and the intelligence community, with many lengthy legal citations. This is a result of Kitamura's background, which he readily admits, as a graduate of the prestigious Faculty of Law at the University of Tokyo, (100) and a veteran of the contentious battles surrounding "State Secrecy Law" legislation to improve the protection of classified material and other national security legislation in the 2010s, coupled with scandals that plagued the Abe administration. Disputatious Japanese media personalities

---

a. John Hudson and Josh Dawsey, "'I remember Pearl Harbor': Inside Trump's hot-and-cold relationship with Japan's prime minister," *Washington Post*, August 28, 2018. Tokyo's designation of Kitamura as a go-between on a possible Japan-DPRK summit was reported immediately after the US-DPRK summit in Singapore in mid-June 2018; see *Japan Times*, "Government to Pursue Talks with North Korea," June 14, 2018, <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0004509394>.

sometimes attacked him by name during this period. As such, the meaty chapters would be of particular interest to legal scholars.

***Keizai anzen hoshō (Economic Security)***

In *Keizai anzen hoshō (Economic Security)*, Kitamura focuses squarely on Japan's need for increased vigilance in its economic national security, which was one of several underlying themes in *Jōhō to kokka*. With its tighter focus on Japan's economy and China, the book resonated more with Japanese readers judging by its number-one best-selling rank among Japanese economy books on amazon.jp throughout summer 2022 and the better initial reviews it received compared to his first book.

Kitamura pulls no punches. He begins by lamenting Japan's long postwar reputation as a "spy's paradise" in detailing at length a series of Russian, Chinese, and North Korean counterintelligence (CI) cases he worked since the early 2000s, cases that were also described in later chapters of *Jōhō to kokka*. The threat is particularly pernicious now, he asserts, given adversaries' increased use of "hybrid warfare" targeting a country's transportation and energy infrastructure, the financial sector, and civil society with cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, citing both Russia's actions in Ukraine and growing Chinese capabilities as examples. (14)

In one of several Russia-related CI cases, Kitamura details the 2005 "Savelyev affair," in which Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) officer Vladimir Savelyev posed as a Russian trade official in targeting Japan's semiconductor sector. (26–28) Savelyev was caught paying an employee of Toshiba Discrete Semiconductor 1 million yen for corporate proprietary technology. As an illustration of Japan's "spy's paradise" reputation, Kitamura describes how he was "honestly taken aback" at how Savelyev and the employee met in the open and sometimes even "walked side-by-side to the train station." The SVR officer seemingly no longer felt the need to adhere to traditional operational tradecraft of using deaddrops and maintaining only indirect contact with assets. Kitamura explains that Savelyev started with open-source research on the company's products and then solicited "information that would not be alarming to the employee." He then gradually requested more sensitive information, paying for entertainment as he did so. The employee ultimately copied sensitive semiconductor and fabrication information onto a flash drive for Savelyev in

return for "cash passed in an envelope." Savelyev fled the country before he could be arrested.

After detailing another incident in which Russian military intelligence (GRU) targeted Japan's Nikon for dual-use guidance technology, Kitamura observes dryly: "Russian intelligence officers are expanding their espionage activities." (28–30)

Kitamura also describes the 2005 "Yamaha Incident," when several employees of Yamaha Motor Company were arrested and the company was fined for illegally exporting up to 11 of the company's RMAX unmanned helicopters to Chinese companies with links to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) from 2001, and for providing training on the drones for additional payments of up to 50 million yen a year. Kitamura highlights that not only did the drones have clear dual-use applications, Chinese companies were able to use Japan's advanced technology to make knock-offs and market them throughout the region, undercutting Japanese market share. "If we allow spy operations to target our advanced technologies ... we'll be strangling ourselves in the long run," he declares, citing a statement by the US FBI director. (31–38)

After reviewing other CI espionage cases, Kitamura details at length Japan's technology sector and provides examples of their dual-use applications. He talks about the importance of artificial intelligence (AI), the "data economy", cyberthreats to Japan's infrastructure, the weaponization of space, developments in bioscience, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, and the future combination of technologies in novel ways that will impact national security. In one of many examples, he cites the threat of AI-enabled drones that "swarm" their targets autonomously. In response, he notes government funding from 2020 to incorporate AI into Japan's "JADGE" national air defense radar network. (59–60) He also describes the danger of access to unprotected data, detailing, for example, the discovery of Chinese and other subsidiaries of the popular LINE messaging app with full access to users' personal information stored in Japan from 2018 to 2021. (173–75)

Kitamura describes the government's nascent efforts to strengthen Japan's economic security during his final years of service by establishing a permanent section in the National Security Secretariat dedicated to economic security (175–77) and working with political leadership to strengthen economic policy and legislation. (178–81)

---

He calls for more to be done, however, to strengthen the clearance process and to keep adversaries from accessing dual-use technologies and experts while at the same time nurturing Japanese advanced technologies and protecting critical infrastructure and supply chains. And despite his overall positive attitude toward US-Japan relations, Kitamura criticizes the US “miscalculation” on China dating to 9/11, when the United States focused overwhelmingly on counterterrorism while leaving China policy to “panda-huggers” (237–41) seeking to use improved international trade to drive domestic reform. This despite China’s long strategic emphasis on intelligence, citing Sun Tzu (209–18) and the 100-year history of the Communist Party of China culminating in the PLA’s “Three Warfares” doctrine from 2003. (219–20)

In both works, Kitamura calls for the expansion of Japan’s intelligence agencies and raising the status of the CIRO to that of an agency, as well as further strengthening legislation to protect classified information. For example, he derisively likens CIRO to a “personal mom-and-pop shop” of the chief cabinet secretary and says staffing lacks “homeostasis” (*Jōhō to kokka*, 96–97; *Keizai anzen hoshō*, 185), an allusion to the continuing challenges of a stovepiped intelligence structure (*Jōhō to kokka*, 12–13) and the disparate personnel assigned to CIRO. Indeed, Kitamura details the long history of

various proposals for intelligence reforms in the second section of *Jōhō to kokka*. An upgraded and independent intelligence agency would house and further professionalize a dedicated intelligence cadre, he explains, and it would also provide additional separation from the potential personal whims of individual politicians. (*Keizai anzen hoshō*, 185)

But by now, it has become a rite of passage for retired Japanese intelligence leaders and national security experts to call for structural reforms and expansion of Japanese intelligence capabilities. Ōmori Yoshio, a CIRO director in the 1990s, in one of many examples advocated for stronger intelligence services in his similarly titled *Kokka to Jōhō* (2006) and as an expert member of a 2005 advisory panel on strengthening Japan’s intelligence capabilities. Apart from the formal creation of an indigenous reconnaissance-satellite capability—with technical roots dating to the 1980s—Tokyo has only tinkered with expanding and professionalizing its intelligence capabilities in the past two decades. While this time might be different, given Tokyo’s increase in defense budgets and cyber defense personnel, a frank conclusion currently is that Japan’s intelligence capabilities will be increasingly limited without structural and expert technical improvements and further legal reforms. Kitamura’s works are an additional push in that direction.



*The reviewer:* W. Lee Radcliffe is an Open Source Enterprise officer and member of the Senior Digital Service in the CIA’s Directorate of Digital Innovation. He has more than 20 years of experience covering Asia and Eurasia.