

## Japanese Nationalism Today - Risky Resurgence, Necessary Evil or New Normal?

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*Keywords:* Japan, nationalism, security, Constitution, military

キーワード: 日本、国家主義、安全保障、憲法、軍需

In recent decades, and particularly since the return to power in 2012 of conservative Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, there has been increasing discourse amongst international analysts, commentators and politicians on trends in Japanese nationalistic sentiment, how the Japanese see themselves and the role Japan seeks to play on the international stage.

Some of Japan's neighbours have expressed fears of a possible return to militarism in Japan apparent in these trends, but are their fears justified? Is nationalism, once an almost taboo topic, resurgent in today's Japan, and if so, is it of the same stripe that led Japan down the road to World War II?

This essay looks at Japanese nationalism past and present, factors contributing to nationalistic feeling in Japan, and implications for Japan's regional relationships, global standing and future prospects.

### **Background to pre-World War II nationalism**

Nationalism in Japan is thought to have originated with the emergence of the Tokugawa era in 1603 (Matthews, 2003) when feudal Japan was united as one nation for the first time under shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu. The advent of the Meiji Restoration, however, saw the Tokugawa Shogun lose his power and the Emperor restored to the nation's supreme position (Columbia University, 2009). Though the core concept of the Meiji Restoration was "direct personal rule" by the Emperor, in practice the day-to-day mechanics of rule were handled by a small group of his advisors, who in fact exercised continued and substantial control over

Japanese political and military decision making (Bix, 2008).

The Meiji Restoration came hot on the heels of Japan's forced opening to US trade and diplomacy following the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry's 'black ships' in 1853, a jarring awakening that thrust Japan "into the geopolitics of Western colonial ambitions" (Estevez-Abe, 2014). Japan's leaders decided that the only way the country could survive as an independent nation was to become like the powerful Western country that had forced it to open up – modern, industrial, a projector of power in Asia, and a colonizer (Estevez-Abe, 2014). Japan's "struggle for recognition of its considerable achievements and for equality with Western nations" (Columbia University, 2009) became a key feature of the Meiji period.

Nationalism became institutionalised by the Japanese state in the form of a corrupted version of Bushido (Japan's 'warrior code'), as well as in the country's vision for a 'Greater East-Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere' (Shad, 2014) in which Japan saw itself as "liberating" Asian nations from the yoke of Western colonialism. When the peaceful, prosperous and brief post-Meiji 'Taisho democracy' of the 1920s was brought to an end through the devastation of economic depression, the scene was thus set for the emergence of a more fascist nationalism that increasingly destabilised Japan (Matthews, 2003).

Japan grew increasingly resentful of Western criticism (which was followed by economic sanctions) of its colonialism and expansionism in Asia, criticism that, to Japan, smacked of inherent racism and double standards. The combination with subsequent economic sanctions imposed by the West led to deepened diplomatic isolation and increasing military control of international and domestic policy-making in Japan (Columbia University, 2009). Japan's civilian authorities had little institutional control over the military (Kitaoka, 2015) and they eventually capitulated to military rule under the banner of the 'divine' will of the Showa Emperor, Hirohito.

As a result, pre-WWII nationalism in Japan was characterised by strident right-wing militarism that insisted the only way Japan could safeguard its sovereignty and its future as a strong, independent, modern nation was through a powerful military led by the Emperor as chief of command and head of state.

## **Post-war pacifism**

With Japan's defeat in World War II, nationalism was stigmatized and marginalised as a topic of public debate (Matthews, 2003). Article 9 of the American-drafted Japanese Constitution that replaced the pre-war Meiji Constitution specifically barred Japan from maintaining a military force and committed the nation to peace – in its first paragraph, Japan “forever renounce[s] war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes”, while in the second, it renounces ever maintaining “land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential” (Constitution of Japan, 1947).

Under this new constitution, Japan's military, known as the Self-Defense Force (SDF), could only engage in self-defense and could not engage in collective self-defense (that is, come to the aid of allies under attack) (NYT Editorial Board, 2015). In addition, civilian authority, primarily the prime Minister, was given much greater oversight of the military (Kitaoka, 2015).

A population scarred by war and fearful of once again heading down a militaristic path should its armed forces be given too much power, embraced this pacifist constitution and took great pride in Japan's post-war role as a promoter, advocate and keeper of the peace, staunchly resisting any attempts to change or even re-interpret Article 9. Politicians too mostly opposed any move towards rearmament for most of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Matthews, 2003), instead committing to defending the international liberal order of which Japan had become a major beneficiary (Kitaoka, 2015).

## **A shift in attitude?**

The prevailing line of thought in post-war Japan was that the country “could follow pacifism, not threaten anybody, have no army, and the world would leave [us] alone……it worked because of the US alliance, not because of pacifism” (Tisdall, 2013). Now, however, there is myriad evidence that Japan's collective mood vis-à-vis itself, its history and its relationship with its neighbours is undergoing a wholesale shift.

Statistics bore out a reawakening of nationalism as Japan entered a new millennium. In 2000, a mere 41% of Japanese supported the amendment of Article 9 to allow the SDF to be transformed into a regular army; only 12 months later, this figure had risen to 47%

(Matthews, 2003). Shintaro Ishihara, one of Japan's most prominent and outspoken nationalists and a four-term governor of Tokyo between 1999 and 2012, did much to give nationalism a more acceptable public face, as did the charismatic Jun'ichiro Koizumi, Prime Minister for almost half this period (Matthews, 2003), but the pace towards a more pro-nationalistic administration really picked up with the return to power in 2012 of the LDP led by Shinzo Abe.

Media and entertainment propagating nationalist views, including movies (the screen adaptation of the book *The Eternal Zero*, about Japan's kamikaze pilots, is already in the top 10 of most successful Japanese films of all time (Kato, 2014)), books, and SNS's are enjoying unprecedented popularity, particularly among groups not normally attracted to right-wing views, including the young and women. The change is also being felt in the political world with the emergence of a new wave of young (30s and 40s) Japanese political candidates who hold the same kind of staunchly conservative views as the US Tea Party (Y. Hayashi, 2014).

At the same time, weekly magazines compete to print stories attacking China and South Korea, a nationalistic monthly current affairs magazine has seen its circulation soar (with those in their 20s and 30s, including many women, making up 40% of a readership previously dominated by males over 50), and books predicting doomsday for these two aforementioned countries that are Japan's most persistent and bitter critics are best sellers (Y. Hayashi, 2014).

Many young Japanese recognise and lament that they have not been able to have pride in their country and feel negative about its future as a result of being taught a "self-torturing view of history" that painted Japan as a country of aggressors (Y. Hayashi, 2014). Prime Minister Abe's unashamed pride in Japan resonates strongly within this demographic; a 2014 Asahi Shimbun poll revealed 60% of people in their 30s supported his visiting of the Yasukuni War shrine (Y. Hayashi, 2014).

Yet concrete moves by Abe aimed at realising a 'normal' military in Japan have brought about a public backlash. While genuine opposition to any perceived attempt to move Japan and its constitution away from pacifism does exist, it would be reasonable to say that the reason for people's anger this time was not so much the substance of the proposed change but the manner in which Abe went about achieving it.

Constitutional reform usual requires two thirds approval in the Lower and Upper Houses of Japan's Diet, as well as a national referendum, but Abe got around this by 'reinterpreting' the Constitution via Cabinet decision and following it up with legislation, a process that requires only a majority vote in the Lower House and no referendum (Chelala, 2015; NYT Editorial Board, 2015).

Views on the significance of this move are contested. One academic stated confidently that despite the passage of the legislation, "democracy is firmly in control in Japan ...this is not a giant backward slide down the slippery slope to prewar militarism" (Stronach, 2015), and government officials have described Abe's actions as "necessary and justified" in the face of Chinese aggression and military build-up (Tisdall, 2013). Another scholar, on the other hand, said: "I often remind young people that our country is not democratic, our country is authoritarian" (Sunda, 2015), while a participant at a rally at the end of August 2015 to protest amendment of Article 9 expressed concern that "the way the government brushes aside public worries.....it's as though Japan is slipping back into its pre-World War II state" (Osaki, 2015),

A telephone survey conducted the weekend of the security bills being passed indicated the support rate for the Abe Cabinet dropping more than four points, to 38.9%, from the figure less than a month earlier, with 79% of respondents saying that the Diet had not deliberated the security bills sufficiently (Kyodo, 20 September 2015).

However, the same poll showed 53% of respondents opposing the bills, while only 34.15% backed them, suggesting that the passage of the legislation had had only a limited negative impact on the government's support rate (Yoshida, 2015), despite fervent nation-wide protests that drew support from across demographic boundaries in the months leading up to the legislation's passage, perhaps implying if not a shared nationalistic sentiment, then at least an acknowledgement on some level of the need for these changed arrangements.

## **Causes of the shift**

What are the factors that have brought about the at least partial rehabilitation of nationalism as an acceptable public sentiment in Japan? An examination reveals a mix of organic, internal, deliberate and external contributors.

### ***Changing political scene and 'Abe's nationalism'***

The Liberal Democratic Party, which has been in government almost continuously since its inception in 1955, has always promoted a nationalist agenda (Kato, 2014). However, one of the biggest factors facilitating Japan's growing nationalism in more recent years was the introduction of a new electoral system in 1994 that replaced multimember districts with single-member districts. The change created incentives for politicians to specialise in national policy issues – calls to patriotism and defending Japan's national interests allowed party leaders to project a strong image popular with voters (Estevez-Abe, 2014).

The policies of Jun'ichiro Koizumi, the first Prime Minister to come to power after the introduction of the electoral reforms, broke with Japan's pacifist past in many ways (Fackler and Sanger, 2014), but it was Koizumi's successor, Shinzo Abe, who, despite lasting a mere 12 months in his first stint as prime minister, established the stronger nationalist credentials, including by upgrading Japan's Defense Agency to a cabinet-level ministry (Estevez-Abe, 2014).

Abe, and the LDP, were swept back to power in late 2012 and promptly set about implementing a bold and comprehensive agenda that aimed to give Japan a bigger role on the global political, economic, diplomatic and security stages by “stand(ing) up forcefully for its interests, its friends and its values” (Tisdall, 2013).

Abe's task has been made that much easier by a more conducive political climate; in the 2012 elections, 189 out of 264 LDP candidates shared his views as opposed to only 61 of 271 in 2009, when the DPJ came to power; he will not face re-election until 2016, meaning he has a relatively long 4 years to progress his agenda (Estevez-Abe, 2014).

Specific nationalistically-slanted policy initiatives implemented by the Abe government include the creation of a national security advisory board modelled on the US National Security Council, sustained increases in defence spending after nearly a decade of decline (Francis, 2015), a new national security strategy, a new 5-year defence plan and 10-year defence strategy, (Tabuchi, 2013), an expansion of Japan's naval and coastguard capabilities, the appointment of far-right figures to the Board of Governors at NHK and even the introduction of a tough and controversial state secrets law (Shad, 2014; Tisdall, 2013; Fackler 2013).

By far Abe's most desired policy initiative, however, was to revise Japan's 'peace constitution' to enhance the role of the Japanese monarchy, reinterpret Article 9 which prohibits Japan from maintaining offensive force (Bix, 2014), and include an "obligation" for the citizens of Japan to "defend the nation's inherent territory, inherent seas and inherent skies" (Dudden, 2015), a self-described 'life goal' that he finally achieved in September 2015 (Tabuchi, 2013).

One other political development of note both reflecting the increasing boldness and policy influence of Japanese nationalists is the 3 September 2014 Abe Cabinet reshuffle, the first since he returned to power in 2012. Fifteen of the 19 Cabinet members (including Abe himself) belonged to a 35,000 member right-wing group called the Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference) whose views could be described as ultra-nationalistic (Shad, 2014; Kato, 12 September 2014), but which sees itself as representing the traditional values of the Japanese people in its calls to preserve Japan's "beautiful traditional national character", centred on the imperial household, adopt a new Constitution and instill patriotism and morality in Japanese schoolchildren by revising Japan's "masochistic" history curriculum (Kato, 12 September 2014). The Diet's Nippon Kaigi Discussion Group has 289 members, about 40% of the entire Parliament. (Kato, 12 September 2014).

### ***Economic climate***

One less-discussed aspect of Japanese nationalism is the economy. If nationalism is interpreted to mean a desire to see one's country play a preeminent global role, then nationalism could be characterised as a key driver of structural reform and other efforts aimed at revitalising Japan's economy and commensurate global clout.

Post-WWII economic success provided the foundation for a new Japanese identity as a global economic power (Estevez-Abe, 2014) that rose to reach the second-highest position in the world, a precedent-setting, awe-inspiring achievement that became the inspiration for scores of books and academic papers and had companies around the world seeking to emulate 'the Japanese way'.

This made Japan's economic crash and 'lost decades' of the 1990s and 2000s that much more devastating; constitutionally stripped of its right to have an army, Japan was a "diplomatic dwarf" but now it was even losing its status as an "economic giant" (Pilling, 2014). Thus, appealing to nationalistic sentiment that sees Japan exerting influence once more by

virtue of its economic might is a way of uniting efforts towards reform needed to revive the economy and strengthen Japan's long-term prospects (Matthews, 2003).

Additionally, some commentators have asserted that improved economic conditions in Japan flowing from 'Abenomics' are ultimately a means to an end: "building a more powerful and assertive Japan, complete with a full-fledged military" (Tabuchi, 2013). Prime Minister Abe himself regards economic growth as a "salve" to damaged Japanese pride resulting from China's supplanting of Japan in 2010 as the world's second-largest economy (Estevez-Abe, 2014).

### ***Demography***

Around 4% of the Japanese population died during World War II (compare this to the 2% of the US population that died during the Civil War) (Kato, 2014), meaning that Japanese war survivors would have been deeply affected, indeed, traumatised by their wartime experience.

However, as the number of citizens who actually lived through World War II dwindles with every passing year, there are fewer people left to tell of the horrors of war and warn others of the dangers of popular nationalism evolving into fascism (Matthews, 2003).

For the post-war generations, having no direct experience of the war means they are free to glorify Japan's martial tradition uninhibited by dark memories (Kato, 2014). Not only that, they have grown up during a period in which Japan's economic success propelled the country to the heights of developed nationhood and fostered within the populace great pride in its unprecedented economic achievements (Matthews, 2003).

Japan's loss of its global #2 economic rank and nominal regional leadership role to China have simultaneously stoked resentment and dented national confidence profoundly (Matthews, 2003) and strengthened the cause of nationalists who believe Japan must once more possess military power in order to restore national pride (Matthews, 2003).

Demographic factors could intensify nationalistic sentiment in Japan given the relative increase in nationalism amongst the younger demographic and the Abe Cabinet's decision to lower the voting age from 20 to 18 (Editor, Japan Times, 2015), a change that will allow 18 and 19 year olds to vote for the first time in the July 2016 Upper House election (Sieg and Kasai, 2015).



### ***Historical issues, education and the media***

One of the more successful ways that Japan's dominant political party, the LDP, has used to promote nationalistic feeling in Japan is the government system for approving school textbooks (Kato, 2014). Nationalists have long championed changes in Japan's education system to teach children more patriotism and to restore Japan's 'sense of self', which they claim has been eroded by an overly negative view of Japan's wartime behaviour (Fackler, 28 December 2013), by providing more positive portrayals of Japan's actions (Fackler, 9 September 2014). Prime Minister Abe sees such an approach as not only countering non-Japanese critics' "propaganda" (Estevez-Abe, 2014) but "integral to restoring Japan's imperial war-time honour and modern-day national pride" (Kotlernov, 2014) as well.

New screening standards for elementary, junior high and high school textbooks, (Estevez-Abe, 2014) introduced in 2014 by Japan's Education Ministry, require the inclusion of material that reflects the government's nationalistic position on history and territorial issues (Fackler, 2013), ostensibly to give a "balanced picture" of disputed historical facts (Fackler, 28 December 2013). One government lawmaker said the changes were "not about going back to militarism but just teaching the love of country that is normal in the United States and other nations" (Fackler, 28 December 2013).

The new standards engendered little public backlash, reflecting both increasing public anxiety over China's more aggressive attitude toward Japan (Fackler, 28 December 2013) and the weakening influence of Japan's teacher unions, who have traditionally held more left-leaning political views and tended to act in a way that moderated the impact of attempted over-reach by conservative national governments (Pollmann, 2015).

The government's more recent directive to all 86 national universities to "abolish or reorganize humanities and social sciences departments" has been described by many academics as fitting in with a larger pattern of promoting patriotism (Kingston, 26 September 2015).

The Abe administration has been aggressive in its attempts to bring the media in to line with its views on history. It has been strident in its criticism of left-leaning institutions such as the Asahi Shimbun, and used a recent incident in which the paper retracted dozens of articles it had published in the 1980s and 1990s on 'comfort women' when a major source of

information for the articles was later discredited to call for the paper to be boycotted, silenced and even driven out of business.

### ***Increased aggression by Japan's neighbours***

An important trigger for more open expression of Japanese nationalism has been a riskier, less stable neighbourhood, primarily vis-a-vis North Korea and China.

In 2002, the Japanese navy fired at and sunk a North Korean spy ship that had illegally entered Japan's territorial waters, the first time Japan had sunk a foreign vessel since World War II (Matthews, 2003). The incident heralded a "major shift in the attitudes of the Japanese about their country and its defence", emboldening Japanese politicians to make nationalistic pronouncements concerning Japan's right to defend itself, and even its nuclear capabilities (Matthews, 2003).

Some analysts contend that rising Japanese nationalism is both a product and cause of increasing Chinese aggression in the region. The facts suggest, however, that it was China's introduction in 1992 of its Territorial Waters Law in which it declared unilaterally that Japan's Senkaku Islands now belonged to China, an "explicit attempt to change the status quo" (Hayashi, 2012), and the subsequent, increasingly frequent illegal incursions by Chinese government craft into Japanese territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands (Hayashi, 2008) and airspace following China's unilateral declaration of a new 'air defence identification zone' (ADIZ) that covers the Senkaku Islands (Tisdale, 2014) that stoked Japanese nationalism.

Thus, though China often criticises Japan over actions it claims indicate a return to the militaristic stance of pre-World War II days, China's own actions have ironically acted to not only encourage nationalist sentiment in government circles in Japan but have, along with history and territory-fuelled tensions with South Korea, also made the Japanese "public more willing to accept Abe's rightist agenda of an expanded role for the nation's military" (Fackler, 2013) and the consequent need for Japan to strengthen its military capabilities (Tabuchi, 2013).

A number of Asian countries, including India, the Philippines and Vietnam, who are worried about growing Chinese aggression in the region, support a more militarily capable Japan (FT Editor, 2015; Fackler and Sanger, 2014), for some (specifically, the Philippines and

Vietnam), to the extent of pursuing closer military cooperation with Japan (Lewis and Harding, 2015; Chelala, 2015; Flanagan, 2014; Tisdall, 2013).

***Pride in Japan's accomplishments and pacifism, growing resentment of foreign criticism and 'apology fatigue'***

Japanese people are justifiably proud of the nation's more than 70 years of exemplary, peaceful participation in the international community (Mitchell, Harding and Mundy, 2015) (which encompasses not only the country's active championing of world peace but also its extensive financial contributions to the UN, World Bank and Asian Development Bank, its provision of infrastructure critical to the Asian economic miracle and huge investment in Asian 'tiger' economies (Matthews, 2003)).

Japanese people feel it is extremely unfair that this good global citizenship has not received the recognition it deserves on account of persistent, and what they see as unjustified, attacks over wartime legacy issues from China and South Korea, who at the same time refuse to acknowledge Japan's repeated apologies and efforts to atone for its wartime behaviour (Mitchell, Harding and Mundy, 2015; Harding, 2 June 2015; Y. Hayashi, 2014). There is particular frustration with foreign critics' narrow focus on what are, to many Japanese, peripheral issues: visits by Japanese politicians to Yasukuni Shrine, school textbooks, Article 9 (Matthews, 2003) and comfort women.

Japanese born after the war, and particularly the current young generation, played no part in hostilities and seem bewildered by the notion of having to apologise forever for something that has nothing to do with them. In his public statement on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII in the Pacific, Prime Minister Abe said: "We must not let our children, grandchildren and even further generations to come, who have nothing to do with that war, be predestined to apologise" (Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet, 2015). It is these post-war generations that are becoming increasingly nationalistic (Mitchell, Harding and Mundy, 2015).

***Japan's desire that it be a 'normal' nation again***

More and more Japanese people believe that it is unnatural for a country of Japan's international standing not to have a standing army, especially given that the country's military spending is among the highest in the world (Matthews, 2003).

The snub of being the only significant contributor (\$13 billion but no on-the-ground troops) to the US-led Gulf War of 1990-91 to receive no formal thanks from Kuwait (Estevez-Abe, 2014) brought about the painful realisation in Japan that soft power was no substitute for the military variety.

While appreciating the SDF for its rescue work at times of natural disasters (Sentaku Magazine, 2015), Japanese citizens have been concerned for some time at the SDF's lack of combat-readiness and whether it would actually be able to defend the nation against attack (Matthews, 2003).

As part of his drive to 'normalise' Japan as a nation, Abe lifted Japan's long-standing, self-imposed restrictions on exporting weapons in April 2014 (Lewis and Harding, 2015), allowing the country to stage successfully its first international defence trade show (Chelala, 2015) since World War II in May 2015 in Yokohama, (Lewis, 2015; Reynolds, 2015). It is Abe's hope that not only will this move lift Japan's export earnings but will also help it deepen geopolitical relationships (Lewis and Harding, 2015).

### ***Changes in US domestic political environment-US neo-conservatism and the nature of the Japan-US relationship***

Despite US snubs of Abe in the early part of his current term as Prime Minister leaving Japan feeling isolated and that it had to stand up for itself, including even to the United States (Fackler, 2014), Abe has taken pains to reaffirm Japan's alliance with the United States as the "bedrock" of Japanese security (Tisdall, 2013).

However, recognition of growing constraints on US military engagement in the region has many in Japan suggesting that Japan needs to take on "a more assertive role in regional security" (Chelala, 2015). In 2014, Yosuke Isozaki, a security advisor to Prime Minister Abe, said that the United States could "no longer afford to play the world's policeman. This is no longer an era when Japan is permitted to do nothing and count on America to protect us. It's become extremely important we do our own share alongside the US" (Francis, 2015).

In April 2015, Abe and Obama approved new Joint Defense Guidelines (Giacomo, 2015) allowing Japan's military to come to the defense of the United States outside Japanese territory (Kitaoka, 2015), a change that analysts described as a "very significant transformation" moving Japan from being "locally focused to being globally focused"

(Hirschfeld Davis and Gordon, 2015).

## Conclusion

An examination of the various causes of a shift in sentiment within Japan towards a nationalistic stance more in favour of Japan becoming a 'normal' country militarily suggests that today's nationalism is indeed of a different kind to that which accompanied and fueled Japanese aggression and expansionism in the 1930s and 1940s.

Unlike the 'ultranationalism' of that period, today's 'new' nationalism does not come from a place of almost arrogant superiority, nor does it represent a desire to redress perceived grievances or seek for Japan a renewed foray into military-led expansionism. Furthermore, the public response to the Abe Cabinet's reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution provides tangible reassurance of how deeply Japanese society treasures the nation's pacifism and democratic process, which should act as a tempering force against ultra-nationalism.

The evidence instead suggests that today's Japanese nationalism is moderate and mainstream. Stemming from a frank admission of Japan's vulnerabilities, it seeks to secure for Japan from its peers respect and political influence commensurate with its economic status and contributions to international society.

This 'new' nationalism is bi-faceted. Firstly, it is an expected and necessary response to changes occurring in Japan's external environment, particularly vis-à-vis growing Chinese military strength, provocation and aggression as well as a more restricted US military budget and demands from the US for Japan to assume a greater proportion of the burden of safeguarding Japan's security.

It is also, however, a reflection of a more permanent, long-term shift in the way Japanese see themselves, a rejuvenated pride nurtured by more than 70 years of pacifism and cognisant of Japan's many and varied contributions to making the world a better place. It is a nationalism that has arisen from, and is fed by, a confluence of factors (a change in the public mood, a political leadership that is actively promoting a nationalistic agenda, and regional geopolitical developments) and so is captive to none, certainly not the military, and not even politics. In this respect, the type of nationalism that we see in Japan now could be considered

as the 'new normal' and thus should not be feared, but instead welcomed.

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(平成27年11月3日受理)