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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL - Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies



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Challenges in Countering Domestic Terrorism in the Absence of Common Intelligence Instruments – Is Japan Closer to Establishing its Own Central Intelligence?

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Abstract

In the era when terrorism, in its multitude of shapes and forms, defines both the daily lives of ordinary citizens as well as briefing formats of countries' Commander-in-Chiefs, it is commonly perceived that every nation has already established several intelligence bodies, each equipped to deal with specific tasks and challenges that terrorism poses. Countries such as Israel or France have even created special intelligence bodies that address nuclear issues (both in its energy spectrum, as well as in its military applications) as one separate domain significant enough to warrant an exclusive attention. Sweden operates the Psychological Defense Agency to specifically counter foreign information influence directed towards the country by its adversaries.

While the global intelligence community and academia have grown accustomed that each nation operates at least three distinct intelligence entities (one tasking with collecting foreign intelligence, one focused on domestic issues and counter-intelligence, and at least one intelligence agency operating in the military realm), there are some national anomalies even among the G7 countries that defy the common sense when discussing a country's intelligence collection set-up, most notably Japan – which does have nominal government branches assigned to information and intelligence gathering but manages them in a manner significantly different than most other world powers. In a discourse about the intelligence gathering capabilities of any developed nation it is customary to highlight the equivalents of bodies such as the US Central Intelligence Agency, British Secret Intelligence Service, Israel's MOSSAD or France's DGSE – although in the case of Japan one needs to dig deeper to actually discover what bodies are tasked with intelligence issues.

The article aims at highlighting some of the challenges Japan faces when it comes tackling the many examples of both domestic-grown as well as potentially foreign-originated acts of terrorism – because of its very structure (or lack of it) in the country's intelligence apparatus. As part of the clarification of various factors involved, the author will discuss the constitutional constraints in Japan in relation to countering historical examples of religious-driven terrorism, and also will touch upon the issue of absence of full-fledged intelligence agencies (both domestic and foreign focused) in the understanding of Western intelligence mechanisms – which at large prevent the functioning of the state security apparatus in both preventing and counteracting the terrorism incidents.

Some attention is also given to the general inability to develop counter-terrorism policies in Japan because of the lack of classified/compartmented information mechanisms among Government agencies – whereby procurement and sharing the vital intelligence is of utmost significance. The conclusions made based on this brief outline could also lead to a discourse whether Japan could become the next soft target of international terrorism (not necessarily stemming from Islamic radicalism, but also various issues related to cyber security and the increasing number of international conflicts) and what factors can be identified to prevent such occurrences from happening.

Nell'era in cui il terrorismo, nella sua moltitudine di forme e forme, definisce sia la vita quotidiana dei cittadini comuni sia i formati di briefing dei comandanti in capo dei paesi, è comunemente percepito che ogni nazione ha già istituito diversi organi di intelligence, ciascuno attrezzato per affrontare compiti e sfide specifici posti dal terrorismo. Paesi come Israele o Francia hanno persino creato organismi di intelligence speciali che affrontano le questioni nucleari (sia nel suo spettro energetico, sia nelle sue applicazioni militari) come un dominio separato abbastanza significativo da meritare un'attenzione esclusiva. La Svezia gestisce l'Agenzia di difesa psicologica per contrastare specificamente l'influenza delle informazioni straniere diretta verso il paese dai suoi avversari.

Mentre la comunità dell'intelligence globale e il mondo accademico si sono abituati al fatto che ogni nazione gestisce almeno tre distinte entità di intelligence (una incaricata di raccogliere informazioni straniere, una focalizzata su questioni interne e controspionaggio e almeno un'agenzia di intelligence che opera nel regno militare), ci sono alcune anomalie nazionali anche tra i paesi del G7 che sfidano il buon senso quando si parla della struttura di raccolta di informazioni di un paese, in particolare il Giappone – che ha rami governativi nominali assegnati alla raccolta di informazioni e intelligence ma li gestisce in un modo significativamente diverso rispetto alla maggior parte delle altre potenze mondiali. In un discorso sulle capacità di raccolta di informazioni di qualsiasi nazione sviluppata è consuetudine evidenziare gli equivalenti di organismi come la Central Intelligence Agency degli Stati Uniti, il Secret Intelligence Service britannico, il MOSSAD israeliano o la DGSE francese – anche se nel caso del Giappone bisogna scavare più in profondità per scoprire effettivamente quali organismi sono incaricati delle questioni di intelligence.

L'articolo mira a evidenziare alcune delle sfide che il Giappone deve affrontare quando si tratta di affrontare i numerosi esempi di atti di terrorismo sia di origine nazionale che potenzialmente originati all'estero, a causa della sua stessa struttura (o della sua mancanza) nell'apparato di intelligence del paese. Nell'ambito del chiarimento dei vari fattori coinvolti, l'autore discuterà i vincoli costituzionali in Giappone in relazione alla lotta agli esempi storici di terrorismo di matrice religiosa, e toccherà anche la questione dell'assenza di agenzie di intelligence a pieno titolo (sia nazionali che focalizzato sull'estero) nella comprensione dei meccanismi

di intelligence occidentali – che in generale impediscono il funzionamento dell'apparato di sicurezza statale sia nel prevenire che nel contrastare gli episodi di terrorismo.

Una certa attenzione viene prestata anche alla generale incapacità di sviluppare politiche antiterrorismo in Giappone a causa della mancanza di meccanismi di informazione classificata/compartimentata tra le agenzie governative – per cui l'acquisizione e la condivisione di informazioni vitali è della massima importanza. Le conclusioni tratte da questo breve profilo potrebbero anche portare a discutere se il Giappone potrebbe diventare il prossimo bersaglio debole del terrorismo internazionale (non necessariamente derivante dal radicalismo islamico, ma anche da varie questioni legate alla sicurezza informatica e al crescente numero di conflitti internazionali) e quali fattori possono essere identificati per evitare che tali eventi si verifichino.

Keywords

Counter-Terrorism, Intelligence Services, Constitutional Constraints, Classified Information Mechanisms

1. Introduction – The Post-World War II Domestic Political Developments as a Precursor of Country's Intelligence Collecting Structure

Japan has had her own share of various societal upheavals after the World War II that often resulted not only in clashes between the ruling political elite and the discontented masses, but also to the forming of multiple right-wing and ultra-left groupings that contributed to the most violent assertion of the respective organization's political agenda. The establishment of these extremist political syndicates had roots in manifold post-war realities – from opposition to the United States – Japan Security Treaty, perception of a loss of national identity, to embracing some of the international political tendencies inclined to the left spectrum, especially in the 1960's among the Japanese youth.

Jo notes that in addition to the post-war development of Japan's security stratagem closely aligned with the US vision of Japan's role in Far East Asia at large, the institution of the Emperor, usually associated with all Japan's right-wing tendencies, had a role in shaping the today's security nexus of the country:

In the 1970s, through approval of the US-Japan Security Treaty and peace constitution, the emperor's responsibility in the war was obscured. Enthroned in 1989, Emperor Heisei then came to symbolize peace in postwar Japan. Thus, one should now seek the Emperor System's agenda, not in the past war responsibility, but in its role of building trust for postwar Japan's peaceful image and taking responsibility for peace in the future. As East Asian nationalism

continues to clash without any compromise and as Japan attempts to restore armament, even this 'image' of peace established by the symbolic Emperor System is at stake.¹

The new regional conflicts, including the ones on the Korean peninsula and Vietnam also led to the polarization of both the Japanese intelligentsia and political parties. The formation of the entities such as Japanese Red Army and United Red Army – splinter groups after its predecessor Red Army Faction was merely a symptom of the turbulent post-war period and were responsible for several both domestic and international incidents that in today's terminology and perception can only be classified as the most violent terrorist acts recorded in history. Although these events are not a focal point of the article, let us recall the Lod Airport Massacre in 1972, hijacking of a Japan Airlines flight to North Korea in 1970, as well as domestic hostage and siege incidents or the series of local riots organized in protest of new Narita International Airport construction that lasted well into 1980's. The terrorism act at the Lod Airport was executed in particular with brutality rarely associated with the Japanese subjects in modern history:

On May 30, 1972, three members of the Japanese Red Army, a terrorist offshoot of the Japanese New Left, arrived at Lod Airport in Tel Aviv on Air France flight 132 on the Paris–Rome–Tel Aviv route. In the airport's baggage claim area, they retrieved Kalashnikov assault rifles and hand grenades concealed in their luggage, opened fire, and threw the hand grenades at passengers in the baggage waiting area. They killed 25 people, most of them tourists from Costa Rica, and wounded 78 people in all. One of the terrorists was captured. Two were killed, one accidentally shot by his colleague, the other after landing on a hand grenade. An Israeli journalist wrote, "The scene here at Lod Airport is like after a pogrom. Broken glass panes, doors riddled with bullet holes and blood patches on every side." The attack was coordinated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Aside from the destruction of the Swissair flight in 1970 that claimed 47 lives, the Lod Airport attack was the worst single attack in Israel in the post-1967 terrorist campaign carried out by a member organization of the PLO's Executive Committee.²

It would only be legitimate to assume that the nature of the events spanning over almost 80 years after the end of the World War II in Japan would create fertile environment for several full-fledged intelligence agencies to be established, operate and exert influence in both the law enforcement as well

¹ Jo G. (2015), *The Revival of Japanese Right-Wing Thought and the Coincidental Collaboration of the Left and Right*, p. 36.

² Herf J. (2016), *Palestinian Terrorism in 1972: Lod Airport, the Munich Olympics, and Responses*, Cambridge University Press, p. 1.

as prevention of terrorism – however to this date the debate of “when” the situation in Japan would be mature and favorable enough for the equivalent of the CIA, MI6 or MOSSAD to be instituted remains just a debate.

It is generally perceived that the long-term dependence of Japan notably on its major ally – the USA – has not created the environment in need of a powerful national intelligence agency (although looking at the neighboring South Korea, the US did contribute heavily to establishing an entity once known as K-CIA). In today’s true globalization of the terrorism itself however, Japan is made to feel both the necessity and pressure in designing its intelligence apparatus to be capable of countering the most distressing threats coming from multiple directions. The article aims to address the structural and systemic issues that in Japan by large prevent the countering of terrorism as perceived by contemporary standards, and explains some of the underlining factors that contribute to this collective idiosyncrasy.

2. Constitutional constraints in Japan in countering religious-driven terrorism

Japan has not been immune to the religious radicalism, in particular after the World War II, when the religious monopoly of State Shinto has been abolished. Although it is yet to see any particular impact of internationally occurring examples of Islamic fundamentalism within Japan – making Japan as a country somewhat of an anomaly as the Islamic extremism is already thriving in neighboring regions of South-East Asia – Thailand, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Philippines or Central Asia – let us be clear that historically we can find acts of terrorism in most religious directions. Some of the examples we need to mention would include the actions of Reverend Jones’s Christian cult in Guyana in 1978, the cult of Branch Davidian in Waco in 1993, a course of action against the Muslim population of Myanmar resorted to by Buddhist groupings, and of course the quasi-religious doomsday cult of Aum Shinrikyo which in its characteristics combines multiple Eastern religious streams with the obsession with Biblical prophecies. In fact, with regard to Islamic extremism in Japan – it is almost non-existent. Statistics state that in the country of 125 million inhabitants, only 250,000 are identified as Muslims, and 95% of these are composed of low-income migrating work force from countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia or China. One of the reasons why the Muslims as a religious group do not congregate in Japan may be that Japan geographically represents a “dead end”, and the migrant flows will not use the country as a platform to move to other countries if coming from the Eurasian continent. Another reason may be the low conversion rate of the local population (only about 5% of all Muslims in Japan are actually the Japanese).

For the purpose of examining the religion as a societal phenomenon and its relationship to acts perceived as threat from the national security perspective (shortly – terrorism), Japan finds its inability (or unwillingness) to surveil extremist religious groupings rooted in its post-war constitutional set-up. In 1945, the Imperial Japan's official ideology embedded in a religious-societal movement called "State Shinto" was abolished, together with the "divine origin of the Emperor" and the path was paved for literally any movement characterizing itself as "religious" by the new Constitution of 1947. As such, in 2023 there were more than 180,500 religious groups recorded in Japan, all of them enjoying the protection under the Constitution, as well as multiple fiscal and tax privileges. While the Article 20 of the Japanese Constitution guarantees the freedom of religion, together with Article 89 they are designed to separate the religion from the state and prevent the former State Shinto from gaining any dominant position in the society.

Article 20 appears to guarantee absolute freedom of religion by not providing any explicit exceptions to that freedom. The only exceptions provided in the Article withhold power from the state in order to protect that religious freedom.³

It seems that the general perception of the State not protecting or providing exceptions to any of the organizations registered as "religious" creates the illusion that the State should not interfere with the activities of any such religious group, and as a result providing a fertile soil for either depraved or even potentially criminal pursuits of such groups to go unnoticed. While the State Shinto, having direct connotations with pre-World War II Japan is certainly of no threat to today's society, its former privileged standing is at the foundation of today's Constitution with regard to religious freedom for all organizations defining themselves as such.

Without the threat of revived State Shintō, Article 20 only serves to protect free conscience in two very distinct forms. One form serves to shield the people from legislation that would impose religious laws, such as Canon Law or Shari'a Law, which is in no way a current threat. More pressing, Article 20 serves to protect religions from the people. Popular opinion in Japan distrusts religions and believes they should no longer enjoy tax privileges. In such a political climate, there simply exists no compelling reason to keep the government from engaging with religious groups to ensure their continued freedom.⁴

Only in the wake of Aum Shinrikyo's perpetrated sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995, a year later the law was adopted to enable the Government

³ Van Winkle A.B. (2012), Separation of Religion and State in Japan: A Pragmatic Interpretation of Articles 20 and 89 of the Japanese Constitution, p. 381.

⁴ Ibid, p. 395.

to supervise certain religious groups – but the terrorist act itself did not lead to the religious group being banned, with authorities fearing backlash based on the constitutional guarantees.⁵

Although by early 21st century, the Islamic extremism and fundamentalism have been monitored internationally given its high-perceived risk to the national security of both developed as well as developing nations, it was only in 2011 that it emerged that the National Police Agency systematically collected personal data of Muslims of foreign origin only to be dismissed three years later by court as a “necessary step” in protecting national security interests. In other words, if there are any measures undertaken to counter any potential threat arising from international terrorism, such measures are very nascent in nature and by far inadequate compared to the scale of internationally perpetrated terrorism acts by extremists.

3. Various Perceptions on the Structure of the Japanese Intelligence Community

Professor Ken Kotani, in a podcast recorded in June 2024, summarized the key players of the Japanese intelligence community as follows:

The size of the Japanese intelligence community is very small, but complicated. At present, the Cabinet Intelligence Research Office silo of the Cabinet Secretariat is a central intelligence machinery of the community, similar to the American CIA, but the number of staff is very small – only 500.

There are also five ministry-embedded apparatuses. The Public Security Department of the National Police Agency, NPA, is close to the American FBI, which engages in counter-espionage and [counter-] terrorism in Japan. The defence

⁵ In the morning of March 20, 1995 when the Tokyo subway gas attack was perpetrated, the author was in the epicenter of the incident between the subway stations Kasumigaseki and Akasaka Mitsuke, witnessing the chaos resulting from at that moment yet unknown cause. The event certainly resulted in the nation’s most broadcasted and commented issues encompassing the religious freedom, principles of democracy as well as the capabilities (or the lack of) the law enforcement agencies countering the terrorist act. Even during the immediate days following the incident, observers were overwhelmed with the volume and diversity of auxiliary events, unable to either connect the dots or analyze them in a qualified manner – because of the very seemingly non-relatedness of the happenings. Let us just mention two – the debate why a chief Aum Shinrikyo cult member tasked with the “scientific research” succumbed immediately to a knife attack by a right-wing Korean national while the National Police Agency’s Commissioner General Takaji Kunimatsu, shot by four rounds from a magnum revolver ten days after the sarin attack, not only survived but fully recovered and returned to duty. While it may have been speculated that the murder and attempted murder respectively were related to the doings of the cult itself, both motives and the relations of perpetrators to the cult remain inconclusive.

intelligence headquarters of the Ministry of Defense, MOD, specialises in technical intelligence, such as signals and geospatial intelligence, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MoFA, has two intelligence services, the Intelligence and Analysis Service, IAS, and the Counter- Terrorism Unit, CTU-J. Both services specialise in intelligence analysis on overseas and terrorist affairs. Lastly, the Public Security Intelligence Agency, PSIA, of the Ministry of Justice, is a security service, like the British MI5. These six agencies form the Japanese intelligence community.⁶

Although nominal institutions as parts of Japan's small intelligence community may be in existence, the country certainly lacks the robust legal and technical mechanism that could utilize the existing entities to their full potential or perhaps consider "upgrading" some of the bodies to more mature intelligence agencies.

Intelligence reform is an underappreciated arm in these security reforms, and in taking a direct modelling approach for intelligence infrastructure Japan risks neglecting a formative period in its intelligence development. Although the creation of a National Security Council has facilitated greater executive decision-making overall, the lack of whistle-blower safeguards in the Specially Designated Secrets Act [of 2013] allows mismanagement to go unnoticed by the Japanese public, stunting institutional growth.⁷

In general, it is only logical that the Japanese intelligence apparatus is observed to have similarities to the counterpart structure in the US – however the individual tasks, operations and end-results visibly differ.

... Japan's current intelligence system is similar to that in the United States in many respects. First, the mission of Japan's IC is to support the Prime Minister's office in making national security-related policy decisions. Consequently, an intelligence cycle is established starting from the prime minister's office as the primary intelligence customer. Second, the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office (CIRO) in the Cabinet Secretariat – which directly reports to the Prime Minister's office – is the nexus between the IC and the policy sector. This mechanism is similar to how the United States established the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) to enhance IC integration after the United States was attacked on September 11, 2001. Moreover, Japan's IC also includes civilian and military intelligence agencies, with the civilian agency responsible for community integration and coordination.⁸

⁶ Japan's Intelligence Capabilities with Professor Richard Samuels, Professor Kotani Ken and Hosaka Sanshiro (2024), Transcript of the Podcast Episode, p. 4.

⁷ Fishlock N. (2019), Policies to Please Political Partners: The Development of Japan's Intelligence Policy in the 21st Century, p. 8.

⁸ Kobayashi Y. (2023), Re-assessing the Organizational Characteristics of Japan's Intelligence Community and Its Social and Political Backgrounds, p. 5.

One of the obvious reasons why the Japanese intelligence community (and their respective member organizations) does not exert both tangible and consequential influence on vital security issues, notably terrorism prevention, is that the country is yet to establish some kind of parliamentary oversight for activities of the individual bodies regarded as “intelligence gathering” subjects.

... Japan is the only country in the G7 and Australia without an exclusively dedicated body, whether parliamentary or administrative, responsible for democratic oversight of the IC. As a bureau within its respective parent organization, each member organization in Japan’s IC is subject only to the same level of administrative and parliamentary oversight as other non-intelligence bureaus. Such ordinary oversight lacks expertise in intelligence affairs and has no access to confidential IC information. Thus, it is highly likely that their effectiveness is limited.⁹

4. Common Intelligence Instruments – Are They Necessarily Repressive?

Engaging in foreign espionage is one of the essential attributes of an adequately functioning sovereign nation, together with the right of belligerency. It seems that together with the renouncement of act of war embedded in the Constitution as one of the sovereign rights, Japan has also quietly rejected the idea of deploying a full-fledged intelligence outfit especially in the country’s foreign engagements. Such decision, whether made consciously by the ruling elites, or having risen out of the geopolitical development of the post-World War II era, has its price. While before the Aum incident of 1995 Japan did not witness on its own territory major acts of terrorism acts perpetrated by either an internal or foreign adversary, the Japanese citizens have regularly become “soft” targets overseas – in incidents either targeting Japan in particular or as part of terrorist acts aimed at the Western civilization at large.

Although the pledge “not to maintain land, sea and air forces” has been circumvented by establishing “self-defense” forces, the key point related to refraining from operating a major intelligence entity is probably in the Constitution’s distancing from the use of military power – the mechanism usually associated with any major intelligence agency:

Article 9 of Japan’s postwar constitution subjects the nation to stringently worded constraints on its legal capacity to wage war. Although not the only constitution to include a renunciation of war, Japan’s postwar constitution is unique in its prohibition of military forces that make war possible. The article reads:
Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat

⁹ Ibid, p. 14.

or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.¹⁰

It is somewhat of a paradox that at the same time, observations are made that Japan is equipped with the most modern warfare (both of national production as a result of state-of-the-art research and development capabilities as well as procured overseas), including the instrumentation designed for intelligence collection.

Japan today possesses the most advanced anti-submarine, air defence, and intelligence-gathering equipment, including missile-mounted Aegis destroyers with advanced detection and analysis systems. Some of these were, in fact, deployed in the Indian Ocean in support of the U.S. coalition action against Afghanistan.¹¹

Perhaps most striking in the characteristics of the overall Japanese intelligence community is a non-existence of a dedicated HUMINT organization, which across the board of international intelligence systems is the most crucial element in gaining vital intelligence especially in the realm of terrorism. It is often perceived that the memories of the repressive secret police in pre-war Japan (disbanded fully after the World War II) prevent the country from engaging in establishing a human-resource based spy organization that would effectively collect essential information for analysis, in particular overseas.

Table 1 – *Comparison of Characteristics of Japan's Intelligence Community with those of other G7 countries and Australia*¹²

International Comparison of IC Organizational Characteristics							
	Japan	Australia	Canada	France	Germany	U.K.	U.S.
Organizations dedicated to IC integration and Coordination	DCI CIRO	DGNI ONI	NSIA	×	×	JIC	DNI ODNI
Organizations dedicated to external HUMINT activities	×	ASIS	×	DGSE	BND	SIS	CIA
Organizations dedicated to domestic intelligence	×	ASIO	CSIS*	DGSI	BfV	SS	×
Parliamentary bodies dedicated to IC oversight	×	PJCIS	NSICOP**	DPR	PKGr	ISCP	Senate SCI HR PSCI

The members of the intelligence community worldwide, and of the individual entities tasked with intelligence operations in particular, often make a point to highlight whether their respective organization is an “information collecting agency” or a “secret service” – the latter having the direct conno-

¹⁰ Haley J.O. (2005), *Waging War: Japan's Constitutional Constraints*, p. 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹² Kobayashi Y. (2023), *Re-assessing the Organizational Characteristics of Japan's Intelligence Community and Its Social and Political Backgrounds*, p. 12.

tations to regular engagement in “active measures” and “covert operations”. It is perhaps also a matter of education and adequate informational guidance to convince the nation that “information gathering with the aim of proper analysis” does not equal “wet jobs”, to use a jargon of intelligence bodies.

5. Absence of full-fledged intelligence agencies (both domestic and foreign focused) in the understanding of Western intelligence mechanisms

Not only in the context of countering terrorism, but as part of a larger discussion of who should be safeguarding the constitutional and public order, it has been deliberated why Japan until today has not fully used the potential of already existing quasi-intelligence bodies or outright enacted the intelligence agencies on par with their Western counterparts (with both counter-intelligence focus as well as foreign intelligence gathering focused). While it is challenging to say that the institutions such as the CIA, FBI, MI6, Mossad or DGSE are always capable of preventing terrorism on their respective soil or targeting their nation’s citizens, the instruments, methods employed and networks of operatives certainly enable mechanisms capable of detecting and countering some of the major terrorist plots.

As part of this discourse, we will examine the one extremist event perpetrated by the members of the Aum Shinrikyo cult in March 1995 in its attempt to sow death and chaos among population in Tokyo. While the common description of this incident usually mention “actions of a doomsday cult”, was this an act based purely on religious beliefs or did it have hallmarks of a very specific national security threat? While not know to the wider public, let us state some of the facts related to Aum Shinrikyo in relation to their long-term activities that had very little in common with their official religious tenets:

1. Well before 1995 Tokyo subway attack, the group was implicated (and later proved) to have abducted and murdered the whole family of a lawyer representing parties against the group.¹³
2. In 1993, the group tried to disperse anthrax spores to cause mass poisoning in one of the Tokyo neighborhoods.¹⁴

¹³ Murders of more than one person by a perpetrator carries mandatory death sentence in the Japanese penal code, and the disappearance of the family of three indicating that they have been murdered should have received attention of not only police but respective organization(s) dealing with subversive domestic activities.

¹⁴ Japan, having pledged never to resort to use of any military weapons, let alone weapons of mass destruction, should have treated the mere occurrence of anthrax substance with heightened attentiveness.

3. In 1993 and 1994, the group's division in Western Australia started to manufacture both sarin and VX gas at a local property, testing it on sheep.¹⁵
4. In 1994 and 1995, the group's members used both sarin and VX to either kill groups of people or assassinate specifically designated individuals.¹⁶

... due to the disproportionate public attention paid to the Tokyo attack, it is often overlooked that Aum's violence was not a one-off event: there was a period of about six years in which Aum became increasingly violent, not only towards outsiders but to its own members, especially against followers whose devotion to the guru was seen to be wavering. Regrettably, its various murders, murder attempts, and its first indiscriminate terrorist attack using sarin in June 1994 in Matsumoto – a midsize regional city in Nagano Prefecture, central Japan – have tended to be sidelined in academic and media debates about Aum. The causes and consequences of the Matsumoto sarin attack merit special attention not only as a historical milestone in Aum's turn to mass violence as a means of achieving religious ends, but also because of its lack of national impact in the immediate aftermath of the attack. The Matsumoto attack killed eight and injured more than 600 residents in a residential neighbourhood, in what was then one of the largest terrorist attacks in living memory.¹⁷

5. In 1994, the group's members broke into the factory of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Company, attempting to steal blueprints for tanks and artillery.¹⁸
6. Following the Tokyo gas attack, explosives, firearms, a functioning Russian military Mi-17 helicopter and stockpile of chemicals to produce enough sarin to kill 4 million people were found in the group's compound. This particular find illustrated a clear picture that the group was in contact with foreign parties from whom the weapons and chemicals were procured.¹⁹

According to some accounts, the group internally designated a “new government” with having a list of people that were to replace the existing

¹⁵ With any substantial international intelligence sharing agreements in place, such incident occurring at object managed by Japanese nationals should have triggered a response commensurate with the gravity of the findings.

¹⁶ March 1995 Tokyo subway gas attack was preceded by the usage of the same mass destruction toxin in the previous year, targeting a judge. It is therefore safe to assume that the Tokyo subway attack could have been prevented if the precedent would be given due attention and treatment.

¹⁷ Ushiyama, R. (2022), *Aum Shinrikyo and Religious Terrorism in Japanese Collective Memory*, p. 30.

¹⁸ In a country governed by a pacifist Constitution, it is somewhat of a mystery why a clear attempt to target military technology would not be treated with adequate response from the authorities.

¹⁹ If any conclusions were made upon the finding among the respective “intelligence” agencies, the informational outcome was certainly not shared with the public. It is alarming that a find of substances and military grade equipment did not obviously trigger a larger scale investigation and overall international repercussions were not tangible.

government personnel, leading to speculations that the ultimate motive of the gas attack was to execute a full-fledged coup d'états.²⁰

Some academic sources also point out the fact that most obviously, the Aum Shinrikyo religious group was aiming at a megalomaniac design to “take over Japan” and actually even for few months after the March 1995 subway attack, the cult’s leader continued to plot various schemes to attack the Government. This illustrates that not only no substantial intelligence was in the hands of relevant authorities, but also even in the weeks following the subway attack, the Government grappled with making a sense of what was happening.

Public fears that Aum may commit another terrorist attack of a similar scale were justified and accurate, as Asahara [the cult’s leader, ultimately executed only in 2018, 23 years after the subway gas attack was perpetrated] continued to give instructions to carry out terrorist attacks. The Vajrayāna Plan to take over Japan was still in effect. In April and May, Aum attempted to spray hydrogen cyanide from a briefcase at Shinjuku, one of Tokyo’s busiest stations. On the day of Asahara’s arrest, 16 May, Aum sent a letter-bomb to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, seriously injuring a government employee. These violent plots came to an end only after the most senior disciples were arrested.²¹

And yet, there was no record of the group’s activities being on a radar of National police or any of the government entities – or at least publicly not admitted. While some of the investigation after the terrorist act may have exposed a foreign related lead, none were reported to the public. In the wake of the sarin gas terrorist attack, one thing is certain – Aum Shinrikyo’s fatal action had a profound effect on how both the society as well as the country’s security establishment became to view the various religious groupings in general:

... the Aum Affair also produced in its wake myriad cultural narratives, discourses, practices, and products that have transformed how people both inside and outside Japan conceptualise and interact with minority religions, millennialism, religious violence, and religious terrorism. One of the most transformative changes occurred in the Japanese religious field. In the wake of the Tokyo attack, religious organisations were left reeling as they confronted a sea

²⁰ An officer of the National Police Agency’s Public Security Department, in a confidential conversation, did confirm the existence of “certain proofs” that a foreign power was partially supporting the preparations leading up to the deadly sarin attack. The gas attack itself may have been only a false flag operation designed to divert public attention from the attempt to subvert the legitimate Japanese Government.

²¹ Ushiyama, R. (2022), *Aum Shinrikyo and Religious Terrorism in Japanese Collective Memory*, p. 57.

change in public attitudes towards religions, from one of apathy and indifference to open distrust and sometimes active animosity.²²

At the kernel of the issue is the intelligence community set-up in general and the lack of the corresponding tools that would have at least provided an indication for the nefarious activities the group had been undertaking totally under the radar of the authorities. While the National Police Agency and several ministries, including the office of the prime minister, have a rudimentary “intelligence” department, most domestic intelligence resources are directed towards perceived threats originating in China and North Korea, and 80% of the intelligence gathering efforts overseas are focused on economic issues – both safeguarding the domestic industrial base as well as obtaining foreign economic indicators vital to national interests. The only entity that comes close to the Western understanding of an “intelligence agency” probably is the Public Security Intelligence Agency (PSIA) of the Ministry of Justice which today engages in some of the internationally adopted practices of intelligence sharing (among G7 nations mostly) and has some of the instruments for both domestic and foreign intelligence operations at their disposal. Historically, however, PSIA has been largely focused on the domestic North Korean diaspora (about 150,000 people) in infiltrating their ranks to obtain North Korea originating intelligence, and lately to some extent focusing on China (both domestically as well as on foreign land). Even given the current diplomatic estrangement between Japan and Russia, the officers associated with the Japanese intelligence community admit that Russia is not as much in their focus as the Asian neighbors North Korea and China.²³

Only given a predicament in the last three decades whereby the Japanese nationals have been targeted in countries such as Bangladesh, Algeria, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Syria, Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan as part of terrorist acts perpetrated by Islamic fundamentalists, a discussion has risen to address the need for full-fledged foreign intelligence gathering agency. In 2014 several Japanese nationals have been identified as ISIS sympathizers and were arrested immediately prior to leaving the country to join ISIS forces in Syria, although this was not a result of a concerted effort to monitor and curb Islamic extremism in Japan. Instead, Japan continues to rely on a “good-will”

²² Ibid, pp. 2-3.

²³ Given the Japan’s security apparatus proximity to those in the USA, it has been debated for some time should Japan join the Anglo-Saxon intelligence sharing network of “Five-Eyes” together with Germany, Singapore and South Korea, and as a result create a new “Nine-Eyes” alliance. Apart from the US, Japan does have bilateral intelligence sharing agreements with some of the G20 countries, including Australia or Italy.

gesture of the main international intelligence agencies to share some of the information about imminent threats if that concerns Japan directly.

6. Inability to develop counter-terrorism policies in Japan given the lack of classified/compartimented information mechanisms among Government agencies

In a conversation the author had in summer 2024 with one of the senior officers of National Police Agency's Public Security Department, the officer highlighted the following:

1. In the context of absence of a full-fledged foreign intelligence gathering entity, a timely procurement of an objective and proven intelligence from abroad pertaining to threats against the national security of Japan is limited. Reliance on other international agencies to obtain vital information does not correspond to the current needs nor imperatives that the threat of international terrorism presents.
2. Even with the development of any entity resembling those of CIA or MOSSAD, such agency will still be heavily limited in its span and authority given the Constitution renounces belligerency as a sovereign right, as well as use or threat of force as means of settling international disputes. This also relates to the right to conduct intelligence operations abroad commensurate with the level of threat to the national security – and so far it has been deemed that it is better not to have access to intelligence rather than being accused of violating its own Constitution.
3. In practice, there is no system of “security clearance” among the Japanese civil servants employed by the security apparatus or by the ministries delegated with threat assessment – and the notion of “Confidential”, “Classified”, “Top Secret” or “Compartimented” information is non-existent. As a result, when such intelligence is received from abroad as part of foreign Embassy or specific security briefing, it is up to the personnel present at the meeting to utilize such information later in government policies.

On the background of the above, some international incidents related to “Japanese intelligence agencies” may even appear to be grotesque. In September 2024, news outlets in the Republic of Belarus reported, accompanied duly with “evidence” and corresponding YouTube channel clips that a “Japanese intelligence officer employed by the PSIA” was apprehended near the Belarus-Ukraine border, who later “confessed” that his intelligence collecting activities “may have been of grave consequence to the national security of the Republic of Belarus”. In Japan the story perspired as an anecdote, with relevant Japanese security apparatus personnel pointing to the numerous facts

highlighted by both Belarussian propaganda as well the concerned person's background that whatever the individual was doing "on the Belarus-Ukraine border", it was not for the benefit of the PSIA. On the other hand, with a record of real PSIA agents being arrested and incarcerated in China, the same security apparatus personnel pointed out that exposé of any real-life agent abroad (at least given the characteristics of how the PSIA operates) is possible only with the existence of internal mole within the PSIA itself. That, of course, is already another topic to be debated on a separate platform.

7. Conclusions

Given the fast changing tendencies on the international arena with regard to both definition of terrorism as well as the corresponding countermeasures, most certainly Japan, among the G7 nations, lags behind in having both instruments as well as opportunities "to be in the know" when it comes to timely reacting to the challenges this arena represents. In the world saturated with new conflicts, new players and new technologies that engage in both offensive and defensive mechanisms, the threat to fundamental principles of each state's national security is growing.

Given the relative frequency of international acts of terrorism to which Japanese nationals succumb, the amount of "food for thought" when it comes to serious deliberations whether or when to establish an intelligence agency capable of countering and neutralizing threats of terrorism both home and abroad is more than enough. Let us remember the In Amenas hostage crisis of January 2013 in Algeria where 10 of the Japanese nationals perished (the largest contingent among the foreigners, out of 40 dead) which had a grave fallout also with regard to how the operations in hydrocarbon industry overseas are to be conducted. 1997 Luxor massacre produced 10 Japanese casualties among the tourists, most of them newly-weds. The so-called "Bangladesh's 9/11" of July 2016 when 7 consultants of the Japan International Cooperation Agency lost their lives in Dhaka to a local Jihadist outfit was certainly one of the most painful reminders that even the non-military personnel abroad are targeted in the line of their duties. Realizing that not all loud terrorist acts are committed by Islamist radicals, the 1996 Japanese embassy hostage crisis in Peru which lasted for over 4 months is a reminder that actionable intelligence needs to be gathered 24/7, in every international location where the Japanese nationals and the country's vital interests are present. Abductions of Japanese nationals in Central Asia, leading to secreted negotiations with the terrorists and subsequent payment of ransom, also give us material to reconsider both the existing intelligence structures as well as mechanisms deployed to resolve the crisis. Execution of Japanese nationals by ISIS groupings in Syria and lat-

er propagated by the groups media is another painful moment to realize that any gathered intelligence needs to be shared with the relevant individuals to prevent such occurrences.

Answering the initial rhetorical question whether Japan is close(r) to establishing its own Central Intelligence body, it is probably a cynical “not until a Japanese 9/11 takes place in the country’s territory”. With the world in a new wave of geopolitical polarization, with multitude of regional wars and political conflicts just a step away from full-fledged military confrontations, and with Japan feeling a need to take sides once too often, we may not be that far from that moment to arise.

Japan may still consider herself as rather detached from the major international domain where most terrorist acts occur but with the increasing tendency of all eco-systems and mechanisms being globally intertwined, it is perhaps a time to consider to rebuild some of the rudimentary instruments and structures upon which the safeguarding of national security principles are based.

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