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RATIONAL RADICALS:
JAPANESE FOREIGN POLICY IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Syrus Jin

Mentor: Colin Bassett

This research analyzes the foreign policy platform of the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and presents the view that the LDP has continued to seek a middle-course of balancing U.S. and national interests despite the rise of nominally nationalist LDP politicians to positions of leadership. The doctrine of pragmatic policy-making that subordinated national autonomy to economic growth developed among Japanese statesmen immediately after the end of U.S. occupation of Japan in the 1950s, amidst a debate between economic pragmatists and nationalist-orientated revisionists in the LDP, where the revisionists were ideologically characterized as having a more glorified view of Japan's imperial past and muscular notion of providing for Japanese security. Although the turn of the century has seen the rise in popularity and influence of LDP revisionists, the expansion of the Japanese military and the rise in Japanese military operations abroad has been more of a reflection of changes in geopolitical threats and developments in the region rather than pure ideological motivations. Additionally, a number of barriers prevent the implementation of aggressive revisionist policies, including the government bureaucracy and relations with the United States. The full defects of pursuing ideologically-based policies were shown when the DPJ opposition party held power from 2009-2012 and soon showed its inability to deal with institutional moderating factors. Despite the fact that LDP revisionists almost entirely controlled the office of the Prime Minister in the twenty-first century, Japan continues to go down a familiar path of taking pragmatic action devoid of nationalist rhetoric which demonstrates an inherent flexibility for future Japanese policies.