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Abject Failure to Abenomics

THE STRATEGIC NARRATIVE REBIRTH OF ABE SHINZŌ

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Abstract

Abe Shinzō served as Prime Minister of Japan from September 2006 to September 2007, and again from December 2012 to September 2012. His first term made him one of the shortest-serving Japanese prime ministers; his second made him the longest-serving premier in the nation's history. This radical transformation in fortunes raises important questions about how political actors can reinvent themselves and alter public opinion of their own capacity to lead. This thesis argues that the projection of a compelling political narrative of national economic regeneration played a key role in Abe Shinzō's political transformation. I examine this reconstruction of political fortunes through the lens of a strategic narrative framework. Although other academic research has analysed Abe's transformation through examination of his policies and political networks, there has been a lack of studies exploring how Abe communicated his new political approach to his audiences. Strategic narrative research in the field of International Relations has shown that stories and their formation by political actors play a critical role in shaping the discursive environment in which politics are done. Through careful analysis of the stories Abe Shinzō told during the LDP presidential election campaigns of 2006 and 2012, the general elections of 2012 and 2014, and the Upper House elections of 2007 and 2013, I demonstrate that Abe's effective deployment of strategic narratives was a crucial factor in his re-emergence as a central figure in post-war Japanese politics and introduce a strategic narrative framework to domestic Japanese politics for the first time. By forming and projecting a compelling narrative focused on a set of economic policies known as 'Abenomics', Abe placed himself at the centre of a story of national regeneration; by arguing narratively that Japan's continued economic recovery was inextricably linked to the success of Abenomics, Abe was able to lead his party to three successive election victories. I also demonstrate Abe's narrative flexibility, examining the complexification of his strategic

narrative over time, introducing the concept of ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’ as he sought to link his story of national economic regeneration to one of greater Japanese contribution to global security. Crucially, these narratives were also broadly accepted by Abe’s domestic and international media audiences, allowing ‘Abenomics’ to become the dominant narrative about the direction of Japanese politics, both within and outside of the country. Overall, I offer a new account of Abe Shinzō’s re-emergence as the central figure in Japanese politics and demonstrate the persuasive power of strategic narratives in the setting of domestic politics.

Lay Summary

From September 2006 to September 2007, Abe Shinzō served a single disastrous year as Prime Minister of Japan. Having succeeded his political mentor, the popular and charismatic Koizumi Jun'ichirō, Abe suffered scandal after scandal, culminating in his resignation after exactly 365 days in the job. It appeared that his days as a first-rank politician were over. However, in December 2012, Abe became Prime Minister once more, and would go on to become Japan's longest-serving PM in history, before finally stepping down in September 2020. How can we explain this remarkable turnaround?

In the period between his resignation in 2007 and his return to power in 2012, Abe came to understand that he required a new political story. During his first term, Abe had focused on a set of divisive policies, including constitutional reform and increasing Japan's military capability. He had also failed to tell a compelling story about his vision for Japan's future under his leadership. This failure meant that Abe could not build strong support amongst the public and the media for his policies. Combined with the various scandals that emerged during his year in charge, this lack of support led to Abe's decision to resign.

When Abe returned in 2012, having won re-election as president of his party, he understood that he required a new story about Japan's future under his leadership to win over the public and the media. Stories are how we understand and make sense of the world around us, and a compelling strategic narrative – a story used by those in politics to build support for their actions - can help a politician to build support for themselves and their policies. Rather than focusing on divisive issues such as constitutional reform, Abe chose instead to tell a story of economic regeneration. This story can be characterised by the term 'Abenomics', which was

used by the media and Abe himself to refer to his new economic policies. Abe was also helped by the failure of the major opposition party to tell their own compelling story about Japan's future.

By examining Abe's strategic narratives, we can better understand how politicians use stories to build and maintain support for their actions. If we understand how politicians use stories to influence, we as members of the public can also better understand how to recognise and interpret those stories and respond accordingly. At a time when social media and new technologies expose us more than ever to political messages and propaganda, it is important that we are able to understand how politicians might attempt to influence our behaviour through telling us compelling and emotive stories.

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This is a thesis that, at times, I thought I might never complete. When I first embarked upon this journey in the autumn of 2017, I couldn't foresee the onset of a global pandemic that would force me in early 2020 to put my studies on hold for more than half a year and go back to work full-time. In those months that I spent as a key worker, masked-up and serving the public in a wholefoods store, I found a renewed appreciation for the process of writing a doctoral thesis. I came to realise how lucky I was to have spent the previous four years at the University of Edinburgh, first in pursuit of my MSc and then as a doctoral student, doing something that I truly enjoyed. I have treasured the opportunity to read, write, and debate on a daily basis, and to have done so in such a supportive and welcoming environment. I want to take this chance to thank those who have helped me along this journey.

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‘Stories are not merely the surface of politics; they are its heart’

(Frederick Mayer, 2014, p.3)

Introduction

Abe Shinzō: Japanese Politics’ Great Survivor

On 28 August 2020 Abe Shinzō, Prime Minister of Japan, stood at a podium and announced his resignation, bringing to a close a seven-and-a-half-year period of government which had seen Abe become Japan’s longest-serving Prime Minister, overtaking his great-uncle, Satō Eisuke (BBC News, 2020). Abe had overseen the implementation of ‘Abenomics’, a macroeconomic strategy characterised by large-scale fiscal stimulus and quantitative easing (QE), as well as wide ranging reforms of the nation’s security apparatus and command structures (Harari, 2013, Ito, 2021, Yoshino and Taghizadeh-Hesary, 2014). Abe had delivered the Olympics to Tokyo for the first time since 1964, although the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, which forced the postponement of the Games until the following year (McCurry and Ingle, 2020), deprived him of the opportunity to personally bask in the reflected glory of the high-profile international sporting event prior to his departure. Although Abe was a divisive figure, often criticised by his opponents for his right-wing views and the perceived long-term failures of his economic policies, the first goal of any politician who wishes to effect change is to win elections, and at this Abe was an unqualified success, consistently winning majorities in both chambers of the Japanese Diet for his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

Perhaps it is better to say that Abe *became* an unqualified success. This princeling of Japanese politics – as well as grandnephew to Satō Eisuke, Shinzō is the son of former Foreign Minister,

Abe Shintarō, and the grandson of convicted war criminal and former prime minister, Kishi Nobusuke – had been here before. He had succeeded as prime minister the popular Koizumi Jun'ichiro, whom he had served as Chief Cabinet Secretary (CCS), in September 2006, comfortably winning an internal vote to become LDP president and, by default, prime minister, following Koizumi's resignation from the role. Abe's first term was, however, an unmitigated disaster. His administration was beset by scandal and corruption, culminating tragically in the death by suicide of a cabinet member, and Abe resigned after just a year in the job, in September 2007 (McCurry, 2007). Common consensus at the time held that he had been one of the most ineffective and incompetent prime ministers in the nation's modern history. Most observers assumed that Abe Shinzō's days as a first-rank politician were over. Despite this, just over five years later Abe would re-emerge not only as the leader of his party, but the leader of his nation, spearheading the LDP's election victory in December 2012 which restored the party to power after three years of chaotic rule by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which had wrested control of the government from the LDP in 2009.

Abe's resignation in late 2020, at the height of the global pandemic, provides an opportunity for us to study the factors behind his re-emergence and incredible longevity. That Abe now stands alone as Japan's longest-serving premier is evidence enough of a political nous that invites analysis, but this electoral success is all the more impressive because it was achieved within the arena of domestic Japanese politics. Despite the almost total dominance of post-war politics by the LDP, the prime minister, save for a few notable exceptions, has been a relatively weak figure in comparison to his (there has never been a female leader of the Japanese government) equivalents in other developed democracies (Krauss and Nyblade, 2005, Masuyama and Nyblade, 2004). Nor has the prime minister traditionally remained in post for an extended period of time. Since 1945, including Abe Shinzō, only three men have made it to

the five-year mark: Satō Eisuke, Abe's great-uncle, and Koizumi Jun'ichirō, his political mentor. By studying Abe and the narratives around which he constructed his premierships, we might better understand how other candidates for office can achieve electoral success in Japanese politics.

There are many factors behind the ultimate success or failure of government administrations. The workings of nation-states and the institutions that govern them are too complex to ascribe one particular event or decision with total responsibility for a government's fortunes. Global events, the presence of internal or external conflicts, the stability or otherwise of international and domestic economies – all these and more impact a political actor's ability to govern effectively and secure re-election in a democratic political system. I will argue, however, that the importance of narrative is often underestimated when we assess the success or failure experienced by governments and political actors. The emergence in recent years of strategic narrative theory (Miskimmon et al., 2013, Miskimmon et al., 2017, Roselle et al., 2014) has sought to address this shortcoming and demonstrate that narrative – the stories we tell to explain the world around us – are central to how we understand politics, and inform the political decisions we, as publics, make.

In this thesis I will apply a strategic narrative framework to Abe Shinzō's career as a means of demonstrating that developing an effective narrative can improve a political actor's chances of electoral success. By analysing the strategic narratives (or lack thereof) projected by Abe in the eight-year period spanning from the 2006 LDP presidential election that marked the beginning of his first administration (2006-7), which ended ignominiously after a single year in office, to the 2014 general election that saw him secure his third term in office (2014-17), I

will show that narrative reinvention provides a key to understanding how Abe eventually became the most electorally successful prime minister in Japanese history.

Strategic narrative research has opened up a fruitful new avenue for political communications research at the intersection with the field of International Relations (IR). Developed primarily by IR scholars, strategic narrative frameworks have produced academic research that has shown how political actors form and project stories to achieve geopolitical ends. This research has developed from the understanding, as the political communications scholar Frederick Meyer succinctly explains in the quote that heads this introduction, that ‘stories are not merely the surface of politics; they are its heart’ (2014, p.3). Stories are what makes us human: we tell stories so that we might understand the world around us. Without stories, without narrative structure, we could not make sense of the seemingly random and disparate events that are constantly occurring and developing on a personal, collective, and global level. By mapping these events onto a narrative framework of cause and effect, beginning and end, humans are able to construct personal, national, and global narratives that inform our understanding of the past and guide our future decisions.

From this insight emerges the concept of a ‘strategic narrative’. Miskimmon et al argue that strategic narratives are

a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors. Strategic narratives are a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate. (2013, p.2)

In this passage, the authors cast strategic narratives as a tool, utilised by actors in international politics, and much of the research output generated by strategic narrative scholars has focused on the intersection between narrative and international relations. Strategic narrative research

strives to understand how the creation and projection of stories can influence the power dynamics between nations and shape our collective understanding of the international order (Miskimmon et al., 2017). While this research has shed valuable light on the power of story as it is utilised in global relations and international identity building, it is not only within international relations that we find narratives deployed as a tool of persuasion and political communication.

This thesis seeks to bring a strategic narrative framework into the domestic political setting. If stories are at the heart of how we, as humans, understand the world around us and our place within it, stories will also play a pivotal role in how the discursive environment of domestic politics is shaped. By expanding the application of strategic narrative from international relations to domestic politics, we might better understand how political actors utilise narrative as a tool across a range of settings and for various audiences, what effects this has on those audiences, and how it can shape an actor's political fortunes.

The thesis will be structured as follows. I will begin in Chapter One with a review of the relevant literature; this will include an overview of the primary fields that strategic narrative research sits across – political communication and International Relations (IR) – as well as the sub-field of Japanese political communication and, finally, a review of strategic narrative research and the opportunities for further study. Strategic narrative research is a multi-disciplinary endeavour, and draws on scholarship in political communication and IR, but has yet to be applied to a Japanese setting. Japanese political communication research, in the English language at least, remains underdeveloped, particularly since the charismatic and idiosyncratic former prime minister, Koizumi Jun'ichirō, stepped down in 2006. Through this review of the literature, I will demonstrate the need for further scholarship on the influence of

strategic narrative in both domestic politics in a broad and global sense, and in the Japanese arena in particular.

Next, in Chapter Two, I will set out the methodology that this thesis will implement. First of all, this will involve mapping out the strategic narrative framework as devised by Miskimmon et al. (2013), demonstrating its use, and explaining how I will apply it to my case study. Then, I will provide an overview of the methods that I will be using to collect the raw data that will be fed into the strategic narrative framework. This will primarily cover content analysis and Gillian Rose's approach to critical visual analysis (Rose, 2012).

In Chapter Three I will begin my analysis of Abe Shinzō and his strategic narratives. In this chapter I will study Abe's narrative of the LDP presidential election campaign that elevated him to the office of Prime Minister in September 2006 and compare it to the stories told by his charismatic mentor and predecessor, Prime Minister Jun'ichirō Koizumi. Having done this, I will analyse the media reaction to Abe's narrative and how this contributed to the collapse of the new prime minister's administration within 365 days of its inauguration. I will demonstrate that vague and incoherent political communication played a role in Abe's failure to develop a foundation of support in the media and with the Japanese public.

Chapter Four will examine Abe's narrative reinvention. This will cover the period from 2007-2012, when Abe receded from the spotlight of frontbench politics and reassessed his career, as well as the LDP presidential election of 2012 – which returned Abe to the leadership of his party – the general election of December 2012, and the House of Councillors election in July 2013. By covering this initial nine-month period of his second administration, I will be able to demonstrate how Abe's strategic narrative developed over time, how it was received by the

media and the Japanese public, and the effects it generated for Abe's long-term political prospects.

My analysis will conclude in Chapter Five, in which I will examine the next phase of Abe Shinzō's premiership, from July 2013 to the early general election of December 2014. Analysis of this period will demonstrate how strategic narratives are complexified over the course of a parliament, and how they are adapted to the specific circumstances of election campaigns. I will show how the Prime Minister's 'Abenomics' narrative contributed to his success across multiple elections, as well as demonstrate Abe's narrative flexibility, as he interwove his successful 'Abenomics' narrative with an inter-election narrative of 'Proactive Contribution to Peace' (Akimoto, 2018).

My conclusion will provide an overview of the thesis, its key findings, and potential avenues for further study. To begin with, however, I now turn to a review of the relevant literature.

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Chapter One: Literature Review

The literature review for a thesis concerned with the utilisation of strategic narratives by political actors operating within contemporary Japanese politics should provide an overview of two areas of academic research in particular: strategic narrative research – and the political communication research that provided its genesis – and the study of Japanese politics. In this chapter, I begin by sketching an outline of political communication and international relations (IR) research and the threads of scholarly discourse from which emerged the strategic narrative framework, before proceeding to examine the current state of political research within the field of Japanese Studies. I shall conclude by analysing the work that strategic narrative researchers have produced, and the gap that this thesis intends to address, namely, strategic narratives within the context of contemporary Japanese domestic politics as utilised by former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō.

Political Communication

Persuading ‘the public’ to engage in a course of action is a subject which has preoccupied political elites since the advent of democratic systems of governance. It is also a subject which has provided a deep well of academic research into how individuals receive, understand, and respond to, political communication. Understanding political communication, in terms of both its form and the effects it produces, is key to understanding why the public, on an individual and a general level, makes the political decisions that it does. Though the frameworks for studying strategic narrative have largely been established and developed by IR scholars for application to international issues, strategic narratives are a form of political communication

and, therefore, it is important to understand where strategic narrative research fits within the wider discourses of political communication research. Beginning in the interwar period with the pioneering work of Harold Lasswell (1947, 1958, 1927) on propaganda, political communication scholars have developed frameworks for understanding the nature of communication between political actors and public actors.

Evolution in political communication studies has been driven by the evolution of communication technology. When Lasswell first argued that political communication was the study of ‘who/says what/in which channel/to whom/with what effect’ (Kenski and Hall Jamieson, 2014, Lasswell, 1958), communication between government and public remained largely unidirectional and confined to what might be termed ‘traditional’ mediums of mass communication such as radio and newspaper. However, in most economically advanced countries (including Japan) these mediums were supplanted in the late 1950s/early 1960s by television as the public’s medium of choice for consumption of political news and communication, with subsequent ramifications for the study of such communication, particularly following the emergence of the 24-hour news cycle in the 1980s and 1990s (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999, Iyengar et al., 1982, Kenski and Hall Jamieson, 2014). The media ecology became even more complex with the advent of the internet, and the practice of modern political communication is no longer a simple question of which medium of mass communication the government utilises to convey its messages to the public. Rather, it is a far more intricate and layered issue, as political actors augment and supplement traditional communicative practices with modern communicative technology, with social media playing a particularly important and transformative role in present-day political communication (Ceron, 2017). As these mediums evolved, so too did our need to understand how they impact on the nature and effects of political communication.

During the post-war period, mainstream political communication discourse developed around the contestation of the ‘limited effects theory’. Its significance is such that, in his analysis of political communications research at the beginning of the current millennium, Steven Chaffee (Chaffee, 2001) divides the study of political communication into two distinct periods either side of the emergence of the limited effects theory.¹ The limited effects theory was developed by Paul Lazarsfeld who, in conjunction with his fellow researchers at the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University, conducted a groundbreaking study of voting intentions and persuasion (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968). Lazarsfeld et al.’s analysis produced the ‘limited effects’ model, which argued that contrary to Lasswell’s theory of individuals as easily manipulated by an all-powerful political elite, political actors actually exerted little influence over the public. Rather, interpersonal communication was identified as the primary factor in shaping public opinion and influencing voting intentions. This theory came to dominate political communication research in the 1940s and 1950s (Berelson, 1959, Berelson et al., 1954, Katz, 1957, Lazarsfeld, 1953). The limited effects theory, however, failed to account for the possibility that the government and media might play a role in shaping the content and normative foundations of those interpersonal discussions which they claimed influenced an individual’s opinion on political policies and issues (Hall Jamieson, 2014, Lang and Lang, 1993). Scholars attempted to redress this failing through the development of framing theory – how actors seek to shape understanding of an event, policy, or idea through their communication.

¹ The limited effects theory is sometimes referred to as the ‘minimal effects theory’; the two terms are used interchangeably. For clarity, I will refer simply to the ‘limited effects theory’.

Framing Theory

‘Framing’ refers to the way communicators describe or explain events or occurrences to an audience. Robert Entman offers the following explanation of framing, its purpose, and its consequences: a frame ‘defines problems, diagnoses causes, makes moral judgements, and suggests remedies’ (1993, p.52). Frames can be developed by the original communicator (e.g., the government) or imposed by a mediating agent or institution (e.g., a newspaper or television news channel) (Entman, 1993, Hall, 1976, Herman and Chomsky, 1994). In contrast to proponents of the limited effects theory, scholars who advocated a frame-based approach to political communication research argued that while the mass media may not have a particularly strong influence on what the public thinks, it does have a measurable influence on what the public thinks *about* (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984, McCombs and Shaw, 1972). At the end of the 1960s, three of the most influential limited effects proponents, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968), published an analysis of how voters make up their mind during political campaigns, stressing the importance of interpersonal communication, and dedicating just a single chapter to the potential effects of mass media campaign coverage. In response to this, an early study of framing effects by McCombs and Shaw (1972) demonstrated that US voters were more aware of those issues which received greatest media attention during a 1968 presidential campaign, whilst they were significantly less aware of those issues which received little or no media attention. From such studies emerged theories of framing and media priming: the ability of the media to set the topics of public debate (Domke et al., 1998, Mendelsohn, 1996, Scheufele, 1999).

Framing theory is familiar to scholars across numerous disciplines, and political communication scholars have developed strands of framing discourse which have impacted upon the wider web of framing theory, including priming and issue-ownership (Arbour, 2014, Petrocik, 1996, Petrocik et al., 2003). In keeping with the predominance of election studies within political communication, ‘issue-ownership’ research has tended to focus on which issues individual parties emphasise within their campaigns, how those issues are framed (or primed) by the party, and how or whether those frames are replicated, undermined, or transformed by the mass media. Issue-ownership research has often focused on case studies within the US (Arbour, 2014, Chong and Druckman, 2007, Kaplan et al., 2006), though not exclusively (see for example, Geers and Bos (2017)). Issue-ownership research suggests that political actors, by defining an issue as ‘owned’ by their party or political group, can emphasise that issue in their communication to motivate their supporters and to drive turnout. Arbour argues that ‘campaigns are thus most effective when they frame their rhetoric in a manner that credibly recalls an accepted set of values that are easily accessible for voters and that can be activated by the rhetoric of other political actors’ (2014, p.607).

Framing theorists have faced a new set of challenges in recent decades, in particular the global spread of internet connectivity and the role that social media has come to play in the doing of politics and political communication. The popularity of blogs and, more recently, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, have provided the opportunity for almost anyone, including political actors, to engage in ‘many-to-many’ or ‘telelogic’ communication (Brake, 2012, p.1058). ‘Many-to-many’ communication allows political actors to engage communicatively with the public in a form of dialogue, as these social media platforms allow for communicative response from the public in the form of comments, replies, and ‘likes.’ This allows political actors to receive feedback on their messages, but it also enables them to bypass traditional mass media

when framing and communicating their messages (Gainous and Wagner, 2014, Hendricks and Denton, 2010, Parmelee and Bichard, 2011). These messages can then be ‘retweeted’ or shared by followers to their own social network, thus disseminating the information further and wider, on a larger scale than was previously possible through traditional ‘word of mouth’ communication (Parmelee and Bichard, 2011, p.66).

Indeed, President Barack Obama and his team’s innovative use of social media as central to his communication strategy during the election campaign of 2008 inspired a proliferation of social media-focused political communication research in the US (Conway et al., 2013, Hendricks and Denton, 2010, Kreiss, 2016, Williams et al., 2013). This has been replicated in studies of elections within European nation-states, such as the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands (Graham et al., 2016, Stier et al., 2018, Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). While the advent of social media has not entirely diminished the mass media’s agenda-setting capabilities or ability to frame the issues, it has provided new political actors with greater influence in shaping commentary around policies and events (Kreiss, 2016, p.1482). As social media evolves and younger, more internet-savvy citizens become the political opinion leaders and agenda-setters of tomorrow, understanding how social media networks mediate and influence political communication will become even more vital to our understanding of the practice of political communication in the twenty-first century.

Japanese Political Communication

Whilst the scholarly literature analysing political communication in the Western world, and particularly within the US political sphere, is vast, there is significantly less English-language

academic exploration of non-Western political communication. English-language Japanese political communication research has, however, developed a body of work focusing on the role of the media in Japanese elections. This has been spearheaded by the long-term studies conducted by Ellis Kraus (2000, 1998) and his comprehensive edited volume produced alongside Susan Pharr (Pharr and Krauss, 1996). This research has drawn on the developments in US political communication studies mentioned in the previous section. Japanese political communication scholars have tested the limited-effects theory within the Japanese political context (Krauss, 1996) and applied agenda setting theory to local elections (Takeshita and Takeuchi, 1996). The electoral success and sustained popularity of Prime Minister Koizumi (2001-2006) gave rise to a wave of research on the ‘presidentialisation’ of Japanese politics and Koizumi’s idiosyncratic approach to political communication via the media (Envall, 2008, Kabashima and Steel, 2007), which found that his charismatic ‘one-phrase’ (*wanfurēzu*) communicative style allowed him to generate public support for controversial policies. However, as Pempel and Muramatsu have argued about the study of Japanese politics more generally, research in this field has lacked an ‘overarching paradigm’ (2014, p.384) and has seen little development in recent years.

As has been the case in Western political communication studies, a significant proportion of the scholarship on Japanese political communication has focused on persuasion in an electoral context (Holden, 1999, Krauss and Nyblade, 2005, Lewis and Masshardt, 2002, McCargo and Lee, 2010). This can be attributed in part to the fact that the Japanese governmental institutions and media landscape share a great deal in common with their Western counterparts. Elections in Japan, as in most Western democracies, are the primary form of political participation for many Japanese citizens. Japanese election campaigns are also highly regulated, and the

methods available to political actors to communicate their campaigns are prescribed by law, providing a convenient and quantifiable dataset for political communication researchers.

Japanese mass media and its role in political communication, both as a conduit for the messages of political actors and as an agenda-setting medium, has served as the focus for research. Taking Ellis Krauss and Susan Pharr's (1996) edited volume, *Media and Politics in Japan*, as a jumping-off point, Japanese political communication studies has produced numerous lively threads of media-focused academic debate. In the words of Krauss and Lambert (2002, p.57), 'Japan is one of the most media-saturated democracies in the world'. A large volume of work has focused on the agenda-setting function of the Japanese media. Krauss and Lambert's (2002) study of the *Asahi Shimbun's* coverage of the political reforms under the anti-LDP coalition government of the early 1990s suggests that the Japanese press plays a relatively neutral role in communicating information about policy and reform; Collett and Kato (2014) noted that the rise of 'soft news' programmes on Japanese television increased breadth of political knowledge amongst the public but did little to deepen understanding.

The election of Koizumi Jun'ichiro as prime minister in 2001 provided an inflection point for Japanese political communication research. Koizumi's self-consciously reformist and populist approach not just to politics but to communication encouraged scholars to investigate whether Koizumi's novel approach to political communication might have fundamentally altered the way in which political communication was done in Japan. Kabashima and Steel (2007) argue

that Koizumi's frequent appearances on variety 'wide shows'² and new news programmes hosted by celebrity anchors allowed him to bypass traditional media outlets and communicate his agenda directly to the Japanese public, often in the form of pithy soundbites, known as 'one-phrase' (*wanfurēzu*) statements (Uchiyama, 2010, p.3). This sparked a discourse on the 'presidentialization' of Japanese politics (Envall, 2008, Jou and Endo, 2015, Krauss and Nyblade, 2005) and the strengthening of the prime minister's office (*kantei*) as the central decision-making organ of the Japanese state (Uchiyama, 2010, chapter 5). This signalled a marked change in the practice of Japanese politics, given that the office of the prime minister had traditionally been understood as relatively weak in comparison to its equivalent in other developed democracies such as the US and the UK (Masuyama and Nyblade, 2004). Koizumi's bold political style also encouraged research exploring how his unconventional approach to political action (by Japanese standards) was interpreted by the media. Killmeier and Chiba (2010), for example, studied the framing of the prime minister's visits to Yasukuni Shrine in the national daily newspapers from 2001 to 2006; they found that by making highly-publicised visits to the shrine dedicated to Japan's war dead – including convicted war criminals – Koizumi was able to successfully reframe Yasukuni as a domestic, rather than international, issue in the face of a fragmented media response. Following Koizumi's succession as prime minister by Abe Shinzō, this strengthening of executive power continued, providing the basis for further research into the changing role of the prime minister within Japanese politics and how the landscape of Japanese political communication has adjusted accordingly (Envall, 2011, George Mulgan, 2020).

² A 'wide show' is a type of variety entertainment show popular on Japanese television. Although wide shows often cover politics and other current events, they are characterised by an often irreverent, superficial approach to 'hard' news.

Koizumi's tenure, however, did not portend the rise of a new breed of charismatic, soundbite-focused Japanese prime minister. Abe's first term lasted less than a year, and the period from 2007 until his return in 2012 was characterised by a succession of short-lived, uninspiring, and scandal-ridden prime ministers from both the LDP and the DPJ. The return of Abe in December 2012 heralded the beginning of the most stable period in Japanese politics since the Koizumi years, however there has been precious little new literature produced exploring the methods and effectiveness of Abe Shinzō's style of political communication, save the excellent work done by Michal Kolmaš (2018) on Abe's notion of 'Beautiful Japan' (Abe, 2006). Pekkanen et al's (2018) edited volume on the 2017 election campaign, *Japan Decides 2017*, provides perhaps the most in-depth study of Abe's approach to political campaigning and the mediation of his campaigns by the press. However, in attempting to explain Abe and the LDP's success, the book's contributors focused primarily on systemic issues such as the impact of electoral rules on party competition (Nemoto, 2018), the under-representation of women in the Japanese political system (Miura, 2018), or social and regional inequality (Chiavacci, 2018).

In contrast to the extensive body of research on the role of traditional mass media within Japanese political communication, there remains an obvious lacuna of English-language academic literature on the new media ecology's impact on how political communication is done in Japan. Though US and European scholars have produced a multitude of studies into the increasing role that Facebook and Twitter play in the election campaigns of political actors, as yet they have not turned their attention to the world's fifth-largest democracy.

Beyond the research inspired by Koizumi Jun'ichirō's bold approach to political communication, however, there has been a paucity of studies exploring the communicative

approaches of Japanese prime ministers and political actors. In part, we can attribute this to the well-earned reputation of Japanese politicians for dullness and uninspiring speeches. Koizumi provided such an interesting case study precisely because he was such an outlier in this regard. However, a lack of charisma in the traditional sense does not preclude effective and strategic political communication; tubthumping speeches and witty soundbites are just one method for winning over an audience. By utilising communicative tools such as strategic narratives, political actors can generate public support for policies and campaigns, regardless of personal charm and charisma.

IR and Strategic Narratives

Strategic narrative research traces its origins to the field of International Relations (IR). A group of UK-based IR academics, in particular Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, developed a framework for studying the utilisation of strategic narratives in political communication, and much strategic narrative research focuses on narratives formulated and projected by state-level political actors to international or supra-national audiences. Therefore, to understand the genesis of the strategic narrative framework, we must have a firm grounding in IR discourse and the role that strategic narrative seeks to play in developing IR theory.

International Relations as a subject of academic study developed in response to the ongoing and seemingly immutable cycles of global war and peace (Lawson, 2017, p.12, Smith, 2013, p.1). The discipline emerged in the wake of the First World War, as scholars grappled with the underlying causes and issues that had combined to produce global conflict on a scale never

previously experienced in human history (Lawson, 2017, p.12). These early IR academics focused on the causes of military conflict between nation-states and the role of state-level actors in engendering or preventing interstate warfare (Lawson, 2017). Manuela Spindler puts a precise date on the emergence of IR theory as a recognisable academic discipline: 30 May 1919. The discipline was born ‘out of a desire to immediately work and reflect on the processes of the Paris Peace Conference’ (Spindler, 2013, p.22), at which the victorious allied powers concluded the peace settlement following the great war.

War and conflict would remain the central focus of International Relations in its early years and continues to provide the focus for a great deal of modern IR research. Immanuel Kant’s (1724-1804) theory of democratic peace, which held that democracies would not generally enter into conflict with one another, was championed by US President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924), who held office during the First World War and who spearheaded the creation of the League of Nations after the war’s end, believing that global peace could only be maintained by a supra-national institution of democratic nations (Lawson, 2017, pp.45-46). Kantian and Wilsonian ideals gave rise to the dominance of Liberalism in IR theory in its early years, which was subsequently challenged by the emergence of Realism in the 1930s (Lawson, 2017, pp.45-51). Realism, founded on the belief that ‘the relationship between states is...fundamentally and inalterably a conflictual relationship’ (Frankel, 1996, p.ix), developed in response to the accelerating remilitarisation of Germany under Adolf Hitler and the invasion of China by Japan, and its proponents argued that it provided a more ‘realistic’ view of international relations than that expounded by the more optimistic idealism of Liberalism (Lawson, 2017, pp.48-49). Both liberalists and realists agreed, however, that the nation-state was the primary actor in international relations.

Liberalism and Realism's state-centred approach to international relations was not shared by all scholars of IR, and in the aftermath of the Second World War new strands of IR theory began to emerge which challenged the assumed primacy of the nation-state and the self-interest of state actors in dictating the course of international relations. Building upon the work of the critical theorists, in particular those of the Frankfurt School in the 1920s and 1930s, Constructivism emerged at the end of the 1980s, against the backdrop of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, as a counterpoint to the focus of realists on the self-interested nature of state actors (Fierke, 2013, pp.187-188). The term was coined by Nicholas Onuf, who's stated aim was 'to reconstruct a self-consciously organized field of study, or discipline, called International Relations' (2012, p.1), and popularised by Alexander Wendt (1992). Though they retained the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis, constructivists argued that state actors could not operate solely on the basis of self-interest and in response to the behaviour of other states, but that they were constrained in their behaviour by social and cultural norms (Jackson and Sørensen, 2016, chapter 8). Constructivists therefore contend that 'it is at the ideational level that *meaning* is created' (Lawson, 2017, p.55, emphasis in original). Further challenges to the dominant theories of IR continued to emerge in the final two decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first. The most significant of these was poststructuralism, which sought to introduce to the study of international relations developments in other branches of the social sciences and humanities, from which emanated vigorous debates about how we construct knowledge about the world (Campbell, 2013).

At the end of the 1980s came a development that continues to influence IR theory today: Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye's theory of soft power (Nye Jr., 1990, Nye Jr., 2009). In contrast to the traditional 'hard' power of military force and coercion through the threat or application of force, or the exertion of economic pressure, Nye defined 'soft' power as 'getting

others to want the outcomes that you want' by co-opting rather than coercing them (2009, p.5). Soft power immediately gained traction as a topic of fierce debate in academic circles, and that debate shows little sign of going away. 'Soft power' is a diffuse term, describing an almost limitless number of actions and ideas that can be used to persuade – effectively any idea or action that cannot be categorised as traditional physical or economic coercion. Given that soft power as a concept can be used to refer, almost by definition, to any sort of persuasionary force that does not fit within the traditional definition of 'hard' power, the term itself is of limited value as an analytical tool (Hall, 2010). Todd Hall argues that soft power should instead be disaggregated into 'separate 'soft powers', each with a discrete pathway of influence' (2010, p.191). It is understanding how these discrete forms of soft power are utilised by political actors to which we should turn our attention, and is an endeavour that is increasingly important in the globalised world of the twenty-first century (Ohnesorge, 2020, pp.6-12).

How, then, has 'soft power' been understood and developed within the field of IR? One prominent strand of research has focused on examining the 'soft power' strategies of the traditional and rising global superpowers (nation-states that also maintain the greatest 'hard power' resources), primarily the US, China, and Russia. Joseph Nye's own conception of 'soft power' was devised as a tool for understanding US foreign policy in a post-Cold War geopolitical world and analysing how the planet's economic and military superpowers exert influence and engage in persuasion with other nation-states has been a preoccupation for many IR scholars. Soft power researchers have on occasion turned their sights towards Japan, though often in a comparative context, and has given rise to the idea that Japan is a 'soft power superpower' (Watanabe and McConnell, 2015). The early 2010s saw the publication of two edited volumes exploring Japan's soft power strategy in comparison with that of the United States: Watanabe and McConnell's *Soft Power Superpowers* (2015) and Akaha and Arase's

book, *The US-Japan Alliance: Balancing Soft and Hard Power in East Asia* (2010). Akaha and Arase's volume analyses the role of soft power in Japan's alliance with the US, how the Japanese government balances its soft power strategy with its hard power strategy, and how these strategies are perceived by the two nations' traditional rivals – Russia, China, and North and South Korea. Watanabe and McConnell, on the other hand, eschew this focus on state-level interpretations of Japanese and American power strategy in favour of breaking down the various spheres of soft power utilised by Japan and the US, including in higher education, popular culture, public diplomacy, and civil society.

To return to a more abstract level, strategic narrative research – one of the 'separate' 'soft powers' that Todd Hall spoke of – constitutes a relatively new field of study, emerging from the soft power discourse within International Relations. Soft power as a concept has been developed within the field of IR, yet political actors in a democratic society must also utilise 'soft' forms of power to persuade their domestic audiences. Strategic narrative is one such form of soft power. Although the scholarly investigation of narratives as a method of communication within politics is not new, the term 'strategic narrative' as a defined academic concept has only emerged in the past decade-and-a-half, due in large part to the work of Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, who have written and edited two introductory volumes on the subject (2013, 2017). The efforts of these researchers have helped to stimulate the emergence of a small but growing body of strategic narrative literature. This research has focused primarily on the utilisation of strategic narratives in the sphere of international politics – in other words, how nation-states construct, project, and contest stories with the goal of influencing one another to achieve a particular end.

Studies of strategic narrative have developed in response to the challenges faced by traditional IR theories, in particular that of Realism: the theory that international relations are ‘a constant struggle for power and security’ (Lawson, 2017, p.47). Liberalism and Constructivism have re-emerged, and the discipline has seen the emergence of a new strand of discourse, post-Positivism (Jackson and Sørensen, 2016, Lawson, 2017). It is in this context of a multi-faceted and layered understanding of IR that the study of strategic narrative has emerged (Levinger and Roselle, 2017).

Therefore, strategic narrative research owes a debt to the theoretical ideas that have developed out of Constructivism and Post-positivism (Jackson and Sørensen, 2016). The norms of international society are amongst the most salient issues for constructivists – according to Constructivism, it is democratic norms which place value on deliberation and negotiation which account for the tendency of democratic nations not to go to war with one another. Strategic narrative, when placed in this context, can be understood as a method by which political actors seek to create new - or change existing - norms in order to persuade other actors to support their policies and actions. Though strategic narrative can be deployed by national governments to persuade their own publics, thus far it has primarily been studied as a tool used by national or supranational governments on other governments or publics (Chaban et al., 2017, Kaldor et al., 2007, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2017, Natarajan, 2014, Roselle, 2017).

This IR-influenced approach to the study of strategic narratives has allowed a coherent and identifiable programme of research to emerge, which takes as its focus the stories told by nation-states and supra-national institutions (such as the EU and the UN) to one another (Chaban et al., 2017, Hinck et al., 2020, Noort, 2017, Yang, 2020). Internationally-focused strategic narrative researchers have explored the use of narrative as a political communication

tool in Russia (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017), China (Yang, 2020), the United States, and the United Kingdom (Dagnall et al., 2020), amongst others. As is perhaps to be expected of a body of research that has developed out of the study of how states and international institutions interact with one another, the narrativization of war has been a consistent theme of strategic narrative research. The best example of this strand of strategic narrative discourse is Dimitriu, De Graaf, and Ringsmose's edited volume *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion, and War* (Dimitriu et al., 2015), which studies how governments across the globe utilised narratives to explain their roles in the prosecution of the war in Afghanistan.

Miskimmon et al (2017, p.8) have outlined three primary types of strategic narrative: *system narratives*, *identity narratives*, and *issue narratives*. *System narratives* often concern a nation's role within the established international order and seek to reinforce or challenge that role. Many such narratives are instantly recognisable: the Cold War, War on Terror, or the rise of China (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p.8). However, not all such narratives have obtained such a strong foothold in the global collective consciousness. Miskimmon and O'Loughlin (2017), for example, have explored how Russia has utilised strategic narrative to challenge the dominant Western notion of a universal conception of freedom and democracy. Russia, they argue, has tended to deploy historically facing narratives which seek to undermine US international political hegemony and posit Russia as a major international actor. Other examples of system narratives include Irvin-Erickson's (2017) comparative study of the US and Russia's strategic narratives of the Iraq and Syria conflicts, Hellman and Wagnsson's (2015) analysis of the role of blogging in Sweden's strategic narrative of the war in Afghanistan, and Lemay-Herbert and Visoka's (2017) work on a 'new strategic narrative of intervention'.

As with political communication studies more widely, research on system narratives has recognised the importance of social media networks to the dissemination of political narratives. Jessica Bain and Natalia Chaban, in their study of the EU's sustainable energy week campaign (2017), demonstrate that the internet and social media have become increasingly effective tools for political actors to project their narratives. Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, on the other hand, recognise that social media presents not only opportunities but also challenges to political actors, as 'today leaders are less able to control the flow of media content because of the proliferation of media sources and the rapid dissemination of information via the Internet, cell phones, and other new media' (2013, p.177). While social media presents an opportunity for political actors to autonomously project their narrative to a global audience, it also provides a forum for the emergence, formation, and contestation of counter-narratives. Publics which were previously limited in their opportunities to contest a political actor's narrative can now project their own alternative narratives, or refutations to existing narratives, via Facebook or Twitter. There remains, however, a great deal of scope to develop a greater understanding of the relationship between social media platforms and strategic narratives. Robin Brown, while stating that it 'seems plausible to acknowledge that the diffusion of digital technologies has some effect on the dynamic of networks through which narratives flow' (2017, p.184), has called for further research into just how much difference digital technologies have made for the formation, projection, and reception of strategic narratives.

Identity narratives, on the other hand, 'set out what the story of a political actor is, what values it has, and what goals it has' (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p.8). These narratives often seek to shape public perceptions of the state or nation and alter the public's understanding of its shared history and values in order to change what is possible in terms of policy. Take for example

Ning Liao's (2017) chapter on Chinese nationalism, or Joanna Szostek's (2017) article on Russia's promotion of its desired state identity through strategic narrative.

Finally, *issue narratives* seek to establish why a policy is necessary and desirable, often through reference to social and cultural norms. Research into issue narratives remains comparatively modest, however, and many of the issue narratives which have been examined could also be classified as system or identity narratives; narratives across each of these levels remain 'inextricably linked' (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p.8). Carolijn van Noort (2019), for example, has written about the BRICS' grouping's issue narrative of infrastructural development, and how it interplays with Brazil's foreign policy in Africa. Van Noort explores how the communication of 'solidarity, economic and geostrategic narratives in both Brazil's Africa agenda and BRICS's communication about infrastructural development perpetuated narrative contestation' (p.9), highlighting the contestation of narratives across nations, institutions, and narrative types.

Strategic Narratives and Abe Shinzō

This thesis, then, will seek to draw on and contribute to the growing body of strategic narrative literature. In taking Abe Shinzō's prime ministerial career as my case study, I hope to both apply a strategic narrative framework to a context that it has yet to take as its focus, namely Japanese politics, and also to develop our understanding of how strategic narratives operate in the domestic political sphere, as opposed to the international stage. To this end, I will apply a strategic narrative framework to the political communication of Abe Shinzō during his first period as Prime Minister, from September 2006 to 2007, and the first two years of his second

premiership, from December 2012 to December 2014. This period covers five election campaigns:

- (1) the LDP presidential campaign of 2006, which resulted in Abe succeeding Koizumi Jun'ichiro as leader of the LDP and Prime Minister of Japan;
- (2) the LDP presidential election campaign of 2012, in which Abe returned to the leadership of his party;
- (3) the 2012 general election, at which the LDP returned to government after three years of DPJ rule;
- (4) the 2013 House of Councillors election, in which the LDP regained a majority in the upper house of the Diet, thus securing control of both houses in the legislature;
- (5) the 2014 snap 'Abenomics' general election, called by Abe to renew his mandate following the government's decision to postpone the implementation of a consumption tax rise

Having examined these periods through the lens of a strategic narrative framework, I seek to answer my research questions:

- (1) *How do Abe Shinzō's strategic narratives change over time and across administrations/election campaigns?*
- (2) *What impact do these narratives have on Abe's political success?*
- (3) *What does this tell us about the use of strategic narrative in a domestic political setting?*

By answering these questions, I hope to build upon the work already undertaken by strategic narrative scholars. I will demonstrate that strategic narratives are not simply an international

phenomenon, formed by nation-states and projected to other nation-states. They are also utilised by domestic political actors and projected towards a domestic audience, to generate support for election campaigns and government policies. In this vein, I also hope to add further value to political communication debates about how political actors frame elections.

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Chapter Two: Methodology

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2017, p.23) state, 'methodology is vital to the enterprise of studying strategic narrative because the right methods allow us to explain how strategic narratives are formed, projected, received, and interpreted'. Strategic narrative research has tended to focus on the narratives crafted by domestic political actors to be projected to an international audience, usually other nation-states, supra-national institutions such as the UN, EU, or NATO, or a more general international audience (Bain and Chaban, 2017, Hertner and Miskimmon, 2015, Kaldor et al., 2007, Roselle et al., 2014). Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2017, p.23), in their introduction to strategic narrative methodology, explicitly state that the framework they provide is 'based on the idea that this is a spectrum of how persuasion is theorised in IR'. Despite this focus, there is an emergent strand of strategic narrative research that has taken as its focus narratives aimed primarily at domestic audiences, such as Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad's domestic narrative of his nation's civil war (Scartozzi, 2015), or how Russian students consume and make sense of their state's narratives (Szostek, 2017).

This general focus on narratives aimed at international audiences presents a methodological challenge for this thesis. Methods that have identified narratives constructed for international audiences may not be appropriate for identifying and analysing narratives constructed with a domestic audience in mind. Communication between political actors on an international level, from one political actor of a particular standing to their equivalent(s) in another nation-state or within a supra-national organisation (e.g., president to president, or foreign minister to foreign minister), is often of a significantly different nature to communication from a political actor to his or her domestic public. Where a study of strategic narratives between state-level political

actors might focus on public speeches made by the actors in question, a study of narratives generated within a domestic election campaign must consider various other modes of political communication, such as television, advertisements, posters, manifestoes, and online social media and video upload websites; this, of course, produces different methodological challenges. Despite these challenges, however, an effective methodology for analysing domestic narratives can still draw a great deal from the IR-focused methodologies favoured by much of the strategic narrative research produced thus far.

My methodology, then, must be suitable for identifying a narrative within a domestic political context, across a range of mediums. It must be capable of taking into account the multitude of forms that a single narrative can be delivered in, and it must be flexible enough to identify a strategic narrative that is not communicated in a manner that is easily quantifiable.

Analysing the impact of a strategic narrative

In the case of this thesis, the subject of research is how Abe Shinzō's narratives changed between his two premierships, and the narrative impact on his administrations. Therefore, it is vital to examine how the Japanese public and media understood and interpreted his narrative communication. This immediately raises a number of issues. First, most individuals do not make public their reactions to, and understanding of, each instance of political communication to which they are exposed. Those who do attempt to articulate their understanding of these instances of communication are often highly politically engaged in comparison to the average individual and are therefore unlikely to be representative of the average voter whose understanding of the communicated narrative may impact on their voting decision, which in turn makes analysing public response more difficult. One method of obviating this issue is to

utilise a framework to map the clarity of a particular narrative or narratives, and then assess their effectiveness in terms of the communicator's success in achieving their stated goals, such as winning an election. In the case of Abe, do his electoral fortunes correlate with the methodological clarity of his narratives?

Correlation does not necessarily equal causation, and therefore other measures of narrative effectiveness must be utilised to understand whether a narrative has had the intended impact upon a public audience. Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle offer a tentative methodological approach for dealing with this problem, suggesting that analysis of the 'two-level game' between 'elites and domestic forces (media, publics, parties)' should be conducted through content analysis of, for example, 'speeches and news reports, correlated with political decisions and shifts in public opinion survey data' (2017, p.43). The media can be seen as a barometer of narrative effectiveness: through analysis of media responses to communication by political actors, we can gauge whether or how a narrative is being understood by its audience. Are key narrative phrases and ideas repeated in and by the media? If so, are they understood in a positive or negative manner?

Furthermore, the media plays a key role in encoding and decoding communication (Hall, 2019), and research has demonstrated that the media also plays a role in agenda-setting for voters to consider at election time (Iyengar et al., 1982, McCombs and Shaw, 1972). If the media understands the narrative as intended, and reacts positively to it, this should in theory have a positive impact on a political actor's electoral chances. Measuring this media reaction through analysis of television news segments, newspaper opinion pieces and editorials, and other modes of media communication allows us to build a coherent picture of the public response to, and understanding of, a strategic narrative. Cross-referencing this with public opinion surveys of

the political actors and policies at the heart of these narratives provides can then provide further evidence of their efficacy.

Identifying a narrative

Analysis of a strategic narrative cannot proceed until we have clearly defined what exactly constitutes a ‘narrative.’ Though this may appear self-evident, a coherent definition is vital for us to be able to properly identify and analyse narratives when they are utilised within political communication. In their conceptual overview of strategic narratives, Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle (2017, p.5) define narratives as ‘frameworks that allow humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation’. Drawing on the pentad developed by Kenneth Burke, they provide a framework for deconstructing narratives, which they claim can be broken down into five discrete parts:

- A character or actor
- A setting, environment, or space
- Conflict or action
- Tools or behaviour
- A resolution, suggested resolution, or goal

A strategic narrative, then, like all narratives, must contain these five aspects if its narrator hopes to achieve the desired impact on their audience. A narrative must also represent a shift in the status quo, a change from state A to state B. Change is at the core of all narrative. In the words of the pioneering narrative theorist, Tzvetan Todorov, ‘the minimal complete plot can

be seen as the shift from one equilibrium to another' (Todorov and Weinstein, 1969, p.75). These constitutive parts, and a sense of change or transformation, are required to construct a complete narrative. Of course, we must also ask the question – what makes a narrative *strategic*? If, as Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle state, the goal of a strategic narrative is to 'influence the behaviour of others' (2013, p.2), and 'most conceptions of strategy rest on the mobilisation of available means to achieve stated aims' (2013, p.13); this suggests that the narrative must be constructed by a political actor in a premeditated and conscious manner. The component parts of a traditional narrative are assembled with the aim of creating a story that will have a particular, desired impact on its audience, be that an international institution, government, or public.

At the heart of any narrative is the *actor*, around whom the narrative revolves, and who will propel the story from its beginning to its eventual resolution. This actor is usually the political actor communicating the narrative, or the state or institution that the communicator represents. The actor must then take a particular action or actions, such as declaring war or enacting political reforms, that will theoretically enact the change upon which the narrative is based, within a defined *setting*, often a physical geographical location such as the nation-state, a geopolitical institution such as the EU, or a more abstract geopolitical setting such as The Cold War. A narrative must also contain a *crisis* that must be resolved; common crises include economic stagnation, regional or international conflict, and intra- or inter-state tension. To solve the crisis, the narrator must provide a *tool*. The narrative tool can take various forms, including political policies, referenda, or diplomacy. The utilisation of this tool will then lead to the achievement of a *goal* or *resolution* to the crisis that the intended audience will find desirable. In the political context, this often entails such goals as economic growth, the suppression of corruption, or the attainment of peace.

By deconstructing instances of political communication into these constituent parts, we can identify whether a complete narrative emerges. In the example below, I examine a YouTube video produced by the Vote Leave campaign in the run-up to the UK referendum on whether to remain in the European Union. Vote Leave, as the official campaign for the vote to leave the EU, was an influential voice prior to, during, and after the official campaign period. The campaign was successful, as the British public voted to leave the European Union by a margin of 52 to 48 percent, and therefore an analysis of Vote Leave's political communication can provide insight on how a coherent strategic narrative can influence a public audience.

I take as my example a video produced by Vote Leave and uploaded to their YouTube channel on 17 December 2015, almost four months prior to the beginning of the official referendum campaign period³. Entitled 'Heroes,' the video sets out a narrative with the intended aim of convincing potential voters to cast their vote for leave. The 1 minute 50-second-long video presents a number of famous figures from British history, including, but not limited to, Isaac Newton, the Duke of Wellington, Florence Nightingale, and Winston Churchill. By presenting these figures, whose impact on history would be well-known to most British citizens, the video seeks to convince the audience that Britain was influential on a global scale before the creation of the EU and that it can be again after leaving the EU. Once the historical figures have been introduced, a satellite image of the British Isles appears on screen, and the video's narrator

³ Since originally writing this section, Vote Leave has closed their YouTube channel. The video has, however been reuploaded by a channel called 'Brexit Sham' and can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0sxnMk7_9U&ab_channel=BrexitSham

claims that ‘these British heroes changed the world,’ and urges the audience, ‘don’t believe those who talk Britain down, who say we’re too weak to control our own affairs,’ before closing with the exhortation, ‘let’s take control.’ The image of the British Isles then fades to white, and the Vote Leave logo appears against this white background. Various short taglines appear in sequence below the logo, ending once again with the phrase ‘take control.’



Figure 1: Screenshot from Vote Leave's 'Heroes' video (Source: Vote Leave YouTube channel)

Though this is just one example of political communication within the wider Vote Leave campaign, a clear strategic narrative emerges from the short video clip. The British public are posited as the *actors* in a nationally critical cause and are asked to identify their support for the Vote Leave campaign with the feats of some of Britain’s most significant historical campaign. The narrative *conflict*, set within the context of Britain’s tense relationship with the EU, is represented by the EU’s arrogation of certain law-making powers that were surrendered by

Britain as a trade-off for EU membership. Though this claim is not explicitly stated in the video, it formed a central pillar of Vote Leave's wider campaign, and would have been understood by much, if not all, of the audience. The *tool* offered to resolve this conflict is the audience member's referendum vote, and by utilising this tool, the video suggests, Britain can achieve a satisfying *resolution* to the narrative: reclamation of Britain's leading role in Europe – as embodied by these historic British 'heroes' – by reclaiming 'control' of Britain's affairs from the EU.

This narrative of 'control' can be seen replicated throughout the communication of the Vote Leave campaign. Vote Leave's official website (voteleavetakecontrol.org) maintains a directory of 'key speeches, interviews and op-eds,' many of which take the theme of 'control' as its central focus. In a speech on immigration delivered on 26 May 2016, Conservative MP Boris Johnson repeatedly referenced Britain's lack of control over immigration policy (Johnson, 2016). In an 825-word statement, Johnson used the word 'control' or 'controlled' 15 times, ending the speech with the following declaration:

The British public support immigration but they want it controlled by those who they elect. They are generous but feel their generosity has been abused. They are right. On the 23 June they will get their chance to take back control. That's the safer choice.

In another speech, delivered to the House of Commons on 31 May 2016, Chris Grayling MP also emphasised a narrative of taking back control from the EU (Grayling, 2016). In the speech, Grayling outlines a list of policies over which Britain, he claims, has ceded control to the EU. Grayling argues that 'control over [the NHS, workers' rights, and social protection] should not lie with Brussels.' He narrativizes the issue, introducing an equilibrium shift when posing the

question ‘so what happens now then?’ Britain is faced with two potential narrative resolutions, Grayling argues. If Britain votes to remain within the EU, ‘our influence will diminish,’ ‘our sovereignty will diminish,’ and ‘our ability to look after our own national interest will diminish.’ On the other hand, should the voters decide to leave the EU, Britain will become ‘an independent sovereign country,’ and the British public will have taken back ‘control of our democracy.’ A ‘taking back control’ narrative can also be traced in speeches and publications by other Vote Leave campaigners, such as Michael Gove and Dominic Raab (2016), and Liam Fox (2016).

Table 1: The Vote Leave campaign's strategic narrative of the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the EU

Narrative Concept	Leave Campaign Communication
<i>Actor</i>	The British People
<i>Setting</i>	Europe and the European Union member states
<i>Conflict</i>	EU hegemony undermining British sovereignty and taking ‘control’ away from the British government and, therefore, the British people
<i>Tools</i>	A referendum on EU membership
<i>Resolution</i>	Leaving the EU and prospering as fully independent nation ‘in control’ of its own affairs

We can see, using this framework, that the Vote Leave campaign constructed a compelling and effective narrative through which it delivered its core message. The Leave campaign cast the target of its communication, the British public, as the protagonists in an emotive narrative struggle against a clearly defined antagonist, the EU. By voting to leave in the upcoming referendum, the public could directly affect the shift in equilibrium required to bring the narrative to a satisfying resolution.

This, however, is an isolated example chosen for the purpose of outlining the strategic narrative framework. To convincingly argue the existence and efficacy of a strategic narrative a much larger dataset is required and, therefore, a set of proven and reliable methods for analysing political communication is also required. In the next section, I will outline and justify the methods utilised within this thesis. The primary methods I use are content analysis and Gillian Rose's approach to visual communication analysis.

Content Analysis of Political Communication

Political communication is conducted via a multiplicity of modes, including text-based, auditory, and visual communication. Though these modes can be broken down into further modes, such as speeches, newspaper op-eds, television advertisements, posters, etc., the distinction between textual communication and visual communication requires a combination of methodological approaches. I will outline my approach to analysing visual communication below; for text- and speech-based communication such as public speeches and newspaper articles, I take a content analytical approach to identifying strategic narratives. This is an approach suggested by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle in their methodological framework for strategic narratives (2017, p.43), and one which is common in the existing strategic narrative literature, in various forms (Bain and Chaban, 2017, Hellman and Wagnsson, 2015, Hertner and Miskimmon, 2015, Scartozzi, 2015).

Though content analysis is often defined as a quantitative approach, involving exhaustive datasets and coding, Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle argue that the 'privileging of quantitative methods' and desire to claim one's own research as 'scientific' is not necessarily

appropriate to the study of politics, which, they argue ‘is the attempt to persuade others to get what one wants’. Therefore, it ‘does not matter what methods are used, as long as the research procedure is transparent and has some empirical or conceptual basis’ (2017, p.40). Indeed, strategic narrative scholars have produced some compelling studies through the analysis of qualitative data (Hertner and Miskimmon, 2015, Scartozzi, 2015). A narrative is not told and re-told in the same manner every time it is told. Though certain common refrains, phrases, and terms will be restated, part of what makes a strategic narrative effective is that it can be adapted for different audiences and varied situations; attempting to analyse a strategic narrative through a quantitative method of content analysis risks failing to account for the many ways that the same narrative can be re-told.

With this in mind, I instead apply a qualitative content analysis (Drisko and Maschi, 2015, Schreier, 2012), which can be defined as ‘a set of techniques for the systematic analysis of texts of many kinds, addressing not only manifest content but also the themes and core ideas found in texts as primary content’ (Drisko and Maschi, 2015, p.82). Qualitative content analysis allows the researcher to ‘inductively generate codes from the data’, allowing for ‘data collection and analysis to be undertaken simultaneously and flexibly in order to capture content and nuance’ (Drisko and Maschi, 2015, p.86). The flexibility provided by a qualitative approach ensures that instances of narrative communication that do not utilise certain common phrases or words are included in the data, and therefore can provide a richer understanding of a strategic narrative and the various forms it can take. Rather than focusing on the specifics of a particular passage, this approach allows for the meaning of a passage to be ‘taken to a higher level of abstraction, resulting in categories that apply to a number of concrete, slightly different passages’ (Schreier, 2012, p.170); in this thesis, this approach, therefore, allows the researcher to map these non-identical passages to a narrative using the strategic narrative framework

provided by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (Miskimmon et al., 2017, Roselle et al., 2014). Where quantitative research focuses on 'manifest' meaning, qualitative research is better suited to the 'latent and more context-dependent' meaning (Schreier, 2012, p.173) found in strategic narrative communication. Qualitative content analysis and narrative in fact often go hand in hand and 'narrative summaries of ideas and themes are common in reports of such research' (Drisko and Maschi, 2015, p.87).

I apply a content analysis approach to a variety of sources of Abe Shinzō's political communication. This includes, but is not limited to, public speeches, Diet remarks, publications such as campaign manifestos and leaflets, and newspaper op-eds. It is important to utilise material from a wide selection of sources to build as complete as possible a picture of any narrative that might emerge (Schreier, 2012, p.175). An effective strategic narrative will be repeated across a political actor's repertoire of communicative modes: the more often an audience is exposed to a narrative, the more likely it is to resonate with them and achieve its intended effect. Therefore, I have also applied a content analysis approach to a range of media, to establish the impact and reception of Abe's narratives. I analyse newspaper editorials, intellectual analysis of Abe's campaigns in monthly publications such as *Sekai* and *Chūō Kōron*, and comments and reaction from a variety of other written sources.

Of course, political communication is transmitted not just via text and speech, but also through pictures and images. Election campaigns disseminate their narratives through manifestos and posters; politicians broadcast their stories via television adverts and street-side billboards. These visual modes of communication require their own suitable methods of analysis.

Visual Political Communication

Strategic narratives are transmitted through various modes of communication. Election campaigns (and politics more generally) such as those under consideration in this thesis are driven by visual mediums as much as written texts (Schill, 2012). This is particularly so in Japan, where strict election laws encourage the proliferation of campaign posters and political pamphlets during a short, sharply delineated campaign period (Lewis and Masshardt, 2002), as well as modes of communication ubiquitous in many modern democratic states, such as television advertisements and televised debates. An effective strategic narrative is likely to incorporate visual communication, and ‘dramatic and emotionally affective imagery is used by every leader, and would-be leader, protest group and any organisation seeking political power and influence’ (Veneti et al., 2019, p.4). Visual modes of communication are particularly relevant to the construction of effective narratives: we are raised to associate narrative with images of noble protagonists and dastardly antagonists and, ‘through the process of making heroes and villains instantly recognizable, education, reading and entertainment permit children to map the world around them and develop perceptions of others based on their appearance and behaviour’ (Lilleker, 2019, p.38). Effective visual communication can reinforce a political actor’s role as a potential saviour, and their political opponents as untrustworthy enemies of the people.

In terms of the methods of analysis of visual communication, I refer to the methodology offered by Gillian Rose (2012). Rose provides a critical visual methodology, which breaks down instances of visual communication into four ‘sites’ and three ‘modalities’, which must be borne in mind when analysing an image’s impact, intention, and reception. The sites are those of its

production (i.e., the circumstances surrounding its creation), the *image itself* (what is contained within the image), its *circulation* (how it is distributed to its audiences), and its *audiencing* (where it is consumed by its audiences). The modalities are *technological* (the technology used to produce the images), *compositional* (how the image is put together, framed, etc.), and *social* (the social environment in which the image is produced). Understanding the sites and modalities which contribute to the production of each instance of visual political communication allows us to analyse in much greater detail the impact that communication has upon its various audiences than would be possible without taking these factors into account. With regards to the visual communication analysed in this thesis, in particular the various posters, CMs, and manifestos produced by Abe Shinzō and the LDP during the 2012 general election, I focus primarily on the site of the *image itself*. What is contained in the image is vital when attempting to parse how it contributes to an overall strategic narrative. Which actors are depicted? Does the advert/poster/manifesto outline a crisis? Does it provide potential tools for resolving this crisis? Does it suggest a compelling resolution to any potential crisis outlined to the audience? By analysing visual political communication at the site of the image we can begin to answer these questions, and outline any emergent strategic narrative contained within the various component parts that constitute a complete instance of visual communication.

I also refer to the ‘image bite’ framework developed by Maria Grabe and Erik Bucy (2011), which provides what they term ‘three enduring character frames’ which manifest during election campaigns: the *ideal candidate*, the *populist campaigner*, and the *sure loser* (2011, pp.213-222). This framework was developed from extensive research and coding of US presidential campaigns. The ideal candidate frame is borne from the ‘mental picture of specific characteristics that an ideal presidential candidate should have’, which the authors divide into two categories, *statesmanship* and *compassion* (2011, pp.213-216). The populist campaigner,

on the other hand, seeks to emphasise their *mass appeal* and *ordinariness*, through acts such as holding mass rallies to demonstrate their popular appeal or dressing casually to show that they represent the ordinary voter. Donald Trump provides a compelling recent example of the quintessential populist campaigner: both as a presidential candidate and as the president himself, Trump sought to emphasise his mass appeal by organising large-scale rallies and regularly referring to the size of the crowds he could draw, whilst also revelling in the fact that he was ‘un-PC’, speaking his mind without moderating his language in a manner normatively expected of presidential candidates. The third frame that Grabe and Bucy offer is that of the *sure loser*, a negative frame that candidates seek to avoid having placed upon them by their opponents and the media (2011, pp.220-222). In contrast to the populist campaigner, a sure loser frame is visually characterised by small crowds, negative audience reactions, and ‘visual displays of physical weakness, defiance, and inappropriate behaviour’ (p.220).

Visual communication in the political context is rarely limited to one-dimensional imagery; rather, text and image, sound, and picture work in tandem to reinforce a political actor’s message. Van Leeuwen (2011, pp.551-552) suggests that Roland Barthes offers a useful semiotic methodological framework for deconstructing and analysing images with text. Barthes outlines three distinct relationships between image and text: *illustration*, in which the text is primary, but the image interprets it for particular contexts and particular audiences; *anchorage*, in which images are not understood in reference to text but are seen as a naturalistic representation of the world, and are open to various interpretations; and *relay*, in which there is no redundancy between image and text, and both convey different yet complementary content. Visual political communication, being as it is meticulously constructed with the intention of persuading potential voters from across the political spectrum, can be most helpfully understood as possessing a relay relationship between image and text. For example,

a campaign television advertisement might feature visuals of a political actor shaking hands, smiling, and kissing babies, while superimposed text or a voiceover delineates the candidate's various policies. Though the visual images and the text may not directly convey the same information, in tandem they nonetheless 'make sense' and reinforce each other: in such an example, the visual images demonstrate the candidate's amiable, approachable personal character, while the text attempts to persuade the audience that the candidate's political priorities align with their own. Taken together, the separate elements of the visual communication serve to reinforce a shared message about the candidate's suitability for the post for which they are running.

Take, for example, an advert broadcast by the LDP during the 2019 general election campaign (jimintō, 2019). In this short, 15-second campaign advert, a succession of teenagers is introduced on screen, each engaging in their own hobbies and passions, with the name of that activity superimposed on the video, beneath the child's age. We are, in order, introduced to an 'artist', a 'kendama player', a 'BMX rider', a '*rakugoka*' (a traditional Japanese comedian) and a 'dancer'. Each of the children makes a statement, such as 'we don't need barriers' or 'I want to overcome convention', played over a close-up of their face. Once the five teenagers have been introduced, Abe Shinzō is shown, also in close-up, with 'Age 64' displayed above the title 'politician'. Abe's statement, following the same short verbal pattern as those of the teenagers, is 'I want to build a future' (*mirai wo tsukuritai*). These combinations of text, both written and spoken, and visuals are intended to deliver a clear message: by voting for Abe and the LDP, the Japanese public can secure a future for the nation's youth in which they will be afforded the opportunity to pursue their own ambitions.



Figure 2: stills from an LDP 2019 election ad (youtube.com)

Though recent Japanese election campaigns have been subject to the digital revolution that has impacted elections across the globe – political parties now upload a wealth of visual communication to their official YouTube channels, Twitter feeds, and Instagram profiles, as well as their own dedicated websites – obtaining comprehensive examples of visual communication published or broadcast during elections that took place prior to the current decade is a difficult proposition, all the more so when conducting research outside of Japan. Therefore, creating – and subsequently coding – an exhaustive dataset of visual communication produced during an election campaign in all its modes is impossible. Nevertheless, election campaign materials such as filmed advertisements, posters, and manifestoes have been archived on both the LDP’s official website, and Abe Shinzō’s own personal site. Therefore, although an in-depth analysis of which materials were communicated to which audiences in which sites is not possible within the scope of this thesis, it is possible to construct an overview

of the visual communication that the Japanese public was audience to in the 2012 general election.

Utilising the methodology outlined above, I will seek in the following chapters to answer my research questions, which are as follows:

- (1) *How do Abe Shinzō's strategic narratives change over time and across administrations/election campaigns?*
- (2) *What impact do these narratives have on Abe's political success?*
- (3) *What does this tell us about the use of strategic narrative in a domestic political setting?*

First, I shall turn to my analysis of Abe Shinzō's strategic narrative approach during the period from September 2006 to September 2007 – covering the LDP presidential election which made Abe Prime Minister, his eventful year as PM, and his subsequent resignation almost a year to the day after entering office.

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Chapter Three: Koizumi to Abe - A Tale of Two Narratives

Introduction

Abe Shinzō took over the post of Prime Minister of Japan from his mentor Koizumi Jun'ichirō in September 2006. Following Koizumi's decision to step down at the end of his term as LDP president, Abe came to power by default after defeating fellow Liberal Democratic Party veterans Fukuda Yasuo and Aso Taro in the party's subsequent presidential election. In other words, Abe ascended to the office of Prime Minister through success in an internal party vote, not through the usual route of success in a general election. He arrived in the office as a relative unknown, the anointed successor of a popular prime minister, but with an opaque political record and little of his predecessor's charisma or flair.

Where Koizumi had proved incredibly durable, lasting five years in office and becoming, at the time, Japan's fifth longest serving PM, Abe proved a disaster. Abe resigned just a year after his victory in the LDP presidential election, his administration broken by scandal after scandal, culminating in a humiliating defeat in the July 2007 House of Councillors election. However, dig deeper, below the surface of the relentless scandals which dominated the front pages of the newspapers, and Abe's policy record appears relatively impressive. The young PM – Abe celebrated his 52nd birthday just days before the beginning of his first term – maintained the strong economic growth of the Koizumi years, thawed relations with Japan's closest neighbours, and initiated far-sighted climate change discussions on a supranational level. Yet, by September 2007, Abe was gone, resigning ostensibly for reasons of health, with his personal popularity and that of his party in tatters.

If Abe's economic and foreign policy record – two fairly reliable indicators of prime ministerial performance – was relatively strong when compared with his predecessor, a man considered Japan's most successful PM for several decades, why, then, did his administration collapse so dramatically? Put quite simply, Abe failed in one key area in which Koizumi had proved himself a master: controlling his own political narrative. Koizumi was the first television prime minister, endearing himself to the public through intelligent use of the media, highlighting his charismatic personality and framing his policies in a favourable manner. Abe, on the other hand, displayed none of his mentor's media savvy or aptitude for controlling the political narrative. As his administration was beset by resignations, corruption scandals, revelations of ministerial incompetence, and, tragically, suicide, Abe proved incapable of maintaining control of his political narrative.

As Prime Minister, Koizumi created a narrative to generate support for his leadership. Koizumi was masterful at articulating what the central conflict of his narrative was, who his (and Japan's) antagonist(s) were, which tools he would deploy to resolve the crisis, and how this would result in a satisfactory resolution to the narrative. He positioned himself as a 'maverick', capable of restoring Japan's national pride through force of personality, overt acts of nationalism, and willingness to confront the country's traditional rivals. Abe, on the other hand, failed to craft an effective strategic narrative in the same manner as his predecessor, culminating in a lack of enthusiasm for, and emotional connection to, his administration and its policies.

In this chapter, I shall examine the key differences between the approach of Abe, and that of Koizumi, in creating and maintaining a positive narrative of their respective administrations. I

shall do this by first analysing Koizumi's approach to crafting his own political narrative, and his deftness in maintaining the dominance of his narrative against competing domestic and regional narratives. Having established this political and recent historical context, I will contrast the approach taken by Abe during his short premiership, and argue that Abe's inability to control his own political narrative was a major contributing factor to the dramatic collapse of his government.

To begin with, however, I will briefly place Abe in the wider context of post-war Japanese politics and political narratives.

Yoshida to Koizumi – LDP Prime Ministers and post-war political narratives

The Japanese prime minister has often been considered in academic analysis as a weak figure; a party manager who must juggle the competing interests of the LDP faction that have dominated the party's operation since the early 1950s. Though this characterisation was challenged by a handful of powerful figures who became synonymous with particular eras in post-war political development – Yoshida Shigeru with the '1955 system' and Japanese embrace of the US security umbrella; Ikeda Hayato with the 'income-doubling plan'; Nakasone Yasuhiro with the bullish foreign policy and Western-aligned privatization of the mid 1980s – these premiers were treated as the exceptions who proved the rule. Krauss and Nyebblade characterise the traditional understanding of LDP prime ministers as follows: 'Despite being the leader of a majority party in a centralized political system, the Japanese prime minister was almost universally described as weak and uninteresting, with both academic and popular discourse focusing on the powerful bureaucracy and factional politics within the Liberal Democratic Party' (2005, p.357). Influential texts exploring the relationship between the

bureaucracy, government, and industry, such as Chalmers Johnson's *MITI and the Japanese Miracle* (1982), which argued that bureaucrats within departments of government such as the monolithic Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) played the central role in developing and implementing government policy, rather than their putative political masters.

This bureaucracy-first, politicians-second understanding of Japanese governance has been challenged in recent years, and post-war Japanese history offers several examples of leaders who have successfully reshaped the discursive terrain in which political actors operate. Perhaps the most effective of these leaders in terms of affecting domestic and international discourse was Ikeda Hayato, who sought to redefine Japan's national narrative in the early 1960s away from military security to economic growth. Ikeda assumed power in 1960 following the resignation of Kishi Nobusuke (Abe's grandfather), who had generated controversy when he had forced through a renewal of the Japan-US security treaty (*Anpo*) against the backdrop of considerable domestic resistance, both within the LDP and from the wider electorate. Though Kishi ultimately achieved his goal of renewing the treaty, the wave of protests that the process triggered across the country made his position as prime minister, and he stepped down in July 1960, to be replaced by his Minister for International Trade and Industry and a former Finance Minister, Ikeda Hayato.

Ikeda's premiership proved to be a crucial inflection point in the course of post-war Japanese politics. The new prime minister understood that the febrile atmosphere of Japanese politics required a narrative reset, and set about redefining Japan's national mission. With Japan's military secured by the US through the *Anpo* treaty, Ikeda – whose pre- and wartime civil service career had been spent in the Ministry of Finance – unveiled his centrepiece proposal

for the next stage of Japan's post-war rehabilitation and development: the income-doubling plan (*shotoku baizo keikaku*).

The plan was characterised legislatively by a raft of new laws enacted by the Ikeda administration, such as the Basic Law for Agriculture, Basic Law for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, and universal health insurance (Akimoto, 2022, p.112), more important was the plan's impact on the discursive terrain of Japanese politics in the 1960s. Rather than focus on divisive issues such as a remilitarisation and the nature of the US-Japan security relationship, Ikeda successfully redefined the crisis at the heart of Japan's post-war national story as one of economic development and living standards. This shift in narrative and policymaking approach did not signal an attempt to decouple Japan from the US; instead, Ikeda and his government sought to redefine the relationship between the two nations as one of mutual economic development, developing strong bilateral economic ties with the Kennedy administration (Akimoto, 2022, pp.112-113).

Ultimately, Ikeda's new national narrative was successful because it was underpinned by effective policy tools for enacting the promised resolution of rapid economic growth. During the 1960s Japan's economy did indeed take off, with wages and GNP (gross national product) soaring even beyond the level's promised by Ikeda when he initially unveiled the plan. Despite Ikeda's resignation in 1964 due to the throat cancer that would kill him the following year, he bequeathed a vital legacy to the nation: the 'economic miracle' would dominate domestic and international discourse on Japan through the next quarter-century, until the economic crash of the late 80s and early 90s. Ikeda's success can be measured by his successors' embrace of his national narrative of economic growth. His immediate replacement, Sato Eisuke (Abe's great-uncle and brother of Kishi), prime minister from 1964 to 1972, continued Ikeda's economic

policies, and though his long period of administration was also characterised by student unrest over continued military alliance with the US and heightened tensions with China, Sato oversaw rapid expansion of the Japanese economy.

Ikeda may arguably be the most successful example of a post-war prime minister setting the narrative agenda for Japanese politics, but he was by no means alone. His mentor and prime minister from 1948 to 1954, Shigeru Yoshida, arguably set the precedent for Ikeda's focus on economic growth by establishing the 'Yoshida Doctrine', under which strategy Japan would focus on economic reconstruction and rely on the US to provide external security. Tanaka Kakuei in the 1970s and his protégé Nakasone Yasuhiro in the 1980s would attempt to reframe Japan as a more confident and agenda-setting (and more overtly confrontational) nation on the global stage; an approach echoed by Koizumi during his tenure. Though Japanese political history is littered with examples of short-lived and ineffective prime ministers, the evidence shows that a leader with a strong vision for Japan's future and a coherent narrative with which to articulate it could successfully redefine the political discursive terrain.

Abe's First Term: a 'traditional' success?

Although a compelling narrative can shape public understanding of a political actor's achievements and failures, it is not the only factor in this process. Members of the public base their voting judgements on a multiplicity of factors, including tangible policy achievements, economic growth, and foreign diplomacy. If a prime minister or president is deemed to have succeeded in these 'traditional' aspects of the job, they will generally be viewed as successful. However, as we will see, the first Abe administration provides compelling evidence that impact

of achievements in ‘traditional’ areas such as economic growth and foreign policy can be subsumed by a negative overarching political narrative of failure and incompetence. I will explore below the argument that, when measured against two traditional metrics of administrative success – economic growth and diplomatic achievements – Abe could claim that his first administration had been no less effective than that of his popular predecessor. Abe oversaw a continuation of the economic expansion fostered by the Koizumi administration – in the first quarter of 2007 Japan posted a record 19th consecutive quarter of economic growth – whilst simultaneously thawing relations with China and South Korea. It is therefore difficult to argue that Abe’s demise was precipitated by economic or diplomatic incompetence. Instead, we must look elsewhere for the reasons for the collapse of the first Abe government.

Let us first take the issue of economic growth under Abe. Studies of elections across the globe suggest that, in the short term, voters value economic achievement, particularly low unemployment and national growth, as the most important factor in making electoral decisions (Evans, 2004, chapter 6, Harrop and Miller, 1987, p.218, Tufte, 1978). Voting based on economic performance has been described as ‘as close to a “law” of political behavior as exists in the social sciences’ (Hart, 2016, p.1). Japan’s GDP growth, which, after the ‘lost decade’, had been reinvigorated under Koizumi, maintained its momentum through Abe’s first year in office. Although the potential capacity of governments to affect a nation’s economic performance is disputed, particularly within well-established democratic systems (Wren, 2008), national economic performance nonetheless often correlates with levels of public support for the incumbent government. Quarterly GDP growth held steady, inflation remained under control, and the budget deficit was lower than in previous years (Harari, 2013). The OECD’s biannual economic survey of Japan in 2008 noted that ‘the Japanese economy is experiencing the longest expansion in its post-war history’ (OECD, 2008). In fact, the 19 consecutive

quarters of economic growth which was reached in the first quarter of 2007 matched the record achieved during the ‘Izanagi boom’ years of the late 1960s (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2007i). Economic growth spurred a similar growth in public satisfaction: a January 2007 Cabinet Office public opinion survey (The Cabinet Office, 2007) suggested that 66.5 percent of the Japanese public were overall either ‘satisfied’ or ‘quite satisfied’ with their lives, up from 59.5 percent in September 2005 (The Cabinet Office, 2005).

It would be misleading to suggest that the economic picture was entirely rosy: experts predicted retrenchment, and though GDP continued to grow quarter-on-quarter, the growth remained relatively slow (The Economist, 2006, The Economist, 2008). Whilst the stock market posted healthy numbers on the tail of Koizumi’s pro-business policies and privatisation of the postal system, suggestions of a possible increase to the consumption tax, designed to tackle Japan’s high debt-to-GDP ratio, suppressed growth in household spending. Nonetheless, media scepticism about the Japanese economy’s ability to maintain long-term growth had been a near-constant feature of Koizumi’s premiership but had failed to undermine public confidence in the PM (Asahi Shimbun, 2002c). The precipitous economic decline of the ‘lost decade’ of the 90s had been reversed, unemployment had steadily declined during the Koizumi administration, reaching a seven-year low in 2005 (Financial Times, 2005), and Abe inherited a relatively stable financial situation.

Despite all this, the international media voiced its concerns about the depth of Abe’s economic strategy. An *Economist* piece from 11 November 2006 succinctly exposed Abe’s lack of narrative substance (The Economist, 2006). Though the article argued that forecasts predicting a reversal of Japan’s economic expansion were wide of the mark, citing Abe’s hints at ‘far-reaching structural change’, it nonetheless criticised the PM for his lack of clarity. Abe has

‘given little sense yet of his priorities’, the piece argued, and of those policies that had been announced many were ‘hardly vote winners.’ A *Wall Street Journal* article of 2 November, whilst praising the broad outline of Abe’s economic vision for Japan, also voiced concerns that his plans were ‘vague’ (Moffett, 2006). Merrill Lynch Tokyo’s chief economist stated that Abe ‘has no deep-rooted philosophy on economic policy’ (Koll, 2006, p.35). The charge levelled against Abe by the domestic media – that his approach to government was too vague and lacked a clear plan – was being echoed in several of the West’s most well-established and well-respected forums for economic discourse. Abe appeared to take little heed of such warnings. A June 2007 *Wall Street Journal* article quoted an economist who described Abe’s economic policy as ‘notable by its absence’ (Moffett and Hayashi, 2007). The article goes on to describe the PM’s first annual economic directive, released the previous week, as having been ‘criticized for vagueness and lack of focus.’ If Abe was attempting to construct an economic narrative, it did not appear to be working.

Abe’s foreign policy accomplishments also should not be overlooked when attempting an objective assessment of his first term. Although foreign policy does not tend to rank as highly as economic policy in terms of importance when voters assess candidates, studies suggest it is nevertheless an issue area which impacts voting decisions, particularly during times of global or regional conflict (Gadarian, 2010, Huddy et al., 2005). In Japan, the influence of the Yoshida Doctrine and the long post-war debate over Japan’s role in global politics has ensured that foreign policy has remained a particularly salient issue in the minds of voters (Krauss, 2016). Abe worked to deescalate tensions with China and South Korea, following Koizumi’s unabashedly belligerent approach to regional diplomacy (Hagström and Jerdén, 2010, p.719), through a resumption of summit diplomacy. Though Abe’s right-wing history ensured he would always be treated with a certain degree of wariness by Japan’s wartime foes, he

nonetheless sought to avoid the sort of incendiary comments and actions that characterised Koizumi's approach to foreign policy. That Abe was at least partially successful in this endeavour is evidenced by the resumption of top-level meetings between Japan and China, and Japan and South Korea, under his leadership, after a hiatus of such diplomacy during Koizumi's term. Abe visited China and South Korea within two weeks of entering office, meeting Chinese President Hu Jintao in Beijing on 8 October 2006, before travelling to Seoul to meet South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun the next day (Japan Times, 2006b). Further vindication of Abe's approach came the following April, with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Japan the first such visit from a Chinese leader for seven years (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2007h), though a South Korean president would not visit Tokyo until Lee Myung Bak met Abe's successor, Fukuda Yasuo, in April 2008. As Hagström and Jerdén (2010, p.720) demonstrate, after plummeting during the Koizumi administration, Abe's thawing of Japan's relationship with China was one of his administration's notable successes.

Success in foreign diplomacy was not limited to Japan's regional relations. At the G-8 summit in Germany in June 2007, Abe played a leading role in brokering an agreement between the participant nations to address climate change. Abe, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, and European Council President Angela Merkel issued a joint statement committing themselves to establishing a framework for combating climate change, as well as confirming their commitment to a denuclearised North Korea (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2007g). At the same conference, Abe also reached an agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin to continue negotiations towards the agreement of a peace treaty between the two nations (Japan Times, 2007a). Within a few months of entering office Abe had made significant progress in thawing and progressing Japan's relationships at both the regional and global levels –

achievements that could have provided a foundation for an effective strategic narrative for the upcoming House of Councillors election.

Following his impressive performance at the G8, Abe returned to Japan to focus on the first major test of his electoral capabilities, the July 2007 House of Councillors election. On the day of the election, a *Yomiuri Shimbun* editorial stressed the success of the Abe administration, highlighting the PM's diplomatic victories and the nation's continued economic growth (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2007e). Even the *Asahi Shimbun*, the most left-leaning of Japan's major daily newspapers and a regular critic of the Abe administration, admitted that regional diplomacy was the most significant success of Abe's first term. In an editorial published on 25 September, two weeks after Abe announced his resignation, the paper praised him for his repairing the damage done by the Koizumi administration to Japan's relationships with China and South Korea (Asahi Shimbun, 2007a). Diplomacy under Abe was widely acknowledged to have been successful, both in the government's dealings with its neighbours and with its Western allies. At a time when 'summit diplomacy' was becoming ever more important to the functioning of the international system, Abe proved himself adept in this sphere of foreign policy.

Abe's administration oversaw a continuation of the economy's longest expansion since the war, whilst attempting, on the surface at least, to chart a more conciliatory course with Japan's East Asian neighbours than his predecessor had done. Which begs the question: if Abe's performance in these key metrics was, at the very least, no worse than his popular predecessor's – and in the case of foreign relations, markedly improved – how can we account for his swift political demise? It is certainly difficult to argue that public opinion had turned against him in these key policy areas, or that the Japanese public was generally dissatisfied with the health of

the nation or their own livelihoods. I would argue that the answer is clear: Abe's political narrative was subsumed by the various scandals which pockmarked his premiership; any attempt that he made to reframe the story of his administration was inevitably undermined by the emergence of a negative counter-narrative. Though Abe's foreign policy ideology was based on a similar premise to that of Koizumi's – re-establish Japan as a regional and international power – the two prime ministers differed in their tactics. Koizumi favoured a confrontational approach, adopting a belligerent stance towards China and South Korea on sensitive issues. This proved relatively successful because it married effectively with a clear strategic narrative. Koizumi framed his aggressive approach as a *tool* which would provide Japan the means to achieve a positive *resolution* to its own narrative *conflict*: restoring national pride and confidence after the 'lost decade'. Koizumi, charismatic and single-minded, embodied the *actor* required to drive such a narrative. This narrative played on powerful emotional themes of nationalism and patriotism, which proved effective at stimulating support from sympathetic media outlets and right-wing voters. The strategic value of Koizumi's narrative also chimed with the international foreign policy paradigm, which was dominated by memories of 9/11 the 'coalition of the willing' conflict in the Middle East. Abe, on the other hand, sought to reassert Japan's strength by attempting to position himself as a proactive leader in global diplomacy, strengthening relations with Japan's global partners, and building new alliances. Abe failed, however, to incorporate this effectively into a narrative which could emotionally connect with the media and the electorate and mobilise support for his policy. Indeed, Abe's pragmatic and conciliatory approach appeared to stand at odds with the nationalist, pro-constitutional reform image he had previously cultivated when he championed the cause of the abductees. In some senses, Abe was more nationalist and patriotic by instinct than Koizumi, but he failed to demonstrate this in his narrative of the LDP election. Koizumi had embraced his instincts; Abe sought to rein his own in, resulting in a fractured narrative.

It is impossible to deny that Abe achieved a degree of policy success. Yet, in the run up to the election, he was not able to construct a narrative in which these achievements could supersede his failures, and he was punished for it at the ballot box. The loss of the July 2007 election lent further weight to the opposition's narrative of Abe Shinzō as devoid of ideas, incapable of leading his party or country, and destined for failure. Abe's incoherent and underdeveloped narrative allowed a succession of scandals to drown out his policy successes, and these scandals came to dominate perceptions of the first Abe government in the run-up to the 2007 election which would ultimately decide Abe's fate. I shall examine these scandals, and Abe's ineffective response to them, in section four of this chapter. Before this, however, I will offer a more in-depth review of Koizumi Jun'ichirō's term as prime minister and argue that Koizumi's political longevity and enduring popularity demonstrate that recurrent government scandals can be mitigated by a well-devised and consistent strategic narrative. In doing so, I will demonstrate that stories matter to the long-term success of Japanese political actors.

Koizumi Jun'ichirō: the master of narrative

The narrative failure of the first Abe government cannot properly be understood without a concomitant understanding of the narrative success of the man whom Abe succeeded as PM. An examination of the administration of Koizumi Jun'ichirō (2001-2006) will aid our understanding of why the Abe administration unravelled as it did. When measured against the record of the Koizumi administration in both economic policy and foreign policy, the Abe administration appears to have at least matched its predecessor, if not exceeded expectations. In the area of foreign diplomacy in particular, Koizumi bequeathed his successor a broken

network of relationships with Japan's East Asian neighbours. Despite this, Koizumi vacated the office of prime minister with a relatively high approval rating, and an enduring personal narrative as a political 'maverick' who was willing to impose radical domestic economic reforms and stand up to Japan's international rivals, rather than as a disruptive, antagonistic presence who represented a threat to domestic and regional order, as his political rivals attempted to portray him.

In fact, Koizumi managed to successfully incorporate these attacks into his own personal political narrative, even basing his bid for the LDP leadership – in which he was considered a distant second favourite to Hashimoto Ryutaro, leader of the party's largest faction – on his reputation as an outsider who would reform the corrupt LDP and put an end to 'pork barrel' politics (Kabashima and Steel, 2007, p.79). Prior to his 2001 election victory, LDP members referred to Koizumi as *henjin*, or 'The Freak,' for his 'policy preferences, antipathy toward his own party, and his forceful personality,' yet Koizumi worked this to his advantage by providing 'the softer news outlets with a compelling story of conflict and human interest' (Kabashima and Steel, 2007, pp.95-96). As Richard Katz and Peter Ennis (2007, p.76) succinctly explained, Koizumi 'as a prime minister was a charismatic, iron-willed maverick and loner', whose 'main political tactic was to successfully portray politics as a conflict between good guys (reformers) and bad guys (the resistance)', a narrative Koizumi maintained throughout his tenure. When he called a snap election for September 2005, opposition politicians attempted to portray Koizumi as an autocrat; Koizumi responded by describing himself as a 'lone wolf', willing to put his political career on the line to defeat his opposition and push through his postal reforms (Jiji Press, 2005). From the outset of his prime ministership, Koizumi instinctively understood the importance of crafting a narrative which could explain to the public in a logical yet emotionally stimulating manner the reasoning behind his political actions, no matter how

controversial they might appear. In this section I will analyse two instructive case studies: 1) Koizumi's narrative framing of three ministerial scandals in the early years of his term, and 2) his framing of trips to the nationally and internationally contentious Yasukuni Shrine.

One of the first major tests of the Koizumi administration was the scandal which engulfed former Foreign Minister Tanaka Makiko in 2002, culminating in her resignation in August of that year. Tanaka was sacked from her role as foreign minister in January, along with her deputy Nogami Yoshiji, following a public rift between the two over who was responsible for barring two NGOs from an international conference on the reconstruction of Afghanistan (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2002b). Following this, Tanaka was accused of financial irregularities related to the salary paid to her private secretary; in April 2002, she was subjected to questioning by the Diet (Asahi Shimbun, 2002e). As the Tanaka crisis deepened, Koizumi's government was rocked further in March by the resignation from the party of former LDP general secretary Katō Kōichi, who faced a myriad of accusations of impropriety, including the tax evasion of 100m yen by an aide (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2002a). Katō's resignation appeared particularly damaging to Koizumi, as the two had been close allies since their days as party outsiders (they formed, along with the late Taku Yamasaki, a trio of LDP reformers known as YKK). Almost simultaneously with Katō's resignation, on 15 March, Suzuki Muneo resigned from the LDP, having been implicated in a bid-rigging scandal involving joint Japan-Russia humanitarian projects. Suzuki had also been involved in a high-profile spat with Tanaka Makiko prior to her removal from her cabinet post.

As these scandals developed, Koizumi's public support began to suffer: following Tanaka's sacking, the PM's approval rating fell to 49%; the day after Tanaka's interrogation by the Diet two months later, it dipped to 42%, according to one *Asahi* poll (Asahi Shimbun, 2002d). An

Asahi editorial lamented what was just the latest in a number of LDP ministerial scandals since 1998 (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2002a); the *Yomiuri* suggested that if political mistrust grew any higher, the ‘basis of democratic governance’ might shake (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2002c). By 20 May, the *Asahi* approval rating had fallen to a new low of 38% (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2002b). Yet, by September, Koizumi’s popularity had rebounded. The *Asahi* polls gave the Koizumi cabinet a 51% approval rating, up from 43% in August. How can we explain this resurgence?

To put it simply, Koizumi approached these scandals in a manner which was consistent with his narrative. Koizumi had narrativised himself as a decisive leader, willing to make difficult decisions and act ruthlessly when required. By removing Tanaka Makiko from her cabinet position within days of her altercation with her vice minister, Koizumi demonstrated that he was, as he had promised, an independent prime minister willing to take on high-ranking party members when it was deemed necessary. Similarly, in the case of Katō, Koizumi did not risk undermining his narrative by attempting to preserve the career of a close ally, as many prime ministers have done in the past. The same could be said of the resignation of Suzuki, which, given his high-profile war of words with Tanaka, provided a further counterargument to accusations that Koizumi’s reformist narrative was merely a front for more politics-as-usual. The *Japan Times* (2002) ran an interview with political analyst Morita Minoru in the week prior to Suzuki and Katō’s resignations, in which he argued that Koizumi must ‘keep a tough stance,’ and, if he could do that, ‘it could lead to a rise in his approval ratings.’ Koizumi did indeed take a tough stance, and, as Morita predicted, his ratings did eventually rebound. These were, of course, not the last scandals the Koizumi administration would face.

Yasukuni Shrine, and the pilgrimage thereto of post-war prime ministers, has ignited controversy on multiple occasions during the post-war years (Breen, 2007, Takenaka, 2015).

This unease has been heightened since the Class-A war criminals indicted at the Tokyo trials were enshrined at Yasukuni during a secret ceremony in 1978 (Breen, 2004). This act resulted in a predictably negative response from Japan's East Asian neighbours – in particular China and South Korea – who had suffered huge loss of life as a consequence of the decisions made by these generals and politicians. As a result of this external and internal pressure, visiting Yasukuni in any capacity became a contentious decision for a Japanese politician to make. Prior to Koizumi, only the avowed nationalist Nakasone Yasuhiro in 1985 had visited the shrine in his official capacity as prime minister since 1978; this proved such a public relations disaster that Nakasone abstained from making further official visits during the remainder of his term in office. For Koizumi, however, Yasukuni Shrine became, along with his dedication to the US-Japan relationship, the defining foreign relations issue of his premiership (Sadou, 2016, p.429). It was also an important case study of his wider narrative in microcosm, as he used the furore caused by his visits to position himself as the decisive and strong-willed saviour of Japan's national pride.

During his term as prime minister, Koizumi rarely shied away from stating his belief that Japanese politicians should not feel prevented from visiting Yasukuni in an official capacity, despite the controversy surrounding its existence and its memorialisation of politicians and military officers found guilty of war crimes by the Allies' post-war trials. At the beginning of his administration, he attempted to strike a balance between appearing sensitive to Chinese and Korean concerns over Yasukuni and promoting greater domestic support for the Shrine's historical and cultural value; as his term progressed Koizumi became less concerned with appeasing Japan's historic rivals (Fukuoka, 2013, pp.33-37). This shift in position can be charted through the dates on which Koizumi chose to visit the shrine each year: in 2001, his

first year in office, the PM deliberately decided against visiting on 15 August, the anniversary of Japan's surrender, to avoid the inevitable controversy that such an action would ignite,



Figure 3: A Japan Times cartoon depicting PM Koizumi on a bull causing havoc in a 'China' shop (22 August 2006, p.13)

sentiments he echoed prior to his April 2002 trip (Fukuoka, 2013, pp.33-34). By August 2006, however, with just a month remaining before he would pass leadership of the nation onto his successor, and despite previous Yasukuni visits having contributed to violent anti-

Japanese demonstrations in China, Koizumi showed no such compunction about arranging his official visit for 15 August (Fukuoka, 2013, pp.36-37). By this point, the prime minister was even defying public opinion on the issue, which had shifted decisively against Koizumi visiting the shrine. By contrast, when he took office in 2001 a *Mainichi* poll indicated that 69 percent of the Japanese public supported the notion of Koizumi visiting Yasukuni on 15 August (Fukuoka, 2013, p.36).

Koizumi's actions, as might be expected, sparked a debate across the political and social spectrum. Newspaper editorials and the monthly intellectual magazines, *Chūō Kōron* and *Sekai*, devoted extensive column inches to opinion pieces expounding on the merits (or otherwise) of Koizumi's stance. In an editorial published two days after the prime minister's visit, the Japan Times described Koizumi as 'callous,' stating that 'he mentioned the feelings of his heart, but

not the hearts of those who were victims of Japan's war of aggression, or the relatives that still suffer' (Japan Times, 2006e). This was a representative view of various popular newspapers, such as the left-wing *Asahi Shimbun*, which excoriated Koizumi for what they viewed as his potentially incendiary and historically insensitive actions (Asahi Shimbun, 2002e).

The visit also incited a predictable backlash from Japan's political opposition. On the day of the prime minister's visit the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) delivered a press release, written by Chairman Kazuo Shii, which sharply criticised Koizumi's actions. Shii stated that the party 'severely objects' to Koizumi's visit and the impact it could have on Japan's diplomacy with other nations. Shii also stressed the party's position that Yasukuni is not 'a place purely for the mourning of those who died in battle', and that its connection to Japan's war of aggression must be squarely faced (Japanese Communist Party, 2006).

Koizumi's actions also caused a split within his own party, particularly amongst former LDP politicians with the political freedom to voice their opinions. Following criticism of Koizumi's trip to Yasukuni, the home of former LDP secretary general, Kōichi Katō, was subjected to an arson attack, highlighting the rising public tensions caused by the controversy. In the wake of the attack, which was alleged to have been instigated by a right-wing group based in Tokyo in response to Katō's comments, Katō said that he saw in Japan a 'kind of aggressive nationalism without repentance' (Japan Times, 2006d); in an interview with the *Yomiuri*, Katō said that the prospect of Shinzō Abe visiting Yasukuni as prime minister was 'extremely worrying' (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2006d). Furthermore, a former LDP lawmaker published an article in the June 2006 edition of *Chūō Kōron* in which he criticized Koizumi's style of diplomacy with Japan's East Asian neighbours, focusing in particular on the antagonistic nature of his pledge to visit Yasukuni, and comparing his approach to foreign relations unfavourably to another

bold and decisive LDP prime minister, Kishi Nobosuke. The former lawmaker argued for a diplomatic approach more akin to that of the early post-war prime ministers Yoshida, Hatoyama, and Kishi, or, as Yoshida himself had defined it: ‘losing the war but winning in diplomacy’ (Fujita, 2006).

As the campaign entered its final two weeks, the conservative newspaper the *Yomiuri Shimbun* published a series of short interviews with politicians from across the ideological spectrum about the Yasukuni controversy. Tomomi Inada, chairman of the LDP’s group of Tradition and Creation and member of Nippon Kaigi, expressed her desire that Koizumi’s successor visit Yasukuni, specifically stating that she would have no issue with them visiting on controversial dates such as the anniversary of the end of the war, or the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2006c).⁴

The debate around the Yasukuni controversy was not limited in scope solely to Koizumi’s personal views on Yasukuni and the fallout generated by this specific visit. The visit also provided a catalyst for debates on the historical metanarratives connected to Yasukuni, particularly that of ‘war responsibility’. The notion of war responsibility is a long-standing feature of discourse on the nature of the wars waged by Japan in East Asia and the Pacific in the 1930s and 1940s, with some far-right conservatives periodically challenging the widely accepted understanding that Japan’s military leaders waged unjustified wars of aggression (Orr, 2001, Schalow, 2000, Ushimura, 2003). For example, the September 2006 edition of *Chūō*

⁴ Inada would later become Defense Minister during the second Abe administration, from August 2016 to July 2017, before resigning due to a cover-up scandal within the department which exposed the dangers faced by the Japanese peacekeeping forces in South Sudan.

Kōron devoted a special section to a collection of articles on the issue of ‘war responsibility’ (*‘ano sensō’ to riidaa no sekinin*). The four articles within this section provide clear examples of the contentious and semantic nature of the debate nearly sixty years after the promulgation of the constitution. An extended piece entitled ‘Modern Japan’s Defeat: The Showa Emperor’s Indecision’, in the format of a discussion between author Masayoshi Hosaka and academic Kenichi Matsumoto, begins with Hosaka’s claim that the phrase ‘war responsibility’ is itself a controversial term, given, he asserts, its historical connection to the post-war far-left (*Chūō Kōron*, 2006).

The continued enshrinement of war criminals was even condemned by Yasuhiro Nakasone, whose appearance at Yasukuni on 15 August 1985 had been the last official prime ministerial visit to the shrine to take place on the anniversary of Japan’s surrender prior to Koizumi’s. Nakasone, in comments made to reporters on the day that Koizumi made his controversial pilgrimage, said that ‘one cannot visit the shrine in a private capacity while in the position of prime minister or LDP president’ (*Japan Times*, 2006c). Instead, Nakasone argued, ‘the prime minister’s job is to make it possible for the emperor to pay respects before the spirits of the war dead’, comments which should be viewed in the context of the recent revelation that Emperor Hirohito had ceased his annual visit to Yasukuni after the enshrinement of the Class-A war criminals in 1978. This revelation was seized upon by newspaper editorialists and opinion writers, who sought to emphasise that visiting Yasukuni in any capacity could not be so easily undertaken without implicitly supporting the enshrinement of the Class-A war criminals.

Despite being denounced by numerous political allies, Koizumi’s popularity with the electorate remained relatively stable. A *Jiji Press* poll showed a dip of just 2.2 points in the outgoing PM’s approval rating during the month of August, suggesting that the negative publicity and

international outcry had failed to significantly tip the scales. To return to the strategic narrative framework, Koizumi had folded the controversy into his carefully constructed ‘maverick’ narrative. By visiting Yasukuni on the anniversary of Japan’s surrender, Koizumi had fulfilled his election promise, utilising his visit to Yasukuni as an effective tool with which beat China and South Korea, two nations that he had positioned as antagonists in the story of Japan’s return to glory. He bowed out of office, in the eyes of his supporters, having delivered – or at least having set Japan on the path to – the narrative resolution he had promised in 2001.

Table 2: Koizumi’s strategic narrative

Koizumi’s Narrative	Strategic
Actor	Koizumi, Japan
Setting(s)	East Asia, Japan
Conflict	Japan’s economic and political decline following the ‘lost decade’ of the 1990s
Tool	A more proactive and self-confident approach to politics, including belligerent foreign policies (embodied by Koizumi) to reassert Japan’s regional leadership and restore national pride, and neoliberal economic policies to revive the Japanese economy
Resolution	The reestablishment of a proud nation and productive economy

The Role of Electoral Reform

The importance of electoral reforms within the LDP should also be examined when analysing the comparative successes and failures of Koizumi and Abe as national leaders during this period. Koizumi owed his success in the 2001 leadership election to crucial changes made to the process by which the LDP elected its president following the collapse of the Obuchi and Mori administrations in 2000 and 2001. Obuchi, who suffered a debilitating stroke while in office, was replaced by the divisive Mori Yoshiro, whose government rapidly lost public

confidence. As Mori had been chosen to replace Obuchi by factional leaders, discontent with the party's internal processes had grown amongst the wider membership, and party rules were changed to allow the party membership a greater democratic voice in selecting its president. As a result of the disastrous Mori premiership, prefectural chapters – whose influence in selecting the LDP leader was greatly outweighed by that of the Diet members themselves – demanded and won in 2001 greater portion of the vote in LDP presidential elections (McElwain and Umeda, 2011, pp.178-179). LDP regulations had stated that whenever four or more candidates put themselves forward for the leadership, the vote would be expanded to the prefectural chapters. However, prior to 2001, the prefectural chapters had been endowed with just a single vote each. Under the new rules, each chapter would receive three votes. Though the factional leaders may have believed that their influence would still remain decisive – factions exerted control over many key regional figures – they were wrongfooted by the decision of many chapters to hold 'primary' style elections amongst their membership.

This change handed much greater power to the rank-and-file members, and ensured that candidates would have to pay greater attention to their needs and demands. This allowed Koizumi, the quintessential media campaigner who was adored by much of the party rank-and-file, to win the 2001 presidential election despite his lack of factional support amongst LDP lawmakers (Kabashima and Steel, 2007, p.101). Koizumi, whose media skills made him perfectly suited to this outward-looking form of campaigning, and disadvantaged poor media performers who were more adept at backroom dealing within the party. As Aurelia George Mulgan notes in her book on Koizumi's economic reforms, the 2001 LDP presidential election was the first in which the leader of the largest faction had failed to win, and the first that an avowedly anti-faction candidate had succeeded (2013, p.46). 2001 was not Koizumi's first run at the presidency; he had launched unsuccessful campaigns in 1995 and 1998. Whilst other

variables (opposition candidates, the wider fortunes of the party, the salience of particular domestic and international issues, etc.) must be borne in mind, the change to the structure of the presidential election in 2001 was crucial. Koizumi was able to campaign on populist issues that may have harmed his chances of winning over factional leaders, but appealed to the grassroots membership – most notably his pledge to visit Yasukuni Shrine, a topic he had avoided in his previous campaigns (Sasada, 2010, p.5).

This shift to a ‘primary’ system redolent of the manner in which US political parties select their leaders allowed candidates with ideologically more ‘extreme’ positions to run populist campaigns (Sasada, 2010). While factional influence remained considerable, a candidate such as Koizumi, who was skilled at distilling and projecting a clear political narrative that would appeal to his public audience, was able to generate such a strong sense of momentum by winning the vote of the prefectural chapters (who, crucially, voted before the Diet members) that many lawmakers felt either pressured or emboldened to lend him their vote. Under these new rules, Koizumi came close to winning a clean sweep of the prefectural vote – in the end he secured the nomination of 42 of the 47 prefectural chapters (Park, 2001, p.458).

Earlier than the 2001 LDP electoral reform, though, was the 1994 electoral reform law that was passed by the coalition government in an attempt to prevent the LDP from restoring their grip on power. The 1994 law is best known for modifying the makeup of the electoral map and how representatives were chosen in each district. The law introduced single-member districts (SMDs), which partially replaced the mixed-member districts (MMDs) that had made up the electoral map since the beginning of the post-war period (Kaihara, 2007, p.750). The effect of the MMDs, under which parties would field multiple candidates to try and win multiple seats in the same district, was to strengthen the influence of factions. A candidate who was running

against other members of their own party needed to stand out – factions could provide financial backing, training, and support networks (Kaihara, 2007, p.751). In an SMD, running solely against candidates from other parties, however, the candidate becomes much more reliant on the overall party label for success, rather than the support of a key faction.

Another change enacted by the 1994 law that would ultimately prove beneficial for a charismatic individual such as Koizumi was an attempt to curtail the financial influence of intra-party factions. The law made it illegal to donate directly to a faction within a party – instead, donations must be made to the party itself, or an individual candidate. Though the legislation did not succeed in removing the influence of party factions from Japanese politics altogether, it did weaken them and their ability to distribute funds to chosen candidates (Krauss and Pekkanen, 2011, chapter 5). This, in combination with electoral reform within the LDP, would allow Koizumi to successfully run as an ‘outsider’ within his own party, and put forward a narrative of ‘smashing’ the LDP – something no faction-vetted candidate would ever be afforded the latitude to do. The law failed in its purpose of curtailing LDP power and ending one-party politics – the LDP would return to government within two years and remain the dominant force in Japanese politics until 2009. Its impact on internal LDP politics, however, was crucial to the rise of Koizumi and the growing ‘presidentialization’ of Japanese politics (Krauss and Nyeblade, 2005; Mishima, 2019).

These reforms, then, not only allowed Koizumi to seize control of and govern the LDP as a maverick; they also resulted in the arrogation of greater power in the PM’s office. No longer entirely dependent on factional support – although a candidate backed by the largest factions of course maintained a distinct advantage – leadership contenders with a distinct vision for the nation had greater latitude to run their own campaigns. Abe, as Koizumi’s chosen successor

and beneficiary of these reforms, had the political space to chart his own narrative course. Given also that Abe had made his name as hawkish nationalist through his championing of the cause of Japanese who had been abducted by the North Korean regime, it does not seem inconceivable that he would have picked up his mentor's populist mantle and taken his narrative to the membership and the public. As we shall see, however, in 2006 and 2007 at least, he conspicuously failed to do so.

The September 2006 LDP leadership election and Abe's 'strategy of vagueness'

The LDP leadership election that propelled Abe to the prime ministership took place in a context of rising nationalism and increasingly fractious debate over war responsibility and the nature of Japan's relations with her East Asian neighbours, fuelled by the unabashedly nationalist rhetoric of the Koizumi administration. It is within this social and political context that Abe's strategic narrative must be understood. As a result of this roiling political debate, and the reality that he simply needed to maintain momentum as the clear favourite to become the next party leader, Abe chose to steer what might be seen as a 'safe' course through the campaign period. He elected not to officially announce his candidacy until just two weeks prior to the election, thus truncating the most intense period of scrutiny he would be likely to face, whilst he also took a studiously non-committal approach in response to charged questions on divisive issues. While this approach may have helped Abe avoid any potential mines in the waters of the presidential election campaign, it also ensured that he entered office as something of a prime ministerial non-entity, with the public unsure what an Abe Shinzō premiership might entail. As we shall see in chapter three, this approach is in marked contrast to the focused

campaign Abe would run upon his return to front-line politics in 2012; it also resulted in an election story which lacked key components of a successful strategic narrative.

During the month prior to the leadership election, as we have seen, the Yasukuni Shrine controversy dominated Japanese political news. Between 5 August and 21 September, the day Abe took office as prime minister, Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni, or stories related to the fallout it caused, appeared on the front page of the Japan Times no less than fifteen times, as well as several previews for page two stories linked to Yasukuni. Significantly, the first of these stories, on 5 August, concerned the revelation that Abe himself had visited Yasukuni in April of that year. Though the story was not officially confirmed by Abe or his staff, Yasukuni staff claimed that the Chief Cabinet Secretary had signed the shrine's visitors' book using his full government title (Japan Times, 2006a). Though front-page stories abated during the official 10-day campaign period from 10 September – partially due to a press holiday, coverage of the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US, and the announcement that the convicted mastermind of the 1995 Tokyo sarin gas attacks, Shoko Asahara, had had an appeal rejected by the supreme court (Asahi Shimbun, 2006a, Yomiuri Shimbun, 2006a) – Yasukuni- and East Asian diplomacy-related stories remained a prominent subject of discussion in the media.

As an *Asahi* editorial argued following Abe's candidacy announcement, the leadership election represented a crucial opportunity for Abe to articulate what his administration might look like. The *Asahi* editorial stated, 'more than anything else, this is an important chance to make clear to the public whether or not Abe has the attributes of a prime minister' (Asahi Shimbun, 2006b). However, Abe's approach differed markedly from that called for by the *Asahi*. Instead, he chose what might be seen as the 'safe' option, offering few concrete policy proposals, and

remaining vague in his statements on potentially controversial issues such as Yasukuni. By maintaining a studious distance from incendiary topics, Abe was able to avoid the sort of gaffe which might have weakened his support from within the party; yet he also denied himself the opportunity to define his own political narrative at a crucial juncture. The comparison with Koizumi is once again revealing in its stark differences. Though Koizumi generated controversy with his unequivocal support for Yasukuni, his lack of ambiguity also ensured vocal backing from those sections of the party and public that shared his views (Deans, 2007). By framing the visits as a ‘matter of the heart’ (Deans, 2007, p.276), Koizumi also folded his Yasukuni policy into his wider political narrative of a maverick politician exhibiting strong leadership and restoring pride in the nation’s history. Abe, on the other hand, by failing to take a clear stance on the issue, ensured that he was trusted by neither the nationalist wing of the public and LDP, nor did he fully reassure those with more moderate, conciliatory hopes for Japan’s foreign policy. The theme of Abe’s political narrative was muddy and uncertain from day one, undermining his ability to build a sufficient coalition of support to govern effectively.

The *Asahi* editorial mentioned in the previous paragraph provides an insight into how Abe’s narrative was perceived by the media. The paper focused in particular on Abe’s pledge to ‘create a new country’, by ‘breaking away from the post-war regime’ (Asahi Shimbun, 2006b), as stated in his candidacy announcement the previous day. Although the phrase itself was evocative, the editorial noted, Abe failed to provide a concrete sense of how this break from the past would be brought about; nor did he spell out what this ‘new country’ might look like. The *Asahi* editorial board returned to this theme on 21 September, following Abe’s victory in the presidential election, arguing that the lack of a serious challenger allowed Abe to assume leadership of the nation without having to state his policy positions (Asahi Shimbun, 2006d). In a passage which seems ironic in hindsight, with the knowledge of Abe’s subsequent collapse,

the editorial suggested that the LDP had selected Abe because it saw him as a ‘face’ capable of delivering victory in the next general election. Presciently, the editorial warned that, although young politicians are expected to make inadvisable statements, Abe’s lack of experience suggests that his speech and conduct might have negative consequences for his popularity.

A left-wing paper such as the *Asahi* might have been expected to raise concerns about a conservative potential PM. However, the right-wing *Yomiuri*, although supportive of Abe’s candidacy, echoed some of the concerns put forward by the *Asahi*. In an editorial on 21 September, the *Yomiuri* criticised Abe’s ‘strategy of vagueness’, and lamented the lack of concrete proposals put forward during the campaign (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2006b). Abe’s campaign, the *Yomiuri* argued, emphasised ambiguous notions such as ‘innovation’ and linking Japan’s growth to that of the wider region, and did not outline a concrete strategy for the new administration. The editorial also suggested that on the issue of Yasukuni in particular, Abe the prime minister would not be able to follow the same ‘strategy of vagueness’ favoured by Abe the LDP presidential candidate. Though the *Yomiuri*’s criticism could hardly be characterised as scathing, it was nonetheless damaging to Abe that his natural allies in the media were not able to discern a narrative in his campaign, contributing to the lack of enthusiasm for his candidacy and an apprehension about his political capability which would follow him into office.

Public reaction to Abe’s victory was underwhelming. Although an *Asahi* poll, conducted immediately following his election success, suggested that 59% of the public thought that the result was ‘good’ (*yokatta*), only 29% believed that Abe possessed strong leadership qualities (*tuyoi riidashippu ga aru*) (Asahi Shimbun, 2006c). Perhaps even more telling, 42% of

respondents replied that they felt Abe was ‘vague’ (*aimai ni shiteiru*) about his ideas and beliefs, compared to 38% of the public that believed he explained his ideas and beliefs clearly (*kichinto setumei shiteiru*). As the article points out, this suggests that as Abe was entering office there was already a clear discrepancy between the public’s view of the new prime minister, and Abe’s claim that he was a ‘fighting politician’. We can only guess how the existence of settled and focused DPJ leadership might have impacted on Abe’s campaign strategy, but it does not seem a great leap of faith to argue that, had he been forced to engage in public debate with a credible political opposition, Abe would have had little choice but to offer a more compelling and policy-informed narrative.

From the outset, Abe’s prime ministership was undermined by his inability to construct a narrative with a clear thread linking past, present, and a possible future. His campaign did not effectively articulate to the Japanese people ‘this is where we have come from, this is where we will go, and this is how I will navigate us there.’ Furthermore, by failing to construct a clear narrative at the beginning of his presidential campaign, Abe ceded space for his political rivals and a sceptical media to provide the public with a compelling counter-narrative of his administration. The muted and underwhelmed reaction to Abe’s campaign can be understood through the prism of his confusing narrative. Though Abe had mentioned vague notions of ‘innovation’ and trailed the concept of a ‘new country’, he had failed, in constructing his story, to convincingly outline a conflict that his government was uniquely capable of overcoming, the tools that he would utilise to overcome this conflict, and the resolution to the nation’s political narrative that the Abe administration would offer.

As it was, despite concerns over his lack of clarity and concerns over his political vision, Abe secured a comfortable victory in the presidential election, thanks largely to his status as the

chosen successor of one of the nation's most enduring and popular prime ministers. Once faced with the realities of the office, however, Abe quickly discovered that narrative ambiguity and contradiction can cause significant damage to political credibility. Next, I shall examine the various crises that engulfed the Abe government, and Abe's responses, which often contradicted and undermined his narrative even as he attempted to define it.

The first Abe administration: a succession of crises

Abe Shinzō's first administration was beset by numerous crises. In fact, it was the collective impact of these crises on the public consciousness which was to define his short-lived government. In this section, I will focus on three events that were particularly damaging to Abe's narrative: the 'comfort women' crisis, the pension records scandal, and the expenses scandal (and subsequent suicide of cabinet minister Matsuoka Toshikatsu). These three case studies are particularly pertinent as they were directly related to the two policy areas in which Abe could most credibly claim success, foreign policy, and the economy, and undermined his narrative during the approach to the July 2007 House of Councillors election, his defeat in which would ultimately precipitate the collapse of his administration.

The 'comfort women' issue refers to a long-simmering dispute between Japan and her East Asian neighbours, primarily China and South Korea, over the forced prostitution by the Japanese army of thousands of women (known euphemistically as 'comfort women') during the Second World War. China, Korea, and other former Japanese colonies have demanded contrition from Japan for this sexual slavery; these demands have been variously met by apologies and rebuttals by Japanese governments. (Izumi, 2011, Jonsson, 2015, Kim and Sohn,

2017, Matsumura, 2007, Soh, 2008). In this instance, the ‘comfort women’ crisis was primarily one of Abe’s own making and was in seeming contradiction to what had been a conciliatory approach to foreign relations during the early months of the Abe administration. The May 2007 issue of *Chūō Kōron* dedicated a special collection of essays to the threat to the US-Japan alliance posed by Abe’s comments regarding the Japanese military’s wartime impressment of ‘comfort women’ (Chūō Kōron, 2007b). Abe’s comments, a response to a US



Figure 4: A demonstrator protests Shinzō Abe's remarks on the 'comfort women' (Source: Reuters Pictures)

House congressional committee resolution

denouncing Japan for enslaving foreign women during wartime and forcing them to serve as sex slaves for Japanese soldiers, proved damaging to his narrative, which had previously focused on regional cooperation as a tool for restoring national pride. The House committee heard testimony not only from former comfort women, who accused the Japanese government of ‘always trying to resolve this issue at its own convenience’ (Ito, 2007), but also from the Japanese political establishment. DPJ Upper House lawmaker, Masayoshi Nakaniya, who sat on the committee panel, stated his embarrassment that it was the US government, rather than that of Japan, which had taken on the responsibility of addressing the plight of the comfort women (Ito, 2007).

The committee hearings prompted responses from the victims of Japan’s wartime actions and, in turn, further international refutations of Abe’s comments. On 20 February, South Korean

newspaper *The Korea Times* published an editorial in which it asked, ‘how long should Japan be fettered by historical self-denial?’ (The Korea Times, 2007). Following this, on 2 March, South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun said in a speech that ‘we hope that Japan will not try to glorify or justify a mistaken past but instead show sincerity by following conscience and the international community’s generally accepted precedent’ (Japan Times, 2007e). A Korea Times article, reprinted in the Japan Times, noted that Abe’s denial was not just a ‘fleeting gaffe’, but came at a time when his personal approval rating had fallen to half of its peak (Japan Times, 2007b). At an International Women’s Day forum at the United Nation’s University in Shibuya, speaker Andrew Horvat even compared Abe’s questioning of ‘incontrovertible evidence’ to the actions of Holocaust deniers in Europe (Japan Times, 2007c). In response, Abe chose to go on the defensive. On the same day that President Roh delivered his speech, Abe claimed that ‘there has been a debate over the question of whether there was coercion...but the fact is, there was no evidence to prove there was no evidence to prove there was coercion as initially suggested’ (Japan Times, 2007f). If Abe had been prepared to commit to his narrative of conciliation, then this could have been a high-profile opportunity to deliver on it. Instead, he chose to undermine his narrative by taking an approach which offended Japan’s regional rivals and offered justification to those in the media who doubted Abe’s dovish credentials.

Though Abe’s comfort women comments would have been ill-advised in any situation, the damage they caused to Abe’s electoral popularity was not pre-ordained. The comments produced particularly negative consequences in large part because they contradicted the narrative of regional cooperation and shared prosperity that Abe had previously been constructing. Koizumi and key ministers within his cabinet had made similarly incendiary comments about the comfort women throughout his term in office, which were compounded

by his administration's attempts to remove references to wartime sex slavery from school history textbooks (Takayama, 2009, pp.582-583), yet the harm caused to his popularity was minimal as the comments were in keeping with his overarching belligerent 'maverick' narrative. Perhaps just as importantly, Koizumi modulated his rhetoric to match the tone of his narrative. Early in his first term as prime minister, before the narrative of Koizumi an independent, effective, and headstrong leader had taken root in the public consciousness, Koizumi had written an official letter to the comfort women, offering his sincere remorse for the wartime government's actions (Koizumi, 2001). It was only once Koizumi had established his 'maverick' credentials that he felt emboldened enough to take a revisionist approach to Japan's wartime history that chimed with his increasingly strident nationalist narrative. Abe's comments, on the other hand, had the opposite effect: they undermined his already shaky political narrative and bolstered those of his political rivals; this proved to be a severe political miscalculation in the run-up to the July elections.

A June 2007 *Chūō Kōron* interview with Sekō Hiroshige (Ōsa, 2007) also highlights the impact of two other government scandals on Abe's political narrative during the months and weeks leading up to the House of Councillors election. Sekō was questioned about the successive resignations of Honma Masaaki, chief of the government tax panel, over the improper use of his apartment (Jiji Press, 2006), and Sata Gen'ichirō, state minister in charge of administrative reform, over illegal corporate donations (Tabuchi, 2006). Compounding this was Health, Labour and Welfare Minister Yanagisawa Hakuo's comments describing women as 'birth-giving machines' (Kyodo News, 2007b), and an expenses scandal involving Matsuoka Toshikatsu, the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, which would ultimately result in Matsuoka's death by suicide on the day he was due to be questioned in the Diet (Tabuchi,

2007). Pressure was mounting on the PM and his key allies to deliver a convincing, conclusive response to the chaos.

Faith in the government's administrative capability was also undermined by the revelation in May 2007 that the Social Insurance Agency (SIA) had failed to maintain adequate records and could not trace pension records linked to 64 million claims (El-Agraa, 2009, pp.195-198). Following discussions with affected pensioners, opposition leader Ozawa Ichirō criticised the government for its 'careless' (*zusan na*) response, and called for a thorough investigation into the loss of records (Asahi Shimbun, 2007d). Despite this barrage of criticism, Abe could legitimately deny that his government was responsible for the problem: the loss of records was traced back to the digitisation of records in the 1990s, under a previous LDP government. However, this mea culpa was undermined by reports that Abe had been notified about the data loss in late 2006 and had chosen not to notify the public. This revelation reinforced the opposition's narrative that Abe was administratively incompetent and politically indecisive. In the crucial weeks prior to the election, when Abe would have hoped to have been laying out his post-election narrative of Japan's future under his premiership, the prime minister was instead focused on crisis control and mitigating the damage of these various scandals to himself and the party.

On 25 May 2007, Abe made a statement to the Diet about the recent revelations that the Social Insurance Agency (SIA) had misplaced data on 50 million pension payments, and that an unknown number of pensioners were not receiving correct payments (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2007f). Two days later, on 28 May, Farm Minister Matsuoka Toshikatsu died by suicide in his home, following his implication in an expenses scandal. The *Yomiuri* reported that Matsuoka's political fund management body had declared 142 million yen as expenses for rent and utilities,

despite being based in a rent-free public office building which did not charge for water or electricity (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2007j). Matsuoka's was the first suicide by a sitting cabinet member since the end of the war (Asahi Shimbun, 2007g). This human tragedy, combined with the expenses scandal to which it was connected and the ongoing pension scandal, posed an existential threat to the Abe administration. The media, in particular those newspapers that were ideologically opposed to Abe's politics, seized the opportunity to tell the public a story of an incompetent executive who could not be trusted to lead the nation.

These scandals came to dominate the narrative around the Abe administration, and public opinion began to turn against the prime minister and his cabinet. A Kyodo News poll in early June 2007 found that Abe's approval rating had fallen by almost 12 percentage points since mid-May and the double scandals of Matsuoka's death and the pension records revelation, to a new low for his premiership of 35.8 percent (Kyodo News, 2007a). An Asahi poll the same week suggested the situation for Abe was even worse than indicated by the Kyodo poll, with respondents giving the cabinet an approval rating of just 30 percent (Asahi Shimbun, 2007b). That these scandals would result in the collapse of Abe's government may appear obvious at first glance – surely such a succession of negative news stories would prove fatal to any administration? Yet we have seen that Koizumi weathered the storm of similar scandals, such as the sacking of Tanaka Makiko and the resignations of Katō Kōichi and Suzuki and managed to salvage his political credibility by crafting an astute strategic narrative allowed the prime minister to take a tough approach to the political infighting and corruption within his party. Abe, on the other hand, prevaricated, attempting where possible to cover-up scandals and preserve his cabinet.

In response to this loss of public confidence, the government attempted to address the issue in the Diet, passing a bill which required politicians' fund management bodies to report expenditures over 50,000 yen. This was dismissed by the political opposition as 'full of loopholes' and 'pointless' (Japan Times, 2007d). Abe also pushed through a bill which would reform the SIA. Abe failed, however, to provide a clear and publicly acceptable explanation of the root causes of the scandal, muddying his narrative further. The *Asahi* seized this opportunity and published an editorial on 29 June which argued that no-one within the government had taken responsibility for, or adequately explained the cause of, the loss of the records (Asahi Shimbun, 2007f). As the Abe government approached the election, its campaign was undermined by its focus on passing legislation in response to these various crises. Though an extension of the Diet session allowed Abe to push through these controversial bills and claim that he was addressing the root causes of these scandals, the extension was instead viewed as a futile and divisive Hail Mary by an administration on the verge of collapse. This period was decisive and exposed both the debilitating impact of Abe's failure to create a clear narrative for his administration during his first year, as well as his inability to craft a new narrative for the upcoming election. Unlike Koizumi, who had mitigated the impact of scandals through adept deployment of his 'maverick' narrative, Abe simply appeared out of control of his own administration and preoccupied with fire-fighting scandals rather than governing the country.

External Factors

There were, of course, other factors outside of Abe's control which prevented him from maintaining control over his own narrative. The importance of *gaiatsu*, or outside pressure from the United States, exacerbated by Japan's reliance on the American security umbrella as a bulwark against potential Chinese aggression, for example, is often cited as a major

influencing factor on the policy approaches of Japanese premiers (Cooney, 2015, chapter 7). Abe and Koizumi, however, demonstrated the limitations of this influence. Although both leaders sought to maintain and develop the close security and diplomatic relationship between Japan and the US, both leaders pursued conflicting approaches to their East Asian foreign policy. Where Koizumi chose belligerence, Abe sought to reconstruct diplomatic relations with China, demonstrated most clearly by his rapprochement with the Chinese leadership after Koizumi's incendiary remarks and visits to Yasukuni. Abe may not have succeeded in portraying himself as an independent thinker or visionary leader to the Japanese people, but he did attempt to follow his own path in foreign policy matters nonetheless. The impact of *gaiatsu* itself more broadly has also been contested, with Kevin Cooney arguing it is little more than a 'myth', and is simply 'just a form of leverage within Japanese politics, rather than as a primary explanatory source why Japan makes the choices that it does' (2015, p.138).

Election Campaign 2007

Abe's Narrative

On 5 July, the first official day of the House of Councillors election campaign, Abe stated at a press conference that 'if [Abe the LDP] can clearly and simply communicate [our] achievements and our plans for the nation [we] can be sure of victory' (Asahi Shimbun, 2007c). During the election campaign that followed, however, Abe and his party were unable to achieve this, as the Prime Minister proved incapable of projecting a narrative that reassured voters that his administration possessed a compelling vision for the nation's future. In the same press conference Abe admitted that it was 'natural to question a prime minister's leadership and trustworthiness' (Asahi Shimbun, 2007c); the PM would fail to answer these questions

adequately by election day. The opposition immediately sought to put Abe on the back foot by calling on him to make clear his intentions regarding the consumption tax. The DPJ argued that if Abe was planning to raise the consumption tax, he should do make it clear prior to the election (Asahi Shimbun, 2007e). Following this, during an appearance on Nihon Terebi on the evening of 5 July, Abe stated that he would ‘not say a single word on not raising the consumption tax’ (Asahi Shimbun, 2007e).

A Yomiuri online poll of nearly 1,000 respondents on the Prime Minister’s image and that of DPJ leader Ozawa Ichirō, conducted between 29 June and 3 July, did not make positive reading for Abe and his government as they prepared for the election (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2007c). Although the results indicated that the public trusted Abe more than they did his rival, only 25 percent of respondents rated the Prime Minister as ‘trustworthy’, hardly a ringing endorsement. When asked which of the two candidates possessed greater leadership ability, however, 37 percent of respondents opted for Ozawa, 13 points greater than those who selected Abe. Among those who voted for the LDP in the 2005 election, 30 percent now believed that the DPJ’s leader possessed the requisite leadership skills to be prime minister, while only 23 percent said the same of the leader of the party they had voted for, with 45 percent responding that Abe was not capable of effective leadership.

In a 6 July editorial, the Yomiuri Shimbun called for an election campaign fought through meaningful debate, with clearly articulated ‘responsible policies’ (*sekinin aru seisaku*) (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2007k). In its pre-campaign overview, published on the same day, the paper highlighted Abe’s attempts to project an election narrative of competing political ideas between the two major parties, quoting the Prime Minister as saying ‘this is an election about asking whether what is said by Abe Shinzō and what is said by Ozawa Ichirō is persuasive and

correct' (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2007b). Ultimately, the paper concluded that Abe was correct in one sense: the key to the election was 'what will [they] do?'. In other words, which of the two parties would be able to offer the most compelling set of policies on which to construct their governments?

Abe's narrative was even criticized by some within his own party. At a campaign event on 16 July, LDP House of Councillors candidate for Kōchi, Tamura Kōhei, stated in reference to Abe's 'beautiful country' rhetoric that '[I] don't really understand what it means', and called instead for concrete investment in disaster prevention in areas such as Kōchi (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2007d).

Another Yomiuri poll, conducted between 14 and 16 July and reported on 18 July, suggested that, nearly half-way through the election campaign, Abe was struggling to change perceptions of himself and his government (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2007a). According to the poll results, public support for the Abe Cabinet had dropped below 30 percent, comparable to the level of support received by former PM Hashimoto at the 1998 Upper House election and approximately 6 percent lower than that enjoyed by Koizumi at the previous House of Councillors election in 2004, according to polls conducted by the Yomiuri at the time. In 1998 Hashimoto had led the LDP to defeat, losing 13 seats and failing to obtain control of the House. In 2004, the considerably more popular Koizumi had achieved only a modest gain of five seats for the LDP. Though one should not place much weight on the results of a single newspaper poll, the numbers reflected the general sense of dissatisfaction with Abe, his government, and the LDP.

The Opposition Counter-Narrative

As alluded to in the previous section, a complicating factor for Abe in his attempts to shape the narrative terrain during his first administration was the resurgence of the opposition, with the DPJ emerging as a unified, centrist political force under the leadership of former LDP heavyweight, Ozawa Ichirō. A lack of cohesion amongst opposition parties, particularly following the fracturing of the short-lived Hosokawa coalition government of 1993-4 – the organisation of which Ozawa had played a key role in – had allowed the LDP to reassert its dominance over the Japanese political system in the years after it regained its status as a governing party in 1994. During the period from 1996 to 2006, no truly viable challenger to the LDP emerged, and although the DPJ did make steady but modest gains under the leadership of future prime ministers Kan and Hatoyama in general and Upper House elections from 1998 to 2003, and a merger with Ozawa's Liberal Party in 2003 cemented its position as the most likely threat to LDP dominance. However, the party suffered a major setback in the 2005 general election, as Okada Katsuya was comprehensively defeated by Koizumi (Kabashi and Steel, 2010, p.132). Okada resigned following the defeat, and was replaced by Maehara Seiji, who would himself resign in April 2006 amidst a bribery scandal, allowing Ozawa to finally assume leadership of the party (Oka, 2011, pp.128-129). Despite his past record of scandal and a history of defections and rebellions, Ozawa had a well-earned reputation for effective campaigning and party organisation, and his leadership would contribute to the party's emergence as a credible challenger to renewed LDP hegemony, and provide an alternative vision for Japan's political future.

Oka Takashi notes that Ozawa understood the importance of 'critical junctures' - in Oka's words, a moment which 'would pull a nation, a political party, or a movement, out of one familiar form of path dependence into a new, unfamiliar path,' but what can also be understood as a crisis that can be placed within a strategic narrative (2011, p.130). DPJ victory in the Chiba

by-election of April 2006, shortly after Ozawa succeeded Maehara, provided early impetus to the new leader's claim to offer a viable alternative to the LDP (Oka, 2011, p.131). The DPJ were handed another stroke of good fortune just a few months later as the larger-than-life Koizumi stepped down as prime minister and turned over the reins of power to Abe.

Ozawa and the DPJ sought to counter Abe's campaign by projecting a narrative of LDP corruption and incompetence. The DPJ leader argued that the election was 'the best and final chance' for the nation to change its political course (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2007b). They were aided by the ongoing revelations regarding the Minister for Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF), Akagi Norihiko. Akagi, who had been appointed his Cabinet position following the suicide of the former MAFF minister, Matsuoka Toshikatsu, was accused of expenses fraud at his office in his home prefecture. Ozawa seized on the issue as further evidence of the Abe Cabinet's corruption, stating that 'this is a financial situation that [Akagi] is unable to explain. It appears that the Abe administration cannot secure the trust of the public because it has too many of these sorts of situations' (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2007m). According to reports, Akagi's support committee (*kōenkai*) had misappropriated approximately 1.2 million yen over a three period (Asahi Shimbun, 2007i). In the DPJ's election manifesto, Ozawa signed off his opening statement with the line 'I will not fail to deliver' (*watashi ha kanarazu*) and introduced his political vision with the statement 'Japanese politics must change' (*nihon no seiji ha kawaranebanaranai*) (archive.dpj.or.jp, 2023).

Ozawa's DPJ sought to differentiate itself from the LDP less through substantive policy differences and more through effective messaging. Ozawa understood that many classic LDP policies such as rural investment (pork barrel politics) and agricultural protectionism were

popular vote-winners and shifted focus away from traditional areas of DPJ attack such as tax surcharges and refuelling in the Indian Ocean, which were not seen as of great interest to the general public (Kabashima and Steel, 2010, pp.140-141). As Kabashima and Steel explain, during the Koizumi-era ‘the differences between the mainstreams of the two parties were not major policy rifts’ (2010, p.140) - perhaps unsurprising given the presence of many ex-LDP lawmakers among the DPJ’s front ranks. Where the DPJ of Ozawa differed most from that of Kan, Okada, and Maehara was in its messaging, and projecting an image of competence in contrast to the LDP’s chaos. In the 2007 upper house election that would shift the balance of power in Japanese politics, Ozawa toured the country, both physically and virtually (through his campaign materials), demonstrating the DPJ’s renewed commitment to rural voters, as the party sought to detach the LDP from its traditional base (Kabashima and Steel, 2010, p.142). Ozawa and the DPJ offered a story through their advertisements, focusing on the daily lives of the average Japanese: one set of advertisements brought the voter into the DPJ’s narrative by placing them front and centre, providing a platform for ‘ordinary people’ to talk about their anxieties (Kabashima and Steel, 2010, p.142). Two posters reproduced by Kabashima and Steel depict Ozawa’s face in close-up, alongside the slogan ‘The Japanese people’s livelihoods are number one’ (*kokumin no seikatsu ga daiichi*) and the campaign’s central message ‘create a new livelihood’ (*atarashii seikatsu wo tsukuru*) (2010, p.143).

Ozawa, then, had shifted the DPJ’s approach to political campaigning. This would not reap political dividends, however, unless the Japanese public received the message as intended.

The Media Narrative

The media narrative was, to a strong degree, influenced by the scandals that continued to emerge from the government during the election campaign. An Asahi editorial on 9 July, in the wake of the scandal around Agriculture Minister Akagi, was scathing of Abe's administration and its inability to prevent corruption and mismanagement.

'It has happened, again. Unnatural accounting by the offices of one of the members of the Abe Cabinet has come to light. It's tedious. Enough is enough. Aren't there many of them [cabinet members] who give this sort of impression?

Agriculture and Fisheries Minister Akagi Norihiko is, of all people, successor to former Agriculture and Fisheries Minister Matsuoka, who died by suicide. Matsuoka, who when investigated in the Diet over his massive payments for heat and electricity costs, gave the ridiculous excuse that it was due to "some sort of water purifier". His successor now finds himself with a similar problem.

(...) In this instance too, Mr Akagi and Prime Minister Abe are trying to justify the situation by simply saying "there is no problem" and "we have explained [the situation] properly". But do they really think that there is any person who is likely to accept this explanation?' (Asahi Shimbun, 2007h)

The Yomiuri, though less hostile in tone, also called for greater clarity regarding the accusations aimed at Akagi. In the paper's editorial on 10 July, it asked 'ought not Agriculture Minister Akagi give a more thorough explanation regarding the office expenses scandal?' (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2007l). The Yomiuri declared that it was difficult to believe Akagi and Abe's denials unless a detailed breakdown of Akagi's support association's expenses was disclosed. At a time when the Prime Minister would have hoped that the media would be projecting his own election narrative to the public, newspaper coverage was instead dominated for several crucial days during the campaign period by stories of alleged government corruption.

In the run-up to the election, Abe's made a further error in his election campaign, choosing to focus on constitutional reform as the centrepiece of his narrative. This left him open to accusations that he was neglecting issues that were more important to the electorate, at the expense of focusing on his concrete achievements. In a *Chūō Kōron* interview in July, Edano Yukio, a DPJ lawmaker from the lower house⁵, accused Abe of concentrating on the 'comfortable' issue of constitutional reform, whilst failing to tackle the more 'concrete' issues of reforming the pension and civil service systems (Chūō Kōron, 2007a). By focusing on the still-growing economy, and the government's plans to implement structural reforms which might have stimulated further growth, or by emphasising Japan's reintegration of Japan into regional geopolitics, Abe might have, if not won the election, at least mitigated his losses. He may even have salvaged his position as prime minister, given the durability he has exhibited during his second spell in the office.

The final blow for the first Abe administration, however, came with the inevitable defeat in the July 2007 House of Councillors election, in which the LDP-Komeito coalition ceded majority control of the upper chamber. Prior to the election, the LDP and Komeito held 133 of the chamber's 242 seats between them, 11 more than the 122 required for a majority. However, the election returned just 83 seats for the LDP, and 20 for Komeito, a combined total of 103, ensuring no party had a majority, and establishing the opposition DPJ as the largest party in the House of Councillors, with 109 seats.

⁵ In 2017, Edano would become de facto leader of the opposition as head of the newly formed Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, having split from the Democratic Party in the run-up to the election following the party's decision to coordinate with the right-wing *Kibō no Tō* (Party of Hope).

Narratives of Abe	LDP Presidential Election, 2006	House of Councillors Election, 2007
Abe's narrative	Prioritised avoiding scandal and maintaining momentum as chosen successor	Crisis management, prioritising reactive policies in response to scandals
Opposition narrative	Not clearly articulated due to almost simultaneous leadership election in the DPJ	Abe focused on the 'wrong' issue of constitution; pension and bureaucratic reform more important Incompetent, unable to exert control over own government Revisionist, nationalist
Media Narrative	Abe as 'vague' and non-committal No understanding of what an Abe government might entail; what vision was offered not supported by clear policies	Abe as scandal-ridden, divisive, impotent, incompetent

Abe's Narratives	2006 LDP Presidential Election	2007 House of Councillor's Election
Actor	Abe	Abe
Setting(s)	Japan and East Asia	Japan and East Asia
Conflict	Poorly defined, attempted to portray himself as both Koizumi's natural successor, but also as a more conciliatory PM who might deescalate tensions with East Asian neighbours	Abe v Ozawa, LDP policies v DPJ policies
Tool	Unclear, lack of concrete policy proposals, equivocal and non-committal statements, largely confined to vague buzzwords such as 'innovation'	Unclear, few concrete policy ideas tabled, those which cannot cut through to the public due to the efficacy of opposition counter narratives
Resolution	Failure to clearly outline a narrative conflict necessarily resulted in lack of narrative resolution	Unclear

Table 3: Competing narratives of Shinzō Abe at the time of the LDP leadership election in 2006, and the House of Councillors election in 2007.

There are parallels that can be drawn between the Upper House election of 2007 and the Lower House election of 2005. These parallels are not obvious at first glance: the 2007 election was a scheduled election, whereas the 2005 was called surreptitiously by Koizumi to secure a mandate for his postal reform bill. Nevertheless, in both instances the elections were viewed as referendums on the prime minister and their ability to govern. Despite overwhelming internal party dissent and factional infighting – which resulted in the failure of Koizumi’s first attempt to pass the postal reform bill and predictions that the LDP would lose the election – Koizumi secured a landslide victory, emerging from the election with the highest proportion of seats obtained by a party since 1960 (Maeda, 2006). This can be attributed to Koizumi’s strong leadership and clear messaging; the prime minister was able to convince the public to support him via an ‘us versus them’ narrative, in which the voters were presented with a binary choice: return Koizumi to office and achieve economic growth through radical reform or vote for the DPJ and risk economic disaster. This electoral narrative was only effective, however, because of Koizumi’s established personal narrative of factional independence and proactive leadership (Nemoto et al., 2008).

Abe’s approach to the 2007 election, however, could hardly have been more different to that of Koizumi. Where Koizumi had established a compelling personal narrative of a ‘maverick’, ‘lone wolf’ reformist, willing to take on a corrupt party to deliver his new vision for Japan, Abe was viewed by the public as indecisive and unable to exert influence over the various LDP factions; an image which was buttressed by the mass media. Though Abe had extended the Diet session in the run-up to the election and pushed through multiple pieces of legislation in response to the recent crises, this merely served to highlight his previous failures and deprived the prime minister of the planning time required to devise and deliver a compelling election narrative. Instead, the dominant election narrative was that articulated by the media and

political opposition: a government in disarray, Abe's underwhelming response, and factional in-fighting undermining the LDP's ability to legislate.

Conclusion

As he stepped away from Japan's highest political office, Abe Shinzō in certain respects could have made a reasonable argument that his administration was a success. His government had maintained economic growth, repaired fractured relationships with Japan's East Asian neighbours, and taken a prominent role in the burgeoning international effort to combat climate change. Abe had taken a markedly different diplomatic tack from his belligerent predecessor and had improved Japan's reputation on the global stage. With more careful narrative management, the Abe government might have navigated its various scandals – or avoided them altogether - and mitigated its losses in the 2007 House of Councillors election. Koizumi Jun'ichirō had demonstrated, with his handling of various ministerial scandals and the controversy caused by his visits to Yasukuni Shrine, that with careful narrative management it was possible to obviate the potential of political scandals to cause irreparable reputational damage.

Conventional wisdom has long held that economic credibility is the most decisive factor in securing public support for a government. Bill Clinton's political strategist, James Carville, once suggested a simple formula securing public support in an election: 'it's the economy, stupid.' Edward Tufte (1978, p.65) said 'when you think economics, think elections. When you think elections, think economics.' By this yardstick, Abe Shinzō appeared to have succeeded

during his first year as PM. As Matthew Singer (2011) demonstrates using data from a cross-national survey (which included Japan), however, whilst national publics tend on average to view economic performance as the most important electoral issue, scandals or evidence of government corruption or incompetence can cause voters to reassess their views. I have demonstrated in this chapter that this is not inevitable; a strong strategic narrative can insulate a canny politician against the damaging effects of scandals and seemingly questionable political actions. Koizumi Jun'ichirō was the master of narrative control, mitigating the impact of controversial statements and policies – in some cases even utilising them to boost his popularity with his supporters – by constructing a political story in which he cast himself as an independent maverick, willing to stand up to Japan's rivals and competitors and speak his own mind. In the examples we have studied, scandals were narrativised as either the consequences of incompetent ministers who lacked Koizumi's integrity, or the positive consequences of a proactive foreign policy.

Abe Shinzō did not possess the storytelling nous of his mentor. Despite his policy successes, Abe was unable to craft a coherent political narrative capable of convincing the Japanese public to maintain their faith in his administration. His prime ministership was secured via a 'strategy of vagueness'; a vagueness which undermined his prospects of success from the beginning. By failing to provide a clear and unequivocal narrative for dealing with the key political issues facing Japan at the conclusion of the Koizumi administration, Abe also failed to build an enthusiastic base of support for his premiership. Instead, he ceded control of his narrative to his political opposition and the national media, who portrayed him as unimaginative, underwhelming, and unable to manage his own government. A succession of cabinet-level scandals, including the suicide of Agriculture Minister Matsuoka, and the emergence of an expenses scandal during the 2007 election campaign in which Matsuoka's successor, Akagi

Norihiko, was implicated, were allowed to derail the government's narrative. By attempting to downplay the severity of these scandals, despite overwhelming evidence, at a time when his political capital was already low, Abe fed the media and opposition narrative of a corrupt and incompetent administration with no clear purpose other than to secure personal profit and power. Abe carried his muddled approach to political storytelling into his premiership, undermining his burgeoning narrative of steady economic progress and Japanese regional geopolitical leadership.

Following his resignation, Abe stepped away from frontline politics. He did not resign his seat in the Diet, however, and continued to represent the 4th district of Yamaguchi as its elected representative. In the next chapter, I will explore the political and personal journey that would lead, finally, back to Nagatacho and the office of prime minister.

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Chapter Four: ‘Take Back Japan’ - A New Narrative for a New Abe

We know now that resignation in 2007 did not signal the end of Abe’s career as a frontbench politician in the LDP. At the time, however, a political comeback appeared unlikely. It was assumed by many that Abe would fade into political obscurity, perhaps assuming a role often taken up by former prime ministers, that of kingmaker and informal advisor to the next generation of LDP political leaders (Harris, 2020, p.150). Instead, Abe set about reinventing himself. A little over five years later, Abe had not only re-emerged as the most influential politician in the LDP, but he had also returned to the office of prime minister and had started down a new path which would culminate in his becoming the longest-serving Japanese prime minister in the nation’s history. It was quite simply one of the most unlikely reversals of political fortune witnessed in Japan’s post-war history.

In this chapter I will chart the development of Abe’s strategic narrative from mid-2012 to mid-2013. This timeframe encompasses Abe’s decision to stand in, and win, the LDP leadership election in September 2012, the general election campaign of December 2012, the early months of Abe’s second administration, and the House of Councillors election in July 2013. I will analyse how Abe’s narrative adapted to new political circumstances, as the shift from opposition to incumbent altered how Abe and the LDP reframed their own roles in the national story, as well as how Abe was able to dominate the narrative space as the opposition DPJ failed to construct a convincing counter-narrative. I shall demonstrate how Abe’s narrative evolved from one of ‘Take Back Japan’ in the 2012 general election campaign, to ‘Abenomics’ in 2013, as Abe’s priorities shifted from *regaining* power to *retaining* power. Before doing so, however,

it is essential to briefly outline the events and decisions that shaped Abe's decision to return from the political wilderness in 2012.

Abe in the Wilderness

Tobias Harris locates the genesis of Abe's re-emergence in October 2009, when he used a speech at the funeral of Nakagawa Shōichi to signpost his intention to return to a leadership role within the LDP. Nakagawa had been a central figure in the creation of the True Conservative Policy Study Group (*shin hōsyū seisaku kenkyū kai*), which was 'committed to rebuilding the new conservative movement after Abe's tenure' (Harris, 2020, p.149). Abe used his speech to signal his intention to carry on Nakagawa's work and assume a leadership role in the new conservative movement once again (Harris, 2020, p.150). In a physical sense, Abe's path to recovery also became much clearer in 2009, with the arrival of new medication which would allow him to manage his ulcerative colitis more effectively (Harris, 2020, p.151). With this physiological barrier effectively removed, Abe was able to refocus his energies on recapturing political influence.

For the first couple of years after the collapse of his first administration, Abe had retreated to the background of LDP politics. He sought to pay penance for his governmental mistakes, analyse his missteps, and regroup. In a speech to his supporters in his home constituency on 7 December 2007, Abe spoke of his determination to 'start again' as a member of the Diet (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2007). Having rarely visited Yamaguchi during his time as Prime Minister, Abe appeared to make a conscious effort to be more prominent in his local area, for example attending for the first time a Shimonseki high school baseball game (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2008b).

Abe did on occasion use his status as an LDP scion to attempt to set the party's agenda, for example calling on the candidates in the 2008 LDP presidential election, held following the collapse of the Asō administration, to set out their policy on the North Korean abduction issue (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2008c); in October 2008, Abe gave a short interview to the Yomiuri in response to the Bush administration's decision to remove North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, calling the move 'regrettable' (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2008a). Yet these remained relatively minor interventions and did not appear to presage the dramatic comeback that the former prime minister was beginning to contemplate. Before we examine the 2012 general election campaign in detail, then, we must analyse how Abe laid the foundation for his new narrative during his period in the political wilderness.

Foreshadowing a new narrative

As the national political situation developed in early 2012 and the popularity of the Kan Naoto government began to wane, Abe seized the opportunity to advance his own narrative ahead of a potential general election. LDP President Tanigaki Sadakazu's approval was diminishing, and the possibility of a leadership challenge was beginning to appear plausible. As such, any challenger-in-waiting would need to present their own case as an alternative LDP leadership candidate. Though Abe would not officially throw his name into the ring to succeed Tanigaki until early September, Abe was in fact planning his comeback well in advance of his formal declaration (Harris, 2020, chapter 10). Through late 2011 and the early months of 2012, Abe consciously developed his economic expertise and cultivated the economic message around which he would construct his narrative.

We have seen that in the years since 2007, Abe came to realise that, if he were to have another chance at running the country, he would have to develop a coherent economic message. Harris goes so far as to characterise this realisation as Abe's 'personal epiphany that would pave his return to power' (2020, p.169). Abe leaned heavily on the economic expertise of five-term LDP lawmaker, Yamamoto Kōzō, who had worked as parliamentary vice-minister at METI during Abe's first term. Kōzō impressed upon Abe the importance of arresting Japan's deflationary spiral, and convinced Abe of the need for a more activist Bank of Japan if the nation was to solve its economic woes (Harris, 2020, pp.169-176). In early 2012 it became clear that this economic message would form the cornerstone of Abe's revitalised strategic narrative. Harris charts Abe's conversion through an analysis of his regular columns between November 2010 and November 2012: economic issues barely feature in Abe's columns until August 2011, at which point they become a regular feature of his writing (Harris, 2012, p.175). This is reflected in heightened media coverage of Abe's economic views, particularly with regards to the DPJ's proposed consumption tax hike and Japan's deflationary spiral – I will examine this in greater detail below.

The DPJ's proposed consumption tax hike provided Abe with the opportunity to advance his new economic message and prepare the foundations for his revised strategic narrative. To address Japan's economic situation, which was struggling to recover in the aftermath of the 3/11 disaster, the Kan government proposed a consumption tax hike. In response, Abe joined calls from LDP lawmakers for a prompt dissolution of cabinet and a snap election. On 20 January, the *Asahi Shimbun* reported that Abe had argued that, as the DPJ had promised in their manifesto not to raise the consumption tax, they should first go back to the country to renew their mandate (Asahi Shimbun, 2012a). On 3 March, Abe renewed his call for the DPJ to dissolve the Diet, arguing that a dissolution should be the prerequisite for any negotiations

between the government and the LDP over the potential tax hike (Asahi Shimbun, 2012c). On 8 March, Abe, along with former LDP Secretary General, Nakagawa Hidenao, and approximately 20 other Diet members, formed a group calling for a closer relationship between the government and the Bank of Japan and a reform of monetary policy. In particular, the group called for the aim of the government's monetary policy to be broadened, to include not only price stability, but employment stability as well (Asahi Shimbun, 2012f). In doing so, Abe established that he had developed a policy toolkit to deal with the economic crisis at the centre of his narrative.

Abe's messaging throughout the spring was characterised by a consistent reinforcement of his proposed economic policies. In an interview with the *Yomiuri Shimbun* on 8 April, Abe argued that the government's economic priority must be to eliminate deflation (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2012). Then on 8 June, at an LDP campaign event in Saitama's 6th District, Abe framed prioritising the reversal of inflation as the antidote to a crisis exacerbated by the current government. In his speech, he criticised the DPJ for their plan to increase the consumption tax, arguing that the consumption tax should not be raised while the current economic situation continued, and that the 'priority should be overcoming the deflationary situation' (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2012b). He built upon this in a speech in Hitachi city on 11 June, in which he called for the government to introduce quantitative easing (QE) and to make the public investments necessary to arrest Japan's economic slump (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2012a).

Abe's narrative pivot, placing the Japanese public's economic anxieties and his proposed resolution to them at the centre of his story, appears to have been a decisive factor in securing internal support from LDP lawmakers for his candidacy. Ono Kōtarō reported in the *Asahi Shimbun* on 9 September that a group of 30 Diet members who supported Abe's candidacy had

impressed upon the former prime minister that ‘the business world is hoping for Abe’s return’ (Ono, 2012). A profile by the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, Japan’s most widely read business-focused daily newspaper, published on 16 September referred to the addition of ‘Economic Abe’ to the former prime minister’s list of policy priorities (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2012b).

Despite this new focus on economic messaging, Abe did not abandon the other, more controversial policy proposals left unfulfilled during his first administration. Instead, they were side-lined in service of a new narrative that might capture the imagination of greater proportion of the Japanese public and to disarm the opposition’s claims that Abe was purely focused on divisive, hard-right goals such as constitutional revision. In the words of Tobias Harris, ‘the lesson Abe learned from his first [administration] was the need to shape the public narrative about his premiership’ (Harris, 2020, p.158). As Andrew Oros argues in his book on Japan’s recent national security realignment that during his 2012 election campaign, rather than put potentially divisive security policy at the forefront as he attempted to do during his first administration, Abe strategically linked his national security strategy to economic regeneration (Oros, 2017, p.129). Rather than shelve these political goals entirely, Abe sought to put them to work in service of his central economic narrative.

This is certainly not to suggest that Abe abandoned his nationalist goals, or that he sought to distance himself from overtly nationalist political actors. In mid-2012, Japan’s national newspapers reported a series of meetings between Abe and the leaders of the right-wing Osaka-based party, *Nippon Ishin no Kai* (Japan Restoration Party), founded by Osaka’s nationalist mayor, Hashimoto Tōru (Asahi Shimbun, 2012f, Yomiuri Shimbun, 2012g). Abe met with both Hashimoto and Osaka Governor, Matsui Ichirō, and *Asahi* reported on 8 June that Abe gave a speech to the supra-party *Sōsei ‘Nippon’* (Japan Rebirth) association in which he called

for cooperation on issues such as constitutional reform; the same article also reported that Abe had met with the *Ishin* leadership team approximately ten times prior to and following the Osaka double election (Asahi Shimbun, 2012a). Indeed, Matsui claimed that he had asked Abe to leave the LDP and join *Ishin*; Abe had turned him down, he stated, arguing that a former prime minister could not leave his own party (Asahi Shimbun, 2012a). Earlier in the year, Abe had attended a meeting of the Association for the Creation of New History Textbooks (*atarashii rekishi kyōkasyō wo tsukurukai*), of which he was the former chairman, and voiced his approval for an education reform plan for Osaka proposed by Matsui (Asahi Shimbun, 2012b). Even as late as 25 August, just a few weeks prior to the LDP leadership election, Abe again moved to reject speculation that he might join *Ishin*; instead, he called again for cooperation between *Ishin* and the LDP on constitutional reform (Asahi Shimbun, 2012e).

Even following his announcement that he would run for the LDP presidency in early September, quelling rumours of a potential defection, Abe continued to promote his nationalistic and conservative principles. During his formal candidacy announcement press conference on 13 September, Abe restated his controversial views on the ‘comfort women’ situation, defending his first cabinet’s decision to deny that the victims had been coerced into sexual slavery. He also called for a review of the Kōno Statement, delivered by former Prime Minister Kōno Yōhei in 1993, which had offered a formal apology on behalf of the government of Japan to the comfort women for the actions of the Japanese Imperial Army in forcing them to work in military brothels during the Second World War (Asahi Shimbun, 2012d). This time, however, Abe’s nationalist policies and opinions were packaged within a compelling narrative of national economic regeneration. It was this broader economic narrative that allowed Abe to present himself as a palatable option to the moderate members of the Japanese public who had rejected him during his first prime ministership. During his first administration, the public had

not accepted Abe's version of the narrative crisis facing Japan, that of a lack of national pride and a constitution incompatible with the future that Abe himself envisioned for the country. Now, Abe provided a narrative crisis far more resonant with the lived reality of the average Japanese: national decline brought about by prolonged economic stagnation.

It is to be expected that Abe would not abandon his conservative instincts entirely in service of his new economic narrative. After all, it was his nationalism that had brought him to the public's attention during the Koizumi administration following his hard-line stance on the North Korea abductee issue. If Abe were to secure the LDP presidency once more, it was imperative that he signalled to potential supporters within the party that he was not prepared to sacrifice ideologic policy goals entirely, whilst simultaneously seeking to reassure the wider public that his ideological campaigns would not subsume his commitment to economic regeneration. An investigative report in the 15 September edition of the *Asahi Shimbun* provides evidence, albeit tentative, that Abe was succeeding in this delicate tightrope act. The paper canvassed potential LDP electoral candidates in each of the city's six districts for their preferred presidential candidate. Four of the six selected Abe as either their sole or joint choice for the position. Their reasons for backing Abe included support for his economic growth policy, his commitment to constitutional reform, his education reform policy, and his 'thorough' foreign policy (Asahi Shimbun, 2012i). Though this is of course too small a sample size to draw any definitive conclusions, the survey does suggest that Abe, in sharp contrast to his 2006 presidential campaign, succeeded in delineating a clear set of policy tools within his new strategic narrative.

Despite intense media speculation during the early months of 2012, it appears that Abe did not make his final decision to run for the LDP leadership again until shortly before the September

election. As the contest approached, it became increasingly clear that the head of Abe's faction, Machimura Nobutaka, intended to run himself, complicating the internal politics of any potential Abe candidacy (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2012c). Though it is unclear at precisely which moment Abe made his final decision to stand, the evidence provided in biographical accounts and contemporary media reports suggests that it probably occurred in late August or early September, as it became increasingly clear that there existed a groundswell of support for his candidacy amongst young LDP lawmakers, and that there was indeed a potential route to victory opening up for the former prime minister.

Abe officially announced his candidacy for LDP president at a press conference on 12 September. In his announcement speech, Abe set out a variety of policy goals, from the familiar pledge to reform the constitution, to his commitment to lift Japan out of its deflationary spiral (Asahi Shimbun, 2012d). The following morning, Abe and the four other candidates attended an opinion announcement meeting (*syoken happyō enzetsu kai*) at the LDP headquarters. Abe used the opportunity to portray his candidacy as a narrative of redemption: he had learned from the mistakes of his first term, and the experience had provided him with a renewed resolve to meet the challenges that the nation faced. Under his leadership, Abe argued, Japan could welcome a 'new morning' (Asahi Shimbun, 2012d). In his official leadership campaign pamphlet, Abe outlined his narrative redemption in the following terms:

Though I accepted the various criticisms I received for such things as resigning abruptly during my first term, having come to believe that 'I must stand at the vanguard of this fight against the nation's problems and make the will of the people one,' I reached today's decision to stand for the presidency (of the LDP).

I will demonstrate leadership with strong belief and cooperation, and I plan to use all my strength to raise the Japanese people's satisfaction with their way of life. (Abe, 2012)

Derided during his first term for his tendency towards vacillation and indecision, Abe now sought to reinvent himself as a dynamic and sympathetic protagonist in his own narrative, one who would fight to raise the standard of living for all Japanese.

Take Back the LDP

On 26 December 2012, following a formal vote in the Diet, Abe Shinzō was returned to the office of Prime Minister, completing a remarkable political comeback. From the outset, Abe appeared determined to right the narrative wrongs of his first administration. Where his candidacy to succeed Koizumi in 2006 had been characterised by circumspection, tactical silence, and vagueness, Abe's re-emergence on the political front line was propelled by a clear and consistent political narrative of his vision for a post-DPJ Japan. In his new administration's inaugural press conference on 26 December, Abe spoke of wanting to 'take a vigorous first step into the future' (kantei.co.jp, 2012). Though Abe's speech understandably focused on the immediate task of guiding Japan's recovery from the previous year's tsunami and subsequent nuclear incident at Fukushima, which was a major contributory factor to the collapse of the Kan administration, the new Prime Minister also set out his vision for the economy, which he referred to as 'the source of Japan's national strength' (kantei.co.jp, 2012). Primarily, though, Abe emphasised a narrative theme around which his re-election campaign had been constructed: 'Take Back Japan.'

‘Take Back Japan’ (*nippon wo torimodosu*) was the central message of Abe’s 2012 election campaign. Though the phrase originated as the designated theme of the 2012 LDP presidential election, which Abe had won, the statement featured across Abe’s own general election campaign literature and communication, as he sought to position himself as a prime minister who would lead Japan forward by reaching back into the relatively recent past. At the core of Abe’s message was a promise that his administration would restore Japan’s economic status, which in turn would accelerate the nation’s regeneration following the ‘triple disaster’ of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown that occurred in March 2011. Concretely, this would involve a set of policies which would become known as the ‘three arrows’ of Abe’s ‘Abenomics’ economic reform plan: fiscal consolidation, monetary easing, and structural reform of the economy (Yoshino and Taghizadeh-Hesary, 2014, p.3).

Abe’s inaugural speech as prime minister on 26 December deserves in-depth analysis, setting out as it does so effectively the strategic narrative of the second Abe administration. In the speech Abe set out the narrative road map for his new administration, establishing a clear story of a national economic crisis that Abe proposes to resolve by using the policy tools provided by his new economic strategy. Abe built upon his campaign’s established narrative of ‘taking back’ Japan, using the phrase on four occasions during his nearly 3,000-character speech, three of which were deployed in an economic context.

In his opening remarks, Abe establishes the narrative *crisis*. Japan, Abe argues, is a nation in the midst of a political and economic crisis caused by the weak leadership of the DPJ – the outgoing DPJ administration serves as the narrative’s *antagonist*, the precipitator of the current national political and economic crisis. Having established the narrative crisis and antagonist, Abe situates himself as the *protagonist*, explicitly framing his new administration as a ‘crisis

relief cabinet' (*kiki toppa naikaku*) (kantei.co.jp, 2012). Abe repeats the phrases 'crisis relief' and 'crisis management' (*kiki kanri*) six times as he reinforces his government's leading role in resolving the narrative's central conflict.

The most important section of the speech is its sixth paragraph, which Abe outlines the crux of his argument and the foundation of his new strategic narrative:

A strong economy is the foundation of Japanese national strength. Without a rebirth of a strong economy, Japan has no future. Because of prolonged deflation, the net income of hard-working people is decreasing. Due to an historically strong yen, domestic export companies that have staunchly persevered are being gradually hollowed out. Taking back a strong economy is without doubt a pressing issue. The Japanese Economic Revival Headquarters is being established as the control tower for revitalising the economy. The Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy is also being restarted. With the creation of a Minister for Economic Regeneration, a Minister for Policy for Overcoming Deflation and a Strong Yen, and a Minister for Industrial Competitiveness, we have put in place a system to address the smooth implementation of policy. (kantei.co.jp, 2012)

In this single paragraph, Abe establishes the central tenets of his entire strategic narrative. The crisis is clear: unless Japan can overcome its economic stagnation, it has no future. The resolution? A 'strong Japan' that draws its national strength from its economy. Who are the actors that will bring about this national rebirth? The Japanese government and its new array of ministers and institutions headed and directed, of course, by Abe himself. And what tools will they utilise to ensure this narrative resolution? The economic and fiscal policies that comprise Abenomics. In the space of seven sentences, Abe establishes a clear story of national

decline and recovery with his administration as the central force delivering Japan from a present of national crisis to a future of national prosperity.

Once the narrative conflict has been established, Abe outlines the *tools* his government will utilise to achieve narrative *resolution*. These are almost exclusively tools of economic policy.

Abe states that a ‘strong economy is the source of Japan’s national strength’ and, re-emphasising his narrative’s central theme, calls for the nation to ‘take back a strong economy’.

On an institutional level, Abe proposes the following policy tools:

- 1) The creation of a ‘Japanese Economic Revival Headquarters’ (*nippon keizai saisei honbu*)
- 2) Restarting the ‘Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy’ (*keizai zaisei shimon kaigi*), established by PM Hashimoto in 2001
- 3) The establishment of three new ministerial posts:
 - a. Minister for Economic Regeneration (*keizai saisei tantō daijin*)
 - b. Minister for Policy for Overcoming Deflation and a Strong Yen (*defure dakkyaku endaka taisaku tantō daijin*)
 - c. Minister for Industrial Competitiveness (*sangyō kyōsō tantō daijin*)

Abe then delineates the policy tools which would become the most recognisable of all those deployed within the strategic narrative of his second administration: the ‘three arrows’ of ‘bold monetary policy, flexible fiscal policy, and a growth strategy which stimulates private investment’. These policies not only represent the tools Abe will use to take action against Japan’s economic stagnation – they also place the citizenry within the narrative by talking of creating a ‘Japanese economy which rewards those who try hard’. He concludes the paragraph by once again referencing the theme of ‘taking back’ Japan, stating that the cabinet will ‘take

back a Japanese economy in which you can feel as though your life tomorrow will be better than today’.

These policy tools provide evidence that Abe has learned a critical lesson from the failures of his first administration: a strategic narrative that does not provide a concrete set of policy tools will struggle to resonate with the public. The Abe of 2012 was determined to not repeat the mistakes of 2006 in allowing his narrative to become undermined by a tendency towards vagueness and a lack of clearly defined policy tools.

Having established his narrative priorities – the economic crisis facing Japan and his suggested policy tools for achieving narrative resolution – Abe sets out his remaining political priorities. What were once at the forefront of Abe’s political messaging during his first administration – foreign policy, education policy, and security policy – are now relegated to the supporting roles in his new strategic narrative. One policy tool is notable for its absence: there is no reference in Abe’s speech to constitutional reform. Given the integral importance of constitutional reform to Abe’s wider political vision, it is safe to assume that this is an intentional omission, sacrificed in service of establishing a focused strategic narrative that might appeal to a majority of Japanese citizens.

This speech demonstrates that, by the time he returned to the halls of Nagatachō in 2012, Abe had learned from the narrative failings of his first term and sought to define his second administration using the strategic narrative established during his presidential and general election campaigns. In the speech, Abe sets out his cabinet as a dynamic *protagonist* responding to a defined *crisis* with a clearly delineated set of policy *tools*, promising a

resolution that will benefit each and every citizen of Japan who is prepared to join him in working hard to achieve economic regeneration.

To better understand how Abe effectively projected this narrative to the Japanese public, I turn now to an analysis of the 2012 general election that returned him to the prime minister's office. Abe's 'Take Back Japan' narrative would also lay the foundation for a wider 'Abenomics' narrative that would dominate the second and third Abe administrations.

'Take Back Japan': The 2012 General Election Campaign

The vote to elect Tanigaki Sadakazu's successor as LDP president took place on the eighth floor of the party's headquarters on 26 September. After the first round of voting by Diet lawmakers and the LDP membership, Abe emerged with 141 votes, which placed him second overall behind Ishiba Shigeru. However, Abe secured enough votes to force a second round, in which only the LDP Diet members participated. From this second vote, Abe emerged victorious, with 108 votes to Ishiba's 89. Five years after his apparent descent into political irrelevance, the comeback was complete.

Later that evening, Abe gave a press conference to articulate a vision for his presidency and any potential general election campaign. In his short opening remarks, Abe referred back to the presidential campaign's theme, 'Take Back Japan', stating that to do so was his duty as the newly elected LDP president. He said that this did not mean taking back political power for the sake of the LDP, but rather it meant taking back power to create a strong and prosperous Japan

(jimintō, 2012). ‘Take Back Japan’, though not a phrase of his own creation, provided Abe with a slogan which readily captured the spirit of his new strategic narrative.

Yet taking back control of the LDP was not the end of the journey for Abe. The leadership election took place against a backdrop of collapsing DPJ approval and vociferous calls for a dissolution of the Diet. It appeared likely that Abe would soon be contesting a general election campaign. However, as an *Asahi* profile of Abe’s political revival suggested, Abe was less popular with the general public at this point in time than he was when he assumed the LDP presidency in 2006, arriving as he did then as a popular prime minister’s anointed successor (Asahi Shimbun, 2012). According to a TV Asahi poll conducted on 7 and 8 October, only 36% viewed Abe as a suitable prime minister, a result which placed him just 5% ahead of Prime Minister Noda, despite the same poll giving Noda a net approval rating of -6 (TV Asahi, 2020). In addition, only 39% of TV Asahi respondents said that they had a sense of ‘hope’ (*kitai*) towards Abe; 50% said that they did not. Abe also had much to prove to his own party’s supporters: Ishiba had comfortably defeated him in the regional membership voting portion of the LDP presidential election, and it was only Abe’s strong support from Diet members in the second round of voting that had seen him over the line. The LDP membership was split on Abe’s suitability. The secretary-general of the Yamanashi chapter of the LDP, which had split its four votes between Ishiba, argued that the result had demonstrated the gulf in opinion between LDP lawmakers and the general membership; an octogenarian LDP member from Akita said that Abe should not have entered the presidential contest as he had already been ‘thrown out’ as prime minister (Asahi Shimbun, 2012c).

As Abe approached the 2012 election, he needed to win over the sceptics within his own party as much as the wider Japanese public. He required a narrative that could resonate with the

sections of the public that had rejected his first administration and its emphasis on issues of right-wing nationalism, whilst also reassuring the conservative core of the LDP. As such, the 2012 election campaign would be fought on a narrative of ‘taking back’ Japan, not just of ‘taking back’ the nation from economic stagnation, but also of ‘taking back’ a sense of national pride.

Take Back What?

Abe’s election campaign was centered on the promise ‘take back Japan’, but from what and where exactly was he taking the nation back? In the LDP’s official television campaign advert, broadcast nationally and uploaded to their YouTube channel, Abe sketched the central themes of the ‘take back Japan’ narrative.



Figure 5: Abe in a 2012 LDP election campaign advert

The advert opens on a close up of Abe (figure 2.1), dressed in a black suit and red striped tie, against an abstract brown background. Abe then repeats the phrase ‘take back’ three times. After each repetition, Abe is replaced by a different phrase, imposed on a black background in white lettering. The three phrases are:

- 1) ‘Take Back the Economy’ (*keizai wo, torimodosu*)
- 2) ‘Take Back Education’ (*kyōiku wo, torimodosu*)
- 3) ‘Take Back Peace of Mind’ (*anshin wo, torimodosu*)

The order in which these concepts are presented signals Abe’s narrative intent. At the forefront of Abe’s narrative is the economy. According to data from the World Bank, Japan’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) had shrunk by 5.4% in 2009, impacted by the global financial crisis, and though it had rebounded to record growth of 4.1% in 2010, the triple disaster of March 2011 contributed to another year of contraction, as GDP fell by 0.1% (The World Bank, 2020). Although the DPJ government could hardly be blamed for a financial crisis that had been precipitated by events in another country during a period in which the DPJ was in opposition, nor the natural disasters that befell Japan in 2011, Hatoyama, Kan, and Noda had nonetheless

been unable to reinvigorate an economy still attempting to recover from the ‘lost decades’ of the 1990s and 2000s.

Abe also sought to visually reinvent himself during the 2012 campaign as an energetic leader, brimming with the vigour necessary to effectively lead a national government. Abe attempted to banish concerns that his political efficacy might be compromised by the health concerns that



Figure 6: Abe atop a campaign bus (source: youtube.com)

had contributed to his 2007 resignation. In doing so, Abe could demonstrate that he was capable of inhabiting the role of protagonist in the narrative he was constructing for himself and the nation.

Below is a selection of images from a video recording of a campaign event Abe attended with Aso Taro on 20 September. Following a short and enthusiastic introduction by a staffer, Abe

bounds up the stairs to the open upper tier of the bus. In figure 1, Abe's shirt sleeves are rolled up and, in contrast to the staffer who delivered his introduction, Abe is not wearing a suit jacket.

We are presented with the image of a politician who is quite literally signalling his intention to roll up his sleeves and get work done, a politician prepared for the rigours of the premiership. Abe waves to the crowd that has gathered in front of the bus, and is joined by a smiling Aso Taro, who has also foregone a suit jacket, seen in figure 2. Aso delivers an enthusiastic speech in support of Abe's candidacy. During his speech, Aso exhorts the crowd to use Facebook and Twitter to spread 'Abe Shinzō's story' (2:07) to their friends and around the country. Abe returns to his campaign theme of 'meeting a new morning'.



Figure 7: Abe and Asō (source: youtube.com)

In these public appearances, Abe sought to project an image of a vital, refreshed political figure, fully recovered from the illness that had contributed to the premature conclusion of his first term and capable of restoring Japan's own national vitality. To use Grace and Busy's

framework for coding visual frames (Grabe and Bucy, 2011, pp.224-225), Abe is accentuating his *ordinariness*, rolling up his shirt sleeves to suggest that he is both approachable and informal – breaking down the image of an out-of-touch, elitist politician whose inability to ‘read the air’ cost him his first administration – but also capable of ‘getting things done’. As I shall demonstrate in the following section, visual framing of Abe as energetic and youthful (aged 58 at the time of the election, Abe was indeed still relatively young for a modern potential Japanese Prime Minister), a man physically capable of tackling Japan’s narrative crisis, was a central theme of the 2012 election campaign, with many LDP election adverts featuring shots of Abe engaged in physical activity, often depicted apparently running from location to location on the campaign trail.

A Disorganised Antagonist: The DPJ Collapses

As I have already touched upon, the context of the 2012 election also provided Abe with something else he had lacked in 2006: a plausible political antagonist for his narrative. In 2006, the LDP’s dominance of Japanese politics remained relatively secure, though the DPJ’s approval ratings were beginning to climb under the stewardship of former LDP lawmaker Ozawa Ichirō. As the chosen successor of a popular prime minister, Abe could not realistically frame his premiership as a righteous alternative to the dangers of an opposition administration. By 2012, the situation had changed dramatically. The DPJ had been in office for more than three years, during which time they had changed leader on two occasions. Hatoyama Yukio, grandson of the LDP’s first prime minister, Hatoyama Ichirō, had become the DPJ’s first ever prime minister in 2009, following a decisive victory in a general election which returned the perennial opposition 308 of the Lower House’s 480 seats, reducing the LDP’s share to just 109

in the process. Hatoyama could not capitalise on this victory – he had only become DPJ leader in the run up to the election after Ozawa had been forced to resign over a potential corruption scandal – and proved an ineffective administrator. Hatoyama resigned in June 2010; a decision attributed to his failure to achieve his campaign promise to relocate Okinawa's Futenma airbase.

Hatoyama was replaced by Kan Naoto, another experienced lawmaker who had led the party for 18 months from 2002 to 2004. Kan's term proved to be as turbulent as his predecessor's and was characterised by indecisive leadership and internal party dissent as Ozawa attempted to assert his own dominance over the DPJ. Kan was also heavily criticised for his perceived inept response to the 3/11 disaster, ultimately leading to his own resignation in August 2012, whereupon he was replaced as prime minister by Noda Yoshihiko. Noda, however, was no more able to stabilise the DPJ government's approval ratings than were Kan or Hatoyama. Amidst pressure from within his own party to step down, Noda announced in November that he would dissolve the Diet and call an election if the LDP-Komeito coalition would vote for the annual deficit-financing act and electoral reform (Kamikawa, 2016, p.47). Kamikawa attributes part of the DPJ's steady erosion of support to its failure to enact the policy tools that it had promised in its various manifestos (2016, pp.48-55). The party had made ambitious spending commitments in an effort to oust the LDP from power and, compounded by a lack of government experience and concomitant inability to effectively work institutional levers, failed to deliver on the narrative of change that it had promised. Three prime ministers in a little over three years added to the sense that the DPJ were not the answer to years of LDP incompetence and administrative churn.

As we have seen above, the LDP's narrative exhorted the electorate to 'Take Back Japan', a story in which the ineffective DPJ were cast as the central antagonist, a government that had

betrayed the ideals that had once made Japan a global success story and the world's second largest economy. The DPJ, understandably, chose not to look to the past in their election campaign, releasing a manifesto emblazoned with the slogan, 'a responsibility towards now and the future' (DPJ, 2012). In his opening remarks, PM Noda asked the question 'Do we continue moving forward, or do we turn back?', warning the reader to not turn back to the 'politics of the past'. Noda also utilised Abe's favoured compound verb, promising to 'take back a thick middle class'. Noda failed to project a clear narrative of progression. Where Kan had at least presented a notion of a 'Third Way' (*daisan no michi*), Noda, who was more adept at intra-party negotiation and parliamentary strategy, did not offer a strong vision of Japan's future under his leadership (Mishima, 2015).

'Decisive Politics': Media Projection of the 2012 General Election Campaign

Abe's new narrative had secured victory within the closed shop of LDP party politics; now he had to take his message to the country and convince the Japanese public that he was, once again, a potential prime minister-in-waiting. Traditional media such as newspaper and television play a pivotal role in the dissemination and projection of a strategic narrative and, as such, the national media's reaction to, and interpretation of, Abe's victory would be influential in shaping the public's understanding of the new LDP leader's narrative. For example, the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*'s editorial on 27 September, looking towards the anticipated general election, called on Abe to deliver 'decisive politics' (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2012a). Another article in the same edition of the *Keizai Shimbun* reported that the chairman of the Keidanren (Japan Business Federation), Yonekura Hiromasa, had praised Abe following his victory, saying that

‘the new LDP president is familiar with policy, and is a political leader with an abundance of experience and the ability to get things done’ (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2012c).

The LDP’s most natural ally amongst the national newspapers, the *Yomiuri*, was cautiously optimistic about Abe’s return, though its editors had clearly not forgotten the strategic failures of Abe’s first administration. Reflecting on his victory, on 27 September, the paper stated that, given that the LDP appeared well positioned to achieve victory in the December election, it was ‘necessary [for Abe] to now refine a strategy and set of policies for Japan’s regeneration’ (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2012d). Yet the *Yomiuri* also noted that the first Abe administration had failed to achieve its lofty ambition to make a decisive break from the ‘post-war regime’, and it was that administration that had overseen the collapse of LDP support and the genesis of the ‘twisted Diet’. Abe had not proven himself a strong leader then, not just politically but physically, and the paper reiterated lingering concerns over Abe’s health.

As the election campaign began in early December, the *Yomiuri* framed the vote as one that would decide whether Japan would maintain its national strength or enter a period of decline and appeared unsure as to which of the major parties was most capable of delivering a positive outcome. A 5 December editorial began:

To preserve and advance the national strength, or to follow a path of decline. Given that it will decide Japan’s future course, this is an exceedingly important choice. (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2012f)

The editorial proceeded to express doubts that, at this early period of the campaign, neither party had articulated a convincing response to this crisis. The piece closed with the question

‘which party will adopt a sincere prescription for the difficult problems that Japan faces?’ As the nation went to the polls, the *Yomiuri* called for the public to weigh their vote carefully, though it did not publicly back one party or the other.

The *Asahi* editorial team was similarly circumspect in its assessment of the two major parties. In its final editorial of the campaign period, published on election day, the paper framed the vote as a key juncture in Japan’s recovery from the previous year’s triple disaster in Fukushima. The editorial implored the reader ‘we want you to cast your vote while considering the challenges faced in the disaster areas and thinking “what would I do?”’ (Asahi Shimbun, 2012g).

Furthermore, the DPJ’s counter-narrative failed to find traction within the Japanese media. The *Yomiuri* proclaimed that the DPJ’s manifesto promises were ‘unrealistic’ and that the party had failed to outline a roadmap to realising their policy pledges (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2012e). The *Asahi*, on the other hand, took Noda and the DPJ to task for what it saw as ‘defeatism’ and an overreaction to criticism of their 2009 manifesto, which had set expectations around foreign diplomacy and taxation on which the government had been unable to deliver (Asahi Shimbun, 2012h).

As we can see, while Abe and the LDP’s narrative did not necessarily provoke an outright endorsement from the daily newspapers, neither did the media reject Abe’s narrative approach as it had done so clearly in 2006 and 2007. The failure of the DPJ government to meet the crises that had occurred since 2009 provided space for Abe to project an alternative narrative of economic policy-led national regeneration.

Election Results

As the election results were returned overnight, it became clear that Abe's narrative had resonated with the Japanese public. The LDP-Kōmeitō coalition achieved a landslide victory. The LDP in particular experienced a meteoric resurgence: reduced to just 119 seats in the previous election, the party secured 294 in the new Diet. Combined with the 31 seats won by Kōmeitō – up 10 on 2009 – this gave the coalition a two-thirds majority in the House of Representatives, a crucial ratio that would allow the Lower House to overrule the Upper House on certain votes; this would be particularly important given that the House of Councillors remained under DPJ control.

Despite the LDP securing an overwhelming victory in terms of seats won, this election result should not be read simply as a resounding endorsement for Abe's narrative. Although the results vindicated his approach, the failure of the DPJ to project a convincing counter-narrative was crucial. Indeed, the DPJ's failure was catastrophic: while the LDP achieved a modest 1 percent increase in its vote since in comparison to 2009, the DPJ saw an almost 27 percent fall in its own share of the popular vote. December 2012 was as much a rejection of the DPJ's narrative as it was an endorsement of the LDP's. To understand whether Abe's new economic narrative was truly having the desired impact, we must analyse the period that followed the election, and the campaign for the July 2013 House of Councillors election.

Table 4: Abe's Narratives of the 2012 Campaigns

Abe's Narratives	September 2012 LDP Presidential Election Campaign	December 2012 General Election
Actor	Abe	Abe
Setting	Japan	Japan

Crisis	Economic Stagnation, Loss of Japanese National Pride	Economic Stagnation
Tool(s)	Creation of New Government Institutions and Ministerial Posts for Developing Economic Policy	‘Three Arrows’ of Monetary Policy, Fiscal Stimulus, and Structural Reform
Resolution	An Economically Prosperous Japan and a Proud Japanese People	An Economically Prosperous Japan and a Proud Japanese People

Post-2012: The Emergence of ‘Abenomics’

The turn of a new year provided Abe with an auspicious moment to set the narrative agenda for his new government. In his 1 January speech inaugurating the new year and framing the LDP’s vision for 2013 and the Abe government’s political priorities, the returning prime minister succinctly reinforced the crisis narrative deployed during his two recent election campaigns (kantei.co.jp, 2013e).

In his speech, Abe returns to the narrative theme of ‘taking back’ Japan, signposting to the Japanese audience, many of whom would have watched his speech live on the television, that ‘Take Back Japan’ was to become the central narrative not only of Abe’s election campaigns, but also of his new administration. The phrase ‘take back’ is utilised on seven occasions during a short, 1765-character address. Abe primarily refers to ‘taking back’ the Japanese economy, although he also talks of ‘taking back’ a ‘respect for Japan’s history and culture’ and ‘taking back’ a ‘strong Japan’.

Abe’s strategic narrative unfolds convincingly as the speech progresses. Abe’s opening paragraphs are dedicated to a setting of the scene, introducing the narrative crisis facing Japan at the dawn of the new year. He first talks of ‘taking back’ the governmental trust forfeited by the DPJ over the previous three years and of ‘building a new, future-facing country’, this latter

phrase drawing attention to the theme of his newly updated book, *Towards a New Country*, the narrative significance of which I shall discuss further below. Abe describes the ‘crises’ facing the country as ‘delayed recovery’, ‘prolonged deflation’ and ‘challenges to our nation’s inherent territory and sovereignty’. The ‘duty’ of the Abe cabinet is to ‘overcome this crisis by steadily rebuilding our economy, education, and foreign affairs, and taking back peace of mind over our lives’. In order to ‘take back trust in government’, Abe continues, a sense of urgency and an ability to act is required, preparing the ground for the narrative tools introduced in the next section of the speech. Abe concludes the introductory portion of the speech by recapitulating the narrative crisis and hinting towards a potential resolution in a single phrase: ‘More than anything, the most urgent issue facing Japan is revitalising the economy by ridding itself of deflation and a strong yen’. At his second regular prime minister’s press conference of the year on 11 January, Abe spoke of ‘taking back a society which properly rewards [people] if they work their hardest’) and ‘taking back a strong economy’ (kantei.co.jp, 2013g). In a policy speech to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on 22 February, Abe spoke of ‘taking back a strong Japan’ (kantei.co.jp, 2013j); at a press conference for foreign and domestic reporters the next day, Abe said he was seeking to ‘take back the bond and the trust between the US and Japan’ (kantei.co.jp, 2013d).

But how precisely will Abe resolve this narrative crisis? He now turns to the tools he will utilise to ensure Japan emerges from this crisis as a ‘new country’. First and foremost, Abe refers to the institutional tools that he revealed in his 26 December speech: the Japanese Economic Revival Headquarters, the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy, and the creation of new ministerial posts whose policy portfolios focus on economic regeneration; Abe then mentions the ‘three arrows’ of Abenomics. These tools, he argues, will allow the Japanese people to

achieve a narrative resolution in which they ‘take back a Japanese economy where you can realise a better life tomorrow than you have today’.

The speech demonstrates that the economic crisis and the Abe cabinet’s response will be the central theme of this Abe administration’s strategic narrative. However, it also provides evidence that Abe intends to utilise an economic narrative with broad appeal to the Japanese population as a basis for legitimising his other, more divisive policy goals. The majority of Abe’s speech is dedicated to the economic crisis and his proposed resolution and yet, four paragraphs from the end of his speech, Abe briefly mentions his intention to ‘take back respect for [Japan’s] history and culture’, echoing right-wing beliefs, shared by the prime minister, that a lack of national pride is a contributing factor to Japan’s ongoing malaise. Rather than link this crisis to the tool proposed during Abe’s first administration – constitutional reform – however, Abe instead frames it as an educational crisis, stating that ‘the children who carry Japan’s future are the country’s greatest treasure’. Abe appears to believe, having learned from the disruptive debates generated by his focus on constitutional reform during his first term, that linking national pride to educational attainment, packaged within a larger narrative of economic revival, is a more effective strategy for achieving policy goals that do not command the support of a majority of the Japanese public.

Abe hit much the same narrative notes in the new year’s inaugural press conference, held on 4 January. In his opening remarks, Abe once again described his cabinet as a ‘crisis cabinet’ seeking to ‘take back trust in politics’. Indeed, the speech is so similar to his 1 January address that it at times comes across as a recycled and truncated draft. Abe signals his intention to ‘build a new country’ and states that ‘in order to relieve the crisis, more than anything [we] must one result at a time achieve economic regeneration’.

Abe's narrative discipline was not confined to his prepared remarks and speeches. Following his opening remarks, Abe fielded a number of questions from journalists, beginning with a query from a Mie Prefecture political club representative on the fact that the DPJ were targeting the prefecture in its upcoming House of Councillors elections. Abe responded that the DPJ would have to 'win back political trust by getting firm results' and, in a response to a follow-up question from the same representative regarding the decline of industry in Mie, Abe refers to 'taking back a strong economy', which is to be achieved by letting off the 'three arrows' of bold monetary policy, flexible fiscal policy, and a growth strategy. In response to a question from the *Asahi Shimbun* about Abe's plans to strengthen the government's relationship with the Bank of Japan, Abe says that 'the duty assigned to this administration is, above all else, to take back a strong economy'.

From a 'beautiful country' to a 'new country'

As Abe settled back into the prime minister's office in January 2013, an updated version of *Towards a Beautiful Country* received its official release. Though the new edition came replete with an updated title, *Towards a New Country* (*atarashī kuni e*), the text itself remained largely unaltered. The most significant update was an additional final chapter, in which Abe outlined his vision for a 'new' Japan. More significantly, as we have seen from the various references to 'creating a new country' in Abe's speeches following his election victory, this shift away from the notion of 'beautiful' towards the concept of 'new' buttressed Abe's strategic narrative realignment.

Abe's political rebirth saw him de-emphasize his more politically conservative inclinations and shine a greater spotlight on his new economic policies. In his first term, Abe had suffered from a lack of a clear economic policy as the public looked to the government for a solution to the nation's structural economic deficiencies, most notably the strain that a rapidly ageing and shrinking population would place on the state's social security apparatus. This was of course only further amplified by the pension record scandal that emerged during 2007. Determined to right the wrongs of his first administration, Abe sought to position economic regeneration and structural reform as central to his new strategic narrative. This task was made easier by the economic legacy that Abe inherited: under DPJ leadership, compounded by the disaster at Fukushima and the long-term ramifications of the 2008 global financial crisis, the Japanese economy was a far cry from even the moderate growth of the Koizumi era.

The new final chapter in Abe's book, also entitled *Towards a New Country*, signposted Abe's intention to focus his revised political narrative on Japan's flagging economy and his plans to revive the nation's fortunes. Abe begins the additional chapter with the statement 'it is clear to anyone that the urgent issue facing Japan is economic countermeasures' (Abe, 2013, p.236). Having established the struggling economy as his narrative crisis, Abe immediately sets out his preferred tool for resolution. He states that the LDP must develop an economic policy in tandem with the BOJ that will address the longstanding problem of persistent deflation – which he traces back to the 1997 East Asian financial crisis – and achieve a pre-determined level of inflation. Though Abe writes that the precise level of inflation will be determined by discussion between experts on the subject, he states at the time of writing the LDP is considering a two percent target (Abe, 2013, pp.236-7).

As *Towards a New Country* was published shortly after Abe's re-election, its value to this study lies not in its contribution to the construction of his campaign narrative, but as a retrospective of Abe's narrative planning. Indeed, this comparison between the original book, *Towards a Beautiful Country*, and the textual additions provided in *Towards a New Country* demonstrate a clear narrative evolution from '2006 Abe' to '2012 Abe'. 2006 Abe was criticised for failing to provide an economic vision for the nation, a failure which contributed to Abe's public image of standing for little besides blinkered political loyalty and far-right political priorities. In *Towards a New Country*, 2012 Abe seeks to remedy this mistake. Although the content of his original publication remained intact, the supplementary chapter is clearly intended to flesh out Abe's new political narrative and convince the Japanese public that not only is the economy the pre-eminent crisis facing the nation, but that Abe is the figure with the political tools and vision to meet this crisis.

Towards a New Country arrived in a climate favourable to the production of a new narrative. In his book exploring the Abe political lineage, Aoki Osamu, *Asahi Shimbun* journalist and no great fan of Abe the politician, concedes that in a post-Cold War ideological vacuum, with China surpassing Japan as the world's second-largest economy and Japan's population in decline, the Japanese public were susceptible to 'nostalgia for the good old days' (2020, p.288).

By the end of the first year of Abe's second term, evidence had mounted that observers of Japanese politics had at least tentatively begun to internalise the narrative that Abe 2012 was a different, more effective, and focused incarnation of the character who had so underperformed in his first term. Mochizuki and Porter (2013, pp.25-26) noted that Abe had, in practice as well as in rhetoric, put economic regeneration ahead of nationalistic foreign policy, citing the nation's rebounding economy and Abe's refusal to escalate tensions with China around the

Senkaku islands. Mochizuki and Porter even speculated that, following the LDP's resounding victory in the July 2013 election, Abe could conceivably surpass his great-uncle, Satō Eisaku, as Japan's longest-serving prime minister (2013, p.26) – a remarkably prescient suggestion less than one year into his new administration, given Abe's previous record in the office.

'Abenomics' Takes Hold

The early months of Abe's second term were dominated by a narrative of 'taking back' Japan. Yet Abe had won the general election and once again occupied the prime minister's office. In an obvious sense, he had 'taken back' Japan. He might argue that Japan would not be truly 'taken back' until he had successfully implemented his policies, and this would of course take time, but it is much harder to support a narrative of 'taking back' the nation after you have wrestled back control of the levers of power. Consequently, as 2013 progressed, we can see the notion of 'taking back' Japan become supplanted by a new narrative frame: 'Abenomics'.

'Abenomics' was not a new term. The first entry returned by the *Asahi Shimbun's* online *Kikuzo II* database containing the term 'Abenomics' was published on 3 October 2006, referring to it as the 'foundational philosophy' (*kihon tetsugaku*) of Abe's economy policy. However, what Abenomics represents in a policy context during this period is unclear; the *Asahi* states that it refers to 'acceleration of innovation through the tax system' (Asahi Shimbun, 2006). A *Yomiuri Shimbun* database search returns just one result for 'Abenomics' prior to December 2012, a 29 October 2006 article which quotes Nakagawa Hidenao as saying that Abe's economic policy will be 'realised through Abenomics', though no elaboration is provided for what concrete policies 'Abenomics' might represent (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2006).

The *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* returns just five results for ‘Abenomics’ prior to 2012. In a 25 December 2006 editorial entitled ‘Abenomics restart’, the paper’s managing editor, Okabe Naoaki, reflects upon the progress of ‘Abenomics’ during the first three months of Abe’s first term (Okabe, 2006). Though Okabe praises Abe’s decisive foreign policy initiatives, he derides the prime minister’s economic strategy as ‘vague’, and states that although the ‘fundamental principle’ of Abenomics ‘is not wrong’, the problem is ‘how does this become a strategy, how is it implemented?’. In the absence of government policy, Okabe dedicates the remainder of the editorial to suggesting his own preferred set of economic policy tools that Abenomics might look to incorporate. On 20 June 2007, the *Keizai Shimbun* reacted to the publication of the annual ‘Solid Plan’ by lamenting that the ‘substance [of Abenomics] is unclear’ (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 2007). This reflects what we have already discussed in depth in chapter one: Abe’s strategic narrative during his first term was consistently undermined by a lack of policy tools. ‘Abenomics’ as a term may not have originated as a concept during Abe’s second term, but it is only in 2013 that it came to represent a concrete slate of policy tools through which a resolution to the narrative crisis could be realised.

Abe’s 2012 re-election prompted the re-emergence of the term ‘Abenomics’ in the national popular lexicon. A search in the *Yomiuri Shimbun*’s database for ‘Abenomics’ returns 38 results from January 2013 alone. It is clear, however, that where understanding of ‘Abenomics’ in 2006 and 2007 was characterised by accusations of vagueness, in early 2013 ‘Abenomics’ has already shifted to represent a set of policy tools clearly laid out by the PM.

Abe himself began to utilise ‘Abenomics’ as a recognisable byword for his economic policy tools during the latter half of 2013. On 17 May, Abe delivered a lengthy speech to a meeting

of *Japan Akademeia* entitled the ‘2nd Growth Strategy Speech’ (kantei.co.jp, 2013h). Abe begins the address by seeking to reclaim the term ‘Abenomics’ for his new strategic narrative. In his own words, ‘the term ‘Abenomics’ was originally spoken of as a byword for a ‘forbidden move’’. Now, Abe signalled his intention for ‘Abenomics’ to include his strategy for internationally focused growth, saying that “‘if you win on the global [stage], the household economy benefits’’. More and more, this is the crux of Abenomics’.

In a speech at the ESRI International Conference, Abe continued this theme of the rehabilitation of Abenomics, while also taking the opportunity to elucidate the international aspect of the Abenomics narrative (kantei.co.jp, 2013a). Where Abenomics was once ‘bashed’ for its riskiness, Abe argued, it was now becoming synonymous with hope. Abe explicitly melded his ‘Abenomics’ narrative with his ‘Take Back Japan’ narrative, stating that:

Now, so that the people can take back ‘self-belief’, I, as the person responsible for policy, must act boldly and without fear of risk. Therefore, I forcefully launched the ‘three arrows.’ That result is steadily coming about through positive real economic change. Consumption is rising, and corporate performance is improving. (...) ‘Japan is Back’: now, in this place, once again, I want to say this to all of you. (kantei.co.jp, 2013a)

To support this proposed boldness, Abe presented data from a newly released OECD report, which had revised upward Japan’s economic forecast, and had stated that ‘Japan is still able to grow again’. The Prime Minister clarified the speech’s overarching narrative by bookending it with quotes from the famed Spanish artist and architect, Antoni Gaudi. At the beginning of the speech, Abe established the transformative nature of the Abenomics narrative with a Japanese translation of Gaudi’s belief that ‘man does not create, he discovers’. At the end of the speech,

Abe concludes with a second Gaudi quote: ‘tomorrow we will do beautiful things.’⁶ These phrases provided a narrative flourish to Abe’s speech and ensured that it was clear to his audience both at home and abroad that the Abenomics story could provide a brighter future for Japan.

Japan hosted the World Economic Forum in June 2013. Abe gave a speech to open the event on 11 June, in which he proudly married ‘Abenomics’ with his ‘Take Back Japan’ narrative (kantei.co.jp, 2013c). Introducing his vision for the role that Japan’s potential economic growth would allow it to play in international affairs and global economic development, Abe stated that ‘Abenomics’ was a policy that would allow Japan to ‘take back’ its self-belief. He echoed the words of former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, in pronouncing that ‘There Is No Alternative’ (TINA) to Abenomics. Abenomics, in Abe’s narrative, was a tool uniquely able to drill through the ‘hard bedrock’ that ‘ordinary drills’ – conventional economic policy – found ‘impossible’ to penetrate. Abenomics was a ‘win-win for both the global economy and the Japanese economy’. Having established that an economically resurgent Japan was a strong Japan, Abe outlined the more prominent role a strong Japan could play in international affairs:

A strong Japan is a Japan that protects and nurtures global public goods.

A strong Japan is a Japan that brings about peace, stability, and prosperity across the vast seas that link the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean.

⁶ Abe was perhaps drawn to this particular quote due to its Japanese translation – ‘Tomorrow, lets create a better thing’ (*ashita ha, motto yoi mono wo tukurō*) – which provides a vivid notion of constructing a better Japan.

A strong Japan is a Japan that reduces global poverty, stands against the infringement of the human rights of women and children, and protects against illness and the degradation of our natural environment.

I stood up once again, believing that it would be good to create such a Japan. Grasping this second chance, this belief became stronger. (kantei.co.jp, 2013c)

Not only did Abe establish a link between an economically healthy Japan and a strong Japan, but he also established a narrative link between Japan's resurgence and his own 'second chance'. The implication Abe clearly sought to make was that the national transformation proffered by the Abenomics narrative was inextricably linked to his own remarkable personal comeback. Without Abe, there could be no 'Abenomics', and without 'Abenomics' there could be no national redemption. Thus, through these speeches, Abe sought to achieve favourable international coverage of his strategic narrative, to reinforce its legitimacy and to establish his own indispensability as the protagonist at the centre of this narrative.

Media Projection of the 'Abenomics' Narrative

If Abe's Abenomics strategic narrative was to achieve success and redefine the discursive environment around his second term, the prime minister would require assistance from the Japanese media to project the narrative in a clear and digestible manner to the Japanese public. A positive reception from the domestic and international media would make the task of embedding Abe's narrative in the public consciousness a great deal simpler.

The early signs were promising for Abe's attempts to set a new narrative agenda for the nation in 2013, as the national daily newspapers assimilated the Abenomics narrative. A search for



Figure 8: Yomiuri Editorial entitled 'First Step to Taking Back a 'Strong Japan', 12 January 2013

the keyword 'Abenomics' in the *Yomiuri Shimbun*'s online database returns 517 articles between 1 January and 1 June 2013, evidence that Abenomics was providing a successful formula for ensuring consistent and effective media projection of Abe's strategic narrative. The *Yomiuri* stated in a 7 January editorial that a growth strategy based upon the three arrows for 'taking back' a strong economy was the 'correct prescription' for Japan (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2013b). In another editorial on 12 January, the paper voiced its support for monetary easing,

arguing that cooperation between the government and the BoJ to implement bold monetary easing was 'imperative' (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2013c). On 18 February, in response to a joint declaration by several developing nations at the G20 summit in Moscow that Abenomics represented Japanese protectionism, the *Yomiuri* urged the government to hasten its implementation of its growth strategy, in particular the monetary easing and fiscal policy arrows of Abenomics (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2013d).

The *Asahi Shimbun*, between January and June 2013, published a total of 70 short articles in a series entitled 'what is Abenomics?' (*abenomikusu tte, nani*), exploring the relationship between the policies encompassed in the Abenomics rubric and the state of the national economy. This included explanations of the three arrows and their aims (Asahi Shimbun, 2013a, Asahi Shimbun, 2013b), the role of Japan's Central Bank in implementing the policies (Asahi Shimbun, 2013e, Asahi Shimbun, 2013f), the relationship between Abenomics and TPP (Asahi

Shimbun, 2013c, Asahi Shimbun, 2013d) – essentially a six-month primer on the government’s flagship policy. Despite the *Asahi*’s left-leaning reputation, these articles provided relatively balanced explanations of the finer points of Abenomics, exploring the merits and demerits of the various aspects and implications of the government’s economic policies, reinforcing the central phrase of Abe’s strategic narrative on an almost daily basis without significantly challenging its core premise. Abe could hardly have asked for more comprehensive projection of his narrative from the national paper most likely to stand in opposition to his political project.

Abe's narrative also won over members of an otherwise sceptical *Asahi Shimbun* editorial board. In a 17 January piece, editorialist Komano Tsuyoshi wrote in favour of Abenomics, commending the government for taking decisive economic action. Komano acknowledged that

although the paper had previously published editorials strongly criticising Abenomics and the potential for administrative overreach and wasteful spending, Japan's impending population crisis and economic decline meant that the time had come for the government to step in and take action (Komano, 2013).

JP Morgan's Chief Economist, Kanno Masaaki, wrote in Japan's leading daily business newspaper, the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, on 22 January that although the Japanese government's decision to increase the nation's debt at a time when the country's finances were already in a relatively precarious state compared to other developed nations had caused surprise around the globe, it had nonetheless received praise from Nobel Prize-winning US economist Paul Krugman, and Kanno offered the tentative



hope that Abenomics might go down as an 'historically brilliant achievement' (Nihon Keizai

Shimbun, 2013b). On 26 January, the *Keizai Shimbun* quoted another Nobel Prize-winning economist from the US, Joseph Stiglitz, who declared at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, that the intention to increase the value of the yen to stimulate the economy was the ‘correct’ policy (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2013c). In an editorial on 29 January, the *Keizai Shimbun* noted explicitly how Abe had self-consciously remodelled his narrative approach since the ignominious collapse of his first administration. Reporting on the Prime Minister’s comment during a recent speech that he had ‘taken to heart’ the lessons of his past failures, the paper noted that his new political narrative was much easier to understand than that offered during his first term, during which the young leader had spread himself too thin as he sought to stamp his authority across the government:

From the policy speech outlining the planned fundamental national policy management over the coming year in the current Diet session, this time the three main themes are narrowed down to economic regeneration, earthquake disaster reconstruction, and foreign diplomacy and security. Adding to this the fourth sphere of education, the Prime Minister indicated his intention to ‘work vigorously towards crisis relief’. The message was easily grasped in this concise speech. (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2013d)

At a press conference following Abe’s speech at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) on 3 June, during which Abe had made no explicit reference to ‘Abenomics’ or his ‘Take Back’ narrative, a reporter from the television channel *Nihon Terebi* asked the Prime Minister to place his commitment to African development in the context of Abenomics (kantei.co.jp, 2013b). The *Nihon Terebi* reporter asked for Abe’s response to the recent dip in stock market prices and calls for the government to ease regulation on the agriculture and medical services industries. Despite Abe’s lengthy, data-driven response, that

the reporter had used the concept of Abenomics to frame his question suggests that the Prime Minister was succeeding in his attempts to set the national agenda, focusing the media's attention on his economic policies.

Abenomics as a narrative concept was taking hold within Japan's domestic media, but strategic narratives are rarely targeted exclusively at either domestic or international audiences. In the endlessly interconnected world of the twenty-first century, narratives are shared, discussed, shaped, and contested on a global level. Even if Abe developed Abenomics into a strategic narrative aimed primarily at influencing the Japanese domestic discursive environment, it was inevitable that there would be international contestation of the concept. Furthermore, national economies, like narratives, do not exist in a vacuum. Abe's economic policies would necessarily impact increasingly globalised systems of trade and finance. As such, by redesigning his strategic narrative to project a story of Japanese economic crisis and regeneration, Abe was inviting international debate on his new narrative.

On 20 May, *The New York Times* ran an article sounding cautious optimism over Abenomics, describing it as 'one of the world's most audacious experiments in economic policy in recent memory' and referred to Abe as the nation's 'cheerleader in chief', drawing a stark comparison with the 'generally colorless' character of most Japanese prime ministers (Fackler, 2013). In the same paper, on 23 May, economist Paul Krugman declared that the 'early signs are good' for Abenomics and that the 'really remarkable thing' about Abe's approach was that 'nobody else in the advanced world is trying anything similar' (Krugman, 2013); Hiroko Tabuchi argued that the LDP's encouraging approval rating in the run up to the July election could be attributed to Abe's decision to focus on the economy and side-line divisive issues such as the future of Japan's nuclear industry (Tabuchi, 2013). The Wall Street Journal remained circumspect,

stating that Abenomics was merely an attempt to ‘sidestep the thorny domestic politics of genuine reform’(Jenkins, 2013a), but the early response to Abenomics in the United States print media can be characterised as one of cautious optimism.

The New York Times

Japan's New Optimism Has Name: Abenomics



Kaori Nirei, in mirror, tried on a dress as her mother and daughter looked on at the Takashimaya department store in Tokyo's financial district. "I can't believe all the people shopping," she said. Ko Sasaki for The New York Times

Figure 10: New York Times article on Abenomics

It was a similar story in the British press. On 11 February, Lucy Alexander wrote in *The Times* that Abenomics had ‘brought a new sense of optimism to the world’s third largest economy’ (Alexander, 2013). The economics editor of *The Guardian*, Larry Elliott, wrote on 3 April with regards to Abenomics that ‘so far things could hardly have gone better for Abe’ (Elliott, 2013), and Simon Jenkins published an opinion piece calling for the British Chancellor, George Osborne, to abandon austerity politics and follow Japan’s lead (Jenkins, 2013b). Similarly, Ben Chu warned on *The Independent*’s website on 9 April that the UK ‘might be clamouring for our own version of Abenomics one day if things don’t turn around’ (Chu, 2013). Henny Sender in the *Financial Times*, however, sounded a much more sombre note, arguing that Abenomics was unlikely to result in positive long-term gains unless the government implemented the extensive structural reforms that it had promised (Sender, 2013). Following the installation of Kuroda Haruhiko as the new governor of the Bank of Japan, and the official launch of a massive quantitative easing programme, Robin Harding wrote in the *Financial Times* that Abe had ‘the right diagnosis and the right cure’ (Harding, 2013). In the *Spectator*, Merryn Somerset Webb wrote ‘thank goodness for Shinzō Abe’, praising Abenomics as a credible and ambitious enough set of policies to drive up confidence in Japanese economic growth and stimulate global investment (Webb, 2013).

Elsewhere, the *New Zealand Herald* hailed Abenomics as a ‘leg up for the world’ (Rankin, 2013); Greg Earl in the *Australian Financial Review* declared on 17 May ‘so far so good’ for Abe’s policies (Earl, 2013). The English-language edition of the German state-funded outlet *Deutsche Welle* praised Abenomics for heralding a ‘strong economy and a strong Japan’, arguing that it would prove to be more than a ‘flash-in-the-pan’ strategy (Fritz, 2013).

The Abenomics narrative had passed a major test. Abe's electoral and administrative frames were taking hold in the international media, providing the Abenomics narrative with further credibility. The lukewarm international response to Abe's first term, when sections of the international press had echoed the Japanese media's concerns over Abe's lack of clarity or a convincing slate of policies, had been replaced by a positive, albeit cautious, embrace of Japan's bold new economic strategy. Abenomics had taken root in both the domestic and international collective consciousness. Abe's narrative had secured positive media projection, and the ubiquitisation of the term 'Abenomics' had served to reinforce Abe's indispensability to Japan's national recovery as the story's titular central protagonist.

The 2013 House of Councillors Election: Success of a Narrative

Abe had won the December 2012 general election on the back of a 'Take Back Japan' strategic narrative, which he then wove as a smaller strand into his economic policy focused 'Abenomics' narrative in the early months of 2013. The effectiveness of the Abenomics strategic narrative received its first genuine test at the July 2013 House of Councillors election, in which half of the upper house's 242 seats were contested. If the LDP and the Kōmeitō could secure a majority in the House of Councillors, then Abe and the government would obtain control of both houses of the Diet, providing the prime minister with the power to fully enact his legislative agenda. In the event, the LDP-Kōmeitō coalition won 76 of the 121 available seats, giving the government 135 seats in the chamber in total, and thus full control of the Diet. The Abenomics strategic narrative had achieved its goal: the Abe cabinet had maintained a strong approval rating of between 60% and 70% in the period between the December 2012 general election and the July 2013 House of Councillors election.

The 2013 LDP Campaign: Keep on Taking Back Japan

An election manifesto offers a focused insight into the how a party intends to define the narrative environment in which the election will be fought. A manifesto is an opportunity to set the political agenda for the public and signal which issues that the public should be considering as they weigh up how to cast their vote. The manifesto also allows a party to try and frame the issues in a particular manner, to cast the narrative around each issue and the election as a whole as the party and its officials desire them to be framed in the media. Of course, a manifesto must provide policy detail, but first and foremost it must advance a narrative through which each individual voter is able to identify themselves with the political goals of the party that is courting their vote. The LDP manifesto for the 2013 House of Councillors election (lit: ‘House of Councillors election campaign pledge’ (*sangiin senkyō kōyaku*)) sought to do just this (LDP, 2013).

The LDP campaign retained the ‘Take Back Japan’ slogan that had proved effective in the 2012 general election, and it now operated as the official slogan of the party. In June 2013, LDP Secretary General Ishiba Shigeru published a book entitled ‘Take Back Japan. Take Back the Constitution’ (*Nippon, wo torimodosu. Kenpō, wo torimodosu.*) (Maslow, 2015, p.752). This theme was the focus of Abe’s opening remarks to the election manifesto, which comprised its first two pages. Abe began the remarks by looking back to that previous election victory, to highlight that the work had only just begun. The Prime Minister stated that ‘last December, we

took on the challenge of ‘Take Back Japan’’, defining the fight as one of taking back ‘a Japan that grows’, ‘a Japan that continues to recover strongly’, and ‘a Japan that steadfastly defends its own land, sea, and sky’. The order in which Abe enumerated these goals reflected the importance of the role they played in the LDP’s larger strategic narrative: first of all, the economy, then reconstruction, and finally national defence. As in 2012, Abe understood that focusing his narrative on economic growth presented the most promising opportunity to drive public enthusiasm for his party’s campaign.

The manifesto itself was broken down into three main constituent parts:

- 1) Towards ‘a robust Japan’ (*‘takumashii nippon’ he*)
- 2) Towards ‘a gentle Japan’ (*‘yasashii nippon’ he*)
- 3) Towards ‘a Japan that has pride’ (*‘hokori aru nippon’ he*)

The first part, ‘a robust Japan’, comprised the majority of the manifesto’s content, encompassing 19 of the 35 pages dedicated to explicating the LDP’s various pledges and intended areas of focus. Within the ‘a robust Japan’ section, the manifesto addresses:

- a) The economy (*keizai*)
- b) Rural areas (*chiiki*, lit: ‘the regions’)
- c) Agricultural, mountain, and fishing villages (*nōsangyoson*)
- d) Diplomacy and defence (*gaikō, bōei*)



Figure 11: LDP Manifesto 2013 Title Page

A detailed analysis of every one of the LDP's pledges in each section is unnecessary: an effective narrative is not defined by the minute details, but by the picture it paints with its broad brushstrokes, its emotional proclamations, and strong personalities. The LDP manifesto is dominated by its central personality: Abe Shinzō.

Abe's visage is featured throughout the document and dominates the pamphlet's front page (Figure 7). Abe's face, in-close up, looking directly at the reader, smiling, is super-imposed with the title of the manifesto and the LDP slogan, 'Take Back Japan'. Abe is positioned quite literally as the face of the LDP campaign.

The party's televisual campaign provided a further dimension to a campaign emphasising the momentum generated by Abe's first six months as Prime Minister. In one of the campaign's official 30-second television spots, Abe is framed as a dynamic, progressive political force (jimintō, 2013b). In the ad, entitled 'Forward, Party Leader' (*susumu, sōsai*), the Prime Minister is depicted striding confidently forward through various scenes as Abe provides his own non-diegetic narration:

A new Japan is beginning to stir. Steadily and with vigour we take one step at a time towards a strong and safe Japan! To protect Japan, to drive Japan forwards, to take back Japan!

As Abe delivers his political statement, we view the Prime Minister striding through a working farm, through an industrial scene, back streets, hallways, an office, and charging up a flight of stairs (Figure 9) before emerging onto a rooftop overlooking Tokyo, from which he delivers his final exhortation, fist clenched, to ‘take back Japan!’



Figure 12: Abe bounding up a set of stairs with the closed caption 'drive Japan forwards'

Another 30 second television campaign ad encouraged the Japanese public to place themselves within the LDP’s strategic narrative and imaginatively construct their own roles in the story of Japan’s immediate future (jimintō, 2013a). Once again, the Prime Minister provides a rousing voiceover as he calls upon the Japanese people to put their own hands to the work of taking back Japan:

Take back Japan. Support society, take it back by your own hand. Living in this country, take it back by your own hand. Bear the future, take it back by your own hand. Realise it by your own hand. Take back Japan!

This call, quite literally, to arms, is reinforced by consecutive shots focusing on the hands of Japanese citizens featured in the video. A blue-collar worker operates a machine; a female orchard worker bags fruit from a tree; an office worker struggles to hold up a pile of folders; a shop assistant rings up groceries on a till; a baby wraps its hand around the bottle from which it is being hand-fed; an elderly couple holds hands in the sunshine; an older student writes in an exercise book; younger students raise their hands in class to answer a question; and commuters grip plastic rings to steady themselves as they stand during their commute on public transport. Finally, Abe stands in medium-close up, lifting his fist and calling out ‘take back Japan!’

These adverts function in a similar manner to those of the 2012 election. Abe is portrayed as an energetic, youthful figure, whose physical fitness is emphasised, both as a metaphor for the more dynamic Japan that an Abe victory would symbolise, and to reassure voters that the former prime minister’s well-documented health issues are under control and would not undermine Abe’s capacity to lead the nation. The shot captured in Figure 9, of Abe bounding up a flight of stairs with the voiceover subtitle ‘drive Japan forwards’ superimposed beneath, exemplifies this literal and metaphorical physical rebirth.



Figure 13: Still from an LDP campaign advert, with the closed caption 'with these hands, [effect] the realisation of growth'

The Failed DPJ Counter-Narrative

The DPJ leader, Kaieda Banri, faced a difficult task as he sought to salvage his party's fortunes at the 2013 election. Kaieda, a Tokyo-based lawmaker who had graduated from Keio University's law school, had succeeded Kan Naoto as leader of the party following the DPJ's defeat in the December 2012 general election. His campaign for the House of Councillors



Figure 14: Title Page of the 2013 DPJ Manifesto

election focused on revitalising rural areas after the economic and physical devastation caused by the 3/11 disaster. This choice meant that the DPJ and Kaieda were seeking to appeal to a group of the electorate long considered to be LDP loyalists: rural constituents and farmers. Since the 1950s, the LDP had reliably secured the support of farmers through protectionist policies and had provided rural voters with outsized political influence through creative redrawing of electoral district boundaries (Gordon, 2009, p.278). The DPJ (and its

predecessor as Japan's largest opposition party), on the other hand, traditionally drew its support from urban centres. This incursion into traditionally LDP territory was not a new development: in 2007, under Ōzawa Ichirō, the party had shifted away from the neoliberalist policies of the early 2000s in favour of 'putting people's livelihoods first', an approach which had made the DPJ the largest party in the House of Councillors in that year's election (Neary, 2019, p.85). Kaieda appeared to believe that, despite the party's humiliating reversal in the previous election, a similar narrative, focused on improving the lived experiences of left-behind, rural Japanese voters, could persuade the Japanese public that the DPJ was not a spent political force.

However, with three years of chaotic DPJ rule having only recently come to a close, the public were not willing to receive Kaieda's narrative as he had intended.

Media Projection of the Narratives

In an editorial published on 4 July, the first day of the official election campaign period, the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* questioned whether the DPJ could put forward a narrative effective enough to prevent Abe from achieving his goal of a unified Diet (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2013a). Specifically, the editorial asked: 'is the opposition party able to present a clear counterpoint to the Abe administration?'. As the editorial develops, it becomes clear that the paper's view is that the answer is no, the DPJ does not have a message capable of challenging the narrative that Abe and the LDP have crafted. If asked for a policy alternative to Abenomics, the editorial argued, the DPJ does not have an answer; in contrast, the paper highlights *Ishin no Kai*'s clear message that Abenomics is a policy working in the favour of vested interests. The *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* is clear, at the outset of the campaign, which party's narrative appears to be most compelling. Abe and the LDP, the editorial notes, has been skilful in shifting the discursive environment away from constitutional reform, towards the most pressing issue in public life, the economy.

The *Japan Times* sounded a similar note of warning regarding the opposition's failure to present an alternative strategic narrative. On 2 July, the paper analysed the DPJ's heavy loss in the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly election on 23 June – in which the party had gone from the largest in the Assembly to fourth-largest – concluding that Kaieda Banri and his party 'needs to present voters with a clear vision for Japan's future and convincing measures to achieve it'

(Japan Times, 2013). In other words, the DPJ's narrative was undermined by the lack of two key components: a narrative *resolution* and *tools* to achieve it.

As the nation went to the polls on 21 July, the *Yomiuri* published a final editorial encouraging the nation to provide Abe with a majority in the House of Councillors and end the 'twisted Diet' (*nejire kokkai*) (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2013a). No doubt to Abe's pleasure, The *Yomiuri*'s arguments focused on the economy, praising the effects thus far of the government's stimulus policies, whilst stressing to their readers that the government required full control of the Diet if it was to assert control over the accumulation of problems facing the nation (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2013a). The DPJ may have been principled in highlighting the adverse side effects of Abenomics, the paper conceded, but it had regrettably failed to offer its own concrete economic plan in response. The *Keizai Shimbun* also focused on the 'twisted' Diet, encouraging its readers not to take their vote for granted in the face of predictions that turnout could fall to a record low (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2013e).

The *Asahi*, in its own editorial, published the day before the election, chose to avoid issues of policy altogether, nor did it choose to endorse a particular party. Instead, it focused on the issue of freedom, citing an incident at Abe's first rally of the current election campaign, during which an anti-nuclear activist was harassed by a group of men claiming to work for the police and, in response to her sign asking the Prime Minister if he was for or against nuclear energy, was told that the rally 'was not a place for questions' (Asahi Shimbun, 2013g). The *Asahi* had come to the conclusion that the Abe government was a threat to personal liberty, yet apparently did not feel that explicitly endorsing a specific opposition party would be the most effective approach for its final election editorial, nor did it critique Abe's policy positions, instead focusing on a more abstract threat.

The genius of Abe's version of Abenomics is that, in its narrative, the protagonist and the tool utilised to achieve resolution of the crisis are mutually entwined. Abenomics, by definition, cannot exist without Abe and, as Abe argues, 'There Is No Alternative' to Abenomics. Without Abe's economic leadership, the story goes, there can be no resolution to the crisis that has engulfed Japan. Furthermore, by focusing on economic policy, Abe was able to minimise the attention paid to his more controversial policy goals. As we shall see in the next chapter, Abe's focus on Abenomics did not mean that the Prime Minister had abandoned his hopes of achieving his national security vision and constitutional reform. Instead, as Sebastian Maslow has argued, the Abenomics narrative was a conscious attempt by Abe to tone down his 'revisionist agenda' and victory in the 2013 election 'opened the reform agenda for an intensified debate on security issues, including collective self-defence' (Maslow, 2015, p.748). This reform agenda would comprise the primary legislative focus of the LDP in the new Diet session, as Abe set about constructing a new state security infrastructure.

Table 5: Abe's narrative of the 2013 election

Abe's Narrative	2013 House of Councillors Election
<i>Setting</i>	Japan
<i>Crisis</i>	Economic stagnation, 'Twisted Diet' threatening Abenomics and the narrative
<i>Tool(s)</i>	'Three Arrows'
<i>Resolution</i>	LDP control of both houses of the Diet, continued implementation of all three arrows of Abenomics leading to prolonged Japanese economic recovery

Towards the New Diet Session

If the old saying holds that art is never finished, the same is true of politics. Elections are not the bookend of one campaign, they are the dividing line between two. Abe had succeeded in

the 2012 and 2013 elections, but he now had just eighteen months to prepare for the 2014 House of Representatives election. The prime minister faced a choice: should he maintain the narrative that had secured him two successive democratic victories in a little over half a year or, with his power entrenched in both houses of the Diet, did he require a new narrative to sustain public enthusiasm for his administration? This question will be the focus of the next chapter, but I would first like to examine Abe's political messaging in the immediate post-election period in mid-to-late-2013 to get a sense of how Abe's second victory in seven months might affect his strategic narrative.

Abe delivered an economic policy speech at the Guildhall in London on the evening of 19 June, a speech he used to outline the next stage in the development of the Abenomics strategic narrative (kantei.co.jp, 2013i). Abenomics, the prime minister argued, was already working. Though the spectre of the deflationary crisis at the heart of his narrative remained, Abe identified encouraging economic data to support his argument that Abenomics was already beginning to address the causes of the crisis at the centre of Abe's strategic narrative about Japan. Abe attributed Japan's economic crisis to the lack of a 'strong political will'. Recent economic results suggested that the Japanese economy had grown by 4.1% in the first quarter of 2013 which, when set against the 3.6% contraction the country had experienced in the final quarter of 2012, allowed Abe to boast of a 7.7% swing in economic growth during the first three months of his second administration. Conscious of his international audience and the British political figures in attendance, Abe drew a narrative thread from 1920s Britain to the implementation of Abenomics in 2013. Quite literally beginning the story with the phrase 'once upon a time' (*wansu apon a taimu*), Abe explained that at the turn of the 20th Century a Japanese politician and future Finance Minister, Takahashi Korekiyo (1854-1936), had travelled to London to secure financing for the Japanese government's military efforts in the war with

Russia (1904-1905). Takahashi secured funding from HSBC's London branch, of which the manager at the time was Sir Ewan Cameron, the great-great grandfather of the British Prime Minister, David Cameron. In case this was not enough to secure British support for his narrative, Abe proceeded to lean further into British economic political history, stating that his Abenomics growth strategy was founded on the economic theories of one of Britain's most famous historical economic thinkers, John Maynard Keynes.

At a press conference to mark the opening of the regular session of the Diet on 25 June, Abe again chose to focus his remarks on the success of Abenomics so far. When he returned to power six months previously, Abe argued, Japan was mired in a variety of crises: long-term deflation, a sluggish economy, declining foreign influence, and challenges to Japanese sovereignty. Since his return, however, Abe's three arrows had fired the starting shot on the revitalisation of the Japanese economy. Abe sought to provide international credence for his approach: at the recent G8 summit, he claimed, the participating nations had 'unanimously praised the three arrows financial policy' (kantei.co.jp, 2013f).

Abe now had the Diet majority and public mandate that he required to properly implement his policies and pass legislation. In theory, Abe now had time to begin the process of implementation. The next House of Representatives election was not scheduled until December 2016, providing the government with three and a half years in which to pass its legislative agenda through the Diet. However, in the post-war period, the House of Representatives had rarely sat for a full four-year term, and this Diet was to prove no exception. Abe and the LDP would go back to the nation less than eighteen months later, in December 2014. A new election campaign would call for a renewed strategic narrative. In chapter three I will analyse the evolution of Abe's narrative in the period from July 2013 to the next election in December

2014. As we shall see, this was not a straightforward process, but rather a process of evolution, increased narrative complexity, and revision.

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Chapter Five: Abenomics, Continued

Following the July 2013 election, the Diet reassembled for a short extraordinary session, before adjourning for the summer on 7 August, and was not due to reconvene for a new session until mid-October. During the intervening months, Abe set off on a global diplomatic tour, visiting several continents and delivering speeches in the Middle East, the US, Europe, and South-East Asia. Perhaps the Prime Minister's most significant trip during this legislative break was to South America. On 7 September in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Japan was awarded the right to host the 2020 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games. This provided a major political coup for Abe, his government, and the nation, which had not hosted the summer edition of the Olympics since 1964, a seminal event in post-war Japanese history which had significant implications for Japan's sense of national identity (Droubie, 2011, Wilson, 2012). In 1964, Japan's successful hosting of the Olympics provided national validation and international recognition that the defeated wartime power had reconstructed itself a peaceful, economically progressive member of the post-war international community. Now, as Japan emerged from the shadow of another national crisis, the 3.11 triple disaster, Abe hoped that the same event would provide a catalyst for the economic regeneration at the heart of his national strategic narrative, delivering the following remarks to a press conference following the International Olympic Committee's decision:

'Japan is magnificent'. I believe we have in our hands a great chance to make [people] think such a thing.

At the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake we received support from people from around the world. I want to extend my gratitude once again. And, in this decision for Tokyo to host [the Olympics], I feel it is as though voices are calling 'Japan, do your best! People of Tohoku, do your best!'.

Once the new Diet session resumed in mid-October, however, Abe's communicative strategy began to evolve as his legislative priorities broadened. As I shall outline in the following section, in late 2013 and early 2014 the Abe administration reprioritised its legislative agenda. With two of the three policy arrows of Abenomics in flight, the government sought in the 2013-14 Diet session to prioritise the passage of security legislation. This new legislative focus would require a new strategic narrative.

July 2013 - November 2014: Evolution of a Narrative and the 'Proactive Contribution to Peace'

Abe wasted little time during the early months of the new Diet session, which opened on 15 October 2013. The Prime Minister moved to enact a slate of reform-focused legislation and redesigned government institutions as he sought to concentrate greater power in the office of the prime minister and centralise bureaucratic decision making. A bill authorising the creation of the Cabinet Personnel Bureau (CPB) was passed by the Diet in November, although the institution itself would not be officially established until the following May. The creation of the CPB was a reform pursued previously by both the LDP and the DPJ which sought to remedy factionalisation and 'stovepiping' within the government bureaucracy and imbue the prime minister with the greater power over personnel decisions (Harris, 2020, pp.212-213). The CDP effectively allowed Abe to exercise greater control over the bureaucracy and arrogate greater power to the prime minister's office (Burrett, 2017, p.417). In this reform we can see the beginning of Abe's legislative shift away from economic policy and towards institutional reform – reform that the Prime Minister hoped would provide him with greater authority and executive power to enact far-reaching changes in Japan's national security policy.

In December 2013, the coalition also passed the most controversial item of legislation since Abe's return to power: the Specially Designated State Secrets Act (SDSSA). The SDSSA 'modernized the government's classification system and strengthened penalties for the unauthorized release of designated state secrets' and generated vocal opposition in civil society (Harris, 2020, p.214). Large-scale demonstrations took place across the country in November and December 2013 as sections of Japanese society made clear their dissatisfaction with what was perceived as a threat to press freedom (Asahi Shimbun, 2013a, Asahi Shimbun, 2013b, Asahi Shimbun, 2013c). It should be noted that Abe was not the first prime minister to advocate for a state secrets law; nor was this a peculiarly LDP policy goal – Kan Naoto had spoken publicly in favour of such a law following the leak of a video that had undermined the government's handling of the 2010 Senkaku Incident, in which a Chinese fishing trawler had rammed a Japanese coast guard patrol boat (Harris, 2020, p.164). Nonetheless, Abe's decision to push through the SDSSA concurrent to the establishment of the CDP opened the Prime Minister up to accusations that his primary focus was no longer economic recovery but implementation of conservative legislation and expanding the executive power of the prime minister's office.

The third act of security policy reform that occurred during this period was the creation of a National Security Council (NSC). The NSC, modelled on its US equivalent, was designed to provide a 'control tower' for the prime minister to exercise greater authority over the planning, coordination, and implementation of Japan's foreign policy and security policy (Liff, 2018). The NSC oversaw the development of Japan's first National Security Strategy (NSS) (The Government of Japan, 2013), which outlined the government's long-term security aims and its

central concept of a ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’⁷ (*sekkyokuteki heiwa shugi*) (Akimoto, 2018, pp.14-15, Liff, 2018). The NSC was established against backdrop of escalating tension between Japan and its East Asian neighbours, China and North Korea (Harris, 2020, pp.217-225).

Given this backdrop of increasingly conservative and divisive government, it was strategically important for Abe to rewrite his strategic narrative to emphasise the importance of institutional restructuring and the state secrets legislation to Japan’s long-term national security. As the 2013-14 Diet session unfolded, Abe pursued a narrative course that attempted to justify security reform as an essential component of his broader goal of economic regeneration. With the security legislation passed, Abe augmented his narrative through his public speeches, constructing a new story that emphasised the importance of mutually reinforcing economic and security policies.

In Abe’s first speech of 2014, on New Year’s Day, he began by talking of the economic, reconstruction, and educational crises that his administration had inherited (kantei.co.jp, 2014g). The Prime Minister emphasised his achievements thus far, in which he included economic policy reform, post-disaster reconstruction, accession to TPP negotiations, securing the Olympic Games for 2020, and the consumption tax (kantei.co.jp, 2014g). To this list he added the establishment of the National Security Council (NSC), the development of a new

⁷ This term has been translated both as ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’ and ‘Proactive Pacifism’. Though ‘Proactive Pacifism’ is a more literal translation, the Japanese government has favoured ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’ in its official translations, and therefore is the form I shall use hereon.

National Security Strategy (NSS), and a redrawing of the fundamental principles of national self-defence (kantei.co.jp, 2014g). It had been 365 days, Abe argued, of ‘decision’ and ‘action’. In this speech we can witness Abe’s attempts to project a narrative that foregrounded economic regeneration as a vehicle for, and symbiotic partner to, conservative security policy that together comprised a wholistic approach to ‘taking back’ a ‘strong’ Japan.

However, this is just the beginning of the battle to take back a ‘strong Japan’. From now on as well, at the start of this year, we are renewing our resolve to move with tension forward on this long and tough journey. (kantei.co.jp, 2014g)

Abe emphasised, however, that the country had not yet reached the conclusion of this particular narrative. The three arrows of Abenomics had effected a reversal of deflation and a return to positive growth, but Japan remained on its journey to extricate itself from a deflationary spiral that had lasted nearly two decades, an argument supported by the data, which showed that the implementation of QE had caused the stock markets to rebound and interests rates to rise (Ito, 2021, pp.191-193). Only by continuing to pursue these policies with all their might, Abe argued, could he and the government – and, by implication, those Japanese who voted for him – truly succeed in taking back a strong Japan.

On the international stage, Abe similarly sought to project a narrative of large-scale economic growth and investment. In early January 2014, the Prime Minister set off on a tour of African nations in an effort to promote Japanese state and business investment in the continent. In a speech in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on 14 January, Abe placed his ‘Abenomics’ narrative in a wider context, arguing that developing nations such as Ethiopia should adopt his methods, taking the opportunity to promote ‘womenomics’ in particular, stressing the need for greater

female labour force participation to drive long-term growth (kantei.co.jp, 2014h). This was a message Abe reinforced at a general press conference in the evening of the same day, in which he urged African nations to create economies in which women could ‘shine’ (kantei.co.jp, 2014d), a phrase he had also used when speaking about ‘womenomics’ in a Japanese context. At the World Economic Forum in Davos on 22 January, the Prime Minister opened his speech by making explicit the intrinsic connection between Abe the prime minister and Abenomics the policy, despite protestations of perhaps false modesty:

Well, my economics policy is called ‘Abenomics’. I don’t know who it was that attached this name to it. Although I’m personally a little reluctant to continue calling it by this name, please allow me to use this phrase here.

The first arrow is bold monetary policy, the second arrow is flexible fiscal policy, and the continued awakening of public investment is the unending third arrow.

The Japanese economy is attempting to emerge from a long period of deflation. This year there will be a wage increase in the spring. Because of this long overdue wage increase, consumption will expand.

Japan’s financial situation is also improving, and we are continuing along the path of financial reconstruction.

Japan is a country in its twilight years. So goes the argument. A country at the peak of its maturity, with no opportunity for growth. Such claims were made as if it is entirely natural. This was the scene before I returned as Prime Minister.

Now, such things are not heard at all. The rate of growth has undergone a great change from negative to positive. In six years’ time the Olympics and Paralympics will come to Tokyo, and the people’s spirits have brightened. It is not twilight that has come to Japan. It is a new dawn. (kantei.co.jp, 2014c)

We can see in this passage Abe’s vision of a national narrative in which Abenomics, and by extension Abe himself, are the central pivot on which Japan’s future hinges. Utilising the vivid

metaphor of dusk and dawn, Abe posits that it is his he and his policy that will prevent Japan reaching the end of its history, and instead live to see a bright new day. Abe succinctly outlined his narrative resolution at the conclusion of his speech, stating: ‘Through Abenomics, I want to create a vigorous Japan that brings about peace and prosperity in the region and around the world’ (kantei.co.jp, 2014c).

Global events did conspire to provide Abe with a pretext for projecting a narrative that prioritised his more controversial security policies, with the Russian government approving military action in the Ukrainian region of Crimea in March 2014. On 25 March, Abe gave a speech at the G7 summit in Brussels (the usual G8 having been reduced to the G7 by the absence of Russia; the annual G8 summit was originally to have taken place in Russia in June), in which he reaffirmed Japan’s commitment to playing a major role in global security operations (kantei.co.jp, 2014e). Abe referenced Japan’s unique history as the sole victim of an atomic bombing and argued that the invasion of the Crimean Peninsula was not just a European crisis, but an Asian and a global problem as well. Though Abe made no firm commitment to Japanese involvement in Crimea, the Prime Minister spoke repeatedly of ‘our’ (*watashitachi*) responsibility to collectively maintain global peace, as a group of democracies with shared fundamental values and who adhered to the rule of law (kantei.co.jp, 2014e). In a speech to new members of the Diet, on 4 April, Abe informed explained to the incoming lawmakers precisely how he perceived the narrative conflict now facing Japan:

At this moment, Japan is at a turning point in an era.

We are only at the midpoint of our recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake. As we respond to the continuing rapid decline in the birth rate, we must revive a strong economy. It is now or never to construct responsible energy policy and reinvent education.

If we turn our eyes outward, a single great economic zone is being created in the growth centre of the Asia Pacific. TPP negotiations are in their final phase.

Last week, North Korea fired a ballistic missile. One after the other, they fired to the southwest these provocations to our sovereignty. The security environment around Japan grows ever more severe. The situation in Ukraine, too, can not been seen by Asia as simply somebody else's problem.

We cannot avert our eyes from these issues. They cannot be allowed to be postponed. We must face these issues one by one and demand an answer. (kantei.co.jp, 2014l)

In this speech, Abe elided his narratives of economic recovery and a more proactive Japanese role in international security. Though economic policy remained the central tool for achieving Japanese narrative redemption, events in the Ukraine and the ballistic missile launches by North Korea provided a pretext for Abe to argue that economic security could only be achieved by greater integration with global security and trade organisations. Furthermore, Japan, as integral member of the Asia Pacific community of nations, must also play a role in providing solutions to these developing security crises. The Prime Minister also sought to emphasise the audience's agency in delivering the correct narrative resolution, calling on the Diet members to make themselves heard, turn out, and take a global perspective. Abe argued that 'a people that does not fight, cannot fail', but that 'a country in which no-one tries hard cannot advance its future' (kantei.co.jp, 2014l). Abe sought to enhance the legitimacy of his narrative – and reduce the probability of counter narratives emerging – by persuading newly-arrived lawmakers, a group from which he drew a significant proportion of his own support, to buy into his version of the national story from day one. In perhaps a veiled reference to another unresolved international dispute in which Japan continued to play a central role, Abe called on the Japanese Diet members to channel the spirit of Mamiya Rinzō (1775-1844), an explorer in the late Tokugawa period who charted the island of Sakhalin, at the time colonised by the Japanese, but which had been ceded to the Russians in the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty.

Despite Japan having renounced its claim to Sakhalin (*Karufuto* in Japanese), Japan and Russia remained in dispute over a chain of islands off the east coast of Sakhalin and the north coast of Hokkaido known as the Kuril Islands.

In response to these developing security concerns the concept of ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’ took on an increasingly central role in Abe’s political messaging. On 17 April, at The Economist’s Japan Summit, Abe stated that Proactive Contribution to Peace was ‘Japan’s new standard’ (kantei.co.jp, 2014b). During a 1 May speech at University College London to Britain’s leading political and economic figures, Abe further promoted the Proactive Contribution to Peace concept in the context of Japan-Britain relations, praising the Royal Navy’s response to the 3/11 disaster and promising Japanese commitment to maintaining peace on the open seas (kantei.co.jp, 2014a). Five days later, during an address to the North Atlantic Council of NATO, Abe once again made reference to ‘raising the standard of Proactive Contribution to Peace’ (kantei.co.jp, 2014f). The Prime Minister emphasised Japan’s increasingly active role in PKOs in Cambodia, the Golan Heights, Haiti, and South Sudan. Abe’s narrative offered a positive vision of a global network of allied nations; alliances which would require protection through mutual participation in institutions that guaranteed collective security such as the UN. If Japan wished to participate in these institutions as a leading member befitting its economic power, Abe’s narrative argued, it was essential that the nation participated in an equal partner in providing security for any member nation whose sovereignty and security was threatened.

On 24 June, two days after the annual Diet session concluded, Abe delivered a speech in which he reflected on the achievements of the parliament. Given that there had been no major economic legislation passed that could compare with the Abenomics measure enacted during

the 2013 session, one might have expected Abe to extol the virtues of the various security reforms that his government had passed. Instead, the Prime Minister focused his messaging on various promising economic markers. Abe concluded the speech by establishing a new narrative turning point at which the nation now found itself.

The world is undergoing a great change. There is no guarantee that that which was common sense yesterday will still hold true tomorrow. We cannot avert our eyes from reality. There is no alternative but, with all our might, to push forward our economy, our foreign policy, and our security.

We are continuing to reliably meet the challenges that we have faced thus far. I believe that there is no other path but this one. Tomorrow will undoubtedly be better than today. In order to take back a Japan that overflows with this belief, and a Japan that firmly protects our lives and peaceful way of living, together with all Japanese citizens, I resolve to follow this path. I ask all of you for your continued support and understanding. (kantei.co.jp, 2014i)

Abe understood that, as he approached the midway point of his administration, and with the central policy pillars of Abenomics legislatively established, his strategic narrative required evolution to maintain its relevance and persuasiveness. Rather than abandon his economic narrative, he broadened its foundations by introducing a security element to the story. This served to maintain the narrative's relevance at an historical moment of increased regional and global tension, provided justification for the Abe Cabinet's divisive security reforms and constitutional reinterpretation, and attempted to assuage the concerns of those Japanese citizens who might perceive recent legislative action as an administrative deprioritisation of the economy in favour of collective military security.

In this period prior to the 2014 election, we can observe a bifurcation of Abe's strategic narrative and the emergence of two distinct but complementary stories. With the early months

of the Diet session dominated by the restructuring of the state security institutions, in the form of the creation of the NSC, the passage of the SDSSA, and the publication of the NSS, a new security-oriented narrative emerged. This ‘proactive contribution to peace’ narrative was a recurring theme of the Prime Minister’s speeches to foreign governments and institutions, and represented a vision of a Japan that would, against the backdrop of the Crimean crisis and renewed North Korean belligerency, play a more active role in global defence initiatives. This narrative was intended to build to support for the Cabinet’s controversial decision to produce its own interpretation of the Constitution to ratify increased Japanese participation in overseas PKOs by ruling collective self-defence (CSD) to be legal.

However, Abe’s new ‘proactive contribution to peace’ narrative did not presage the abandonment of the Abenomics narrative. Instead, the Prime Minister sought to interweave the two as threads of a larger meta-narrative. As Abe stated in a speech to the Research Institute of Japan on 19 September:

Others are asking of this year’s growth strategy, ‘the substance is good, but can it really be done?’

To identify one [claim], they say ‘The Abe Cabinet isn’t really about the economy, it wants to do security.’

Security and economics are not separate issues. They are actually incredibly intimately connected. Secure oceans are an important prerequisite for free trade. Are we even able to talk about this increasingly deep global economy without including sea- and air-defence policy?

Without sea and air security, we cannot enjoy the flourishing of regional peace and stability. Therefore, I have taken the clear position that, raising the standard of ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’, we will make even greater contributions to world peace.

A Cabinet reshuffle at the beginning of September also witnessed another significant change in Abe's political messaging. Where the previous Cabinet had been titled the 'Crisis Cabinet', the rejigged administration was to be known as the 'Reform Cabinet' (*kaizō naikaku*). This terminological shift represented a clear acknowledgement by the Prime Minister that the national narrative was entering a new phase. Media reports suggested that an early election might be on the horizon, and as Abe approached the second anniversary of his return to office, he recognised that a 'crisis' narrative was no longer appropriate for an established government seeking to cultivate an aura of success.

These narratives spoke not just to Abe's attempts to ensure future electoral support, but to frame his current policy priorities. With the security legislation enacted and the first two arrows of Abenomics set loose, the Prime Minister now sought to focus his energies on making a success of the TPP negotiations, establishing an EPA with the EU, and to further strengthen the US-Japan alliance. Abe wanted to take Abenomics global, and to do so he offered a vision of a Japan at the heart of a hub of international trade networks and security cooperation. Or, as Abe put it to the Japan Investment Seminar in late September, 'Abenomics is entering its second chapter'.

What we have seen over the first half of 2014, then, is a clear attempt by Abe to provide additional depth to his strategic narrative. By so doing, he aimed to persuade voters of three things: 1) economic recovery continued to be the government's first priority; 2) that the emergence of global crises such as the Ebola outbreak, ISIL expansion, and climate change necessitated greater Japanese integration into the international community and global institutions, and; 3) greater international integration justified the government's controversial security reforms and reinterpretation of the constitution to allow CSD, a policy known as

‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’. The Prime Minister also pushed a fourth narrative thread, his much-vaunted ‘society in which women shine’, though the administration conspicuously failed to push through meaningful female labour reform during this period. There remained no narrative tool for effecting such a transformation of Japanese society.

At its core, Abe’s narrative argued that while Japanese economic recovery remained the government’s top priority, economic growth in the 21st century could only be attained through greater integration into global trade and security networks, and to achieve such integration Japan would necessarily have to implement domestic security reforms and engage in constitutional reinterpretation or reform. The Prime Minister attempted to support his rhetoric through action with Japan’s accession to TPP negotiations, development of an EU-Japan EPA, and a foreign policy that prioritised bilateral and multilateral alliance-building, most notably with Australia and Central American and African nations. Now that he had called an election, however, Abe faced a decision point. Was the strategic narrative of the previous Diet session appropriate for the very different communicative environment of an election campaign, in which the competing political parties were constrained in their messaging by both financial and temporal limitations? The Prime Minister had dissolved the Diet on the basis that he had broken his campaign pledge to implement the consumption tax rise on schedule, and therefore would seek a new mandate for his legislative agenda and, in particular, his economic policy. To that end, Abe argued that this would be a vote on Abenomics to the exclusion of all else and would consequently require a narrative that once again framed Japan’s economic situation as its central crisis.

At the moment of the 2014 House of Representatives election, on 14 December 2014, Abe Shinzō was two weeks shy of his second anniversary as Prime Minister since returning to the

post. Abe had already outlasted his first term by almost a full year and had overseen two successive election victories in the first seven months of his current term. Now he faced a new challenge: convincing the Japanese electorate to retain their faith in an Abe government over the long term. He had built his return to government on the back of a narrative of change and regeneration; now Abe sought to construct a narrative that extolled the virtues of continuity and stability.

The 2014 Election Campaign Strategic Narrative: Onwards with Abenomics

The 2014 LDP Campaign

Abe announced the dissolution of the House of Councillors at a press conference on 18 November. In his opening statement, the Prime Minister referred to this decision as the ‘Abenomics dissolution’, an attempt to frame the election as a judgement on Abenomics and his government’s performance thus far (kantei.co.jp, 2014j). The opening paragraphs of his speech are worth quoting in full:

Today, the Lower House of the Diet was dissolved. This dissolution is the ‘Abenomics dissolution’. Do we move forward with Abenomics, or do we come to a halt? This is the question this election asks. Day after day, over and over again the opposition party does nothing but claim that Abenomics has failed. Through this election, I want to ask the people of this country whether our economic policies are mistaken or whether they are correct, and indeed whether we have any other option.

I want you to think back to two years ago. Four years on from the Lehman Shock, our economy wasn’t recovering, and Japan alone was suffering from deflation and three consecutive quarters of negative economic growth.

An extremely strong yen was driving many companies abroad and causing deindustrialisation. In my home prefecture of Yamaguchi, a large factory which employed more than 500 young people had no choice but to close because of the overly strong yen. Due to this strong yen, no matter how much they tried, no matter how much sweat flowed, no matter how many good ideas they had, they could not win the fight, and many jobs were lost. Unemployment rose, subcontractor companies lost jobs, and the phrase ‘chain bankruptcy’ spread across Japan. Even now I will never forget being told at that time, wherever I went as the leader of the opposition, ‘Abe-san, please do something about this’. (kantei.co.jp, 2014j)

Abe had set his narrative. If the nation turned its back on Abenomics now, he argued, it would return to the crisis of 2012: unemployment, recession, and a lack of hope for the future. The people of Japan had placed their trust in them as their saviour then; they should do it again now if they wished for a happy ending to this story. Abe also sought to narrow the parameters of the debate by positioning the consumption tax rise as the critical juncture in the progression of Abenomics, announcing that ‘as this is an important decision for the tax system which has a great impact on the people’s livelihoods, [I] have concluded that we must listen to the people’s voices’ (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014i).

Tanigaki Sadakazu, now Secretary-General of the LDP, told reporters outside the Diet following its dissolution on 21 November that the election would be a referendum on the government’s economic policies. When asked by a journalist on what platform would the LDP be fighting, Tanigaki replied:

Well, two years ago we returned to government, and compared to the period before that I think the economy has improved, hasn't it. Business earnings have improved, and the employment rate is expanding. On top of that, this summer's bonuses and the like were good, and in that way the economy is starting to experience a virtuous cycle. (jimintō, 2014b)

The Abenomics narrative was reflect

Figure 15: A still image from an LDP 2014 election campaign television ad, with text reading 'This is the only path to economic recovery'

ed in the official LDP slogan for the election campaign, 'this is the only path to economic recovery' (*keiki kaifuku, kono michi shikanai*). This slogan was deployed during Abe's press conference speech confirming the dissolution of the Diet, with the Prime Minister stating that 'this is the only way. This is the only path to economic recovery' (kantei.co.jp, 2014k). Abe even had the slogan emblazoned on his clothing so that it could be visually reinforced at campaign events which would later be broadcast on television or uploaded to the party's YouTube channel (Figure 16).



Abenomics as the only cure for Japan's economic crisis provided the central theme for the LDP's official 30 second campaign advert, entitled 'This is the only path to economic recovery' (*keiki kaifuku, kono michi shikanai*). The advert is very similar in style to the 2012 campaign

advert analysed in chapter two. Once again, Abe stands in front of a neutral background and delivers a series of short, sharp phrases, first in close up, and then in medium distance, with the campaign slogan superimposed on the screen (Figure 14). The transcript of the advert concisely conveys Abe's narrative:

Japan is now emerging from 15 years of painful deflation. We must not let this chance slip away. [We] made the decision to postpone the consumption tax. Thanks to Abenomics, employment is increasing, incomes are increasing, rural areas are reviving, and the Japanese people's livelihoods are becoming richer. This is the only the path to economic recovery. (jimintō, 2014a)

Abe's narrative now clearly placed Japan at the midway point of its journey to economic recovery. Through the well-worn metaphor of a 'path', the Prime Minister argued that the nation had now completed a significant portion of its journey to economic recovery, though it had not yet reached its conclusion. To vote the government out of power now would be akin to returning the nation to the start of its path, invalidating the efforts and sacrifices made thus far and placing it further from the story's resolution, and asking it to begin anew.

A 2 December *Yomiuri* roundup of the party leaders' debate at the Japanese National Press Club summarised Abe's central argument as follows:

Employment is improving. Wages are beginning to rise. [We] are finally able to rid [Japan] of 15 years of severe deflation. We have seized this opportunity. [We] are putting all our energy into the revitalisation of Tohoku. [We] are also advancing security legislation to protect Japanese lives, territory, and [our] beautiful seas. Each of these are only halfway done. However, this is the only path. Based on this belief, [we] will continue to march forwards with all our strength. (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014d)

Abe was making a bet that the Japanese public would look at the top-line economic figures and conclude that the Prime Minister was correct in his assessment that the government's economic policies were producing a satisfactory outcome, and that they were worth persisting with. The Prime Minister was also gambling that, despite Japan's return to recession in previous months, the steady economic growth of the previous two years would result in continued positive media projection of his narrative. The nation had slipped into recession in 2011 as a result of the 3.11 disaster, recording a negative growth rate of 1.1%, before experiencing modest annual growth of just 0.2% in 2012 (The Government of Japan, 2017). These figures would feature heavily in the DPJ campaign's attempted rebuttal of Abenomics, as we shall see below. Since Abe's election and the implementation of Abenomics, however, GDP had climbed 2.6% during fiscal year 2013. The unemployment rate had sat at 4.5% at the beginning of 2012, but by December 2014 it had declined to less than 3.5%; the job-to-applications ratio also continued to rise (The Government of Japan, 2017). In these adverts, Abe's message was clear: I am fixing the economy and achieving results; to turn back to the DPJ is to turn back to crisis.

Just as revealing was what was not included in these tightly focused messages. The Prime Minister made no reference to security issues or foreign diplomacy, two policy areas to which he had devoted a great deal of energy and political capital over the previous 18 months. A candidate is highly restricted in terms of content by a 30 second televisual advert, and Abe and his team made a decision to project a narrative of economic recovery rather than one which sought to promote the vision of social and cultural change that Abe had attempted to advance through legislation since the 2013 election.

If the 2012 campaign had been built around the concept of 'taking back' Japan, and the 2013 election focused on a dual message of 'taking back' Japan while moving forward with

Abenomics, the 2014 LDP policy manifesto made clear that Abenomics was now the central narrative on which Abe intended to build. The 26-page document was dedicated primarily to setting out the party's platform in great detail, but its opening section, which introduced the broad theme of the campaign, focused exclusively on the success of Abenomics thus far. Abe's opening statement, on page one of the document, harkened back to narratives past by stating that the people of Japan had heeded the call to 'take back a strong Japan!' (LDP, 2014, p.1). The deflationary cycle had been ended, Abe argued, and a 'virtuous economic circle' had taken hold (LDP, 2014, p.1). More than one million jobs had been created, and wages were at their highest point for 15 years – all thanks to the three arrows of Abenomics.

Abe had not entirely dispensed with his previously successful narrative formula. His opening remarks included the above-mentioned exhortation to take back a strong Japan, and closed by asking the reader whether they couldn't, together, 'take back a proud Japan, a Japan that shines at the centre of the world?' (LDP, 2014, p.1). But this was no longer the central narrative, insofar as it had become folded into the new narrative of Abenomics. The 'Take Back Japan' narrative of 2012 had provided as its resolution a Japan that based its newness on a glorified imagining of the past, on the 'better times', prior to the disastrous DPJ administrations and the lost decades of the 90s and 00s. Now, Abe sought to project a fresh resolution to the nation's narrative crisis, one characterised by economic and technological innovation. Abenomics, promoted as a bold new economic plan for a new era, necessitated a forward-looking strategic narrative. To achieve public buy-in, the government had to demonstrate through their narrative that the vast capital investment required to implement the policies which comprised Abenomics would generate a proportionally impressive resolution for the Japanese taxpayers being asked to foot the bill.

The third and fourth pages of the document were dedicated to a bold spread of economic data intended to highlight the economic progress being made under Abenomics, entitled ‘through Abenomics, we have come this far’ (LDP, 2014, pp.3-4). There followed boxes with data on employment, wages, industry, tourism, overseas infrastructure, and female economic activity. The implication of the heading was that this was only the beginning. By voting for the LDP, the public would be rewarded with further positive economic growth; Abenomics remained a work-in-progress, but it was one that was already bearing fruit.

A (Small C) Conservative Narrative

By positioning economics at the forefront of his strategic narrative in 2013, Abe had deemphasised, but not abandoned his more divisive and conservative policies. Abe’s approach in 2014 was to build upon the broad appeal of his economic story, transforming it into a richer narrative tapestry with the interweaving of new plot threads: while the narrative continued to emphasise economic policy and regeneration on the front pages of manifestos and multimedia advertising, traditional LDP issues such as constitutional reform and defence policy remained were introduced into the mix. Abe achieved this by reframing the narrative around the issue of security, which, he argued, was inextricably entwined with both economic policy and foreign policy.

Despite this, and despite Abe’s considerable efforts since the 2013 election to pass wide-ranging security reforms and restructure the state’s security management institutions, the government sought to deemphasise security during the 2014 election campaign and refocus its

communication on economic policy. In part this was a natural consequence of the decision to call the election in response to the Prime Minister's postponement of the consumption tax hike. Abe recognised that as the election had been called on the stated grounds that he wished to renew his mandate having broken a central campaign promise of the previous election, defending that decision would necessarily have to play a central role in his campaign narrative. By referring to the dissolution of the Diet as the 'Abenomics dissolution', Abe made this much explicit. However, this did not preclude the Prime Minister and his party from highlighting the security and foreign policy achievements they had obtained and had devoted considerable time to integrating into their strategic narrative, over the previous 18 months. This suggests that Abe and the LDP remained convinced that their most effective narrative tool remained Abenomics. Though the government had successfully pushed through its desired security reforms and, as evidenced by the election manifesto, remained committed to further reforms, and despite the disappointing national economic data of the latter half of 2014, Abe recognised that his most persuasive narrative tool remained the bold economic policies that had kickstarted the modest recovery of 2013 and early 2014.

This was no doubt in part influenced not just by Abe's own conservative inclinations and political ideology, but by social and civic reality. In an article concerning prefecture-sponsored forum for young people in their 20s and 30s in Oita to share their opinions on the election, the *Yomiuri* reported that the event sponsors had predicted that only around 30% of 20-somethings were likely to vote in the election, half the likely turnout of the over-50s (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2014l). Abe understood that the broad appeal of his economic message was more likely to drive favourable turnout for the LDP than was a divisive message that emphasised security issues. Despite the Proactive Contribution to Peace narrative receiving a great deal of projection through the Prime Minister's official speeches and statements over the previous year, Abe

chose during the campaign to return to the less complex narrative that had delivered success in the 2012 and 2013 elections. This should not suggest that Abe had concluded that his new narrative of interdependent economic and security threads had failed. Strategic narratives operate across timeframes of varying length; the strategic narrative of a parliamentary session may not be appropriate to the communicative goals of a month-long election campaign.

The DPJ: A(nother) Narrative Failure

As we have seen in the 2012 and 2013 elections, a strategic narrative is more likely to produce the desired effects if your political opponents are not able to project a compelling narrative of their own. Fortunately for Abe Shinzō and the LDP, the DPJ's narrative failures continued into the 2014 election. Kaieda Banri was facing his second election as party leader yet did not appear to have settled on a focused narrative formula in the eighteen months since the 2013 House of Representatives election. In 2013 Banri had set his sights on Japan's rural voters, only to be roundly rejected by them. In 2014, Banri and the DPJ would attempt to counter the LDP narrative by focusing on their own economically focused strategic narrative.

In a blog post on his personal website written as speculation was growing that the Prime Minister would dissolve the Diet to seek a new mandate for Abenomics having broken his election pledge to raise the consumption tax as planned, Kaieda disputed the framing of Abe's argument and its legislative foundation. Article 18 of the supplementary provisions to the consumption tax legislation provided for the postponement of the consumption tax due to unfavourable economic circumstances, so why did Abe feel the need to subject the nation to yet another election? The answer, Kaieda contended, was that the Prime Minister was cynically

calling a vote at a moment when the opposition parties were underprepared for a contest. He wrote:

This can be thought of as nothing more than a selfish pretext [for calling an election], dissolving [the Diet] while the opposition parties are unprepared and Abenomics is at an amber light. At this moment in time, if one was to give a name to this dissolution, it should be the ‘PM Abe’s egotistical dissolution’.
(Kaieda, 2014b)

Kaieda dismissed Abenomics as merely a short-term solution to the nation’s economic problems, arguing that ‘it is clear that sustainable growth cannot be achieved by Abenomics’ (jiji.com, 2014).

As the official campaign period approached, Kaieda attempted to frame the election in terms favourable to the DPJ. In an interview with the *Asahi Shimbun* on 27 November, when asked what position (*shisei*) his party would be adopting during the campaign, the DPJ leader said that his priority was to ensure that the election was a referendum on the Abe administration as a whole, not just the government’s economic policy:

[Our] intention is to prevent the LDP and Kōmeitō majority that is Prime Minister Abe’s target. I want the voters to judge on not just Abenomics, but the two years of the Abe administration. That includes the establishment of the Secret Information Protection Act and the cabinet decision on the right to collective defence. And if you look at their nuclear policy, it is as if 3/11 never happened.

The DPJ 2014 election manifesto provided a direct response to Abe’s argument that the election would be a judgement on the initial outcomes of Abenomics. The DPJ manifesto, entitled ‘Now is the Time to Change Course’ (*ima koso, nagare wo kaeru toki*) appeared to agree with Abe

and the LDP on at least this point, and countered that, yes, the election was a judgement on Abenomics, and Abenomics had been found wanting. Seizing upon the negative GDP growth of the previous quarter, the manifesto was a dense article that dedicated its opening pages to a data-driven rebuttal of the Abenomics policies. Alongside the heading ‘A Change from Abenomics’, the manifesto outlined the DPJ’s alternative ‘3 Economic Policy Pillars’:

- 1) ‘A flexible monetary policy that pays attention to the Japanese people’s livelihoods’
- 2) ‘Investing in people who turn life’s uncertainty into hope’
- 3) ‘An investment strategy that is connected to the future’

These ‘pillars’ were clearly designed to provide the audience with a direct alternative to the ‘three arrows’ of Abenomics and demonstrate that the DPJ had devised its own tools to engineer a positive narrative resolution.

Abenomics was not the only target of the DPJ's narrative, however, and the manifesto detailed proposals for reversing what the party characterised as the LDP's disregard for the constitution and the government's sweeping legislative reform of national security. In addition, the opposition criticised the Abe administration's efforts to restart nuclear reactors without sufficient assurance that to do so would be safe, and argued that the care and nursing industry, of ever-growing importance in an aging Japan, remained underfunded. The manifesto mentioned a 'medical care breakdown crisis' (*iryō hōkai no kiki*), a 'crisis of the closing down of domestic rice-producers' (*kokusanmai nōka ni haigyō kiki*), and a 'domestic rice industry on the verge of a crisis caused by falling prices' (*beika kyūroku de kiki ni hin shiteiru kokusanmai*). Compared to the singular, positive, Abenomics-focused message of the LDP manifesto, the DPJ text attempted to present a more complex and critical assessment of the political issues that the nation faced, framing the national narrative crisis as the culmination of a variety of smaller-scale crisis created, exacerbated, or unaddressed by the current government's policies.



Figure 17: Pages 2 and 3 from the 2014 DPJ election manifesto



In many respects, the DPJ manifesto provided a broadly appealing slate of policies, consistent with the party's long-term vision and prior campaigns. The Waseda University Manifesto Research Institute (*Waseda daigaku manifesuto kenkyūjyo*), which analyses national and regional election campaign manifestos, gave the 2014 DPJ manifesto an overall mark of 45/100, a marked downgrade on the 65 assigned to their 2012 manifesto, but only a point worse than the 46 that the 2014 LDP manifesto received in the same report (Waseda University Manifesto Research Institute, 2014).

Waseda identified a lack of original vision in the DPJ manifesto, arguing that the party had communicated clearly that it stood in opposition to the LDP, but had failed to articulate its own vision for Japan's future, awarding the manifesto just five points out a possible 10 for the category (Waseda University Manifesto Research Institute, 2014). It should be noted that Waseda awarded the LDP just four points in the same category, stating that the party had also struggled to transmit its own vision for Japan's national image. However, this was far less of a problem for the ruling LDP, which could point to the tangible economic achievements of the previous two years as evidence for the efficacy of its policies, and the need for continuity rather than rupture, than for the DPJ, which was tasked with providing a compelling enough alternative to the LDP to convince the Japanese public to switch horse mid-race. Kaieda and his team failed in this regard. NHK opinion polling suggested that although the DPJ achieved a slight boost in public support during the election campaign, with its party approval rating increasing from 7.9% in November to 11.7% at the time of the election, this remained miniscule in comparison to the LDP, whose own approval rating had not dropped below 34.3% during the calendar year, and sat at 38.1% in December (nhk.or.jp, 2021).

The televisual advertisements produced by the DPJ provided a riposte of their own to the LDP's narrative. The party produced three 15 second TV spots, which remain accessible on the party's now-dormant YouTube channel. Each of these adverts focused on the role of women in the future of Japanese society. The first of these, 'Compilation of Female Allies' (*jyosei no mikata hen*), features shots of three smiling women accompanied by voiceovers that appear to be from those same women, describing their hopes for the future. The first woman, seen working in an office at a computer, announces that 'my dream is to become a regular employee'. The second woman, who is playing with her young child in a park, says that 'I want to raise my children with peace of mind', and the third woman, serving drinks in a restaurant, states that 'I want to save money and get married'. Through these adverts, it is fair to surmise that the DPJ was taking aim at the 'womenomics' plank of Abenomics, and Abe's vision of a 'society in which women shine'. Kaieda's party moved to frame itself as the party of not just female economic empowerment, but greater liberation for women in all areas of life.

As the election campaign entered its final days, the DPJ leader made explicit his invitation to the Japanese public to understand themselves as protagonists in the party's narrative. In an attempt to generate public enthusiasm for what many viewed as an unnecessary distraction, Kaieda warned of the 'dangers of the Abe administration' and exhorted the electorate to go to the polls in numbers:

Many people have lent us their ears, and I feel that our message is permeating the electorate. As the people are the protagonists [of this election], I absolutely want them to make manifest their intentions at this election. I want to say to them that I would like them to vote without fail. (Kaieda, 2014a)

On the eve of election day, Kaieda was not particularly effusive about his own party's chances of success at the polls. Despite comparing the DPJ to a 'phoenix' that had spent the past two years since its election defeat passing through purgatory and would now re-emerge as a political force, the party leader forecasted a tepid version of success (Kaieda, 2014c). In a statement quoted on his personal website, Kaieda confined his ambitions to increasing the party's presence in the Diet to a level sufficient enough to place a 'check' on the Abe administration and solidifying the DPJ's position as the largest opposition party (Kaieda, 2014c). On election day, Kaieda closed the campaign by imploring the Japanese public to look back on the previous two years of LDP rule and come to their own conclusion as to whether Abenomics had produced tangible benefits in their own lives, saying that 'when casting their vote, first [I] want everyone to consider whether their lives have genuinely improved over these two years' (ANN News, 2014).

The DPJ was not alone in its failure to provide an effective alternative to the LDP. Surveying the field of political parties in the days after Abe called the election, the *Yomiuri* proclaimed the death of the 'third forces' in Japanese politics. *Minna no Tō* (Your Party), a centre-right party founded by former LDP politicians in 2009, dissolved following a disagreement within its ranks over whether to support the ruling coalition in the election (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014g). *Ishin no Kai* reformed as *Ishin no Tō* (Japan Innovation Party) due to a split between Hashimoto Tōru and Ishihara Shintarō; the *Yomiuri* attributed these ruptures to the strong personalities at the head of these institutions, suggesting that the paper did not anticipate that the required cooperation would materialise (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014g). As the editorial noted, the LDP's victory in 2012 had not been as overwhelming as suggested by the number of seats the coalition secured – the government had won 80 percent of the available seats with just 43 percent of the total votes, thanks in part to the strategic incompetence of the opposition parties, which had

crowded the field with candidates and allowed LDP candidates to emerge victorious with a small percentage of the vote share (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014g). Dissension in the ranks of the minor opposition parties should have been a boon to the DPJ's fortunes, and the party leadership had attempted at the outset of the campaign to negotiate an accord with *Minna no Tō* to amalgamate the two parties and present a united front against the government (Asahi Shimbun, 2014c). Despite the discord within the ranks of the other opposition parties, the DPJ failed to capitalise on the collapse of the so-called 'third forces' and unite public opposition to the government under the banner of its own strategic narrative.

Media Projection

Since the 2013 election, Abe had developed a multi-layered strategic narrative that built upon the foundations of the 2012 and 2013 'Take Back Japan' and 'Abenomics' narratives, seeking



Figure 18: Front page article from the Yomiuri Shimbun,

21/11/2014

to evolve a narrative formula that had proved successful but into which he desired to incorporate his renewed focus on security issues, global diplomacy, and constitutional reinterpretation. The official LDP election campaign, in turn, focused primarily on the short-term successes that Abenomics had delivered thus far, while framing the election as a critical juncture in the narrative of Japan's long-term economic health, in which the Japanese people must renew the Abenomics

mandate or risk reversing what gains had been achieved. The DPJ, led by Kaieda Banri, had countered with a narrative of its own which closely echoed that of the party's failed 2013 campaign.

Following Abe's announcement that he would dissolve the Diet and call an election, the media set about establishing their frames for the campaign. The *Yomiuri* was explicit in framing the election as a public evaluation of Abenomics. The paper's 19 November editorial, written in reaction to Abe's announcement of the dissolution, stated that the big issue of the election would be whether the Prime Minister could obtain the confidence of the public that his politics – prioritising long-term economic policies and general mobilisation of the economy, Proactive Contributions to Peace, and strengthening of the US-Japan alliance – was the right politics for Japan in this moment (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014i) and on 28 November specifically argued that the 'biggest point at issue' was Abenomics itself (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014e). On 20 November the paper published a short Q and A with Abe in which the LDP leader was able to outline his party's vision for its election campaign. The *Yomiuri* titled the interview with a headline that combined the LDP's election slogan with the government's primary economic policy: 'Abenomics is the only path' (*Abenomikusu no michi shika nai*) (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014b). This frame was lent support in the *Yomiuri*'s 28 November interview with Yamaguchi Natsuo, the leader of the LDP's coalition partner the Kōmeitō. Asked what the key points at issue in the election were, Yamaguchi responded that postponement of the consumption tax rate and stimulating the economy were the two issues on which the election ought to be fought, and the central question of the election was whether the LDP-Kōmeitō coalition was the correct choice to realise these goals (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014a).

The paper's front-page splash on 21 November, following the official announcement of the Diet's dissolution, declared in its headline that the election was a 'contest on the judgement of Abenomics' (*abenomikusu hyōka sōten*) (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014j). The efficacy of Abenomics was once again under public scrutiny given the government's decision to postpone the proposed consumption tax hike to early 2017. Abe's argument for postponing the tax hike was based on the contention that the economy was not yet in a stable enough position to withstand a possible retrenchment in spending that a tax hike could conceivably cause. This contention begged the question: if economic growth was fragile enough that it would not be able to survive a long-planned consumption tax rise, and would not be able to do so for another two and a half years, then was Abenomics in fact working as had been promised? On 22 November, the paper's editorial made clear its own position that the election was an 'interim verdict on the Prime Minister' and expressed its desire for a deeper debate of the merits and achievements of Abenomics (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014h). The editorial also argued that the 'increasingly severe' security situation left Japan with little room for error in terms of deciding its political course (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014h). In its 'policy examination' series of articles on the primary loci of debate during the campaign, the paper declared Abenomics the greatest issue of the election.

Should Prime Minister Abe's economic policy 'Abenomics continue? Has it failed? Judgement of the Prime Minister's management of the economy and public finances is the greatest issue at hand in this election.

Additionally, the *Yomiuri* also framed the election as the 'Abenomics' election in its coverage of non-political public and expert opinion. In a roundtable interview with three academics on

28 November, the paper offered the effects of Abenomics, trust in government, and the validity of the recent security legislation as the three central issues of the election, though Abenomics was given top billing. On this point, Tokyo University professor Itō Motoshige reaffirmed the government's positive assessment of Abenomics, saying that 'during these approximately two years of the second Abe administration, the main economic indicators have improved greatly', adding that although difficult challenges remained ahead, 'to just say "Abenomics is bad" probably doesn't have much persuasive power' (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014k) – precisely the central message of the DPJ campaign. Interestingly, in the same article, Taniguchi Naoko of the Tokyo Institute of Technology, writing on the issue of long-term trust in the Abe government, argued that the Prime Minister was framing the election as a referendum on Abenomics so that he could win more time to achieve constitutional and security reform, two goals which would presumably require the expenditure of a greater degree of time and political capital than would economic stimulus. Taniguchi compared Abe's strategy to that of Koizumi Jun'ichiro in the 'postal privatisation' election of 2005, in which Koizumi campaigned so intensely on one proposed legislative measure that it made it almost impossible for discussion of other issues to break through into the public discourse during the election campaign period (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014k). Though few would argue that he possessed the same skills of media manipulation and charisma as his former mentor, it appears safe to assume that this a lesson that Abe, Koizumi's CCS during the 2005 election, had well learned.

The *Yomiuri* conceded that although the government's economic agenda had achieved rising stock prices, a 'sense of stalemate was strengthening' (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014e). The *Asahi Shimbun* was more explicit in its scepticism of Abenomics, pointing out that although stock market levels were up, per-capita wages were failing to keep up with inflation, and that this was the real reason that public consumption was not increasing (Asahi Shimbun, 2014e). The

Minister's more divisive policies, such as collective self-defence and his 'steamroller' vote to push through the State Secrecy Law (Asahi Shimbun, 2014b).

The *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* also framed the election as an opportunity to evaluate Abenomics (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2014a), however it also voiced concerns that a third election in two years, at which no credible alternative political or economic vision was being offered, would only serve to disillusion voters, and the paper predicted a record low turnout (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2014d). Its front-page headline on the evening of 19 November, the day that Abe announced the dissolution of the Diet, framed the election as

an attempt by the government to secure the overwhelming, two-thirds majority required to enact constitutional reform, and focused on the suddenness with which the election had materialised, leaving both the government and the opposition parties scrambling to construct their respective campaigns (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2014e). Also in the evening edition on 19 November, the *Keizai Shimbun* published short opinions from six economists and financial experts on the decision to dissolve the Diet to postpone the consumption tax hike (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2014c). The reaction was mixed, with the experts split in the evaluations; some argued that the postponement was a sensible decision that would preserve the growth already stimulated by Abenomics; others accused the government of short-termism, sacrificing future national economic stability for growth in the here and now. In response to Abe's announcement



Figure 20: Front page article from the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 22/11/2014

of his intention to dissolve the Diet, the paper declared that there were two sides to the election: it was a judgement on the LDP's term so far, and a chance for the voters to express their hopes for the future (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2014a). While this can of course to an extent be said about any contest in which the government is standing for re-election, the point that the *Keizai Shimbun* sought to make was that, when looking back over the previous two years, the second Abe administration had returned a degree of stability to Japanese politics that had been missing perhaps since the Koizumi administration.

The Second Abe Cabinet has brought stability to politics. Although there was friction with Minister for Regional Development Ishiba Shigeru during the September Cabinet reshuffle, [the LDP] remains stable compared to the continuous discord of the DPJ administrations. The damage caused to the Japan-US alliance by the DPJ has almost been repaired. We must recognise this achievement. (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2014a)

The *Keizai Shimbun*'s immediate reaction to the dissolution of the Diet then was to argue that Abe's decision to call an election was simply an exercise in *realpolitik* as the Prime Minister sought to re-establish his dominance over the party and its factions by securing a renewed parliamentary mandate while the opposition parties remained weak (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2014d). On 22 November, however, the paper splashed its front page with a headline declaring that the election was battle over Abenomics, in a similar fashion to the *Yomiuri* on the previous day. The paper had accepted and adopted Abe's framing, reporting in the article's opening paragraph that the Prime Minister had set out the narrative as such during his press conference the previous day (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2014b). The article was accompanied by a table detailing the impact of the government's economic policies since December 2012, providing data on economic growth, employment, inflation, national debt, and wealth disparity between

the nation's urban and rural regions (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2014b). The data selected provided on the whole a positive assessment of Abenomics and indicated that the paper believed that the Prime Minister's narrative had the facts on its side.

Some voices in the media did attempt to challenge the Prime Minister's Abenomics frame. On election day, *Asahi Shimbun* journalist Sonoda Koji accused Abe of shirking prior promises to contest the election on a broader platform (Asahi Shimbun, 2014a). Sonoda noted that during an appearance on a Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) news programme, following criticism for his decision to avoid public consultation on CSD by reinterpreting the Constitution via cabinet decision, Abe had responded by arguing that the public could deliver their judgement at the next election. Despite this claim, Sonoda argued, the Prime Minister had failed to address CSD during the election campaign, nor had he attempted to put across the case in defence of his course of action on the issue.

Media reaction to the DPJ campaign, on the other hand, proved tepid. On 1 October, the *Yomiuri* had produced an editorial criticising Kaieda and his party for failing to elaborate upon its own economic counterproposals to Abenomics; this criticism would return during the election campaign. The DPJ was questioned on its 'nuclear-zero' manifesto pledge: how, the *Yomiuri* queried, would the opposition implement such a policy without harming economic growth? Despite the popular appeal of reducing Japanese dependency on nuclear power, the DPJ had failed to provide a realistic alternative, the paper argued (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014f). As the official election campaign kicked off, the *Yomiuri* was unimpressed by the DPJ's attempt to fight a 'manifesto election'. The paper criticised the party for getting bogged down by numbers and targets, which the paper argued was draining the heat from the campaign (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014c). The left-leaning national daily and the party's most natural ally in

the popular national print media, the *Asahi Shimbun*, critiqued Kaieda's campaign in similar terms to those used to describe the uninspiring election campaigns of the LDP pre-2009. The *Asahi* apportioned blame for the low national turnout – a post-war record – to the DPJ failing to offer a compelling alternative to the LDP. This was meant quite literally: the DPJ had failed to stand a candidate in 117 of the 295 electoral districts. The depth of disappointment in the DPJ's campaign was, the *Asahi* argued, comparable to the breadth of hope invested in it in 2009. The DPJ's 2014 campaign failed to inspire enthusiasm in the media, which projected the party's narrative as uninspired and lacking a coherent vision of its own for the future.

In the run-up to Abe's decision to dissolve the Diet, the international media had speculated that the Prime Minister was likely to call a snap election to renew his mandate at a time when his approval rating was beginning to slide. Reporting on an NHK poll which showed that the gap between Abe's approval and disapproval ratings had begun to tighten following the September resignations of two cabinet members, Reuters suggested that Abe could call an election despite the poll showing that 76 percent of the Japanese public opposed another national ballot (White, 2014). The results of that NHK poll, however, suggested that Abe might be gambling that election fatigue would be outweighed by public agreement with his argument that he would have to postpone the consumption tax rise to protect economic growth: 74 percent of those polled opposed the tax hike and economic stimulus was ranked by 25 percent of voters as the most pressing issue facing the country (White, 2014).

The *Wall Street Journal* noted that news of a possible election had caused the Nikkei stock index to rise to a seven-year high, and stated that the LDP would likely fight the election on the success of Abenomics, though it noted the public skepticism of Abe's timing, quoting a 55-year-old homemaker who described the election as 'meaningless' (Nishiyama, 2014). Justin

McCurry in the *Guardian* believed that Abe's 'scandal-hit' government was unlikely to lose the election, but the coalition may lose its two-thirds majority, citing the 'disarray' of the DPJ as a contributory factor in the LDP's likely victory in the face of growing unpopularity (McCurry, 2014). The *Economist* worried that, by focusing his energies on a snap election, Abe might divert resources from the more pressing need to implement the structural reforms promised by Abenomics (The Economist, 2014). Tobias Harris, at this moment not yet a published Abe biographer, writing in the *Financial Times* provided English-speaking audiences a more nuanced insight to the Prime Minister's possible motives: Harris suggested that Abe was seeking an election not simply to renew his public mandate, but as a 'cudgel' against his opponents in the LDP, particularly the fiscal hawks who had sought to rein in the more economically aggressive portions of Abenomics (Harris, 2014).

International framing of Abe's decision shifted with the news on 17 November that Japan had slipped into a recession (Al Jazeera, 2014, Suzuki, 2014). A contraction in Japan's GDP for a second consecutive quarter lent statistical credence to Abe's desire to renew his mandate for Abenomics; the Prime Minister duly announced the following day that he would delay the consumption tax hike until 2017 and call the election for 14 December (Reuters, 2014). The *Telegraph* viewed the decision as an admission that Abenomics was 'losing steam' (The Telegraph, 2014). Julie Gilson, Reader in Asian Studies at the University of Birmingham, wrote for the Australian news site *The Conversation* that Abe's intention was not just to seek a renewed mandate for Abenomics, but also for his security policies, including constitutional revision and strengthened economic ties with the US (Gilson, 2014).

Election Results

An effective narrative requires a central crisis, and in the LDP's 2014 campaign is visible the crisis point foreshadowed during the 2013 campaign: Abenomics is working, but its foundations are still fragile. 'This is the only road to recovery' bellowed the title page of the party's policy manifesto (LDP, 2014). Abenomics was now the central message; almost gone was the call to 'take back Japan'. When the votes were counted, the LDP ultimately surrendered 3 of its 291 seats, though the coalition gained one seat net as the Kōmeitō picked up four places in the new Diet. More encouragingly for Abe and his strategic narrative, despite the DPJ securing an extra 11 seats for the opposition, the LDP raised its vote share in both the constituency vote and PR vote by more than 5%. Furthermore, the DPJ leader, Kaieda Banri, resigned from office having lost his district seat to an LDP challenger (Asahi Shimbun, 2014d). The LDP had retained its decisive majority in the House of Representatives, increased its share of both the constituency and PR block votes, and ousted another DPJ leader – Abe's narrative approach was vindicated.

Analysis

To answer the question of whether a given strategic narrative was a success, it is important to consider not only whether the political actor delivering the narrative was electorally successful, but also whether the narrative impacted the wider political discourse and in the manner in which it was intended. On the first count, Abe Shinzō's strategic narrative in the period beginning after the 2013 election and concluding with the 2014 election campaign would appear to have achieved what the Prime Minister and the LDP had intended. The government coalition had

retained its overwhelming majority in the Diet and even increased its proportion of both the constituency and proportional representation votes by more than 5%. The primary opposition party, the DPJ, on the other hand, despite gaining 11 seats had failed to increase its overall proportion of the vote by a significant margin, and its leader had suffered the ignominious humiliation of losing his seat.

The benefit of taking as our period of analysis an entire administrative term, rather than focusing primarily on the more compacted but communicatively focused period of an election campaign is that it allows us to observe the long-term and subtle evolutions that strategic narratives undergo. It also allows us to better understand how political actors tactically adapt their narratives according to the temporal, political, and news landscapes. The Diet session that preceded the 2014 election had been one dominated by security legislation and, in comparison to the previous session, saw little in the way of the passage of economic measures. Abe and the LDP attempted to drive up public enthusiasm for (or at least public acceptance of) these contested security reforms by introducing a new thread to their narrative which wove together economic and security legislative policy as interdependent tools for the resolution of Japan's national crisis.

In the short-term, given that the government was successful in securing the passage of its key security legislation, this narrative evolution can be viewed as a success, although this judgement must be qualified by the fact that Abe failed to shift public opinion on security issues enough for him to feel secure in calling the constitutional referendum that remained his stated aim. Furthermore, this failure to decisively move public opinion had another short-term effect: Abe chose to adapt his narrative once more to the markedly different communicative terrain of a general election. In his general election campaign, the Prime Minister deemphasized the

security elements of his narrative and instead sought to focus on the story that had proven successful in the 2013 election, that of Abenomics and the efficacy of the government's economic policy. Given that the coalition achieved a result that effectively matched that of the 2013 election in which it secured a two-thirds majority in the lower house, it is difficult to argue other than that this was a wise decision by the Prime Minister.

As with everything in politics, Abe's success cannot be credited entirely to his own decision-making skills. The government's communicative strengths were highlighted by the narrative weaknesses of the opposition. Where the LDP focused on economic issues and framed the election as the 'Abenomics election', Kaieda Banri and his DPJ party attempted to frame the election as a broader referendum on LDP policy. The DPJ narrative seized upon recent evidence of a slowdown in the growth that had followed the firing of the first two arrows of Abenomics and constructed a story of a Japan once again on the precipice of a collapse that would further imperil the livelihoods of all Japanese, in particular those who did not already enjoy the secure benefits of 'regular' employment. Though this narrative framing may have had some merits, it did not markedly differ from the failed DPJ campaign of the 2013 election and suffered from negative media projection which framed it as lacking a compelling and credible alternative vision of its own to the LDP-induced crisis that it depicted in its election communication.

Abe sought to define the election as the 'Abenomics election', and the national and international media were obliging in their projection of the contest. The major national daily newspapers ran front-page headlines on the 'Abenomics dissolution' and the 'Abenomics contest', simultaneously reinforcing both the government's insistence that the election be understood simply as a referendum on economic policy and the Prime Minister's centrality to

the national narrative the titular protagonist in the struggle against potential national economic crisis. The international media adopted similar, economic-focused frames, lending further credibility to the government's strategic narrative.

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Conclusion

Abe Shinzō: The Story of a Narrative Reset

‘Since January of this year, in line with coronavirus countermeasures, as we have struggled against this invisible enemy, we have, with the knowledge we have gained from this experience, done our utmost time and time again to check the spread (of the virus), to do our best to prevent serious cases of illness, and to protect the lives of our citizens.’

- Abe Shinzō, 28 August 2020

2020 was supposed to be Abe Shinzō’s last hurrah, his final moment of great triumph before he departed frontline Japanese politics after almost a decade as its central figure. The summer of 2020 was to see Abe inaugurate the Olympic Games in Tokyo, an event that was to serve as the Prime Minister’s farewell gift to the nation, the political actor whose reign had been defined by ‘Abenomics’ generating a supposed economic stimulus of heightened tourism and investment and delivering a sporting event that would focus the eyes of the world on Japan. Instead, Abe’s story encountered one final crisis; a crisis that no-one could have predicted – the outbreak of an international pandemic.

As the coronavirus pandemic engulfed the planet, effectively shutting down entire sectors of the global economy and severely restricting international travel, the International Olympic Committee and the Japanese government took the decision to postpone the games – something which had not occurred since the Second World War – until 2021. With a general election due by October 2021, it appeared that Abe may be denied his farewell tour altogether. On 28 August

2020, he took the matter into his own hands, announcing his intention to resign as Prime Minister of Japan; Abe officially stepped down on 14 September, handing over the reins to his former Chief Cabinet Secretary, Suga Yoshihide. For perhaps the first time since his return as LDP President in 2012, Abe Shinzō had lost control over his own political narrative.

Abe left office as the longest-serving prime minister in Japanese history, eclipsing his great-uncle, Satō Eisuke, but his legacy will be defined by the early years of his second premiership. The era of ‘Abenomics’, and the narrative Abe crafted around his economic policies, came to dominate political discourse during Abe’s almost eight years of national leadership, particularly during election campaigns.

This was no accident. During his period in the political wilderness following his unsuccessful first term as prime minister, Abe recognised that, if he was to re-emerge as a potential candidate for Prime Minister of Japan, he would require a new narrative. In 2006, as the handpicked successor of a popular prime minister, Abe’s ‘strategy of vagueness’ had secured him the votes of his fellow lawmakers to emerge triumphant in an internal LDP party election, but also denied him the opportunity to craft a compelling personal narrative through which he could connect with the general public and generate support for his policies and political capital with which to enact said policies. Stepping out of the shadow of Koizumi Jun’ichirō proved to be particularly difficult for Abe; where his charismatic mentor had been a master of the media, providing effective soundbites and casting himself as the renegade protagonist in a narrative of dramatic political change, Abe Shinzō appeared bland, politically naïve, and incapable of exerting control over the government, his own party, and, crucially, his own story. In so far as a narrative did emerge around Abe during his first term, it was one of an incompetent, far-right nationalist whose political priority was to re-establish a sense of national patriotism through the re-writing

of history textbooks and who was blindly loyal to corrupt and inept colleagues. Abe's story was defined by the themes that he emphasised in his 2006 book, *Towards a Beautiful Country* (Abe, 2006), in which he envisioned a Japan that could foster a renewed pride in its national history, shed its constitutional commitment to pacifism, and embrace symbols such as the Japanese flag and the national anthem.

Following his resignation in September 2007, however, Abe sought to rectify these mistakes, crafting a strategic narrative that enabled him to re-emerge as a credible candidate for the highest office. Abe re-released his book, with a new title: *Towards a New Country* (Abe, 2012). This new edition retained the original text in its entirety, but Abe appended a new chapter in which he outlined his views on Japan's economic regeneration. This pivot from nationalist rhetoric to economics, physically symbolised by an addendum to his own book, would come to define the shift in Abe's strategic narrative from his first term to his second. By projecting a narrative that focused on economic policy, Abe effectively refocused the discourse around his politics, reframing his political approach as one centralised on providing a solution to Japan's ongoing economic crisis, rather than the nation's supposed identity crisis on which he had focused during his truncated first term. By recognising that a narrative which had at its core the promise of an economically resurgent Japan after two decades of stagnation was inherently more appealing to his audience than one which framed Japan's crisis as one of insufficient nationalism, Abe was able to re-establish LDP dominance in the national political arena. Under the slogan, 'Take Back Japan', Abe redefined himself as the key political actor in a narrative of national redemption, mirroring his own successful return to prominence. At the forefront of his message of 'taking back' Japan was Abe's call to 'take back the economy', and it was from this message that the portmanteau which would dominate the narrative of Abe's second and third administration's emerged: Abenomics. Abenomics provided the central tool around

which Abe crafted his strategic narrative. Although Abe did not coin the term himself, he recognised its value, and by adopting it Abe was able to reinforce his role as the central protagonist in Japan's national story each time that the term was repeated and reprinted by the mass media and other political actors, both domestic and foreign.

Abe was remarkably successful at ensuring that his Abenomics story dominated the narrative terrain over the course of several consecutive election campaigns. In 2014, Abe successfully framed his early dissolution of the Diet as the 'Abenomics dissolution' (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2014, Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014), establishing a narrative frame which was largely accepted by, and therefore further projected by, Japan's mass media. Prime Minister Abe was able to craft a story in which each election was simply a staging post in the implementation of Abenomics. As long as the public continued to lend Abe their votes, the narrative stated, then he, as the central protagonist, would be able to resolve Japan's economic crisis through the implementation of his Abenomics policy tools. If the public were to choose the DPJ, however, then the country would face a very different, and far less desirable, narrative resolution of economic regression and national stagnation. Top line economic recovery in 2013 and 2014, as the government let loose the first 'arrow' of Abenomics (Yoshino and Taghizadeh-Hesary, 2014) – massive fiscal stimulus and quantitative easing (QE) – supplied Abe with credibility as he made the argument to the public during the 2013 and 2014 election campaigns that Abenomics was achieving the results that his narrative had promised. Yet Abe also posited that the desired narrative resolution could only be ensured by long-term LDP governance; if the country was to turn away from Abenomics before each of its arrows had hit their marks then the progress the government had achieved would be undone and the nation would be returned to the beginning of the story once more. Though Abe sought to complexify the narrative after he had secured control of both houses of the Diet in 2013, introducing the concept of the

‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’ (Akimoto, 2018, Maslow, 2015) as the government passed a series of national security-related bills, the Prime Minister ensured that the primary focus of his narrative remained Abenomics and the nation’s economic health.

Abe’s domination of Japanese politics’ narrative space was aided by the narrative failures of the primary opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan. The DPJ, under the leadership of Noda Yoshihiko and Kaieda Banri, proved ineffective at challenging the ‘Abenomics’ narrative in the election campaigns of 2012, 2013, and 2014, eventually resulting in Kaieda himself losing his own seat in the Diet in the general election of December 2014 (Asahi Shimbun, 2014). After three chaotic years as Japan’s governing party, from 2009 to 2012, which had seen the DPJ cycle through three different prime ministers, by the time of the 2012 election the public and media had become sceptical of the centre-left party’s capability for governance. As a result, the DPJ’s strategic narrative, which focused on ‘moving forward’ rather than returning to the ‘politics of the past’ (i.e., the LDP’s politics), was received by the media as ‘defeatist’. It was a similar situation in July 2013: the DPJ’s narrative failed to convince the media that it presented a compelling alternative to the LDP. In 2014, the party faced a different problem, as it overcompensated for its failures in 2013 and released a complex policy platform that undermined narrative clarity. The DPJ also allowed the election campaign to be fought on Abe’s narrative terrain, placing their three ‘economic pillars’ at the centre of their campaign, a set of policies that were designed to provide a counterpoint to Abe’s ‘three arrows of Abenomics’, but which ultimately served to reinforce the LDP’s own messaging.

Political longevity of the sort achieved by Abe Shinzō cannot be wholly attributed to a single person, incident, or decision. The success or failure of governments and political actors is decided by a multitude of factors, the confluence of which decide these actors’ fates. A skilled

political actor, however, is able to shape these factors into a narrative in which their actions are convincingly portrayed as necessary to achieving a positive resolution for the nation and its people. If a political actor fails to communicate their actions as part of a wider narrative, they will struggle to generate support for their policies, which will lead to a failure to affect change and achieve desired policy outcomes. This, in turn, will generate dissatisfaction amongst the public that voted them in to power.

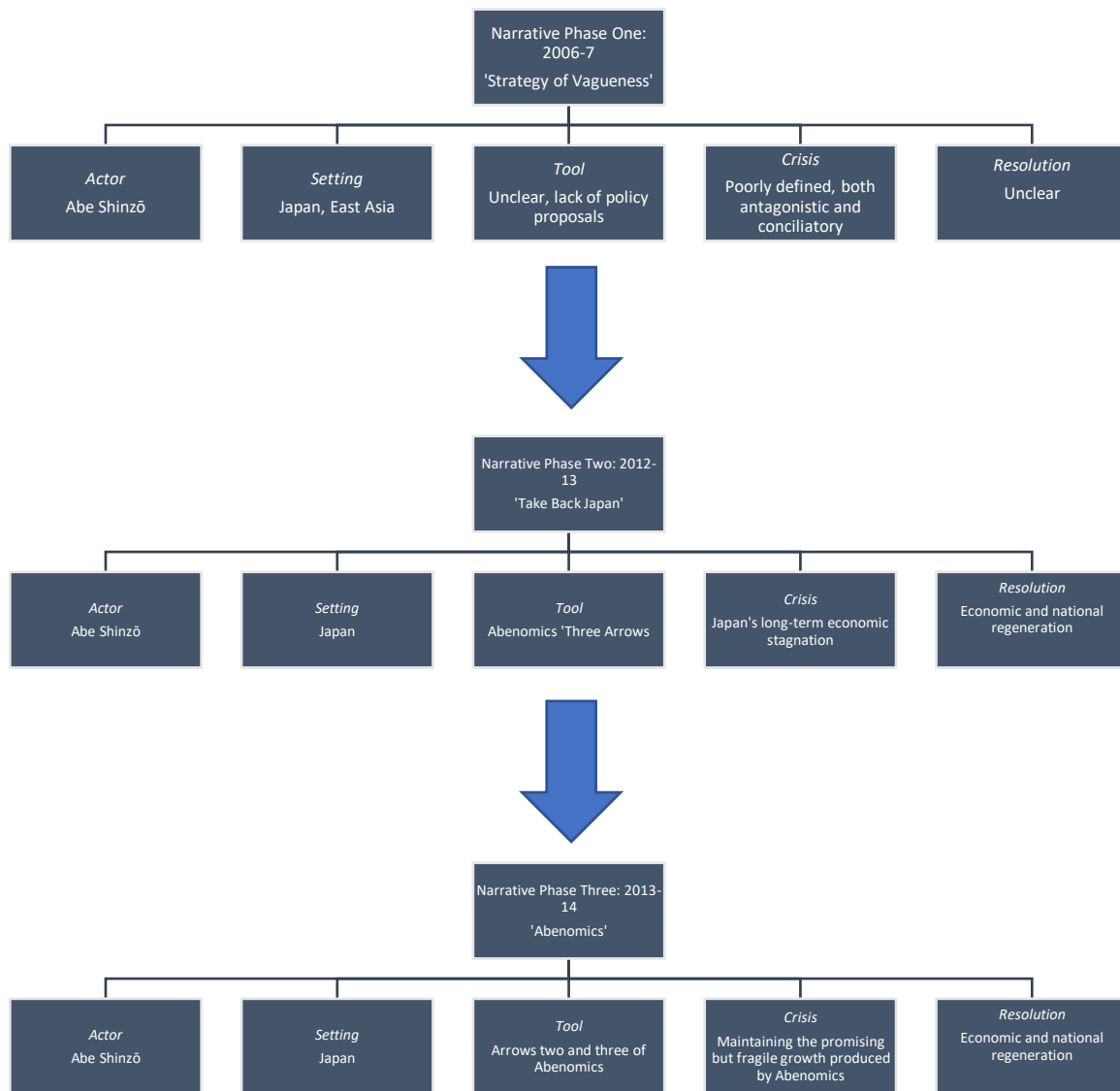


Figure 21: The Narrative Evolution of Abe Shinzō

As can be seen clearly in Figure 21, Abe's narrative evolution as Prime Minister can, therefore, be traced through three phases. The first phase, characterised by the 2006 LDP presidential election from which Abe emerged victorious but to a lukewarm reception from the media and general public, was dubbed by the LDP-friendly newspaper the *Yomiuri* as a 'strategy of vagueness'. Abe had entered the election as favourite to succeed the popular and long-serving Koizumi, and chose to run a 'safe' campaign, during which he conspicuously avoided committing himself to a clear policy platform or vision for his leadership, so as not to cause disruption within the coalition of LDP lawmakers that he would require to win the election. Although Abe ultimately won the election and became Prime Minister, these compromises ensured that his victory was received by his audience with a great deal of scepticism. Having failed to project an inspiring strategic narrative for his premiership, the media and the public quickly turned against Abe, and the media and the opposition parties were able to successfully project their own counter-narratives of incompetence and corruption.

Once Abe returned to the LDP leadership in 2012, under the party slogan of 'Take Back Japan', the story quite literally changed. Having learned from his experiences and constructed a new team of political advisors and sponsors, Abe returned to frontline politics and approached the December 2012 general election with a narrative of economic regeneration. Like his mentor Koizumi had done over a decade previously, Abe recognised that narrative which promised a resolution to Japan's long-term economic malaise was key to winning the support of the media and the general public. Abe promised to 'take back' Japan from the economic malaise that had afflicted it with varying degrees of severity since the collapse of the bubble economy in the late 1980s. 'Take Back Japan' as a narrative worked on multiple levels. Through the term 'Abenomics' – coined by others as a pejorative term but soon claimed by the Prime Minister

as a badge of honour – Abe was able to build a narrative association between himself and path to Japan's ultimate economic redemption. The 'three arrows' of Abenomics provided the tool that the returning prime ministerial candidate would wield to ensure narrative redemption, and Japan's long-term economic woes was a crisis that resonated with the vast majority of the Japanese population. The narrative quickly gained traction and Abe successfully led the LDP back to power in the election.

The 2012 general election was followed in July 2013 by the House of Councillors election, and Abe chose to maintain the strategic narrative that had proven so successful the previous December. As only seven months had passed between the two election campaigns, Abe could plausibly argue that the second vote was, in effect, an extension of the first. It would take time for the effects of Abenomics' three arrows to be felt, Abe claimed, and to ensure a positive resolution to the narrative it was imperative that the public voted to return the LDP to power in the Upper House and end the 'twisted Diet' that could theoretically paralyze government efforts to enact legislation. The narrative had the desired effect. The coalition government won the election in a landslide, reclaiming control over both houses of the Diet and providing Abe with the political capital and legislative power to enact his Abenomics agenda.

Two successive, overwhelming election victories in six months proved the efficacy of Abe's new strategic narrative. With control over the Diet and his party secure, Abe turned his focus to other legislative priorities, and in late-2013 and early-2014 enacted a raft of national security-focused legislation. The Prime Minister overhauled the administrative apparatus that oversaw Japan's defence forces and developed a system of greater prime ministerial oversight of national security. These new priorities required a more complex narrative: Abe sought in to link his narrative of economic regeneration to one of national security regeneration. Abe

developed the concept of ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’, arguing that an economically global Japan that championed the benefits of free trade must also make a greater contribution to maintaining the geopolitical stability which made such trade possible. As his government negotiated with the Obama administration in the US over the development of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – a free trade zone that would link much of East Asia with the US – Abe stressed to his domestic audience that greater international security contributions were a fair and necessary price to pay for greater national prosperity.

By the conclusion of the Diet session, however, with much of his security legislation enacted, Abe pivoted away from his new narrative of interlinked economic and military security. Instead, the Prime Minister returned to the strategic narrative that had served him so well since his return to office. Having called an early general election for December 2014 following the postponement of a promised hike to the consumption tax, Abe framed the dissolution of the Diet as the ‘Abenomics dissolution’. Emboldened by consistent GDP growth and low unemployment, Abe explicitly asked the public to make the election a referendum on Abenomics. Should Japan continue to stride towards the bright economic future that Abenomics was delivering, or should the nation risk losing it all by returning the DPJ to power. Although the Abenomics election narrative had remained essentially unchanged through three campaigns, the apparent success of its policy tools allowed it to retain its persuasive strength: the coalition government comfortably retained its control of the Diet with a greater share of the popular vote than in 2012.

Where Next?

This thesis posed three central research questions:

- (1) *How do Abe Shinzō's strategic narratives change over time and across administrations/election campaigns?*
- (2) *What impact do these narratives have on Abe's political success?*
- (3) *What does this tell us about the use of strategic narrative in a domestic political setting?*

The answer to the first of these questions has become clear. Abe Shinzō underwent a dramatic narrative transformation over the course of his prime ministerial career. His first administration of 2006-7 was undermined by the lack of a clear strategic narrative, or what became known as Abe's 'strategy of vagueness' which allowed him to win the internal LDP election that made him prime minister but denied him the opportunity to build a narrative connection with the media and the Japanese public. This was an important factor in the collapse of Abe's government within a year of taking office. Without a clear strategic narrative and vision for his administration, Abe and his government's story was subsumed by counter-narratives following the emergence of numerous scandals, including the suicide of Minister for Agriculture, Matsuoka Toshikatsu, and the resignation of Matsuoka's successor over misappropriation of funds. When Abe resigned in September 2007 it appeared that his fate was to be consigned to history as one of Japan's most ineffective prime ministers.

When Abe returned to the leadership of the LDP in 2012, however, he had a very different story to tell. Having recognised the shortcomings of his vague, inconsistent narrative during his first term, Abe resolved during his period in the wilderness to formulate a strategic narrative that could resonate with the nation. Having neglected economic policy during his first term, Abe now placed it at the centre of his political storytelling. Abe's new strategic narrative centered around long-term national economic stagnation, a crisis with which the majority of the Japanese public could empathise. Abe also recognised that he had previously failed to

outline a clear set of policy tools with which he would engineer the resolution to his narrative crisis. The development of what would become known as the Three Arrows of Abenomics lent credibility to Abe's story. This combination of crisis and appropriate tools, in turn, lent credence to the narrative resolution that Abe outlined, namely, an economically prosperous Japan in which every section of society shared in the new wealth generated by Abenomics.

(2) What impact do these narratives have on Abe's political success?

Abe Shinzō's transformation from one of Japan's least popular and effective prime ministers in living memory to the nation's longest-serving premier in history cannot, of course, be explained by one particular factor or decision. Leading a nation is far too complex a task, subject to the whims of too many outside forces, for a scholar to confidently assert that *this* is the reason that a prime minister has succeeded or failed. There are however crucial aspects of political leadership that have an important impact on an actor's fortunes. Strategic narrative is one of these factors, and one that deserve greater research and attention.

In the case of Abe Shinzō, we have seen through this thesis that an effective narrative can transform the perception of a political actor by the media and the public. In 2006, Abe failed, almost by design, to construct a strategic narrative for his premiership and his vision for Japan. As a result, he failed to engender critical support in the media, who in turn projected a narrative of vagueness and incompetence to the Prime Minister's most important audience, the Japanese public. Without a coherent and persuasive story to tell, Abe could not construct a base of support within either the media or the public, and when scandals began to emerge from within his government, a lack of shared vision with his audience ensured that support for his administration plummeted and Abe's position quickly became untenable. When Abe did

attempt to construct a narrative for his vision of Japan, it was divisive, focusing on nationalist issues that instinctively drew a negative reaction from large portions of his audience. Abe also suffered from the unfavourable comparison to his direct predecessor and political mentor, Jun'ichirō Koizumi, a master of direct communication with his audience who had crafted a compelling strategic narrative for Japan during his five years as Prime Minister.

When Abe returned as a candidate for leadership of the LDP in 2012, however, he returned with a story to tell. Speaking to his audience about Japan's economic malaise, a shared issue with which most could sympathise, Abe laid out a coherent narrative of crisis and resolution, in which Japan would be 'taken back' by Abe Shinzō and the tools of his 'Abenomics' policy. 'Abenomics' is the narrative that came to define the Abe Shinzō years, providing the story that drove his 2012 LDP presidential election campaign, as well as the successful general elections of December 2012 and December 2014, and the House of Councillors election victory in July 2013. The 'Abenomics' narrative complexified over time – notably the introduction of the concept of 'Proactive Contribution to Peace' during the 2013-14 Diet session – but at its core the message remained the same: Abe's economic policies, given enough time, would lead to the rebirth of a proud and vibrant Japan.

(3) What does this tell us about the use of strategic narrative in a domestic political setting?

Strategic narrative research has provided a new layer to our understanding of how political actors operate within the international sphere. Strategic narrative scholars have demonstrated that the formation, projection, and reception of narratives play a key role in how international relations are conducted. By constructing strategic narratives that explain the past, present, and desired future for a nation or people, political actors are able to shape the communicative terrain

within which they operate. This allows those political actors to generate support from their audiences – the media, the domestic public, other governments, states, or international institutions – for their desired policy outcomes.

In this thesis, I have sought to expand our understanding of strategic narratives by applying a strategic narrative framework to a domestic political setting. The prime ministerial career of Abe Shinzō provides clear evidence of the efficacy of a compelling political narrative. While the literature on political campaigning and political rhetoric is vast, by applying a strategic narrative framework I have shown that a coherent story is central to the success not just of the individual election campaigns of a specific political actor, but also to how that political actor is perceived by its audience over the course of a parliament.

Stories are how we, as humans, make sense of the world around us. By imposing narrative on them, we are able to make sense of seemingly random events and understand how and why they occur, and what they can potentially tell us about the future course of events. By harnessing story in a strategic manner, political actors can explain to their audiences the crisis that they are collectively facing, why they are capable of overcoming this crisis and the tools they will use to achieve this goal, and the desired resolution that will naturally occur if the audience lends their support in steering the narrative to its promised conclusion.

This analysis of Abe Shinzō's strategic narratives over three administrations and four election campaigns has demonstrated that the application of a strategic narrative framework to a domestic political setting holds great promise. We have seen that Abe's lack of narrative clarity – poorly formed and projected – during his first term as Prime Minister, was a crucial factor in his inability to generate support from the media and public as his administration collapsed

under the weight of a succession of crises. By forming a new narrative, one that addressed a crisis with which the majority of the Japanese public and media could empathise, Abe was able to return to the prime ministership in 2012 as a political actor with greater credibility and a more durable base of support. His Abenomics narrative projected a clear crisis and desirable resolution, with concrete policy tools with which Abe, as the story's protagonist, would bring about a brighter future for Japan.

There does, of course, remain work to be done. This is just one case study of one political actor in one domestic political setting. This thesis has, hopefully, at least opened up a promising avenue for further research on strategic narratives in a domestic political setting. By applying a strategic narrative framework to political actors in other nations and differing circumstances, we will be able to better understand how narratives affect public and media perceptions of not only the political actors who project them, but also our shared understanding of who we are as a people, our national stories, and the future we wish to collectively work towards.

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