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Japan in 2020

COVID-19 and the End of the Abe Era

ABSTRACT

Japan's leaders began 2020 with grand ambitions to make it a historic year. Tokyo was set to welcome the world for the Summer Olympics, Japan's first since 1964, and Abe Shinzō, the powerful prime minister, planned to realize his party's 65-year-old dream: revising Japan's never-amended, US-drafted 1947 constitution. By spring, however, it was clear that COVID-19 had other plans. Despite public health outcomes better than in any other G7 member, daily life was severely disrupted, and the domestic political and economic fallout for Japan was significant. By late summer, circumstances were improving, but both Abe's popularity and his personal health had suffered. He resigned in September, ending the longest prime-ministership in Japanese history. Though COVID-19 and the end of the Abe Era were the major storylines of Japan in 2020, a subplot was, paradoxically, remarkable continuity in national politics and foreign affairs.

KEYWORDS: Japan, COVID-19, politics, economics, Abe

JAPAN'S LEADERS BEGAN 2020 full of hope and expectation, and with lofty ambitions. As then-Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (2020a) proclaimed at his New Year's press conference, "Together with the Japanese people, I will make this historic year ... a year for carving out a new era for Japan." Indeed, 2020 was not just any year. Perhaps more than any other in recent memory, the Japanese public (and Abe himself) had long anticipated that 2020 would be one for the history books. In 2013, Japan had been awarded

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the 2020 Summer Olympics and Paralympics. The following January, Abe predicted in a major policy speech that in 2020 Japan would “be newly reborn,” just as, he argued, it had been in 1964, the last time Tokyo hosted a Summer Olympics, just 19 years after Japan’s defeat in World War II (*Asahi Shimbun* 2014). In 2017, not only was it announced that 2020 would also be the first full year of Japan’s new Reiwa imperial era, but also Abe began repeatedly pledging that he would make it the year that Japan finally revised its (never-amended) US-drafted 1947 constitution—a deeply held ambition central to Abe’s personal and political legacy and a key pillar of the 1955 founding charter of his conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

But COVID-19 had other plans for Japan in 2020. Though Abe entered the record books as Japan’s longest continually serving prime minister, a historic feat, other key ambitions were dashed. By March, the Olympics had been postponed. By summer, the pandemic had wiped out many of the hard-won gains since 2012 of Abe’s signature economic policies (“Abenomics”). And on August 28, just four days after Abe’s second stint as prime minister set the record for leadership continuity, he abruptly announced his intent to resign. He stepped down in September, ending his seven-year, nine-month tenure without achieving his life-long political ambition of constitutional revision. In short, COVID-19 was the dominant storyline of Japan in 2020, affecting almost all others in ways large and small, including the end of the Abe Era and its policy legacy.

COVID-19 AND JAPAN

Abe and Japan’s government were widely criticized domestically for a slow and ineffective response to the novel coronavirus in early 2020. Yet many months later it was clear that in terms of public health outcomes, Japan overall handled the pandemic far better than other G7 members, though not as well as some others in its region (e.g., fellow Asian democracies South Korea and Taiwan). The contrast between Japan’s performance and the US’s was particularly striking: by the end of the year, Japan’s cumulative per capita confirmed case and death counts were roughly 1% of the corresponding US figures.¹

1. As of January 2, 2021, Japan’s cumulative absolute death and case counts (roughly 3,500 and 238,000, respectively) were the G7’s lowest despite Japan’s having the second-largest population. Compare the US, 340,000 and 19.6 million; UK, 74,000 and 2.5 million; Italy, 74,000 and 2.1 million; France, 64,000 and 2.6 million; Germany, 34,000 and 1.7 million; and Canada, 15,000 and 573,000 (World Health Organization, n.d.)

Nevertheless, COVID-19 had a hugely disruptive impact on Japan. Daily life was severely affected, with residents asked to stay home and thousands of schools and businesses closed for extended periods. Major sporting and cultural events were cancelled, postponed, or shifted online. During the April–June period, Japan’s GDP collapsed at an annualized rate of 28%, the worst quarterly decline on record. This in turn further tarnished the legacy of Abenomics, especially as it affected GDP growth and record tax revenues, both of which Abe had touted as major accomplishments in his January speech to the Diet. COVID-19 also caused job losses, reduced pay and work hours, and widespread disruptions for students and parents of school-age children. These consequences, in turn, hampered progress on other government priorities, such as tackling Japan’s massive public debt, increasing women’s workforce participation, and facilitating better work–life balance to encourage more young couples to have children.

During the first half of the year, despite Japan’s relative success in keeping the pandemic under control and passing what ultimately became two major stimulus packages (totaling 234 trillion yen, or US\$ 2.2 trillion, over 40% of Japan’s GDP), the Japanese public rendered a harsh judgment on the government’s response. By April, 64% of the public expressed disapproval. Some critics judged Abe’s response to be “timid and sluggish,” and suggested that “his slowness and indecision seems due to his reluctance to prioritise COVID-19 over other policy priorities—first the Olympics and now business and the economy” (George Mulgan 2020). For a premier who had cultivated a reputation as a strong, decisive leader and manager of crises, the political fallout was significant. By late May, support for the Cabinet had plunged to 29%, its lowest level since Abe’s return to power in 2012 (*Asahi Shimbun* 2020a). By September, Abe was no longer prime minister.

THE ABE ERA COMES TO AN ABRUPT END

On August 28, for the second time in as many decades, Abe abruptly announced his intent to resign as prime minister due to a worsening health condition (ulcerative colitis) that made it impossible to serve out the final year of his term as LDP president (and, by extension, as prime minister).² In

2. Abe’s third term as LDP president was scheduled to end in September 2021, with a general election no later than October 2021.

an often emotional news conference, Abe expressed regret for resigning during a pandemic and “overwhelming sorrow” (*danchō no omoi*) for failing to achieve key policy objectives, especially revising the constitution, resolving the decades-old issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea, and signing a peace treaty with Russia (*Asahi Shimbun* 2020b). Abe’s abrupt resignation after nearly eight years (2012–2020) ended the longest prime ministership in Japan’s history one year earlier than expected. Though space constraints prevent a full account of his tenure and its significance, a brief overview follows.

In terms of national politics, the Abe Era was noteworthy for exceptional political stability,³ six consecutive victories in national elections (facilitated by a weak, divided, and unpopular opposition), and further centralization of executive power. Despite Abe’s reputation as a conservative ideologue, his approach to governance and policy during his second stint as prime minister evinced remarkable pragmatism. Though some of this moderation was by political necessity—due, for example, to the underappreciated spoiler role of Komeito, the LDP’s junior coalition partner (Liff and Maeda 2019)—Abe and his Cabinet had also drawn sobering lessons from his abortive first term (366 days in 2006–2007). Nevertheless, the administration faced repeated criticism on several fronts, including gender equality, press freedom, national security, and a mixed record on historical reconciliation regarding Japan’s early-twentieth-century colonial and wartime behavior. For example, though Abe had historic reciprocal visits with US President Barack Obama at Hiroshima and Pearl Harbor, friction over the issue of wartime “comfort women” hurt Japan–South Korea relations. In terms of economic policy, Abenomics emphasized bold fiscal and monetary policy and structural reforms, and his government oversaw the second-longest economic expansion in Japan’s history (December 2012 to October 2018), just two months shy of the postwar record. Especially given the March 2011 triple disaster’s devastating impact on Japan’s nuclear power industry, the Abe government’s prioritization of economic growth took attention away from other issues, including climate change mitigation (Incerti and Lipsy 2018).

In terms of Japan’s international role, in the national security space Abe championed a robust US–Japan alliance; domestic reforms, including establishing Japan’s first-ever national security council and passing major

3. Before Abe’s return in December 2012, Japan had seven prime ministers in seven years.

legislation expanding the roles and missions of Japan's Self-Defense Forces; and deepening ties with third parties in East Asia and beyond. Nevertheless, Abe failed to achieve several coveted reform objectives, such as Article 9 revision or enabling exercise of the UN-sanctioned right of collective self-defense without conditions (Liff 2021). In terms of diplomacy, Abe and his government invested significant energy in expanding political, economic, and security ties with a wide array of "like-minded" (especially democratic) partners under the banner of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Central to its effort to buttress a "rules-based liberal international order," and absent robust US leadership on free trade after 2016, Japan emerged as champion of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement. Despite these diplomatic accomplishments, however, Abe's tenure came to an end without fundamentally resetting Japan's often tense relations with its geographically closest neighbors, South Korea, Russia, and China—to say nothing of North Korea.

Though COVID-19 cratered popular support for Abe's Cabinet, he nevertheless left office in September with the public appreciating his accomplishments. According to the left-leaning *Asahi Shimbun* (2020c), 71% of the public positively evaluated Abe's nearly eight-year tenure. Asked what policy area they evaluated most positively, a plurality (30%) identified foreign affairs and security policy; 24%, economic policy; 14%, social security; 5%, constitutional revision; and 22%, none.

JAPAN'S FIRST NEW PRIME MINISTER SINCE 2012: SUGA YOSHIHIDE

Since Abe's LDP dominated Diet seats, it could effectively choose his successor as prime minister. For the stated objective of avoiding a political vacuum and ensuring stability during a national crisis (COVID-19), the LDP General Council made the controversial decision to hold its presidential election under emergency rules, excluding rank-and-file party members. Suga Yoshihide, Abe's long-serving chief cabinet secretary, quickly emerged as the front runner. On September 14, Suga handily defeated former Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio and former Defense Minister Ishiba Shigeru, giving him the right to serve out the remainder of Abe's term as LDP president, until September 2021. Two days later, he officially became Japan's prime

minister. Continuity, of both policy and personnel, quickly emerged as the new administration's defining characteristic. Suga repeatedly emphasized that he would "inherit and promote" Abe's signature policies and prioritize political stability during a "national crisis." Meanwhile, Suga's first Cabinet retained 15 ministers from Abe's final Cabinet, eight of whom remained in the same post.

Though not particularly well known outside Japan, the 71-year-old Suga had arguably been the second-most influential figure in Japanese politics since December 2012. As the longest-serving chief cabinet secretary in Japanese history, Suga had been instrumental in shaping the Abe government's relatively pragmatic approach to governance and focus on economic growth, both key factors in Japan's historically exceptional political stability the past eight years. In that post, Suga had served as the top government spokesperson and was also involved in, or at least present for, almost all major policy debates. Though he reportedly did not often travel overseas or participate in diplomatic negotiations, Suga had significant exposure to foreign affairs as one of four "core" principals on Japan's National Security Council. He also attended many of Abe's meetings with foreign leaders. Nevertheless, Suga does not appear to have his predecessor's enthusiasm for, or personal commitment to, diplomacy.

NATIONAL POLITICS

As a testament to COVID-19's dominance of national political discourse in 2020, at the June press conference to close the Diet's ordinary session, Abe (2020b) summarized the session as "150 days of corona responses." And more than 80% of his speech concerned the pandemic. Major topics of the session included amending the Act on Special Measures for Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases Preparedness and Response, which enabled a declaration of a state of emergency, and the two aforementioned supplementary budgets. As Abe noted in his speech, Japan's stimulus was "the largest scale anywhere worldwide," an indication of the extraordinary impact of COVID-19 and the government's response.

Beyond COVID-19, political storylines concerning the government in 2020 included nagging scandals, such as the arrest of Abe's former justice minister on suspicion of vote-buying; the transition from Abe to Suga; and the Suga administration's controversial decision to reject the nominations of

six academics to the prestigious Science Council of Japan, apparently due to past criticism of government policy. Concerning the opposition parties in the Diet, the major news was the September formation of an expanded Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan. The new party is Japan's second-largest (roughly 150 Diet members split between the upper and lower houses, out of a combined total of 710). Nevertheless, various factors—including the similar progenitor of the parties which combined to form it (the defunct Democratic Party of Japan, whose landslide defeat in December 2012 returned Abe to the prime ministership, their pre-merger cooperation in national elections, relatively low public support, and different positions on key issues—raise questions about whether its formation will disrupt the basic post-2012 status quo: LDP-Komeito dominance of national politics. Nevertheless, Japan again has a relatively large and at least nominally unified opposition party. As Japan's political world mobilizes for the first general election of the post-Abe era (to be held no later than October 2021), the new party's actions are a space to watch.

What did *not* happen in Japan's national politics in 2020 is perhaps as remarkable as what did. Though there were no national Diet elections scheduled, rumors of a possible snap election abounded all year. Yet none was called, likely due to COVID-19-induced disruptions. Given the ambitions Abe himself had sketched out on Constitution Day in 2017, it was also significant that during the ordinary Diet session there was, in Abe's own words, "no progress at all on discussions on draft amendments within the Diet's Commissions on the Constitution." Though Abe (2020b) had claimed that resolution of outstanding issues would be put off "under no circumstances," that expectation was misplaced. Thus, the Abe Era ended with Abe's signature political ambition, constitutional revision, not even emerging as a major focus of Diet debate, much less being realized. A final important non-event was the basic continuity in Japan's political and policy direction despite the massive disruptions of COVID-19, the collapse in Abe's public support, and his abrupt resignation. Indeed, Suga's Cabinet, rhetoric, and actions since becoming prime minister suggest that fundamental changes are unlikely for the foreseeable future.

The Japanese public generally welcomed these developments. As noted above, Abe ended his term with 71% reflecting positively on his legacy. Meanwhile, Suga's first Cabinet launched with the third-highest initial public support on record: 74%. (By October, however, it had begun to

decline—likely due a backlash against the apparent politicization of the Science Council [*Nikkei Asia* 2020].) In his first Diet policy speech (October 26), Suga largely doubled down on his predecessor’s signature policies, especially in prioritizing economic growth and proactive foreign policy. Nevertheless, Suga is not Abe, and there is already some indication of changed approaches and priorities. Suga (2020) appears particular eager to emphasize environmentally friendly growth (including an audacious goal for Japan to become carbon neutral by 2050), achieving a “digital society” (*dijitaru shakai*—e.g., expanding telework and telehealth), and bold administrative and regulatory reforms. Whether Suga is ultimately remembered as a caretaker serving out the final year of Abe’s term or 2020 is the beginning of a new Suga Era remains to be seen.

ECONOMY

COVID-19 hit Japan’s economy at a particularly vulnerable time. By late 2019, a consumption tax increase had already catalyzed a months-long slowdown. The pandemic caused additional supply chain disruptions, a sharp decline in domestic consumption, significantly lower demand in major export markets, the postponement of the Olympics (which was already massively over budget), and an unprecedented collapse of inbound tourism.⁴ The government responded with two historically large stimulus packages in the first six months of 2020, but the economy continued to shrink, including a 28% contraction in the April–June quarter, the largest on record. One additional consequence: Japan’s already-massive public debt surged.

Despite these sobering headlines, and Japan’s already severe labor shortage due to its aging population, the government stimulus meant that COVID-19’s immediate impact on employment was far less severe than in many other countries. As of October, Japan’s jobless rate was only 3% (*Kyodo News* 2020). But the longer-term consequences are uncertain, and the relatively low jobless rate may miss many people simply dropping out of the labor market. Furthermore, the negative effects were not distributed equally. Whereas some industries (e.g., IT) fared relatively well, others (especially service industries, such as restaurants) suffered major losses. And as far as

4. The number of inbound tourists in August 2020 was 99.7% fewer than in August 2019 (JTB Tourism Research & Consulting, n.d.).

individual livelihoods were concerned, female and non-regular (e.g., part-time) workers disproportionately bore the brunt of the crisis in terms of job loss and reduced work hours and income. Working mothers and those whose employers did not or could not provide telework alternatives were hit particularly hard (Social Science Research Council 2020).

By mid-autumn, circumstances appeared to have improved significantly. COVID-19 case counts and deaths remained relatively under control, allowing various aspects of daily life to return to something approximating normal for many. Rebounds in other major economies helped buttress Japanese exporters and businesses with a large presence in overseas markets. Japan also began to gradually reopen its borders to foreign (particularly business) travelers, especially from neighboring countries where the pandemic was under control. In early November, Japan's benchmark Nikkei 225 index hit a 29-year high, and a survey of private think tanks estimated that real GDP for the July–September quarter had risen at an annualized rate of 18.4%, the first growth in four quarters. Still, in late October the Bank of Japan noted that the “economic outlook remains highly uncertain and there are big downside risks.” It projected that Japan's economy would contract by 5.5% in the fiscal year through March 2021 but grow by 3.6% in the following year (*Wall Street Journal* 2020).

FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND NATIONAL SECURITY

Even before COVID-19, Japan's leaders had already identified 2020 as a year in which Japan would face major and disruptive geopolitical and geoeconomic headwinds. In January, Abe (2020a) described a world “in the midst of a surge of major changes” and a regional security environment “more severe than ever before.” Suga (2020) continued that basic refrain, and, like Abe before him, emphasized the importance of the US–Japan alliance as “the cornerstone of Japan's foreign and security policy” and “the foundation of peace, prosperity, and freedom in the Indo-Pacific region and the international community,” pursuing a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific based on the rule of law and in collaboration with countries that share basic values,” and emphasizing “proactive diplomacy” (*sekkyoku gaikō*) with all nations to “develop relations of trust and cooperation.” Like Abe, Suga selected Southeast Asia for his first overseas trip as prime minister, indicating that region's growing strategic importance to Japan.

Though 2020 was another eventful year in Japanese diplomacy, it is difficult to identify any major departures from longer-term trends or from circumstances the previous year. Even COVID-19's major effect, generally speaking, was to exacerbate extant geoeconomic and geopolitical frictions, especially as it concerned the downward spiral in US–China relations, supply chain diversification pressures, and challenges to free trade and international organizations. Amid these vicissitudes Tokyo and Washington commemorated the US–Japan Mutual Security Treaty's 60th anniversary with a joint statement heralding the alliance as “stronger, broader, and more essential today than ever,” emphasizing its “unwavering commitment to values such as democracy, respect for human rights, and a rules-based international order” and asserting its “integral role in ensuring the peace and security of our two countries, while realizing our shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific including through regional security cooperation” (US Department of Defense 2020). Though the year also saw friction, particularly over Japan's cancellation of the planned Aegis Ashore ground-based ballistic missile defense system (based on US technology), stalled host-nation support negotiations, and the US military's handling of a COVID-19 outbreak, these were hardly game changers, and cooperation in many other areas was full steam ahead. Meanwhile, consistent with its 2013 National Security Strategy, Japan continued to pursue closer ties with various “like-minded” nations, especially US allies and partners across and beyond the Indo-Pacific region.

Concerning Japan's diplomacy with its neighbors in Northeast Asia, no major breakthroughs occurred. The year began with expectations that Xi Jinping would finally make a state visit to Japan, potentially heralding a new era in Japan–China relations, but the visit was postponed. Furthermore, serious bilateral friction continued, including over the contested Senkaku (Diaoyu in Chinese) Islands, which are claimed by China but administered by Japan; Beijing's crackdowns in Hong Kong and Xinjiang; Japan's unofficial but robust engagement with Taiwan; and fallout from the US–China “trade and technology war.” With Seoul, the 2018 order by South Korea's top court that Japanese companies must compensate plaintiffs who say they were forced to work for the firms during World War II—a demand that Japan contends violates the two countries' 1965 normalization agreement—continued to fester. Though there was hope a new administration could prompt a *modus vivendi*, in October the Suga administration reportedly

decided to skip a hoped-for China-Japan-Korea trilateral summit in protest, suggesting that a breakthrough remains elusive. Regarding North Korea, there were no fundamental changes. Though Suga announced his willingness to meet with Kim Jong Un without conditions, he also emphasized that his administration would inherit the “abductee issue” as its “most important task.” Finally, despite a massive investment since 2012 in personal diplomacy with Vladimir Putin, the Abe Era ended without a Japan–Russia peace treaty or resolution of the Northern Territories dispute. It is unclear whether Suga will prioritize such diplomacy.

In the realm of national security, too, 2020 generally witnessed a continuation of longer-term trends. Japan’s 2020 defense white paper again emphasized a worsening regional security environment, including North Korea’s advancing nuclear and missile capabilities, China’s expanding military power and policies toward Japan and other neighbors (widely seen in Tokyo as destabilizing and coercive), deepening “uncertainty over the existing order,” “inter-state competition,” and manifold challenges in the “gray zone,” space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum (Ministry of Defense 2020: 15). North Korea tested more missiles (though no nuclear weapons or ICBMs). China continued to employ Coast Guard ships to assert its claim to the Senkaku Islands, breaking new records for time spent in the island’s territorial waters and number of days operating near them. In response, Japan continued to bolster its gray zone response and traditional deterrence capabilities nearby, including standing up a Border Islands Security Force (police) in Okinawa, deploying anti-ship and surface-to-air missile units to Miyako Island, and announcing plans to establish electronic defense units.

Other national security headlines from 2020 include the historic and domestically controversial (but largely uneventful) dispatch of a Japanese destroyer to carry out information-gathering in support of Japanese commercial vessels operating in the Middle East; the abrupt summer cancellation of plans to acquire a major land-based, US-developed ballistic missile defense system (Aegis Ashore) and subsequent decision to acquire two new Aegis-equipped destroyers instead; and an increasingly robust debate within Japan about missile defense and deterrence alternatives, including the possible acquisition of a capability to “strike” enemy bases.

In terms of defense diplomacy, the major story was the reinvigoration of security consultations among Japan, the US, India, and Australia—the

so-called Quad. In October, their top diplomats gathered in Tokyo for a symbolic signal of solidarity, and the following month their militaries participated in the annual Malabar military exercises, with Australia joining for the first time in 13 years. Meanwhile, Japan's bilateral security ties with Australia continued to deepen. Most significantly, the countries announced that they would start coordination to enable Japan to protect Australian military assets in noncombat situations and agreed in principle to a historic "reciprocal access agreement" to allow the two nations' militaries to conduct joint exercises and training, and possibly be stationed on each other's soil. Lastly, though 2020 saw various rumors about Japan possibly revising its 2013 (and first ever) national security strategy, as of this writing it appears that effort has been postponed.

In terms of foreign economic policy, Abe and Suga largely stayed the course. In January, Abe (2020a) called for Japan "to further spread to the world an economic zone based on free and fair rules" and to "continue to demonstrate leadership as a standard bearer for free trade." Indicative of a longer-term coalescence of national security and economic policy was the spring expansion of Japan's national security secretariat to include a new "economic security" unit tasked with reviewing economics-related national security topics (e.g., investments, telecommunications, and cybersecurity). Meanwhile, under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific banner, Japan continued its support for regional infrastructure development, accelerated supply chain diversification as a hedge against risks (both predating and newly exposed by the pandemic), and signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a major trade agreement involving ASEAN, China, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

CONCLUSION

In Japan in 2020, the dominant storylines were COVID-19 and the abrupt resignation of Prime Minister Abe, which ended the longest and arguably most stable administration in Japanese history. The pandemic was profoundly disruptive for Japan's economy and society. Its impact included not only a public health crisis but also the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics/Paralympics, the largest quarterly economic contraction on record, the near closure of Japan's borders, and immense interruptions to

daily life and work. Nevertheless, in the second half of the year it became clear that in terms of public health Japan had handled the pandemic far better than other members of the G7, and its economy was on the mend. Despite these massive disruptions to the status quo, 2020 was also remarkable for striking continuity in national politics and foreign affairs, including a remarkably quick and smooth transition from Abe to his long-time chief cabinet secretary and the new Suga administration's inheritance of the Abe government's signature policies.

ADDENDUM

In the closing days of 2020, Japan confronted a new wave of coronavirus infections that raised questions about public health, but also about the sustainability of its nascent economic recovery, mounting debt, plans to host the postponed Olympics in Summer 2021, and Prime Minister Suga's political future. In late December, as Tokyo and the nation set new records for COVID-19 cases, the government suspended its controversial Go To Travel campaign, banned entry (again) to most nonresident foreign nationals, and announced a third economic relief package, of roughly US\$ 700 billion. Amid these headlines, public support for Suga's cabinet declined sharply, from 74% in September to 42% by late December, with a majority disapproving of his leadership and coronavirus response (*Nikkei Shimbun* 2020).

Nevertheless, there were silver linings. Japan's COVID-19 case counts and deaths remained a small fraction of corresponding figures in other G7 nations. Japan's July–September growth of 23% beat forecasts and marked the first real GDP growth in four quarters, and the government announced expected real GDP growth in fiscal 2021 of 4% (*Japan Times* 2020; *Jiji* 2020). Plans for a national (free) vaccination campaign in the first half of 2021 raised hopes of brighter days ahead. In his 2021 New Year's address, Suga pledged to bring the “unprecedented national crisis” under control, hold the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, and champion “green” and “digital” as core drivers of economic recovery—including massive investments to begin fulfilling his audacious October pledge to make Japan carbon-neutral by 2050 (Prime Minister of Japan 2021).

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