

Japan is building its own MI6 after 80 years, but how?

Citizens were delighted when the intelligence services were dismantled after the Second World War. Creating them anew will not be easy



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Before 1945, Japan had perhaps the most effective security services in Asia. At home, its feared Special Higher Police carried out surveillance of suspected spies and political dissidents. Abroad, agencies

After the end of the Second World War, however, and the creation of its American-authored postwar constitution, these organisations were dismantled and Japan was left with no foreign intelligence agency at all. The country had no law that specifically criminalised espionage, so it became known as a “spy’s paradise”.

Sanae Takaichi, the prime minister today, wants to change that. In recent weeks a law has been passed creating what is in effect a domestic intelligence agency. A National Intelligence Council will be formed as a kind of command centre, as well as a foreign intelligence agency from next year, and anti-espionage legislation to tackle Japan’s vulnerabilities.

It is a substantial task and will pose serious challenges for Takaichi’s government at home and abroad. The process is naturally shrouded in secrecy, but there are clues: Australia’s next ambassador to Japan, Andrew Shearer, used to be his country’s director-general of national intelligence, and Takaichi has publicly expressed her gratitude for the appointment of an ambassador with an intelligence background. Co-operation is said to have been sought with the United States and Germany’s foreign intelligence service, the BND.

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Britain may also be involved. Japanese officials are known to have looked closely, in the 2010s, at MI6 as a potential model for

assistance.

Japan used to be good at this. At the beginning of the 20th century, Makiyo Ishimitsu, graduate of Japan’s Army College, set up a laundrette in Russian-occupied Harbin, in Manchuria, northeast China, as a means of listening in on conversations by Russian soldiers. He established a chain of photo studios to the same end. Most famously, Takeo Yoshikawa toured the Hawaiian island of Oahu in 1941, by taxi, boat and plane. He noted the positions and movements of US military assets, helping to prepare the ground for the attack on Pearl Harbor that year.



Takeo Yoshikawa
CBS

This sort of activity did not end entirely after 1945. Japanese trade representatives and diplomatic staff would feed useful information back to Tokyo where they could, and Japan’s defence attaché system has been particularly useful in recent years. But while the nation is a world leader in signals intelligence — intercepting electronic communications — its human intelligence remains underdeveloped and it relies heavily on allies.

So how do you recruit enough spies to fill a new agency? Japan is thought to be looking at creating a training school whose graduates would work alongside personnel seconded from organisations including the National Police Agency and the Public Security Intelligence Agency. Direct recruitment from

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All this is likely to be a slow process. It took years for the Self-Defence Forces, Japan’s military in all but name, to gain their current shape and win public trust and approbation. In 2007 a junior officer copied highly sensitive data about the US Aegis radar system on to a compact disc, which he passed round fellow officers, who all made fresh copies for themselves. This was bad practice rather than proven malice, but it was one of several astonishing breaches that caused allies such as the US to regard Japan as dangerously leaky, and to rethink their co-operation. Should the job of creating Japan’s answer to MI6 be rushed, there is a risk of half-trained agents getting themselves into a mess around the world and ruining the agency’s reputation at the outset.

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It is not a universally welcomed idea at home either. The dismantling of espionage organisations after the Second World War was so popular in Japan that plans to create an equivalent of the FBI had to be shelved. Having lived under an authoritarian regime, people were fiercely protective of the civil liberties enshrined in the postwar constitution, from freedom of thought and speech to guaranteed due process. Critics have been on the lookout ever since for instances of state overreach, whether that be the Self-Defence Forces being called in to put down protests — as nearly happened in 1959-60 — or attempts to give police the sorts of intrusive powers they enjoyed before the war.

Anti-espionage legislation, in particular, could be controversial. Hirohito Ogi, a senior research fellow at the International House of Japan and a former official with Japan’s foreign and

Christopher Hughes, professor of international politics and Japanese studies at the University of Warwick, points out that Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party is adept at using media contacts to help manufacture a sense of necessity surrounding legislation of this kind. "The LDP are masterful at massaging public opinion and creating a sense of crisis to which [Japan](#) needs to respond," he said. If the party can combine this with assurances on privacy, then anti-espionage laws may well pass.



Sanae Takaichi in parliament this month

YUICHI YAMAZAKI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

There has certainly been growing recognition that Japan can no longer afford parts of its postwar settlement. The US remains a close ally, but a less predictable one. China, Russia and North Korea have made no secret of their evolving military capabilities. The same could be said of the decision, a few months ago, to lift longstanding restrictions on the supply of Japanese-made weapons to key allies, with the aim of developing its defence industry.

Japan's shift began in 2013 when Shinzo Abe, the late prime minister who mentored Takaichi, created a National Security Council to centralise security policy. He also passed a law allowing official secrets, something for which allies such as the US had been pushing after those dangerous leaks. Last year came an "active cyberdefence law", under which the government can monitor suspicious online activity and

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But it is Takaichi’s creation of a domestic National Intelligence Bureau, operating under the Council, that will be particularly significant. That is because it replaces an old system in which a jumble of competing agencies passed information they thought might be relevant up the line to the political leadership. The agencies will remain, but what Hughes describes as a “push” system is being replaced by a “pull”: government ministers can now require agencies to go out and gather specific intelligence, to meet their priorities and guarantee the country’s security.

Combined with the expected anti-spy legislation, these measures are intended to counter threats emerging on Japanese soil. This month The New York Times reported that agents expelled from various European countries had redeployed to Japan, including from Russia, partly in order to obtain components for weapons systems used in Ukraine.

At least as serious is the Chinese threat. This often went unreported, Hughes said, because Japan’s relations with China were at a low ebb and required delicate management. It would not be smart diplomacy to make a show of throwing Chinese diplomats out of the country. Nevertheless, there have been cases of Chinese people suspected of buying up land around Japanese military bases or trying to build ties with Japanese officials.

Having its own foreign intelligence agency and associated networks will not only help Japan to better protect itself. It will give it additional clout with allies as a valued source of

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But Japanese officials will be thinking hard about how to sell this new reality to the public. Look out, over the coming years, for attempts to use popular culture to shape how people inside and outside Japan think about this new agency — particularly if recruitment is open, rather than done by way of a tap on the shoulder. Manga and mascots have been used in the past to try to persuade the Japanese public of the virtues of the Self-Defence Forces. It may not be long before we encounter Japan’s answer to James Bond too.

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