Abstract:

What determines Japan's willingness to flex its limited military muscle abroad? While analysts and scholars are closely watching Japanese "militarization" under the leadership of Prime Minister Abe, Japan first deployed its military overseas over a decade ago in support of U.S. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. By contrast, Japan has been unwilling to support current U.S.-led operations against the Islamic State (ISIL) in Iraq and Syria. This presents a puzzle, as the fight against ISIL offers the kind of international legitimacy that the 2003 Iraq invasion lacked and Japan traditionally seeks. Moreover, ISIL has killed Japanese citizens. This paper explains Japan’s varying policies in Iraq in 2003 and 2014, thereby shedding light on the determinants of Japanese foreign policy more generally. Our argument focuses on both domestic political factors (especially the pluralist view of foreign policy making) and strategic thinking rooted in realism. We argue that Japanese policies are driven by domestic politics, especially deep suspicions about the utility of military force and fears of becoming entangled in a seemingly never-ending conflict. While Koizumi may have had more room to maneuver despite long-standing public opposition to overseas militarization when he deployed the SDF to Iraq in 2003, it is precisely such deeply-entrenched popular anathema that many blame for the Liberal Democratic Party’s (LDP) historic and devastating loss in the 2009 election. Abe was unwilling to repeat such a risky venture in 2014. We also highlight the role of realist calculations on the part of both Japanese elites and the public, who by 2014 had come to see China rather than state or non-state actors in the Middle East as a primary security threat. We thus confirm Paul Midford’s finding that “defensive realism” tends to drive Japanese foreign policy thinking. Japanese citizens are not pacifist, as conventional wisdom might hold. Rather, Japanese public opinion supports military power to defend Japan’s national sovereignty and territory, but much more suspicious of such power when it comes to deployments and the pursuit of other foreign policy goals.
I. Introduction

What determines Japan's willingness to flex its limited military muscle abroad? While Japan contributed to the U.S. war in Afghanistan in 2001 and the controversial invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, why didn’t Tokyo join the international military coalition that has been fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIL) since 2014?

While analysts and scholars are closely watching the "normalization" of the Japanese military under the conservative and nationalist government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan first deployed its Self Defense Forces (SDF) overseas over a decade ago in support of U.S. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan under then-Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. By contrast, Japan has been unwilling to support current U.S.-led operations against ISIL. This presents a puzzle, as the fight against ISIL offers the kind of international legitimacy that the 2003 Iraq invasion lacked and Japanese foreign policymakers (and the Japanese public) traditionally seek (Saunders 2008). On 20 November 2015 the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2249, which calls upon "member States that have the capacity to do so to take all necessary measures," in compliance with international law, international human rights, and refugee and humanitarian law, "to redouble and coordinate their efforts to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by ISIL . . ."1 Furthermore, ISIL presents a threat to states around the world that is by some measures more serious than that the regime of Saddam Hussein posed in 2003.2

Finally, multiple Japanese citizens have been among ISIL's victims. In January 2015, two Japanese were beheaded by ISIL in a gruesome display the terrorist group

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1 The text of the resolution is available at: http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2249.pdf
2 This is especially true with the benefit of hindsight, in that the Saddam Hussein regime was ultimately found not to possess weapons of mass destruction (WMD), limiting the threat his regime posed. By contrast, ISIL has proven its will and capacity to direct terrorist attacks around the world.
broadcast to the world, while on 1 July 2016 seven Japanese aid workers (along with 13 others) were killed in a terror attack by ISIL-affiliated terrorists in Dhaka, Bangladesh. These factors and the current efforts by Prime Minister Abe to "normalize" Japan's military, including a constitutional reinterpretation permitting collective self-defense, would seem to point to a greater willingness to deploy Japanese forces. Yet, since ISIL fighters swept through large swathes of Iraq and Syria in 2014, Japan has been unwilling to put its Self Defense Forces in even the logistical support roles they assumed during the previous Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts.

This paper explains the divergence in Japan’s policy responses to conflict in the Middle East in 2003 and 2014, thereby shedding light on the determinants of Japanese foreign policy more generally. We focus on both domestic political factors and strategic thinking rooted in realism. We challenge the notion that the Japanese state is a rational, unitary actor, arguing that Japanese foreign policies are driven by domestic politics, especially public opinion. The Japanese public harbors deep suspicions about the utility of military force and fears becoming entangled (or "entrapped") in a seemingly never-ending conflict, recalling its alliance with the U.S. during the early parts of the Cold War. Public opinion in Japan also does not see threats emanating from the Middle East as central to the country’s security. Following Midford (2011 and 2017), we focus on public opinion as an enabler and limiter of Japanese foreign policy. While Koizumi may have had more room to maneuver despite long-standing public opposition to overseas military deployment when he deployed the SDF to Iraq in 2003, it is precisely such deeply-entrenched popular anathema and backlash that many blame for the Liberal Democratic Party’s (LDP)
historic and devastating loss in the 2009 election. Koizumi’s party colleague, Abe, was unwilling to repeat such a risky venture in 2014.

Our argument also takes into account the role of realist calculations on the part of Japanese policymakers, who, according to evolving defense strategy papers, by 2014 have come to see China rather than state or non-state actors in the Middle East as the primary security threat to Japan. In this sense, in 2014 there was a synergy between Japanese public opinion and its enduring suspicion of using military force on one hand and ever-growing realpolitik concerns about China in particular on the other. This is in line with Midford’s (2011) elucidation of “defensive realism” in Japanese foreign policy thinking, which argues that Japanese citizens are not pacifist, as conventional wisdom might hold. Rather, Japanese public opinion supports military power to defend Japan’s national sovereignty and territory, but much more suspicious of such power when it comes to deployments and the pursuit of other foreign policy goals.

In Section II, we highlight a number of theories contained in international relations theory and the existing scholarship on Japanese foreign policy analysis and consider their utility and limits in helping us to understand the policy divergence that is the subject of this study. We apply these theories to formulate hypotheses about the determinants of Japanese foreign policy. In Section III, we describe the context surrounding Japan’s participation in the 2003 Iraq invasion and occupation, and in Section IV, analyze how Abe’s “proactive pacifism” led Tokyo to opt out of active participation in the anti-ISIL coalition formed in 2014. In Section V, we summarize our findings and argument and broaden the discussion about Japanese security interests and identities. We offer a brief conclusion in the final section.
II. Explaining Japanese Foreign Policy: Theories and Literature

Realist Scholarship

Existing scholarship on Japan’s foreign policy often relies on theories rooted in the realist paradigm of international relations (Green 2001; Gronning 2014; Hornung 2014; Hughes 2015; Pugliese 2015; Oros 2017). Though these arguments have alternately described Japan’s foreign policy using terms such as “reluctant realism” (Green 2001) and “resentful realism” (Hughes 2015), they all have in common the premise that the best way to account for Japanese foreign policy is the view that Japan has been engaging in a security-minded, realpolitik foreign policy.

It is worth noting that Kenneth Waltz opposed applying neorealism to explain the content of a state’s foreign policy. Waltz’s argument was that a system-level theory such as neorealism, which explains the systemic (i.e. multi-state) consequences of shifting distributions of power, cannot be used to explain the state-level formation of foreign policy (Waltz 1996). In other words, neorealism explains how the international system tends to find itself reverting to a balanced distribution of power when the previous balance is disturbed: that is, when one state or alliance grows too powerful, other states balance it. However, if that were the case, why would a state want to craft a foreign policy emphasizing power projection knowing that it will be balanced?

Elman (1996) counters Waltz by pointing out that the pre-eminent realist theorist engaged in foreign policy analysis on multiple occasions, and that he must have therefore thought that realism was useful for that enterprise. Moreover, it is only natural for scholars to contribute to and expand a theory they find useful beyond the original interpretation of its founder. Finally, a defensive realist explanation of foreign policy can be made based upon the key assumption of (defensive) neorealism that
states’ goals are to maximize security (not power, which is the goal of offensive realists). A defensive realist foreign policy is a rational, *realpolitik* foreign policy that focuses first and foremost on the defense of a state’s territory and a small and concisely-defined set of national interests. It does not maximize the pursuit of power because that would ultimately draw the attention of counter-balancers, potentially negating any security gains. It may engage in liberal policies such as Overseas Development Assistance, but these all play second fiddle to the maximization of security.

This description certainly seems apt when applied to the immediate security concerns of Japanese foreign policy, as pointed out by the realist-focused scholarship cited above. Over the past two decades, Japan has found itself in an increasingly insecure position on the edge of the Asian continent. Since the 1990s, a major security concern has been North Korea, which has developed a weaponized nuclear program and tested ballistic missiles which could deliver a nuclear strike anywhere in Japan. Some DPRK missile tests have had flight paths over Japanese territory into the Pacific Ocean, which is a frightening prospect given the frequent failure of the North Korean tests.

Over time, China has developed into a daunting security threat. China’s surging economy over the past 25 years and its accompanying rise in military spending have occurred simultaneously with Japan’s two decades of economic stagnation. Japan’s relative decline compared to China has also coincided with the intensification of historical controversies over Japan’s imperial past and its perceived failure to properly atone for that past. Most importantly, the long-standing territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has become more dangerous since 2010, reaching its most dangerous point when Chinese military units locked their missile
fire-control radar onto a Japanese helicopter and destroyer in two incidents in January 2013.

Prompted by these security threats, according to realist arguments, Japan has embarked on a path of action that aims to build up its security anew. The realist approach is captured well by Gronning, who argues that Japan’s evolving national and alliance defense posture represents traditional or hard balancing behavior as a response to the confluence of two factors: 1) Japanese perceptions of Beijing’s aggressive behavior, in particular in the maritime domain; and 2) the shifting distribution of military and economic capabilities in China’s favor. Together, these factors are both necessary and sufficient in terms of explaining Japan’s counterbalancing response (Gronning 2014, 2).

In reaction, the Japanese Ministry of Defense (MOD), as part of its five-year Mid-Term Defense Program (MTDP), has called for a significant maritime buildup to counter the People’s Liberation Army Navy’s (PLAN), for strengthening the JSDF’s amphibious warfare capabilities, for strengthening Japan’s ballistic missile defense (BMD) capability, and doubling its F-15 fighter presence at Naha Air Base in Okinawa, among other buildups (Gronning 2014, 4-6). Moreover, Abe has reinterpreted Article 9 in order to allow for Japan to participate in collective self-defense with other states. The unsubtle language that Gronning uses paints a simple picture of a Japan that is without a doubt balancing.

Middle Power Hedging

A more recent buzzword in international relations scholarship is “hedging,” used to describe behavior of middle and weaker powers and their relations with powerful states. There is as of yet no standard definition of hedging, but rather a slew
of differently worded definitions. Scholars of middle power hedging, however, agree on several key dynamics: 1) hedging is performed by middle, small, or weak powers who find themselves in unfavorable situations vis-a-vis a stronger power (typically a neighbor); 2) hedging is designed to avoid direct confrontation with the more powerful state, or to sometimes encourage friendly relations with it, while also trying to minimize losses in areas of national interest; and 3) hedging involves a wide variety of policies, some of which might seem to counter each other, in order to maintain flexibility (Goh 2005; Tessman 2007; Kuik 2008; Le 2013).

Richard Samuels is prominent in the discussion of hedging in Japanese foreign policy. In a 2002 issue of Foreign Affairs (and a 2003 postscript), Samuels and Heginbotham described Japan’s “dual hedge:” the twin crises of North Korea and participation in the yet-to-start Iraq War that were then pulling Japanese foreign policy in separate directions. According to the authors:

In both cases, Tokyo's priority is to avoid any action that might lead to a break with Washington without putting it conspicuously out of line with other states with which Japan would like to do business. To avoid abandonment, the Japanese government is convinced it must show some support for the U.S. position on Iraq (Heginbotham and Samuels 2003).

Samuels continues his hedging prediction in his 2007 book, Security Japan, describing a four-way debate over the direction of Japanese foreign policy between pro-normalization politicians, neo-autonomists, pacifists, and internationalists. He argues that Japan will continue to hedge between maintaining the U.S. alliance and fostering closer relations in the economic sphere with Asia. As Envall observes in his review of Securing Japan, this invokes the much-criticized policies of the former Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) prime minister, Yukio Hatoyama (Envall 2010). Hornung argues that Japan moved into a policy of what he calls “hard hedging” against China post-2010 by strengthening the U.S. alliance and security ties with
Australia and India, efforts at ties with states throughout Southeast Asia and Europe, and reductions in foreign direct investment in China and imports of rare earth minerals from China (Hornung 2014, 98).

Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

Two approaches have characterized the study of public opinion and its influence on foreign policy. The elitist approach argues that public attitudes on foreign policy are inherently uninformed, incoherent, and unstable, and thus both irrelevant to explaining foreign policy outcomes and subject to easy manipulation at the hands of foreign policy elites. The pluralist approach, by contrast, sees public opinion as stable and composed of rational and coherent foreign policy views. While individual opinions may suffer from the deficiencies noted by elitists, collectively the public tends to reach a kind of equilibrium that is more coherent. In the pluralist view, public opinion shapes and sets the parameters for elite foreign policy behavior as much as elites (and the media) can control what the public believes. Yet, as Midford (2017, 4) points out, the elitist view has dominated both Japanese and Western studies of public opinion and foreign policy. And, as Midford points out, elites dismiss the very notion that they should be attuned to public opinion as a kind of “mobocracy.”

Midford’s empirically grounded contributions to the discussion of Japanese foreign policy has set itself apart from others through its presentation of public opinion research on Japanese security matters (Midford 2011, 2017). In his 2011 book, Midford’s chapters cover public opinion on 9/11, the U.S.-led Global War on Terror (GWOT), the deployment of JSDF troops to Afghanistan and Iraq, and the post-2006

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3 Examples of the elitist approach include Almond (1950); Converse (1962); Miller and Stokes (1963) and Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki (1975).
4 Examples of studies employing the pluralist approach include Verba et. al. (1967); Mueller (1973); Holsti (1992) and Jentleson (1992).
withdrawal from Iraq and show that the Japanese public was deeply distrustful of the efficacy of military power and the U.S.-led action in Iraq. Midford’s argument is that Japan’s defensive posture has in large part been shaped by Japanese public opinion, which has in general been distrustful in the postwar period of the state’s ability to control the military. Though Japanese public opinion does evolve in some respects, overall it is quite stable and remains opposed to the deployment of the JSDF for combat operations. (Midford 2011, 2-3). This has restrained policymakers, who are careful to avoid provoking opposition to its policies (Midford 2011, 26).

Yet, Midford also argues that Japanese public opinion has never fully embraced pacifism. It has also, according to Midford, contained significant elements of realism insofar as it has come to terms with using military power to defend territory and sovereignty. So, public opinion is more likely to support using the military in Japan’s immediate vicinity, or especially in defense of Japanese territory. However, Midford shows that Japanese public opinion views offensive military force as undesirable for achieving objectives such as counterterrorism or democracy in foreign lands. In a forthcoming book chapter (Midford 2017, 4), he lays out some of the specific conditions in which Japanese public opinion affects foreign policy outcomes: when there are large and stable opinion majorities, when there is the presence of political competition among parties or party factions, when there is united opposition in the Diet, when a new policy is proposed or an old one has perceptible costs, among other conditions.

While the public was initially favorable to Japan’s response to 9/11, its support of Koizumi’s policies sank quickly thereafter (Midford 2011, 117). This could provide one possible explanation for the inconsistency of Japanese policy on overseas military deployment. Koizumi thought he had a rare window of opportunity with
which he could send the military to participate in the Middle East after 9/11, but as that policy took a nose-dive in public opinion, the action was brought to an end. In this view, Japan’s anti-militaristic security identity, described above, could momentarily be overcome. Still, bringing the SDF operations in Iraq to an end took over four years, whereas public support dissipated quite quickly. But, one could take Midford’s position to argue that the content of the mission—highly limited involvement in a non-combat zone of Iraq—reflected public opposition to a more extensive role. Moreover, the public opinion argument would go far in explaining why Shinzo Abe, acutely aware of public opposition, does not support any participation of Japanese forces in the anti-ISIL coalition. Nevertheless, public opinion alone does not emerge as a satisfying explanation of the divergence.

Constructivists have also contributed to the discussion on public opinion and foreign policy through their work on the formation of Japan’s security identity (e.g. Jerden and Hagstrom 2012; Gustaffson 2014; Hagstrom 2015; Hagstrom and Gustaffson 2015; Suzuki 2015). Oros’s work is helpful in the constructivist discussion as well – his recent book, Japan’s Security Renaissance (2017), applies a two-pronged theoretical approach, using realism and constructivism to complement each other in explaining Japan’s security policies and identity. In an earlier article, Oros addresses almost the same question as the present paper. He asks, “Why does a conservative government with high levels of popular support not pursue policies more in line with views widely reported to be central to its values and outlook?” (Oros 2015, 139). For Oros, the answer “lies in Japan’s long-standing security identity of domestic antimilitarism...one that thoroughly pervades both the framing of Japan’s national security debates and the institutions of Japan’s postwar security policy-making process” (Oros 2015, 140). In this view, Abe’s hawkish inclinations are constrained
by a public with a security identity that would oppose most uses of the military overseas. As Oros argues, this anti-militarist identity is under siege in debates over security, but long-standing identities are not so easily jettisoned.

**Hypotheses**

A number of hypotheses can be extracted from the preceding literature review to address why Japan became involved in the Middle East in 2003 but not 2014. First, it is possible that Japan did not commit resources to the war against ISIL because it does not see the terror group as a serious security threat, while China, Russia, and North Korea are much more immediate security concerns. These three states, all of which could be typified as Japan’s regional rivals, draw the most attention in Japan defense planning.⁵ Thus, we can state the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1: If Japan’s regional rivals gain power, then Japan will balance them. If there is a threat other than regional rivals, then it is unlikely to draw much attention from Japanese policymakers.*

A second hypothesis follows the hedging argument of Samuels (2007) and Hornung (2014). As summarized earlier, Samuels (2007) argues that Japan will continue to hedge between maintaining the U.S. alliance and fostering closer relations in the economic sphere with Asia, while Hornung (2014) argues that Japan will strengthen its alliance with the U.S. and strengthen or build security ties with Australia, India, and Southeast Asia, while reducing its dependence on China. It is not entirely clear, however, if Japan qualifies as a “hedger” because hedging states are typically middle or small powers, while Japan has a rather powerful military force and is the world’s third largest economy. However, if Japan were following a hedging-

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style foreign policy, then it would engage in a variety of foreign policy behavior, some of which might be inconsistent, in order to maintain good relations with the U.S. and its regional rivals, China and Russia; avoid direct confrontation with the threatening states, China, Russia, and North Korea; yet also minimize its losses in areas of national interest. Thus, the hedging hypothesis may help explain the puzzling variation that is the subject of this paper. Koizumi was “hedging” Japan’s alliance with the U.S. when he went ahead with the deeply controversial decision to deploy the SDF to Iraq, while such hedging was no longer seen to be necessary in 2014 as other interests came into play. The following hypothesis can be derived from hedging-centered theories:

Hypothesis 2: If Japan faces a threat, then it will respond primarily by attempting to balance maintaining its national interests and good relations with the threat and other great powers, and secondarily by avoiding direct confrontation.

A third hypothesis, drawn from the pluralist view of foreign policy-making, would posit that Japanese political elites are intensely afraid of the electoral repercussions of public opinion if Japanese troops were to be killed overseas fighting ISIL specifically, or engaging in the broader war on terror more generally. Alternatively, Japanese elites fear that involving the country in anti-terror operations will make Japanese citizens in Japan and around the world targets of terrorist organizations. In other words, Japan did not commit to the war against ISIL because Japanese public opinion has been consistently against interventions outside of its immediate vicinity that put Japanese lives at risk (Midford 2011). While this does not explain why Koizumi deployed the SDF in 2003, the LDP might have subsequently learned from the consequences of ignoring public opinion and opposed participation.
in the anti-ISIL coalition, thereby lending credence to the hypothesis. Therefore, we can hypothesize that:

_Hypothesis 3: If Japan faces a threat outside of its immediate vicinity, then Japanese public opinion will be against intervention and policy makers will be unlikely to support participation._

III. Japan and the 2003 Iraq War

On 24 July 2003 Japan departed from half a century of pacifism when the Diet approved the dispatch of troops to support the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. Then-Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi overrode opposition, a no-confidence motion, and a late-night filibuster to ensure the passage of the legislation, which led to the country's biggest military deployment since the Second World War. Japan’s support for the Iraq War in 2003 was a bold move that surprised and shocked not only many Japanese citizens, but indeed many around the world, especially given that some key Western allies of the United States such as Germany, France, and Canada refused to participate in the U.S. invasion. In fact, Koizumi had pledged Japan’s support for U.S. President George W. Bush’s “Global War on Terror” as early as February 2002. The Bush Administration maintained that invading Iraq was a necessary part of the international campaign against Islamic terrorists. Koizumi promised Japanese backing with the consciousness that doing so was likely hurt his standing among a Japanese public skeptical of military interventions. But perhaps he calculated that public opinion would matter less in the long run.

The U.S.-led coalition attacked Iraq in March 2003. Koizumi voiced his strong support, and his disapproval rating quickly leaped to 49 percent (Shinoda 2006). He was arguably under strong pressure from Washington and aware of Japan’s need to

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show solidarity with the U.S., both because of U.S. security commitments to Japan and because of lingering shame about Japan’s “checkbook diplomacy” during the first Gulf War. However, acutely aware of public sentiment, Koizumi sought a way to allow Tokyo to maintain its official pacifism without actually exposing Japanese civilians or military personnel to any real danger. At the May 2003 U.S.-Japan summit, Koizumi assured Bush that “Japan wished to make a contribution [to the reconstruction of Iraq] commensurate with its national power and standing.”

While small numbers of Japanese troops had participated in UN peacekeeping operations since 1989, never before had Tokyo sent forces overseas without a UN mandate. Even then, no Japanese soldier had fired a weapon on been killed in action since the 1940s. Polls at the time showed that the deployment was opposed by more than half of the Japanese public, a number which only grew as the situation on the ground in Iraq deteriorated. After months of debate about the nature of the Japanese role in Iraq, in early January 2004 a Japan Self-Defense Forces Iraq Reconstruction and Support Unit (Jietai Iraku Fukkou Shiengun) consisting of 600 soldiers was sent to Samawah, in British-occupied southern Iraq. The location was chosen in large part because it was not an active combat zone, and on top of that Australian troops were dispatched to protect their Japanese counterparts. The operation was legalized by a “Humanitarian Relief and Iraqi Reconstruction Special Measures Law” (Iraku Jindo Fukko Shien Tokubetsu Sochi Ho) passed on 9 December 2003 in the Diet without support from the opposition. Rhetorically, Tokyo described the participation in terms that emphasized Japan’s support for Iraq and the Iraqi people, and said little about the U.S. military and the controversial invasion. The Japanese Defense Ministry even

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7 On Japan’s policy debates at this time, see Curtis (2016).
9 Watts, op. cit.
created a specialized cartoon-like logo for the operation as a way to build support in public opinion and downplay both militarism and the U.S. connection (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Japanese Defense Ministry campaign to garner public support for the Iraq mission. Source: Japan Times.

Meanwhile, public support for the deployment continued to fall as the situation in Iraq deteriorated. In August 2003, Japanese public opinion was shocked at the massive bomb attack against the United Nations compound in Baghdad, which killed 22 UN employees, including the Secretary General’s Special Representative. On 29 November 2003, two Japanese diplomats were shot and killed near Tikrit, Iraq while preparations for the deployment were in their final stages. In April 2004, several Japanese journalists and aid workers were kidnapped but released several days later, with the kidnappers threatening to burn the hostages if Japanese troops were not removed from Iraq within three days. In a statement released on 20 July 2004, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi warned Japan, Poland and Bulgaria to withdraw their troops, threatening further attacks on Japanese citizens. And in October 2004, the body of a Japanese backpacker was found in Baghdad.

All of this had a direct effect on already hostile public opinion, putting significant pressure on Koizumi to withdraw the SDF. Nevertheless, Koizumi decided

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10 See http://www2.jiia.or.jp/research/kikou/08thompson.html
in December 2005 to renew the contingent's mandate for another year, despite a poll by the Asahi newspaper which found that 69% of respondents were against renewing the mandate, up from 55% in January 2005.\textsuperscript{11} Though Japanese camps in Samawah came under mortar and rocket fire several times, there was no damage or injuries to Japanese personnel. It was only in July 2006, bowing to public pressure and opposition from within his own party, that Koizumi withdrew its GSDF from Iraq, though Japan maintained a small Air Self-Defense Forces unit (ASDF) in the region until December 2008.

Even after withdrawal, however, the battle over Koizumi’s highly unpopular Iraq policy continued not only in the court of public opinion, but also in the actual judicial system. In April 2008, the Nagoya High Court declared that the Air Self-Defense Forces (ASDF) airlifting of coalition troops (which Japanese forces engaged in beyond their reconstruction role in Samawah) was unconstitutional, violating both Article 9 and the hastily written law that provided justification for the SDF dispatch on condition that Japanese forces would operate only in "noncombat" areas (McNeill 2010). "In modern warfare, the transport of personnel and supplies constitutes a key part of combat," concluded Judge Aoyama Kunio. "The airlift of multinational forces to Baghdad . . . plays a part in the use of force by other countries." The ruling LDP rejected this ruling, continuing to insist that Baghdad was not actually a combat zone (McNeill 2010). Nonetheless, the damage was done, and public resentment only deepened. Perhaps Koizumi thought he could count on a reservoir of post-9/11 sympathy of Japanese toward the U.S. and thereby overcome deeply-rooted public resistance to Japanese military actions overseas. If so, he gravely miscalculated.

\textsuperscript{11} Cited in Catley and Mossler (2007, 148).
There is a realist interpretation of Koizumi’s determination to back Bush’s war in Iraq. Perhaps North Korea’s continuing belligerence convinced at least some part of the elite and public that supporting the U.S. in Iraq was a way to guarantee Washington’s protection against Pyongyang. Alternatively, some analysts have pointed out that an anti-Saddam stance was very much in line with Japan’s post-Cold War policy in the Persian Gulf (Azad 2008). According to this view, Japan’s relations with Baghdad had deteriorated sharply in the 1990s, and Tokyo had turned to other sources, such as Iran and Kuwait, to meet its energy needs. Moreover, Japanese elites began to see Saddam as a serious obstacle to much-needed stability in the region. This realpolitik view compelled Koizumi to challenge both dominant public opposition and the lack of a UN endorsement of military action in Iraq. On the other hand, Tokyo maintained diplomatic relations with Baghdad throughout the period of international sanctions, right up to the March 2003 U.S. invasion. Finally, there was significant shame and regret over Japan’s failure to assist the coalition that ousted Saddam from Kuwait in 1991. Tokyo’s financial support in 1990 increased to $13 billion (from an initial offer of $10 million) only after the U.S. Congress began threatening to withdraw U.S. troops from Japan (Nakanishi 2011).

These factors may help explain Koizumi’s push for Japanese involvement, but the degree to which he was put on the defensive soon afterward, and the intensity of public opposition to the Iraq entanglement, already had a direct and determining effect on the LDP’s electoral fortunes in the 2004 Upper House election, when the party lost many seats. Although Koizumi withdrew the SDF from southern Iraq in the summer of 2006, the unpopularity of that mission and a continuing Marine SDF refueling mission in the southern Indian Ocean negatively impacted the popularity of Koizumi’s successor, none other than Shinzo Abe in his first stint as prime minister.
Yet, Abe continued to call for SDF deployments, and as a result the LDP was punished severely in the 2007 Upper House election, losing their majority. This, as Midford (2017: 5) observes, “paved the way for the LDP to be voted out of power for the first time ever in the August 2009 lower house election.” The DPJ actively played to public opinion in 2009, pledging to end all SDF deployments, including the Indian Ocean refueling mission (Midford 2017, 6). Future LDP leaders, including Abe himself in his second iteration as premier, seemed to readily absorb the lesson that public opinion intensely opposed military deployment to distant conflicts.

IV. Japan, ISIL, and Abe’s Proactive Pacifism

In August 2014, then-U.S. President Barack Obama initiated an air campaign against ISIL targets in Iraq following rapid territorial losses on the part of the Iraqi government to the terrorist organization, which included the fall of Iraq’s second largest city of Mosul. However, unlike in 2003, when George W. Bush proved unable to muster support from even key allies, Obama was able to secure wide international backing for the war against ISIL. In an effort to muster international support for the war effort, on September 10, 2014, the U.S. announced the creation of a multinational coalition to defeat ISIL (U.S. Department of State, 2014). And as of December 2014, the time of this coalition’s first official gathering, the U.S. led anti-ISIL coalition contained 60 states, including Japan, that had joined the coalition through the provision of either military, logistical and financial support. In November 2015, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2249 that authorized member states to take all necessary measures against ISIL, and by 2016, the number of states in the US-led multinational coalition had grown to 66. However, while Japan
signed on to the broad multi-national coalition to defeat ISIL, it did not contribute the military-logistical component of this mission, which was joined by only 27 states.

In the autumn of 2014, as President Obama was assembling his U.S.-led anti-ISIL coalition, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was engaged in crafting a new Middle East policy for Japan. At the time, there was much speculation that Abe’s security doctrine of proactive pacifism, which sought to recast Japan’s role overseas into one that would take more responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, could be tested in the Middle East (Otake and Murai 2015). Yet, at the same time Evron (2017, 191) cautioned that one should not expect too much from Japan’s deepening involvement in the Middle East noting, “Japan lacks crucial tools to shape Middle Eastern processes or to compete with other world powers attempting to exercise their power influence in that region.” Nonetheless, Prime Minister Abe’s January 2015 six-day tour of the Middle East was meant to showcase Japan as a regionally relevant power and Japan’s security doctrine of proactive pacifism at work (Asahi Shimbun 2015). Indeed, in January 2015, it appeared Japan was moving toward greater participation in the US-led multi-national coalition. With Abe’s pledge of $2.5 billion in regional humanitarian and development assistance, which included $200 million in non-military assistance to support the war effort against the Islamic State, Abe sent a strong message that Japan was committed to playing an active role in contributing to regional peace and security.

However, the subsequent beheadings of two Japanese citizens, Haruna Yukawa and Kenji Goto, carried out by ISIL in an apparent response to Abe’s pledge, cast a dark shadow over Abe’s visit to the region, and his broader Middle East agenda. Indeed, commentators in Japan argued in the aftermath of Yukawa and Goto’s killings and an additional attack in Bangladesh which left Japanese nationals dead, that Abe’s
proactive pacifist doctrine had made Japan, and Japanese nationals, more vulnerable to terrorist attacks (Otake and Murai 2015). Thus, despite Abe’s immediate pledge to make ISIL “pay the price” for the beheading of two Japanese nationals, within months of ISIL’s atrocity, Abe quickly reassured the Japanese public that Japan would not be embarking on any military adventures against ISIL.

Abe’s new Middle East policy was initially envisioned to go beyond Japan’s existing bilateral relations with states in the region. In the past, it was Japan’s oil dependency that led Tokyo to take an ambivalent stance toward the region’s explosive political tensions, which simmered during the first half of the Cold War. However, this early mix of neutrality and ambivalence, which quickly came to define Japan-Middle East relations, proved untenable as the 1973 oil embargo, the 1979 Islamist revolution in Iran, the first Gulf War in 1991 and the U.S. led global war on terrorism launched in the aftermath of 9/11, confronted Japan with the jarring contradiction between its attempt to avoid costly political entanglements in the Middle East, while also attempting to maintain its important relationship with the United States.

In addition, Abe’s new Middle East policy emphasized Japan’s exceptional role in the region by drawing an implicit contrast between Japan’s policies toward the Middle East and those of Europe and the United States. In fact, when setting out the core tenets that guide Japanese policy, Abe used three Arabic terms to describe Japan’s approach: al-tasaamuh (harmony and tolerance), al-ta’aaish (coexistence and co-prosperity) and al-ta’aun (collaboration). Significantly, the main objective of al-tasaamuh, ta’aaish and al-ta’aun, for Japan is the promotion of stability. However, Abe’s unequivocal support for the Egyptian government’s “efforts to bring about stability,” delivered in his address to the Egypt-Japan Business Committee during his January 2015 visit to Egypt, stand in sharp contrast to the more muted stance taken
toward Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s Egypt by Europe and the United States (at least until new U.S. President Trump’s embrace of al-Sisi in 2017).

In contrast to the Middle East, Japan’s security-minded focus on its regional rivals has only grown with each year in the 2000s, especially with regard to China. In November 2004, a Chinese nuclear-powered submarine made an incursion in Japanese territorial waters near Ishigaki Island in Okinawa Prefecture, which the Chinese expressed regret for, but which nevertheless heightened the sense of threat. In 2005, Foreign Minister Taro Aso characterized China as being on course to becoming a considerable threat (MOFA 2005), and then DPJ leader Seiji Maehara called China’s military buildup a “realistic threat” to Japan (Mochizuki 2007, 240).

According to a report in the Asahi Shimbun, the SDF has studied a military response to several contingencies involving China in the East China Sea and Taiwan (Asahi Shimbun 2006; Mochizuki 2007, 248). In September 2010, amidst the controversy over the detention of the Chinese fishing boat captain, then-Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara again drew attention to China’s double-digit increases in military spending. Tensions increased since 2010 over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, with Chinese protests increasing and China’s PLA Navy and fishing fleet acting more aggressively in the vicinity of the islands. In September 2010, the Japanese Coast Guard arrested the crew and captain of a Chinese fishing boat after it collided with a coast guard vessel. The crew was released soon after but the captain was held and was going to be tried until China’s boycott of rare earth mineral exports to Japan caused Tokyo to release the captain. The Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute sunk to a low in January and February 2013, when two Chinese frigates locked their missile guidance systems onto Japanese forces, and in November 2013, when China announced an expansion of their air defense identification zone to include the East China Sea, including the
Senkaku/Diayou Islands. While Chinese naval incursions into the Senkaku territorial waters have dropped dramatically since October 2013 (Fravel and Johnston 2014), air intrusions by Chinese aircraft that have been intercepted by Japan’s Air SDF have increased to record numbers in 2015 (Japan Times, Oct 19, 2015).

Japan’s annual white papers issued by the Defense Ministry have long highlighted China, Russia, and North Korea as central threats to Japanese security. In the section entitled, “Security Environment Surrounding Japan,” the 2005 white paper devoted 3½ pages out of 16½ total to China’s double digit military spending and growth and its relations with Taiwan and North Korea, with two pages on North Korea and a half page on Russia. By 2006, the coverage of China grew to 11 pages, expanding to coverage of China’s military posture, defense spending, missile capabilities, relations with other states, internal security, disputes with Japan in the East China Sea, and recent incursions in Japanese territorial waters and air space; with 8 pages devoted to Russia and North Korea each in the 2006 white paper (Japan Ministry of Defense 2005, 2006). The following data lists the numbers of pages devoted to each of these three countries in subsequent white papers:

- 2007: 16½ pages for China, with 10 for Russia and 9 pages for North Korea;
- 2008: 14 pages for China, 11 for Russia and 6½ pages for North Korea;
- 2009: 15 pages for China, 11 for Russia and 8 pages for North Korea;
- 2010: 15½ pages for China, 10½ for Russia and 9 pages for North Korea;
- 2011: 19 pages for China, 12 for Russia and 10 pages for North Korea;
- 2012: 20 pages for China, 11 for Russia and 8 pages for North Korea;
- 2013: 18½ pages for China, 9½ for Russia and 11 pages for North Korea;
- 2014:19 pages for China, 11½ for Russia and 12 pages for North Korea;
- 2015: 31 pages for China, 18½ for Russia and 20 pages for North Korea, 4 pages for ISIL.

The July 2015 white paper lays out the issue of why Japan considers China to be its greatest threat most clearly. Focusing on China’s unilateral declaration of an Air
Defense Zone in the East China Sea, its frequent incursions into Japanese air space and territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands, and military buildup, the paper states that China “continues to act in an assertive manner, including coercive attempts at changing the status quo, and is poised to fulfill its unilateral demands without compromise. China’s actions include dangerous acts that may invite unintended consequences, raising concerns over China’s future direction” (Japan Ministry of Defense 2005, “Section 3 China”, page 1). The fact that the paper’s release was delayed because Japan PM Abe’s Cabinet “demanded mention of additional examples of China’s ‘one-sided’ maritime activities, such as undersea gas and oil development in the East China Sea” (Guardian, July 21, 2015) could be construed as supporting the argument that these leaders perceive China to Japan’s greatest threat, and that they wanted the Defense Ministry to show that in the report.

The Japanese public’s views of China dovetail with these findings. According to Japanese Cabinet Office polls, Japanese public opinion over the last 17 years shows a decreasing favorability rating of China (from around 50% in 2000 to the teens by 2016) and a consistently low rating for Russia (always hovering around the teens for the same years). The Middle East as a whole is consistently viewed unfavorably as well, when it is included in the questions (Japan Cabinet Office 2016). In contrast, the U.S. has consistently high ratings in the 70s during the Bush years and in the 80s during the Obama years. Table 1 presents these favorability ratings for the years 2000-2016.
These favorability ratings could be seen as a proxy for the security fears that the public feels. China’s ratings for instance begin a bigger slide after the September 2010 fishing boat incident escalated the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

Other public opinion data expresses consistent opposition to collective self-defense, which encompasses any form of military intervention in the fight against ISIL. Asahi Shimbun polls conducted in 2014, while the collective self-defense legislation was being debated, showed opposition by a majority of respondents. An Asahi poll from 23 June 2014 had the following results:

The right to collective self-defense is the right to fight with the Japanese close allies, such as the U.S., if those allies are attacked even if Japan itself is not under attack. So far, the Japanese Government had interpreted the Constitution of Japan to not allow Japan to carry on the right to collective self-defense, but the Abe Administration plans to reinterpret the Constitution of Japan so that Japan can exercise the right to collective self-defense. Are you for or against for allowing the use of collective self-defense by changing the
interpretation of the Constitution? (Yes: 28%; No: 56%). (Mansfield Foundation 2016a)

Another poll was conducted after Abe explicitly connected collective self-defense to the fight against ISIL in February 2015, after the beheadings of the two Japanese hostages (Fackler 2015). A 19 May, 2015 Asahi Shimbun had the following results,

In the case of an international situation that threatens Japanese peace and security, the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) may support U.S. forces as they diminish the situation. However, the SDF may only provide support within Japan’s immediate geographical vicinity. Do you support the bill that would extend the geographical reach of foreign military support? (Yes: 29%; No: 53%).

We will now ask about SDF deployment, in case of international conflicts that do not threaten to Japanese peace and security. At the present time, the Diet is required to pass a new law each time they wish to deploy the SDF in these circumstances. The new bill would allow the government to deploy SDF forces abroad without passing a new law each time. Do you support this bill? (Yes: 30%; No: 54%). (Mansfield Foundation 2016b)

These polls clearly show that a majority of Japanese do not favor any type of military intervention outside of the immediate vicinity of Japan, including in the fight against ISIL, despite the violence committed against Japanese citizens.

The strategic focus on China helps to explain why Abe carefully distanced himself from embracing the US-led military coalition against ISIS both so as not to mobilize greater opposition to his proposed legislative agenda at home and to not distract from perceived threats closer to home, especially China. Thus, in contrast to 2003, realpolitik thinking may have been a more central consideration, and yet public opinion also loomed large. Rather than generate public support for military involvement in the anti-ISIL military campaign, Abe’s provision of humanitarian
assistance to the war effort was blamed for having made Japan, and Japanese nationals, more vulnerable to acts of terrorism. Furthermore, given the public opinion backlash against involvement in the 2003 Iraq war that was suffered by Koizumi, and polling numbers on constitutional changes that suggested a deeply divided public, Abe could not risk allowing his constitutional reform agenda being hijacked by involvement in a domestically unpopular military campaign in the Middle East.

V. Analysis

The contrast between Japan’s decision to contribute to the controversial invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, and its decision not to contribute to the military-logistical component of the U.S.-led international military coalition that was formed in 2014 to reverse ISIL’s gains in Iraq and Syria, helps to shed light on the determinants of Japanese foreign policy and highlight the limits of Abe’s much touted proactive pacifism and the “normalization” of Japan as a security actor on the global stage. This paper put forward three hypotheses to explain both Japan’s decision to intervene in 2003, and decision not to intervene in 2014.

Analysis of Hypothesis 1 – Realism

The first hypothesis posed Japan did not partake in the 2014 military campaign against in Iraq and Syria because Japanese elites do not see ISIL as a serious security threat to Japan. Rather, Japan’s defense planning, as highlighted in successive defense ministry white papers highlighted above, increasingly focuses on regional rivals, especially China. We found credence in this hypothesis, rooted in realist conceptions of international relations. In short, Japanese strategic planners were much more worried about China in 2014 than 2003 and did not want to expend
valuable political capital and limited defense resources on a Middle East conflict that
appeared distant to Japanese security concerns.

*Analysis of Hypothesis 2 – Hedging*

The second hypothesis suggested that Japan will act in way that balances its
regional and other concerns with the U.S. alliance. Certainly Koizumi’s contribution
to Iraq—ultimately more symbolic than substantive, despite its controversial nature—
gives weigh to this hypothesis. Koizumi sought to satisfy U.S. requests for assistance
while doing so in such a way that minimized the risk, including the risk that Japanese
SDF deployment would be seen as militaristic by Tokyo’s Asian neighbors. From this
perspective, the deployment was largely symbolic as it came at little financial or
human cost to the Koizumi administration, had a negligible effect on the strategic
situation in Iraq, and instead was simply aimed at currying favor with the U.S.
administration. However, hedging does not account for why Abe would not seek to
lend credibility to his desire for “normalization” by making at least a symbolic
contribution to the campaign against ISIL. Yet, even while supporting the U.S.
venture in Iraq, it maintained diplomatic relations with Baghdad throughout the
period of international sanctions, right up to the March 2003 invasion. This may be
indicative of hedging as well.

*Analysis of Hypothesis 3 – Public Opinion*

A third hypothesis posited that Japanese elites are unlikely to deploy troops to
far-flung areas that the “defensive realist”-minded Japanese public does not see as
central to Japan’s security. Japan’s political elites feared the domestic repercussions
of Japanese troops being killed in fighting in wars in the Middle East, or Japanese
citizens becoming the target of ISIL. Both the 2003 Iraq war and the 2014 war against
ISIL highlighted how successive Japanese governments were confronted with the task of balancing public opinion, hostile to involvement in open-ended military commitments in the Middle East, the maintenance of access to energy recourses, and “hedging” the U.S. Japan alliance with other imperatives. In 2003, a reservoir of Japanese public sympathy for America in the wake of 9/11, a high watermark of popular support for the bilateral alliance, existing anti-Saddam policy repertoires, and a China that still did not present the threat it would a decade later, helped Koizumi to take the unprecedented step of deploying the SDF to Iraq. In contrast, by 2014, Japan under Prime Minister Abe was seeking to sell domestic public opinion on deeply polarizing constitutional reforms as part of Abe’s proactive peace agenda. Involvement in another war in the Middle East would have only weakened Abe’s hand, especially since the Japanese public (and parts of the judicial system) had already judged the Iraq deployment harshly and more generally disdained foreign military adventures and feared “entrapment.” However, public opinion alone does not provide a satisfactory explanation of why Koizumi would take the risk he did in 2003 while Abe would not do more to fight ISIL considering the significant toll that the group had inflicted on Japanese lives.

**Summary of Analysis**

Our analysis indicates support for both the defensive realist and public opinion hypotheses. Perhaps this should not be surprising given Midford’s (2011) finding that Japanese public opinion reflects defensive realist views. In fact, at key junctures the two are mutually reinforcing. While conventional views might see public opinion as a challenge to realist understandings of foreign policy behavior, we saw that in the 2000s Japanese public opinion became the driver of realism, effectively pushing elites, and especially the LDP, back to a realist equilibrium—that is, back to a focus on
immediate, regional threats rather than counter-terror or nation-building operations in the Middle East. In this view, Koizumi, whether he was hedging or acting in a neoliberal way by supporting the U.S. mission in Iraq, a more realist public ultimately forced his hand, leading to the withdrawal of the SDF from Maysan Province by 2006. By 2014, elites and public opinion were acting in a mutually reinforcing way based on realpolitik motives to produce a non-interventionist outcome. While Abe may have rhetorically supported greater involvement in collective self-defense, he never actually acted by deploying the SDF to the Middle East.

To be clear, we are not saying that Japanese public opinion is driven by purely realist motivations. Anti-militarism and various stripes of pacifism continue to play a role in Japanese security identities. But in a way, this does not matter, insofar as public opinion and elite realpolitik calculations became virtually indistinguishable in the 2010s, especially with the rise of a Chinese threat. Having said, we also saw that public opinion had independent exploratory power at key junctures, especially around the time of the 2009 elections, when LDP leaders, chastened by their defeat at the polls, resisted any impulses to continue supporting U.S. counterterror efforts around the world.

Our conclusions largely support Midford’s finding that Japanese foreign policy is driven by defensive realism, in which strategic calculations are shaped by a public that is simultaneously supportive of defending Japanese territory and sovereignty but suspicious of risky overseas military adventures with dubious goals. Elites and the public in Japan saw America’s post-9/11 wars as being in Washington’s narrow interest, one that was not shared by the Japanese. Japan’s policy repertoires in the Middle East, after all, had traditionally emphasized neutrality, access to energy resources, and a lack of any civilizational quarrel with Islam of the sort with which
Western states must contend. Moreover, Abe and the ruling party were acutely conscious of how the LDP was punished by voters in the 2009 election, in no small part due to Koizumi’s decision to deploy the SDF to Samawah. A vivid illustration of this is Abe’s unwillingness to relaunch even the Indian Ocean refueling mission—even though the LDP had introduced a bill to do just that during the brief period of DPJ rule. In both cases, then, we must consider how security interests rooted in realism dovetail with public opinion, which remains a powerful domestic constrainer and enabler of elite action on Japanese foreign policy.

VI. Conclusion

Realist threat perceptions on the part of Japanese elites and long-held security identities expressed in the form of public opinion acted in a mutually reinforcing way to preempt any Japanese participation in the coalition the U.S. launched in 2014 to fight ISIL. Public antipathy toward military deployment overseas holds fast to this day. Polls taken in recent years by Asahi and noted above suggest that there is little appetite among the public for any further deployments, and instead a healthy dose of suspicion about Abe’s muscular policy initiatives. Polls also show that an overwhelming majority of Japanese believe that any deployment of the SDF will inevitably lead to undesired entanglements in combat situations. Such attitudes underpinned the SDF’s recent withdrawal from South Sudan, ending the last Japanese involvement in a UN peacekeeping mission. Evidence also suggests that elites have little to no appetite for further deployments. A colleague who interviewed a dozen Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense officials in early June 2017 received a singular and simple answer when he asked whether Japan might
deploy troops to fight terrorism, an answer which amounted to “no way!” In short, Japanese do not see using military force to support counterterrorism operations overseas as relevant to their security interests. By contrast, the Japanese public has a measurably growing fear of China, as we showed above.

Thus, was Japanese participation in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars an entirely *sui generis* cases of Japanese military involvement overseas, never to be repeated? Many details of what compelled Koizumi to deploy the SDF to Iraq remain unknown and a tantalizing subject for future research, especially as documents pertaining to that period are declassified. Perhaps we will learn that strong U.S. pressure exerted by the George W. Bush personally, and the close relationship he reportedly enjoyed with the Japanese premier, made a difference. By contrast, Obama’s allegedly cooler relationship with Abe may have reduced Washington’s leverage over Tokyo. Even so, it is clear that China’s rise will be at the top of the Japanese foreign policy-making agenda for the foreseeable future.

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12 Personal communication with Tom Le, June 2017.
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