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Issue Brief

History and Future of Japan's Landmark Intelligence Reforms

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S*ummary*

Japan's establishment of the National Intelligence Council (NIC) and the National Intelligence Bureau (NIB) marks a historically significant shift for its national security architecture. The new bodies offer potentially improved coordination among government agencies, reduced duplication of effort and more comprehensive assessments for policymakers. However, Japan's pre-war intelligence organisations offer cautionary examples regarding the need to maintain strong safeguards against political instrumentalisation and appropriate selectivity in terms of capabilities.

Introduction

Japan's establishment of the National Intelligence Council (NIC) and the National Intelligence Bureau (NIB) on 31 July 2026 marks a historically significant shift for its national security architecture. The two new bodies were formed pursuant to the passage of the National Intelligence Council Establishment Act of 2026, a long-declared objective of the Liberal Democratic Party under Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi.¹ The fulfilment of the LDP's promise represents the most substantial centralisation of Japan's intelligence apparatus since the end of the Second World War, and a continuation (after an enforced pause) of Japan's history of intelligence collection. Yet this history, implicated as it is with memories of wartime excess and foreign aggression, also offers a cautionary note to the future evolution of post-war Japan's intelligence community.

Pre-1945 History of Japanese Intelligence

Japan is well-known as being the home of the semi-legendary ninja, black-clad assassins proficient in martial arts and deadly weapons who served feudal lords in early modern Japan and maintained professional rivalries with the more chivalrous samurai. Though this image is largely the product of modern mass media, the historical ninja (written in Japanese with characters meaning ‘those who hide or sneak in’) were in truth employed as clandestine operatives proficient in gaining and then subverting the trust of their targets through a variety of stratagems to extract information and conduct surveillance. In brief, they were spies, not assassins.²

After Japan emerged as a modern state in the Meiji era, their roles were inherited by a set of institutions devised to protect the new regime from catastrophic outside intervention as well as internal rebellion. These institutions mainly emerged from the military structure, with the Imperial Japanese Army in particular playing a key role. Still, the powerful Home Ministry also had a parallel set of organisations. Two of these in particular are worth paying attention to for the legacy they have left behind: the *Kempeitai* (憲兵隊, ‘Soldiers of the Law’) and the *Tokko* (an abbreviation of 特別高等警察, ‘Special Higher Police’).³

¹ “【速報】国家情報局設置法が成立 情報活動強化へ 総理がトップの国家情報会議が司令塔に スパイ防止法の検討も加速” [“Breaking: National Intelligence Bureau Establishment Act Passes; Step Toward Strengthening of Intelligence-Collection Activities; PM-led National Intelligence Council to Be Command Post, Accelerated Consideration of Spy Activities Prevention Laws”], *Fuji News Network*, 27 May 2026.

² Jeanhee Kim, “[Ninjas: How Japanese Spies Evolved into Pop Culture Heroes](#)”, *History.com*, 10 November 2023.

³ Richard J. Samuels, *Special Duty: A History of the Japanese Intelligence Community*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2019, Chapter 2.

The *Kempeitai*, a mixture of secret policemen and intelligence operators, were first established in 1881 as a military police corps. However, they soon added a host of clandestine operations capabilities to their repertoire as Japan increasingly sought empire abroad.⁴ Explicitly conceived of as a group of soldiers loyal only to their military superiors (and through them to the Emperor), the *Kempeitai* gradually came to be seen as the dealing hand of the unsavoury parts of Japanese colonial policy. Their involvement in the torture and liquidation of independence activists in Korea and other areas, as well as their atrocities in China during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), served as the backdrop to their deployment during the Second World War to Japan’s newly-occupied Southeast Asian territories, where they came to achieve the apex of their infamy.

The *Tokko*, a later invention, had a different objective.⁵ Founded in 1911 by the Home Ministry, it was mainly conceived as a counter-intelligence and public security body. However, it eventually began to enforce thought control as part of the march towards greater militarism. Composed of six departments, the *Tokko* took care of activities as diverse as censorship and surveillance of foreigners in Japan, and often relied on surprise raids, prolonged warrantless detention and coerced confessions to deter activities deemed undesirable by the state.

The Post-war Interval in Japanese Intelligence

After its surrender on 15 August 1945, the United States of America (US)-led Occupation took over all governmental functions in Japan, with a view to achieving the ‘3D’ policy of democratisation, demilitarisation and decentralisation. The *Tokko* fell afoul of democratisation and decentralisation, while the hated *Kempeitai* was targeted as part of its demilitarisation policy. Both organisations were disbanded, and several of their members were prosecuted criminally. As the Americans drafted the 1947 Constitution (that remains in effect today), they inserted Article 9 not only to eliminate Japan’s military capabilities but also its intelligence capabilities.

Though these measures were partially reversed after the Cold War led to a reappraisal of US priorities, Japan in the post-war period was deprived of a single, centralised intelligence agency comparable to the American Central Intelligence Agency or the British Secret Intelligence Service. Instead, intelligence responsibilities remained

⁴ An excellent introduction is Raymond Lamont-Brown, “[Kempeitai: Ruthless Policemen of the Rising Sun](#)”, *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles*, Vol. 67, No. 2, April–June 1994.

⁵ An excellent introduction to the *Tokko*’s activities can be found in Elise K. Tipton, *The Japanese Police State: The Tokko in Interwar Japan*, Bloomsbury Academic, London and New York, 1990 [reprinted 2014].

divided among several civilian, military, law enforcement and diplomatic organisations.⁶

Japan's contemporary intelligence structure stands on several pillars. The Public Security Intelligence Agency, based in the Ministry of Justice, focuses primarily on domestic security intelligence (or policing intelligence, as one scholar calls it), counter-subversion, counter-terrorism, monitoring of extremist organisations and foreign intelligence activities.⁷ The National Police Agency, nominally the country's apex law enforcement agency, also handles counter-espionage, counter-terrorism, cybersecurity, foreign influence investigations and policing intelligence.⁸ The Defense Intelligence Headquarters (DIH) of the Ministry of Defense tackles military intelligence, signals intelligence (SIGINT), imagery intelligence (IMINT), geospatial intelligence and battlefield assessments.⁹ The Japan Coast Guard's Security Intelligence Division, which reports to the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, is in charge of maritime intelligence, monitoring territorial waters, illegal fishing, smuggling and maritime security threats.¹⁰ Finally, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), through its extensive embassies and missions worldwide, provides open-source as well as semi-classified political and diplomatic intelligence.¹¹

Until July 2026, the output of these agencies was funnelled to the Prime Minister and their Cabinet by the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office (CIRO), a sub-agency within the Cabinet Secretariat responsible for national intelligence coordination, strategic analysis, intelligence integration and policy support.¹² Analysts frequently argued, however, that these agencies operated in 'stovepipes', while the CIRO lacked absolute coordinating authority over these agencies.

⁶ See Richard J. Samuels, *Special Duty: A History of the Japanese Intelligence Community*, no. 3, especially pp. 92–105.

⁷ Patrick F. Walsh, *Intelligence and Intelligence Analysis*, Routledge, London and New York, 2011, p. 17; “[PSIA](#)”, Public Security Intelligence Agency, Ministry of Justice, Government of Japan, 6 March 2025.

⁸ “[National Police Agency](#)”, National Police Agency, National Public Safety Commission, Cabinet Office, Government of Japan.

⁹ “[情報本部について](#)” [“[About the Intelligence Headquarters](#)”], Defense Intelligence Headquarters, Ministry of Defense, Government of Japan.

¹⁰ Lorenzo Erasmo Vernetti, “[The Japanese Intelligence Community: An Overview](#)”, Commentary, Grey Dynamics, 3 September 2024.

¹¹ “[Information Collection and Analysis on the International Affairs](#)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, 1 August 2025.

¹² Richard J. Samuels, *Special Duty: A History of the Japanese Intelligence Community*, no. 3, especially pp. 92–95; Robert Alan Ward and Laurence Stobart, “[Japan's Sweeping Intelligence Reforms](#)”, Commentary, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 6 August 2026; Lorenzo Erasmo Vernetti, “[The Japanese Intelligence Community: An Overview](#)”, no. 10.

Japan did not possess even the legal framework to detect and prosecute instances of espionage, with cases of industrial espionage being prosecuted under far-weaker provisions against fraud and espionage. Further, there was no mechanism for the CIRO to gather the principal Cabinet members in one place to report its findings and receive tasking orders, something which was left to the individual ministers.¹³ As a result, a host of individually collected critical data was lost in a maze of inter-ministerial rivalry, exacerbated by a lack of unified, cross-departmental coordination and sluggish all-source information sharing.

Why Reform Was Necessary

The impetus for an overhaul grew out of mounting external pressures. Prime Minister Takaichi's administration needed to directly counter escalating geopolitical threats, specifically heightened security concerns involving China and Russia. Furthermore, the new architecture came to be envisaged as a cornerstone of broader efforts to adapt Japan's security posture to modern challenges, including sophisticated cyber threats, espionage, foreign influence operations and counter-terrorism. A related impetus may have come from Japan's burgeoning desire to participate in US-led intelligence-sharing frameworks such as the Five Eyes consortium, which required it to centralise and systematise its intelligence framework.¹⁴ Takaichi's electoral promise, which eventually metamorphosed in near-record time (by Japanese standards) into the May legislation establishing the NIB and NIC, was the result of these considerations.

The newly established framework explicitly borrows conceptual elements from the US' Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), providing a strong indication of Japan's intention to seek some participation in Western intelligence-sharing networks. Headed directly by the prime minister, the NIC is to act as the premier forum for the cabinet to deliberate, formulate and direct national intelligence policies. Alongside the prime minister, the council comprises key ministerial officials, including the Chief Cabinet Secretary, Foreign Minister, Defence Minister, Finance Minister and the Minister of Justice, ensuring high-level political alignment.¹⁵

Meanwhile, the NIB, operating as the administrative secretariat of the NIC, is an upgrade of the former CIRO. With its 730 personnel, the bureau is to function as a

¹³ Jonathan Berkshire Miller, “[Japan, China and the Folly of Coercion](#)”, *Global Asia*, Vol. 21, No. 2, June 2026, p. 92.

¹⁴ Arman Sidhu, “[Sixth Eye In-The-Making? Rise of Japan's National Intelligence Agency](#)”, *Situation Reports*, *Geopolitical Monitor*, 16 April 2026.

¹⁵ “[Japan Launches National Intelligence Bureau](#)”, *Nippon.com*, 31 July 2026.

central clearinghouse for intelligence with the statutory authority to streamline information management, compel interagency cooperation, and synthesise all-source intelligence reports.¹⁶ The Bureau's leadership, currently at the Director-General level, is deliberately designed as an equivalent to the head of the National Security Secretariat, with experts pointing to the need to create constructive friction between the two bodies to ensure the quality and reliability of the inputs received by the Prime Minister.¹⁷

After its formation, the NIC is expected to convene an advisory expert panel in short order. The panel will be responsible for several things. First, it will be expected to assist the NIC in formulating a National Intelligence Strategy by the end of 2026, which will set the guardrails for inter-agency coordination. Secondly, it would be expected to formulate legislation that would allow Japan to implement a registry of foreign entities active domestically, to better trace funding sources and connections with foreign governments. Finally, the expert panel is expected to set out the outlines of two new bodies, namely, a central counter-intelligence agency (akin to the Intelligence Bureau in India) and a foreign intelligence agency (akin to the Research and Analysis Wing in India).¹⁸ Both of these latter organisations, expected to be activated in 2027, would most likely integrate the lion's share of the functions of the existing agencies mentioned above.

Debates and Concerns

The establishment of the NIC and NIB offers several overt advantages. A centralised intelligence system can potentially improve coordination among government agencies, reduce duplication of effort and provide policymakers with more comprehensive assessments. Faster information sharing could strengthen crisis management during military emergencies or natural disasters. In addition, stronger intelligence capabilities may enhance Japan's credibility within intelligence-sharing partnerships and support a more proactive national security strategy, especially if it aspires to join the Five Eyes.

¹⁶ [“Japan Launches National Intelligence Bureau Amid Counterespionage Push”](#), *Mainichi Shimbun*, 31 July 2026.

¹⁷ 谷内正太郎 [Yachi Shotaro], [“Vol. 3 人事、人材育成、NSSとの干渉...インテリジェンス・サイクル確立へ「国家情報局」の難題”](#) [“Human Resources, Personnel Training, Clashes with the NSS...Difficult Task Ahead for ‘National Intelligence Bureau’ on Path Towards Setting Up Intelligence Cycle”], *新潮QUE* [Shincho QUE], 7 August 2026.

¹⁸ Robert Alan Ward and Laurence Stobart, [“Japan’s Sweeping Intelligence Reforms”](#), no. 12.

However, the new and forthcoming agencies are also haunted by the spectre of the pre-war past. As a noted scholar of intelligence notes:

[o]ne can identify two general conceptual approaches to defining and understanding intelligence activity. The first conceives of intelligence primarily as a tool *to guide* policy. A second, more controversial, conception is of intelligence as not only a guide to decision making, but also as a tool *for the implementation* of policy.¹⁹

The *Kempeitai* and the *Tokko* were clearly expressions of the latter conception. In their mandate as well as their self-image, they came to represent—and implement—Japan’s gradual descent into the belligerence and atavism that led to the catastrophe of the Pacific War. As a democratic Japan, secure in its identity as a peace-loving country, embarks on the re-creation of its intelligence capabilities, concerns expressed by opposition lawmakers and sections of civil society in Japan and abroad retain some relevance, particularly as they pertain to the operational capabilities of the new organisations as well as the delicate issue of their political neutrality.

The scholar quoted above warns that ‘[t]here is a particular danger of politicisation when intelligence services are used as tools of policy’.²⁰ Japanese lawmakers need to concern themselves about whether the new agencies are adequately shielded from political interference or from displaying tendencies that favour ‘working towards the Führer [leader]’ (as was the case with the Nazi regime in the 1930s and the Soviet Union’s intelligence apparatus during the Stalinist era).²¹ This is particularly important given that the LDP has remained in office for almost the entirety of Japan’s post-war history. Similarly, tendencies within Japanese political and administrative culture dictating conformism and consensus-seeking would also need to be accounted for.

The formation of the new agencies would also be an appropriate occasion to envisage the suite of capabilities each would be endowed with. Would Japan’s foreign intelligence capabilities be best focused on cultivating HUMINT and SIGINT sources, or should it adopt the US’ lead and adopt rendition and enhanced interrogation as part of its toolkit? Would Japanese law, and its international commitments as a signatory to several human rights agreements, allow it to conduct targeted assassinations abroad or permit the US to set up so-called ‘black sites’ on its

¹⁹ Peter Jackson, “Historical Reflections on the Uses and Limits of Intelligence”, in Peter Jackson and Jennifer Siegel (eds), *Intelligence and Statecraft: The Use and Limits of Intelligence in International Society*, Praeger, Westport, Connecticut and London, 2005, p. 12. Italics in original.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

²¹ Ian Kershaw, “[‘Working Towards the Führer.’ Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship](#)”, *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 2, No. 2, July 1993, pp. 117–118.

territory? Would its strong privacy protections countenance wide-ranging domestic signals surveillance and mass collection of data by its counter-intelligence apparatus, as the US was revealed to be doing in 2013? How Japan answers these questions will be of interest to lawmakers and scholars all over the world, as they could potentially offer alternative models to the prevailing understanding of intelligence services dominated by studies of Western models.

Conclusion

The creation of the National Intelligence Council and National Intelligence Bureau marks a historic shift in Japan's national security policy. It offers allies and partners precious new opportunities for collaboration. The reforms aim to address longstanding weaknesses in intelligence coordination and prepare Japan for evolving geopolitical threats. However, their long-term success will undoubtedly depend on striking a fine balance between the universally acknowledged need to be forewarned (and forearmed) against contingencies and a liberal democracy's hallmark virtues of democratic accountability, transparency and respect for and protection of civil liberties.

About the Author



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