

Why and How Did Japan Expand Defense Cooperation with the United States from the Late 1970s? A Rhetorical Explanation

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Abstract:

Military cooperation between the United States and Japan in the early decades of the Cold War was limited due to the Japanese cultural norms of antimilitarism. Once the Japanese government approved the Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation in 1978, however, cooperation between the U.S. and Japanese militaries on Japan's territorial defense expanded significantly. How was the Japanese government able to expand and sustain defense cooperation with the United States against the preexisting domestic cultural constraints? This paper emphasizes the role of legitimation in domestic political debates in the mid- to late 1970s as creating an essential condition for Japan to expand U.S.-Japan defense cooperation. It argues that the Japanese government successfully legitimated defense cooperation to its domestic public by the late 1970s due to two interrelated reasons. First, the main policy idea the government used to legitimate U.S.-Japan defense cooperation was situated within the dominant national security discourse at the time, which made it difficult—if not impossible—for the majority of the public to reject defense cooperation as completely unacceptable. Second, key government proponents of defense cooperation held rhetorical authority to speak of national security policies, making their legitimating ideas seem credible to the public.

Keywords: *Japan, the U.S.-Japan alliance, the 1978 Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation, rhetoric, legitimation*

1. Introduction

Despite being formal treaty allies, military cooperation between the United States and Japan was limited in the early decades of the Cold War due to Japanese antimilitarist cultural norms (Berger, 1998). These norms limited substantive discussions on defense policy in Japan, as both the political elite and the public were concerned about ensuring tight civilian control, which led Japanese leaders to believe that cooperation between the U.S. and Japanese militaries would provoke strong public backlash. Once the Japanese government approved the Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation in 1978, however,

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Received on 2025/10/6, accepted after peer reviews on 2026/3/23.

cooperation between Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and the U.S. military for the defense of Japanese territory expanded. The document explicitly encouraged the SDF to clarify the operational division of labor and conduct joint military studies and exercises with the U.S. military to smooth out their joint operations (Japan Ministry of Defense 1978). Although the 1978 Guidelines was not a treaty (and hence did not carry any legal obligations), the U.S. and Japanese militaries began conducting a series of joint military studies and expanded the number of joint military exercises (Hunter-Chester 2016, 174–175; Smith 1999, 80–83). By the mid-1980s, the two militaries were emphasizing the importance of interoperability and joint operations to counter a common Soviet threat, and the SDF became more focused on how it could contribute to U.S. regional strategy—an unthinkable feature just several years earlier (Smith 2019, 47, 49). What is notable is that these changes did not provoke major public protests and outcry.

How was it that the Japanese government was able to expand and sustain defense cooperation with the United States in the face of preexisting domestic cultural constraints? While the origins of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation remain understudied, the limited scholarship that exists generally focuses on why Japan expanded defense cooperation, rather than domestic conditions that enabled it (Buck 1981; Hasegawa 2013; Lind 2004; Mochizuki 1983/1984; Nishihara 1983/1984; Smith 1999; 2019, Chapter 1). Specifically, it remains unclear how the U.S.-Japan defense cooperation was legitimated domestically and why the public accepted cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military to the extent that they did by the late 1970s. Because legitimacy is critical for policy endurance, had the Japanese government failed to legitimate U.S.-Japan defense cooperation to its domestic public, it would not have been able to expand and sustain cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military in the first place.

This paper emphasizes the role of legitimation in shaping domestic political debates in the mid-to late 1970s and creating a necessary condition for Japan to expand and sustain defense cooperation with the United States. Legitimation—the act of justifying policies in public in order to enhance their legitimacy—has been recognized as a central aspect of political interactions at both domestic and international levels (Goddard 2018, 2020, 2021; Goddard and Krebs 2015; Jackson 2006, 2013; Krebs 2015; see also Stein 2000). The core assumption of the legitimation approach is that what actors say and how they speak to legitimate their preferred policies can affect the extent to which the targeted audiences accept them, thereby affecting the political outcome.

To explain why some policy ideas used to legitimate policies are seen as more viable than others by the public, the legitimation approach I draw on emphasizes two factors. The first is the *discursive context*—whether or not there is a dominant national security discourse that the majority of the public subscribes to, and if there is, whether or not political actors situate their legitimating policy ideas in it (Goddard 2021, 331–332; Krebs, 2015, 32–36). Discourses of national security provide ontological world views and core strategic “facts” about national security—which include philosophical ones—such as what deterrence is and how it works, and whether or not military might is necessary for deterrence—as well as strategic ones—such as the sources and nature of the threat the state faces, whether and why the state should adopt offensive or defensive military doctrine, and whether and why it should ally with another state for security. Any legitimating policy idea that emphasizes a certain policy's instrumental effectiveness or normative appropriateness is founded on some national security discourse, whether it is explicitly stated or not. In other words, the assessment of the viability of any policy idea cannot be done without understanding the discourse that underpins it. As such, in order to effectively legitimate a policy, a political actor must ground their legitimating policy ideas in a dominant security discourse that the majority of the public subscribes to. The second is speakers' *rhetorical authority* or legitimacy to

speak on national security policies (Goddard 2021, 330–331; Goddard and Krebs 2015, 27; Krebs 2015, 48–52; see also Goddard 2010, 25–27; Krebs and Lobasz 2007). Opinions expressed by individuals who are seen as authoritative speakers by the public are most likely to be regarded as legitimate and more credible than those communicated by speakers who lack rhetorical authority.

Drawing on this legitimation approach, I argue that the Japanese government was able to successfully legitimate U.S.-Japan defense cooperation as a legitimate—and even commonsense—national security policy to its domestic public by the late 1970s for two interrelated reasons. First, the Japanese government used a legitimating policy idea that was situated within the dominant national security discourse that most of the public subscribed to at the time. The dominant security discourse described Japan's external world as an environment filled with danger, where military power is necessary for security, and recognized that the SDF and the U.S.-Japan alliance were both essential for ensuring Japan's survival. The main policy idea the proponents used to legitimate U.S.-Japan military cooperation was squarely situated within this dominant security discourse, as it emphasized the necessity of regular defense cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military to smooth out their joint operations during contingencies. The fact that the policy idea was situated within the dominant security discourse made it extremely difficult for opponents to cast U.S.-Japan defense cooperation as completely unacceptable. Second, the leading government proponents—most notably the Director General of the Japan Defense Agency (JDA), Michita Sakata (1974–1976), and Prime Minister Takeo Miki (1974–1976), both of whom proposed to expand U.S.-Japan defense cooperation—held rhetorical authority, which allowed them to legitimate national security policies domestically more effectively than others. I would argue that their rhetorical authority derived not only from their national security-related positions in the government but also from their perceived centrist and dovish policy preferences. As centrist doves who are expected to pursue non-military policies, they were able to justify U.S.-Japan defense cooperation as a legitimate national security policy for Japan—rather than being seen to be driven by ulterior ideological commitment to increase Japan's military profile.

To be clear, I do not argue that legitimation is the primary cause behind U.S.-Japan defense cooperation. While legitimation can certainly affect actors' policy preferences, many Japanese leaders most likely came to support or, at least, accept expanding defense cooperation with the United States due to the decrease in their confidence in Washington to honor its security obligations to its allies and their concern about the Soviet military buildup in the Far East in the 1970s (Berger 1998, 130; Buck 1981; Hasegawa 2013; Hunter-Chester 2016, 174; Lind 2004; Smith 1999). This paper does not focus on what motivated individual leaders to support or accept U.S.-Japan defense cooperation. Rather, it focuses on how legitimation created a necessary domestic condition that enabled Japanese leaders to expand and sustain defense cooperation with the United States from the late 1970s onwards.

This paper is significant in both theoretical and empirical ways. Theoretically, it contributes to the emerging literature on legitimation in international security in two ways. First, by demonstrating the utility of the legitimation approach in analyzing domestic politics of national security in post-World War II Japan, the paper shows the approach's broader applicability to democratic regimes beyond Western—particularly U.S.—cases, where it has often been applied. Second, through a case study of the origins of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation, the paper shows when and how effective legitimation can enable political actors to circumvent normative structures to pursue their preferred policies that were previously seen as outside the bounds of acceptable behavior. Empirically, this paper's findings carry significant implications for understanding Japan's contemporary foreign policy since it has evolved within the framework of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation.

This paper consists of six sections. In the next section, the paper explains antimilitarist cultural norms that hindered cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military in the early decades of the Cold War, as well as the brief historical process behind the Japanese leaders' decision to expand U.S.-Japan defense cooperation. The third section lays out the research puzzle for this study. The subsequent section explains the legitimization approach to the politics of national security used in this study. In the penultimate section, the paper explains how and why the Japanese government was able to successfully legitimate U.S.-Japan defense cooperation to its domestic public. The final section concludes the paper.

2. The Culture of Antimilitarism and U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation

Even though the presence of the U.S. military has been the centerpiece of Japan's national security in the post-World War II era, there was little cooperation between the U.S. and Japanese militaries until the late 1970s due to Japanese domestic cultural constraints.¹ The culture of antimilitarism exerted influence on bilateral military cooperation in two main ways. First, the political elites and civilian officials at the JDA avoided substantial discussion on defense policy beyond the idea that the SDF and the "security framework" (*anzenhoshō taisei*) with the United States would provide deterrence for Japan, as the 1957 Basic Policy of National Defense articulated (Japan Cabinet Secretariat 1957). This stemmed from the fact that concerns about civil-military relations occupied much of the discussion on national security policy. Political elites and civilian JDA officials, as well as the general public, focused on ensuring tight civilian control over the SDF as they blamed the lack of it on the Imperial Japanese military for Japan's prewar expansionism (Berger 1998, 50–52, 105–106; Smith 2019, Chapter 1).

Second, Japanese leaders regarded cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military as off limits, fearing it would provoke a strong public backlash. The controversial nature of military cooperation is understandable, given that the mere presence of U.S. military in Japan itself was a highly contentious issue in the 1950s and 1960s, as seen in the protests against the expansion of runways for a U.S. Air Force base southwest of Tokyo between 1955 and 1957 ("Sunagawa struggle") and the 1960 revision of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty ("Anpo protests"). Furthermore, even the use of the term "alliance" (*dōmei*) to describe Japan's relationship with the United States was considered taboo until the early 1980s for its military connotations (Oros 2008, 64). The taboo against U.S.-Japan military cooperation became even clearer to Japanese leaders and civilian defense officials after the 1965 public controversy over a leaked military study (Berger 1998, 105–106; Hunter-Chester 2016, 174; Smith 1999, 77–78; 2019, 34). The leaked study, known as the Three Arrows Study (*Mitsuya Kenkyū*), was conducted by SDF officers in 1963, which concluded that the SDF and the U.S. military would need to cooperate in the event of a contingency on the Korean Peninsula. While the controversies surrounding the Three Arrows Study incident primarily revolved around the lack of civilian oversight over the SDF, politicians

1 To be clear, unlike other branches of the SDF, the Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) did maintain some level of regular contacts with the U.S. Navy, conducting regular joint military exercises. This is because the MSDF considered its core mission broadly as the protection of sea lanes and anti-submarine warfare and emphasized its cooperation with the U.S. Navy from its inception in 1954 (Sado 2017, 32-35, 56-57, 108-109, 114; see also Auer 1996, March; Patalano 2015, 98-99, 108). In contrast, Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force and Air Self-Defense Force defined their missions more narrowly as homeland defense from external aggression, limiting their willingness to cooperate with their U.S. counterparts from the beginning (Sado 2017, 55-57). Even though the U.S. and Japanese navies cooperated closely in the early years of the Cold War, "Joint training and exercises ...were often held 'over the horizon' in open waters, out of sight of domestic critics" (Smith 1999, 72).

from the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), the main opposition party at the time, repeatedly problematized ties between the U.S. and Japanese militaries in the Diet (Japan's parliament). While this did not prevent the SDF from conducting informal tactical and strategic discussions with the U.S. military, it was a traumatic experience for many Japanese political leaders and civilian defense officials, making the discussion of promoting U.S.-Japan military cooperation essentially taboo. As Sheila Smith writes: "The controversy generated by the *Mitsuya Kenkyū* [the Three Arrows Study] made any attempt to create mechanisms for military coordination anathema to Japan's political leadership, and the incident reinforced the government's tendency to divorce Japan's defense requirements from a discussion of the implementation of alliance cooperation and national policy debates" (Smith 1999, 78).

In spite of these cultural constraints, Japanese leaders decided to expand defense cooperation with the United States by the late 1970s because of two main factors: their fear of abandonment by the United States and their perception of the threat posed by the Soviet Union (Berger 1998, 130; Buck 1981; Hunter-Chester 2016, 174; Lind 2004; Mochizuki 1983/1984; Smith 1999). From the late 1960s, the Japanese political leaders began to question Washington's credibility in honoring its obligations to provide security to Japan. As the war in Vietnam dragged on, the United States faced budgetary constraints, and the anti-war sentiments within the country encouraged calls for retrenchment. President Richard Nixon famously pressured U.S. allies—particularly in East Asia—to take more responsibility for their own defenses (known as the Nixon Doctrine or the Guam Doctrine) and reduced the U.S. military footprint in South Korea and Japan in 1970 (Blankenship 2023, 77–78; Cha 1999, 62–63, 71). Even after Nixon's resignation, the U.S. inaction during the 1975 fall of Saigon and Jimmy Carter's pledge to withdraw U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula were seen as signs of U.S. disengagement.

The increased fear of abandonment by the United States among Japan's political leaders triggered national debates on defense from the late 1960s into the 1970s. While much of the initial debates concerned clarifying Japan's comprehensive military doctrine and the appropriate amount of Japan's peacetime military capabilities (Smith 2019, 37–42; see also Berger 1998, 97–98), some in the JDA began to question the lack of operational discussion between the SDF and the U.S. military and sought to clarify the division of labor and promote regular cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military for national defense in the early to mid-1970s. These officials—such as Ko Maruyama, a senior JDA official who became director of the Bureau of Defense Policy in 1974, and Michita Sakata, Director General of the JDA between 1974 and 1976—were concerned that even though the U.S. military was an essential component of Japan's territorial defense, there was no clear joint contingency strategy—such as how long the SDF would need to wait for U.S. military to arrive at the front lines and what its collective actions with its U.S. counterparts would look like (Maruyama 1996, 10–12; Sado 2017, 109–112).

Although many in the JDA initially rejected the idea of cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military, Director General Sakata used his position to promote defense cooperation in public (Maruyama 1996, 10–14; Natsume 1996, 10–11; Sado 2017, 111–112). In April 1975, Sakata seized an opportunity to respond to an allegation posed by a JSP politician in the Diet to propose deepening U.S.-Japan defense cooperation. The Socialist politician alleged that the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) had a secret agreement with the U.S. Navy for sea-lane defense. When pressing the government on this matter, the Socialists most likely kept the memory of the 1965 Three Arrows Study incident in mind, in which they successfully cornered the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). However, Sakata, while flatly rejecting the existence of the secret agreement, cleverly used the allegation to stress the importance of clarifying the respective roles of the Japanese and U.S. militaries during both peacetime and wartime as Japan relied on the U.S. for protection (Sakata 1975a). This statement was acknowledged

as a surprising turning point even by defense officials at the time (Maruyama 1996, 10; Natsume 1996, 12; *Yomiuri Shimbun* July 9, 1976). In the following August, Washington and Tokyo agreed to set up the Subcommittee for Defense Cooperation (SDC) to draft a document establishing the guidelines for defense cooperation between the U.S. and Japanese militaries, which was finalized in July 1976.

The increased Soviet military activities in the Far East from the mid-1970s also gave further political momentum for U.S.-Japan defense cooperation. The Soviet Union's Pacific Fleet had grown to be its largest naval fleet with ballistic missile submarines and increased amphibious capabilities (Lind 2004, 107). This was coupled with various naval exercises in waters surrounding Japan (Japan Defense Agency 1976, Chapter 1, Part 2). The Soviets also expanded the number of fighter jets and bombers in the Far East. The number of incidents of Soviet incursion of Japanese airspace and scrambles by Japan's Air Self-Defense Force against them significantly expanded (Cha 1999, 306 n.32; Japan Defense Agency 1976, Chapter 1, Part 2; 1977, Chapter 1, Part 2). Furthermore, in September 1976, a Soviet fighter jet pilot defected on a MiG-25 and landed in Hokkaido. The incident exposed the weakness of Japan's air defense system and heightened tensions between Tokyo and Moscow (see Japan Defense Agency 1977, Chapter 4). Against this backdrop of increased Soviet military activities, many leaders came to accept expanding defense cooperation between the U.S. and Japanese militaries (Berger 1998, 130; Buck 1981; Hunter-Chester 2016, 174; Lind 2004; Mochizuki 1987, 341; Mochizuki 1983/1984; Nishihara 1983/1984; Smith 1999). The Soviet threat also allowed the Japanese leaders to put down bureaucratic resistance to defense cooperation (Hasegawa 2013).

After the Japanese government approved the Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation produced by the SDC in November 1978, the U.S. and Japanese militaries began conducting a series of joint military studies and expanded the number of joint military exercises (Hunter-Chester 2016, 174–175; Smith 1999, 80–83). On the very day the Japanese government approved the 1978 Guidelines, Japan's Air Self-Defense Force conducted its first joint military exercise with the U.S. Air Force (Japan Defense Agency 1979). The Ground Self-Defense Force also began holding joint military exercises with its U.S. counterparts (the U.S. Army and Marine Corps) from the early 1980s for the first time since its inception (Japan Defense Agency 1982). The MSDF joined the biennial multilateral Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) military exercises in 1980 (Japan Defense Agency 1980). The MSDF also expanded its protection of sea lanes up to a thousand nautical miles from its shores in 1981, a move that complemented U.S. East Asia strategy by helping Washington channel its naval resources to the Persian Gulf (Cha 1999, 178; Smith 2019, 49). By the mid-1980s, the U.S. and Japanese militaries were emphasizing the importance of interoperability and joint operations to counter the common Soviet threat. The SDF became more focused on how it can contribute to U.S. regional strategy (Smith 2019, 47, 49). These were significant changes to Japan's military policy that were unthinkable in the early decades of the Cold War.

3. The Puzzle

What remains puzzling about the origin of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation is how the Japanese government was able to expand and sustain defense cooperation with the United States despite preexisting cultural constraints. It seems that the majority of the public accepted (at least, grudgingly) the legitimacy of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation for securing Japanese territorial integrity by the late 1970s. This is despite the fact that the Socialist politician who brought up the alleged secret agreement between the MSDF and the U.S. Navy in the Diet reacted to Sakata's clever use of the allegation to expand U.S.-Japan defense cooperation by stressing that cooperation between the two navies should not be permitted

under the Japanese constitution (Ueda 1975a, Nos. 384, 395; 1975b, No. 379). Indeed, major national newspapers published in the mid- to late 1970s, while often being critical, showed some understanding of the need for U.S.-Japan defense cooperation in their editorial pages, as explained in more detail below. Furthermore, neither the 1978 Guidelines nor joint military studies and exercises between the SDF and the U.S. military that resulted from the document provoked a major public outcry. How and why did the Japanese government succeed in legitimating U.S.-Japan defense cooperation to its domestic public? My central thesis in this paper is that the Japanese government's ability to successfully legitimate U.S.-Japan defense cooperation depended on the content of the policy idea it used for public justification in relation to the dominant national security discourse, and on who within the government presented it to the public.

Before I lay out my argument, let me first rebut two alternative arguments. The first is that the Japanese leaders' fear of abandonment by the United States and the Soviet military buildup also affected the public's willingness to accept military policies. As Izumikawa (2010) and Midford (2011, Chapter 4) argue, the fear of abandonment that the leaders felt was accompanied by a decrease in the public's fear of entrapment. As the fear that the SDF might get entangled in a U.S. conflict decreased, the public became more receptive to making changes in Japan's military policy. Additionally, the national debates on defense policy, spurred by Japanese leaders' fear of U.S. retrenchment from the late 1960s, had a way of mainstreaming the discussion on national security by the end of the 1970s (Mochizuki 1983/1984). The Japanese public's support for the U.S.-Japan alliance and the SDF increased (Berger 1998, 111–114). In this new domestic environment, the Japanese government was able to promote U.S.-Japan defense cooperation without heated public resistance.

The second argument is that the Japanese government was able to expand U.S.-Japan defense cooperation because it strictly limited the scope of military cooperation to the defense of Japanese territorial integrity. While the SDF officers were willing to cooperate with the U.S. military for regional contingencies (since they believed a regional conflict was a much more realistic scenario than the direct invasion of Japan), many political elites and civilian bureaucrats in the JDA and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejected it out of concern that this would raise legal issues surrounding the Japan's right of collective self-defense, or the ability to fight for the United States or other friendly states even if Japan was not directly attacked, which Article 9 of the Japanese constitution prohibited (*Asahi Shimbun* 1996, September 2; see also Natsume 1996, 15–16; Nishihiro 1995, 14–15). The limited scope of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation allowed the Japanese government to mask the changes that took place by emphasizing the continuity in Japan's military policy. This fits the familiar pattern of salami slicing tactics, where the Japanese government implements small changes to its security policy and presents them to the public as "*kiseijijitsu*" or *fait accompli*, leaving no room for public dissent (Berger 1998, 132).

Neither of these arguments is satisfactory. To be fair, it is true that the public became more accepting of the SDF and the U.S.-Japan alliance by the late 1970s. It is also true that by avoiding the discussions on regional contingencies, the government was able to avoid legal issues surrounding the right of collective self-defense, which, without a doubt, helped it avoid public controversy. However, neither argument tells us how U.S.-Japan defense cooperation was successfully legitimated to the public. In other words, the causal process underlying why and how the Japanese public came to accept defense cooperation between the U.S. and Japanese militaries as a legitimate national security policy remains unclear. Because legitimacy is central to policy endurance, especially for policies that cannot be implemented covertly (Goddard and Krebs 2015), had the Japanese government failed to legitimate U.S.-Japan military cooperation to the domestic public, it would not have been able to expand and sustain defense cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military.

To account for why and how a certain policy becomes accepted as legitimate without risking tautology—we know that a policy becomes successfully legitimated when the public accepts it—requires a rigorous theoretical framework. In the next section, I will explain the legitimation approach to analyze the role of and causal mechanism behind legitimation in the politics of national security used in this paper.

4. Legitimation and the Politics of National Security

Legitimation is the act of justifying policies in public in order to enhance their perceived legitimacy among the targeted audiences (Goddard 2018, 2020, 2021; Goddard and Krebs 2015; Jackson 2006, 2013; Krebs 2015; see also Stein 2000). It is a natural occurrence in any social environment where human interactions are shaped by a common set of norms and values, including interactions among sovereign states. In domestic politics, politicians almost always legitimate their preferred policies to the public, seeking to garner support or, at least, acceptance. Because legitimacy is central to a policy's survival, the failure to legitimate one's policies can make it more challenging—if not impossible—to mobilize the necessary resources.²

The legitimation approach to the politics of national security emphasizes the centrality of domestic political debates in affecting the state's behavior (Goddard 2021; Goddard and Krebs 2015; Jackson 2013; Krebs 2015, 2018). Unlike the rationalist conceptualization of politics, the legitimation approach holds that political outcomes are not always reduced to the material and institutional power of key actors, and that talk is not “cheap.” Publicly shared ideas used for legitimation can constrain even the most powerful actors, depending on the extent to which the public accepts them. Unlike traditional constructivism, the legitimation approach embraces a relational approach to studying the social environment and emphasizes how actors' social relations and transactions with one another make or unmake social structures (Jackson 2013; see also Jackson and Nexon 1999).

The legitimation approach emphasizes actor agency (Goddard 2018, 14; Jackson 2013, 154–157; Krebs 2015, 32). It is based on the premise that what political actors say and how they express their ideas to legitimate their preferred policies can affect the degree to which they can persuade, or even coerce, their targeted audiences into accepting their preferred policy positions (on rhetorical coercion, see Krebs and Jackson 2007; Krebs and Lobasz 2007). Political actors are conceptualized as both social and strategic in the pursuit of their interests (Goddard 2018, 14; 2021, 323; Goddard and Krebs 2015, 15–16; Krebs 2015, 32). They are regarded as social because they are familiar with collective norms that structure their interactions with others and what the public considers legitimate. However, they are also considered strategic in that they are not slaves to these norms and can use them strategically to justify their preferred policies. The ultimate aim of political actors is assumed as seeking to dominate the debate, rather than seeking to reach a consensus, as many conventional constructivists believe (Goddard 2018, 14; Goddard and Krebs 2015, 17; on a conventional constructivist account of politics, see Risse 2000).

The main ideas used for legitimation are policy ideas. These ideas can emphasize policy instrumentality, such as how a particular policy can achieve certain political goals in the most cost-effective manner, or normative dimensions, such as how pursuing a particular policy aligns with certain normative ideals or principles (see Krebs 2015, 37). Political actors use these policy ideas to legitimate

2 To be clear, not all policies require legitimation. In some cases, particularly when the executive holds significant power over foreign and security policies, the state may resort to covert actions out of the public view. In other cases, policies may endure without much legitimation effort by the government because they are part of a longstanding institutional tradition or relatively less “visible” to the public (Goddard and Krebs 2015).

why their preferred national security policies are in the national interest.

However, the public seldom judges policy ideas objectively on their own terms as expected by the familiar concept of the “marketplace of ideas.” Some ideas are seen as more credible and reasonable than others. Some ideas are simply ignored as completely unacceptable. The perceived viability of certain ideas can differ depending on who has expressed them. To unpack these dynamics, the legitimization approach emphasizes two factors.

The first is the *discursive context*—whether or not there is a dominant national security discourse that most of the public subscribes to, and if there is, whether or not political actors situate their legitimating policy ideas in it (Goddard 2021, 331–332; Krebs 2015, 32–36). National security discourses set ontological world views that underpin the core elements of national security for the state. They clarify philosophical understanding of how the world works—such as what deterrence is and how it operates, and whether or not military might is necessary for security. Oftentimes, they also clarify fundamental strategic aspects of the state’s foreign and security policies—such as the sources and nature of the threat the state faces, whether and why the state should adopt an offensive or defensive military doctrine, and whether and why it should ally with another state for security. When a security discourse becomes dominant—i.e., it is subscribed to by the majority of the elite and the public—it sets what the majority considers as commonsensical “facts” about national security (Krebs 2015). From the legitimization perspective, dominant discourses are relatively stable as they are reproduced on a daily basis by shaping how elites and the public perceive, understand, and describe the world (see Krebs 2015, 35).³

The existence of a dominant national security discourse is essential for effective legitimization using policy ideas. Any policy idea used to legitimate national security policy is linked to a security discourse, whether it is explicitly stated or not (see Krebs 2021, 674–675). In other words, policy ideas—whether they are instrumental or normative in nature—are not comprehensible without considering the ontological world views that national security discourses provide (Goldstein and Keohane 1993, 8–11). One cannot assess the viability of instrumental policy ideas (how a particular policy achieves a certain political goal) without identifying a stable and predictable environment in which the policy is expected to operate. For instance, if one seeks to legitimate a particular policy on the grounds of increasing deterrence, it is imperative that the targeted audience accepts that military power is necessary for security and that increasing defense capabilities help deter a potential aggressor from attacking the state. Likewise, one cannot understand the viability of normative policy ideas (how the policy is aligned with a certain norm) without identifying which norms and principles are widely accepted as legitimate and why following them is in the state’s interests.

The fact that one cannot assess the viability of policy ideas without understanding the national security discourses underlying them suggests that any political actor seeking to legitimate their preferred policies must use policy ideas that are situated within dominant security discourses that most of their main targeted audiences—i.e., their respective publics—subscribe to. If there is no single dominant security discourse, they must channel their efforts into building a common world view by telling stories

3 The very act of legitimization by referring to a dominant national security discourse reproduces the discourse as well. Some of the legitimating ideas situated within the dominant discourse may become institutionalized into laws, bureaucratic standard operating procedures, and formal and informal government practices, thereby helping reproduce the dominant discourse. The only viable way for dominant security discourses to collapse and be replaced is through the occurrence of an event that upends how many of the elite and the public see the world. Such an event creates an opportunity for political actors to challenge the dominant discourse and present alternatives without the risk of them being seen as outside the bounds of acceptable behavior (see Krebs 2015, 35).

of how the world works (Krebs 2015, 36–48). When policy ideas are situated within dominant national security discourses, they are likely to be taken seriously as legitimate, rather than shunted aside as outside the bounds of acceptable behavior.

The second factor that affects the credibility of policy ideas used for legitimation is political actors' *rhetorical authority* or legitimacy to speak of national security policy (Goddard 2021, 330–331; Goddard and Krebs 2015, 27; Krebs 2015, 48–52). When speakers hold rhetorical authority, their policy ideas used for legitimation are taken more seriously and considered more credible than those spoken by actors without such authority. To be clear, rhetorical authority does not derive from the legal institutional positions actors possess (though authoritative speakers can include institutionally powerful actors such as presidents and prime ministers). Rather, it derives from political actors' social relations. That is to say, authority is not something that actors possess but is something conferred by their audiences (mainly their respective publics). While this means that those who are seen as authoritative speakers can differ depending on the social context (i.e., spatially, among different countries, or even temporally, within the same country), individuals—such as executive leaders and politicians who hold (or have held) foreign policy related positions, (former) senior officials from foreign policy and defense bureaucracies, and public intellectuals who research on national security—are generally seen as authoritative speakers on national security in most democratic countries.

Additionally, even among these actors, their individual attributes—such as their prior experience, ideological beliefs, and policy positions—can affect the degree to which the public confers rhetorical authority on them. For instance, if the given issue is politically polarized, partisan elites tend to have more authority conferred on them by party-affiliated voters than independent or opposition party-affiliated experts (Guisinger and Saunders 2017; see also Berinsky 2009; Zaller 1992). Studies show that when state leaders seek to pursue cooperative policies with a perceived aggressor, those with hawkish policy positions are generally seen as more competent than dovish ones, allowing them to legitimate policies more effectively than doves (Krebs, Saunders, and Schultz 2018; Mattes and Weeks 2018). Theoretically speaking, the reverse of the hawk's advantage is also possible: the idea that dovish leaders can be seen as more credible than hawks when they “play against their type”—that is, pursue hawkish policies that run counter to the public expectations (Mattes and Weeks 2018, 64). Furthermore, in the presence of a dominant discourse of national security, political actors who publicly defy the discourse tend to lack rhetorical authority to speak of national security and are often rudely ignored or criticized as outside the bounds of acceptable behavior (Krebs 2015, 33, 47).

The legitimation approach's emphasis on rhetorical authority means that even if a political actor grounds their legitimating policy idea in a dominant national security discourse, the degree to which the public pays attention to it and considers it as viable depends on the extent to which the actor is perceived as an authoritative speaker on national security. In other words, even the same idea can be perceived and treated differently depending on who has expressed it.

In sum, legitimation is most likely to succeed when the policy ideas used to justify a particular policy are situated within a dominant discourse of national security and spoken by actors recognized as having the authority to speak on national security.

To be clear, the legitimation approach does not tell us about political actors' motives for pursuing or supporting certain policies. While legitimation can certainly affect the degree of elite support for or acceptance of a particular policy, it is important to recognize that political actors are often driven by their own material or ideological interests. Implementing new policies usually requires political actors' commitments and efforts to persevere in the face of bureaucratic, institutional, and public opposition.

Without expected benefits, few actors would put themselves in the position to pursue a new policy. Moreover, while legitimation is central to coalition building, political actors often use instruments that are material and institutional in nature to build and maintain elite policy coalitions—such as inducement by offering side payments, coercion by threatening punishment, and manipulation of information (e.g., threat inflation by the executive)—which can mislead others into accepting the policy or undermine their ability to criticize it (Krebs 2018, 266–267; Saunders 2015). What the legitimation approach tells us is how and why certain policy ideas used for legitimation are seen as more viable and credible than others and become accepted as legitimate by the public.

5. Legitimizing U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation

What is puzzling about the origin of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation is how the Japanese government was able to expand defense cooperation with the United States from the late 1970s, despite preexisting cultural constraints. As mentioned above, a statement made by then-JDA Director General Michita Sakata during a Diet session in 1975 created a political momentum to expand U.S.-Japan defense cooperation. Sakata (1975a) stated that because the SDF and the U.S. military would need to work together during a contingency, the two militaries should cooperate on a daily basis to improve their ability to operate jointly. In another instance, Sakata (1975b, No. 360) explained to an opposition party politician why the Japanese government decided to establish the SDC to draft the Guidelines for Defense Cooperation in the summer of 1975, by problematizing the absence of a “forum for discussion” (*hanashiau ba*) regarding “operational cooperation” (*sakusen kyōryoku*) between the U.S. and Japanese militaries. He then asked: “Shouldn’t this be properly corrected?” What Sakata essentially did to legitimate U.S.-Japan defense cooperation was to portray it as not only necessary for Japan’s national security but also a natural and commonsensical security policy for Japan.

This line of legitimation became the main strategy the Japanese government used to justify defense cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military.⁴ Defense white papers from 1976 to 1978 problematized the lack of consultation on defense cooperation between the two militaries to justify establishing the SDC to draft up the Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation (Japan Defense Agency 1976, 1977, 1978). The 1978 Guidelines justified cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military as necessary “[i]n order to be able to take coordinated joint action smoothly in the event of an armed attack against Japan” (Japan Ministry of Defense 1978). The same logic was also emphasized in the first defense white paper published after the government approval of the Guidelines (Japan Defense Agency 1979).

As mentioned above, it seems that the majority of the Japanese public came to accept this logic as legitimate. There were few public protests and controversies surrounding U.S.-Japan defense cooperation. Moreover, as explained below, most editorial coverages of major national newspapers on

4 To be clear, there were other ways the Japanese government officially legitimated U.S.-Japan defense cooperation. For instance, the 1979 defense white paper mentions the need for Japan to maintain “a friendly and cooperative relationship” (*yūkō kyōryoku kankei*) with the United States because it is “indispensable for the development and prosperity of our nation and for a stable international political structure in the Asia-Pacific region” (Japan Defense Agency 1979, Part 3, Chapter 3). That said, I would argue that the instrumental policy idea emphasizing the need to maintain regular cooperation between the U.S. and Japanese militaries to facilitate their joint operations during contingencies is the most crucial and fundamental one in constituting the legitimacy of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation.

this issue during the mid- to late 1970s did not explicitly consider cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military for defending Japan as illegitimate. Why and how was the Japanese government able to successfully legitimate U.S.-Japan defense cooperation as a national security policy to the public?

Drawing on the legitimization approach explained above, I argue that the Japanese government was able to successfully legitimate defense cooperation with the United States to its domestic public for two interrelated reasons. The first is the fact that the Japanese government's main legitimating policy idea was situated within the dominant national security discourse that the majority of its domestic public subscribed to during the 1970s. Contrary to popular belief, the majority of the post-World War II Japanese public was not really pacifist. Even in the early postwar years, many of the public accepted the realist worldview that the world can be a dangerous place and military power is necessary to deter others from aggression (Midford 2011). The number of those who accepted this view expanded during the 1970s and the early 1980s as a result of national debates on defense, spurred by the Nixon Doctrine and the Soviet military buildup in the Far East (see Berger 1998, 111–114; Mochizuki 1983/1984). Opinion polls show that in 1972, 45 percent accepted the need for some level of military power for national security, while 25 percent advocated for an unarmed pacifist position (Japan Cabinet Office 1972). The number supporting the necessity of military power increased to 58 percent by 1975, while those who supported the pacifist position dropped by 5 percent (Japan Cabinet Office 1975). Furthermore, opinion polls also show that the majority of the public accepted the necessity of both the SDF and the U.S.-Japan alliance for defending Japan (see Table 1).⁵ While much of the public support for the alliance and the SDF option most likely derived from the fear of uncertainty caused by radical policy change, it clearly indicates that the public preferred this option over other viable alternatives. The same opinion polls also indicate that the public acceptance of the SDF and the U.S.-Japan alliance as a means of deterrence grew from the late 1970s to the early 1980s. The fact that the majority of the public subscribed to the realist worldview and accepted the existence of the SDF and the U.S.-Japan alliance as a means of ensuring Japan's survival indicates that there was a dominant national security discourse in the 1970s, and the degree of its dominance increased by the early 1980s.

Table 1. The Japanese public's preferences for defense policy

Year	Terminate U.S.-Japan Alliance and Strengthen Defense	U.S.-Japan Alliance and SDF	Terminate U.S.-Japan Alliance and Abolish or Decrease SDF	Others	Undecided
1972	10.8%	40.7%	15.5%	1.1%	31.9%
1975	8.6%	54.3%	9.5%	0.6%	27.0%
1978	8.2%	61.1%	5.0%	0.8%	24.9%
1981	6.1%	64.6%	7.6%	0.9%	20.8%
1984	5.0%	69.2%	6.8%	1.1%	17.9%

Note. The survey respondents were asked, "What measures should be taken to safeguard Japan's security?"

Source. Japan's Cabinet Office. 1972-1984. *Jieitai, Bōei Mondai ni Kansuru Yoron Chōsa* [Public Opinion Poll on the Self-Defense Forces and Defense Issues]. These opinion polls are available online at: <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp> (accessed October 3, 2025).

The government's legitimating policy idea was clearly situated within this dominant national

5 Note that the term "U.S.-Japan Security Framework" (*Nichibei Anpo Taisei*) was used instead of "U.S.-Japan alliance" (*Nichibei Dōmei*) in the opinion polls.

security discourse. The idea that the SDF needs to expand cooperation with the U.S. military to smooth out joint operations during contingencies is only understandable when one recognizes the possibility of armed invasion and the necessity of the military power of both the SDF and the U.S. military for Japan's survival. This legitimating policy idea's connection to the dominant security discourse suggests that it was challenging for one to reject U.S.-Japan defense cooperation as a taboo if they accepted, as the majority of the Japanese public did, the existence of both the SDF and the U.S.-Japan alliance for Japan's national security.

This does not mean opposing U.S.-Japan defense cooperation was not possible or that it was a natural outcome, however. It was possible to oppose U.S.-Japan defense cooperation on the grounds that it risked Japan's entrapment into a U.S. conflict or further loss of Japan's autonomy or that it was unnecessary because the U.S. forces stationed in Japan would provide enough deterrence. Indeed, some senior defense officials—including Takuya Kubo, a senior civilian official who played a central role in creating the 1976 National Defense Program Outline, which laid out post-World War II Japan's first comprehensive military doctrine—were opposed to U.S.-Japan defense cooperation for these reasons (Sado 2017, 112, 115–116). My point is that although one could have opposed the utility of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation, it was difficult to reject it as completely unacceptable, as many of the key opponents would most likely have hoped.

A close reading of the editorial pages of major national dailies that reflect the dominant views on national security (i.e., accepting the existence of the SDF and the U.S.-Japan alliance for deterrence) suggests this dynamic. As the Japanese government began to push for closer cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military in 1975—while emphasizing the problems with U.S.-Japan defense cooperation and the need for Japan to set clear constraints on it—the *Yomiuri Shimbun* (June 6, 1975) did not reject having talks on defense cooperation with the United States in its editorial page. While it was not an editorial piece, an investigatory article by the left-leaning *Mainichi Shimbun* (July 16, 1975) on U.S.-Japan defense cooperation showed an understanding of the need to clarify the division of labor between the SDF and the U.S. military for the defense of Japan. When the SDC was established in 1976 to draft the Guidelines for Defense Cooperation, neither *Asahi Shimbun* nor *Yomiuri Shimbun* denied the importance of conducting bilateral discussions on defense cooperation to prepare for a potential contingency (*Asahi Shimbun* 1976, July 10; *Yomiuri Shimbun* July 10, 1976). This does not mean that the two newspapers supported expanding defense cooperation with the United States. On the contrary, both emphasized the potential problems of promoting U.S.-Japan defense cooperation, most notably the risks of the SDF becoming entrapped in U.S. geopolitical strategy. Nevertheless, they did not rule out U.S.-Japan defense cooperation as an illegitimate policy.

A similar dynamic is observable when the 1978 Guidelines were being finalized. While being highly critical of and emphasizing the need for clear constraints on expanding cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military, *Yomiuri Shimbun*'s (November 29, 1978) editorial page showed some understanding of the instrumental utility of defense cooperation with the United States for “further strengthening the deterrent power (*yokushi ryoku*) of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.” In a similar manner, while emphasizing the need for clear constraints, the editorial page of *Mainichi Shimbun* (November 28, 1978) welcomed concluding the Guidelines for “building a foundation for realistic cooperative relations (*genjitsu-teki na kyōryoku kankei*)” between the SDF and the U.S. military to prepare for a potential contingency. While *Asahi Shimbun*'s (November 29, 1978) editorial page struck the most critical tone, arguing for reconsidering the Guidelines, it did not necessarily cast U.S.-Japan defense cooperation as outside the bounds of acceptable behavior. Instead, it focused on the Guidelines

themselves—particularly criticizing the Japanese government for “prioritizing *only* the military aspect” (*gunji-men dake o yūsen*) of U.S.-Japan relations—implying that if the government also emphasized the importance of political and economic dimensions of diplomacy, the editorial piece would be more receptive (*Asahi Shimbun*, November 29, 1978, my emphasis).

In fact, one can even observe this dynamic during the 1965 Three Arrows Study incident that reinforced the taboo on U.S.-Japan defense cooperation among the Japanese elite. Interestingly, the two newspapers—while strongly criticizing the leaked military study for the lack of civilian control—showed an understanding of the reasons for conducting a military study to prepare for a contingency in their editorial pages (*Asahi Shimbun*, February 13, 1965; *Yomiuri Shimbun*, February 13, 1965). *Asahi Shimbun*’s (February 13, 1965) editorial piece, in particular, explicitly acknowledged the fact that Japan ensures security through the SDF and “joint defense” (*kyōdō no bōei*) with the United States and stated that it was “justifiable (*yamu o enai*) to draw up national defense plans by assuming potential contingencies.”⁶

The second reason why the Japanese government succeeded in legitimating U.S.-Japan defense cooperation was that key government proponents—most notably Sakata and Prime Minister Takeo Miki (1974–1976), who proposed to expand defense cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military in 1975—held rhetorical authority, or legitimacy to speak of national security.⁷ As mentioned above, the words of actors with rhetorical authority carry more credibility than those spoken by individuals without it. Because of their rhetorical authority, legitimating words spoken by Sakata and Miki were most likely seen as viable by the majority of the public, allowing them to effectively advance U.S.-Japan defense cooperation.⁸

I would argue that the rhetorical authority of Sakata and Miki derived not only from the fact that they both occupied national security-related positions in the government, but also from their perceived centrist and dovish policy preferences. The fact that they were seen as centrists means that they were not perceived as nationalists, seeking to revive prewar Japan. Izumikawa (2010, 148) argues that one of the reasons why Sakata and Miki succeeded in moving the discussion of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation forward was that they were free of the nationalistic image that plagued nationalist leaders such as Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi (1957–1960)—whose attempt to revise the security treaty with the United States in 1960 invited massive public protests that collapsed his government. Moreover, it

6 The fact that centrists showed understanding for the Three Arrows Study implies that if Japanese leaders recognized and legitimated the importance of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation in 1965, it is possible that they could have succeeded in expanding defense cooperation.

7 While Miki was not an ardent supporter of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation himself, I consider him as one of the key proponents because it was his cabinet that pushed it forward as the government’s policy. To this end, I would also consider many of the subsequent Japanese leaders who continued the efforts to expand the U.S.-Japan defense cooperation initiated by Sakata and Miki—such as Prime Ministers Takeo Fukuda (1976–1978), who approved the Guidelines in 1978, and Masayoshi Ōhira (1978–1980) and Zenkō Suzuki (1980–1982), both of whom maintained and implemented the Guidelines—as also holding rhetorical authority as recognized centrist doves.

8 In contrast, I would argue that the main opponents of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation—most notably JSP politicians—lacked the rhetorical authority to counter the government’s legitimation strategy effectively. By advocating “unarmed neutrality” (the abrogation of the U.S.-Japan alliance and the disbandment of the SDF), they publicly challenged and promoted an alternative to the dominant national security discourse. As the legitimation approach explains, by harboring and promoting an alternative national security discourse in the face of a dominant one, JSP politicians were most likely seen by the majority of the public as illegitimate speakers on national security whose words lacked credibility.

is also arguable that their perceived dovish preferences allowed them to legitimate U.S.-Japan defense cooperation effectively. Both leaders were known to have been strong advocates for constraining Japan's military power and establishing effective civilian control over the SDF.⁹ As such, Sakata and Miki were expected to pursue non-military policies. Yet, by "playing against their type" and endorsing defense cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military, they could, at least theoretically speaking, justify defense cooperation as a necessary national security policy more effectively than hawks could have.

To be clear, we cannot clarify the extent to which Sakata's and Miki's perceived centrist political views or dovish policy preferences mattered in constituting their rhetorical authority. It is possible for one to be a hawk without being seen as a nationalist. Arguably, only survey experiments can provide reliable evidence to clarify the relative causal importance of one's perceived nationalism and hawkishness in shaping the extent to which the public confers rhetorical authority on them (see Mattes and Weeks 2018). I am not familiar with any such experiment conducted on this matter in Japan during the Cold War. That said, this point matters little for our purpose here. Empirically speaking, most postwar Japanese leaders perceived as hawkish in their policy preferences were also regarded as nationalists. What matters to us theoretically is that they were not seen to be pursuing U.S.-Japan defense cooperation as an end in itself. As centrist doves, Sakata's and Miki's efforts to expand U.S.-Japan defense cooperation were not seen as driven by an ulterior motive to expand Japan's military profile. The words they used to legitimate defense cooperation were most likely taken seriously and considered credible by the public. Counterfactually, if Sakata and Miki had been widely recognized as staunch hawkish nationalists, all things being equal, the public would have most likely been concerned about their true intentions (*honne*) and more suspicious of the utility of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation.

Taken together, the fact that the Japanese government's legitimating policy idea of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation was situated within the contemporary dominant discourse of national security and that it was spoken by government actors with the rhetorical authority to speak on national security enabled the Japanese government to successfully legitimate U.S.-Japan defense cooperation despite preexisting cultural constraints. These two factors arguably made it difficult for the majority of the public to express dissent on the fundamental importance of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation for Japan's national security. It should be noted that while cooperation between the U.S. and Japanese militaries for the defense of Japan was successfully legitimated on a very fundamental level, cultural norms of antimilitarism have continued to constrain—arguably to this day—the nature and degree of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation, particularly in the form of the public fear of entrapment and pacifist ideals (Izumikawa 2010). Indeed, the editorial opinions of major newspapers in the mid- to late 1970s were mostly critical of the expansion of cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military. Nevertheless, an effective legitimation enabled the Japanese government to pursue and sustain a certain degree of defense cooperation with the United States.

To be clear, I am *not* arguing that legitimation caused U.S.-Japan defense cooperation. Sakata's and Miki's legitimation of defense cooperation, without a doubt, affected the degree to which other elites and members of the public came to support or, at least, accept expanding cooperation between the U.S. and Japanese militaries. That said, the main reasons why many Japanese leaders came to support U.S.-Japan defense cooperation most likely lay with their fear of abandonment and perception of threat posed

9 For instance, the Miki cabinet placed the limit to defense spending to 1 percent of Japan's Gross National Product in 1976. Furthermore, its 1976 National Defense Program Outline explicitly recognized that Japan had already acquired necessary amount of defensive military power, and that further quantitative increase of military power is no longer necessary (Japan Cabinet Office 1976).

by the Soviet Union during the 1970s (Berger 1998, 130; Buck 1981; Hunter-Chester 2016, 174; Lind 2004; Mochizuki 1983/1984; Smith 1999). In other words, I would argue that without those factors, defense cooperation would not have garnered enough political support from the elite. Legitimation, however, is an essential factor when accounting for the origin of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation, as it enabled the Japanese government to expand and sustain cooperation between the SDF and the U.S. military from the late 1970s onwards by making it a legitimate—and potentially even commonsense—national security policy for the Japanese public.

6. Conclusion

This paper has emphasized that one cannot fully account for the origins of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation without explaining how and why the Japanese government was able to expand military cooperation with the United States in the face of preexisting domestic cultural constraints. Drawing on a legitimation approach, this paper has argued that the Japanese government was able to successfully legitimate U.S.-Japan defense cooperation as a national security policy for defending Japanese territorial integrity to its domestic public by the late 1970s for two interrelated reasons. First, the Japanese government employed a legitimating policy idea that was situated within the dominant national security discourse that the majority of the public subscribed to, making it difficult for many to reject U.S.-Japan defense cooperation as completely unacceptable. Second, key government proponents of expanding defense cooperation with the United States held rhetorical authority, or legitimacy to speak on national security policy, because they were widely seen as national leaders with centrist and dovish policy preferences. Their rhetorical authority made their legitimating ideas seem credible to the public.

By analyzing Japan's domestic political debates on U.S.-Japan defense cooperation, this paper has demonstrated the broader applicability of the legitimation approach beyond the domestic politics of Western democratic regimes. In addition, the paper has also shown how effective legitimation—i.e., the situatedness of legitimating policy ideas within a dominant national security discourse and rhetorical authority of key proponents—can enable political actors to circumvent normative structures to pursue and sustain policies that were previously seen as illegitimate. However, further comparative research is desired to clarify the relative causal importance of the situatedness of policy ideas within dominant discourses and the rhetorical authority of key speakers in affecting the degree of legitimation and to deepen our understanding of the conditions that make actors' legitimation effective in the face of normative structures. To this end, Japan offers ample case studies as its national security policy—including its defense cooperation with the United States—has evolved over the decades by enacting policies that were previously considered outside the bounds of acceptable behavior. Considering the central role legitimation played in expanding U.S.-Japan military cooperation, as this paper has shown, the legitimation approach can shed new and important light on the overall development of postwar Japanese national security policy.

Furthermore, this study carries implications for understanding contemporary Japanese politics related to national security. The dominant national security discourse that this paper identified in the 1970s seems to have persisted to this day, as the majority of the public continues to accept the need for the military power of the SDF and the U.S.-Japan alliance for ensuring Japan's national security. Furthermore, centrist doves appear to have had an edge over hawkish leaders in pursuing and legitimating hawkish national security policies even in recent years. During the brief period when the center-left Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) formed the government from 2009 to 2012, DPJ prime

ministers were able to implement significant changes to Japan's military policy—most notably shifting Japan's military resources southward to counter China, improving the SDF's ability to deal with grey-zone scenarios, loosening constraints on arms export and joint arms production, and making strategic use of foreign aid in the military-related sectors as outlined in the 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines (Japan Ministry of Defense 2010)—without provoking public outcry (see also Oros 2017, Chapter 4). In the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, another recognized centrist dove, was able to make significant changes—including a massive hike in defense spending and the acquisition of offensive capability to strike enemy bases (“counterstrike capabilities”)—without facing much public opposition (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022).

Future research should explore how the presence of a dominant security discourse and the rhetorical authority of key government leaders affected the Japanese government's ability to legitimate its recent national security policies. For the analysis of recent policies, survey experiments can be used to assess the extent to which centrist doves actually have an advantage in advancing and legitimating hawkish policies, and if they do, the degree to which the advantage derives from their perceived nationalist or hawkish policy preferences. These findings would carry significance for understanding the politics of national security in Japan and beyond.

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