

2025

Meiji Journal of Governance Studies

Vol.11

Meiji University
Graduate School of
Governance Studies



Meiji Journal of Governance Studies

Vol. 11, 2025

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Assessing Police Accountability in Japan's Counterterrorism Activities:

**A Case Study of the Assassination of
the Former Prime Minister Using
the “Chain of Accountability” Framework***

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※ This research was supported by the JEPS KAKENHI Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (c) (Grant Number 24K04748).

Abstract

This study examines the institutional challenges to counterterrorism accountability in the Japanese police, using as its core a case study of the assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on 8 July 2022. The assassination's aftermath raised public concerns about the delay in disseminating information about the incident and the selective disciplinary action. The research question is, whether these accountability issues surrounding Abe's assassination are coincidental, or the inevitable outcomes of the institutional challenges within the Japanese police. The study hypothesizes that these are inherent systemic challenges in the chain of police accountability. The analysis utilizes a qualitative approach based on publicly available records and yields two key findings that support the hypothesis: 1) The institutional challenges within the 'chain of police accountability' may have contributed to the public dissatisfaction with the responsibility for the security failure in the incident; 2) The National Public Safety Commission, which oversees the police, is identified as a key player in improving the chain of police accountability. This study is the first comprehensive attempt to examine the chain of accountability within the Japanese police and identify the specific institutional challenges. The results have significant practical implications for enhancing police accountability in Japan.

Keywords: counterterrorism, police accountability, Japan, assassination, Shinzo Abe

Introduction

This study examines the institutional challenges to counterterrorism accountability in the Japanese police, centring on a case study: the assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on 8 July 2022. This event reverberated across the Japanese political and social spectrum, exposing vulnerabilities within the country's security framework and marking one of the most profound security breaches since the Japanese police was restructured after World War II.

The aftermath of the assassination prompted pertinent questions from the public, raising concerns about the delay in disseminating information about the incident, the selective disciplinary action that primarily targeted local prefectural police officers while exempting officers from the national agency, and the striking contrast between the punitive measures taken against senior police officers and those taken against elected political leaders, who remained unscathed. The specific research question is, whether the abovementioned accountability issues surrounding Abe's assassination are coincidental or the inevitable outcomes of the institutional challenges within Japan's police apparatus. This study hypothesizes that these challenges are institutionally inherent in the chain of accountability of the current police system.

Although previous studies have analyzed various aspects of the Japanese police system, its accountability is yet to be comprehensively explored. Tamura's pioneering analysis (2011) provides a comprehensive overview of the Japanese police system but does not focus on accountability issues. Recent studies on specific aspects of police accountability, such as civilian police oversight (Kobayashi 2020, Hirai 2021) and police-public communication (Kobayashi 2022), offer essential insights. However, research providing a comprehensive analysis of police accountability in Japan is still scant. Furthermore, while the previous studies generally agree

that the accountability of the Japanese police could be more robust, they tend to rely on conceptual arguments rather than empirical evidence based on actual cases. The present study seeks to bridge this gap by providing a broader institutional analysis of accountability in the Japanese police, by using a significant event, the assassination of a former Prime Minister, as a case study to — empirically explore the challenges of police accountability.

After the assassination, the Japanese police tightened counterterrorism measures surrounding dignitary protection. In a democratic society, there must be parity between strengthening security measures and appropriate democratic control over the authorities based on accountability. This study contributes to enhancing the accountability of the counterterrorism measures of the Japanese police.

This study analyzed the case study using the 'chain of police accountability' framework and qualitative research methods that include content analysis of official documents from relevant organizations, such as meeting minutes and transcripts of press conferences, and the interpretation of relevant laws and regulations. Informal interviews with current or former police officials were also conducted to supplement the analysis. This approach is widely used for evaluating the accountability features of institutions and systems.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a summary of the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe, followed by an overview of the academic arguments on police accountability. Section 3 provides an overview of the Japanese police system, Section 4 narrates and examines the actions of key stakeholders in response to the assassination, and Section 5 provides the case analysis and discussion of the institutional factors contributing to accountability challenges in Japan's police system based on the assassination. Section 6 summarises the findings and concludes.

The assassination of Shinzo Abe and police accountability

On 8 July 2022, Japan's former Prime Minister and incumbent member of the House of Representatives, Shinzo Abe, was assassinated by gunfire. The incident occurred at approximately 11:30 a.m. while Abe was making a campaign speech in front of the Yamato-Saidaiji station in Nara City, Nara Prefecture, Japan. The perpetrator, a 41-year-old unemployed male, was immediately apprehended at the scene. According to the police, the perpetrator acted alone and used a homemade handgun, violating Japan's strict firearms regulations (National Police Agency 2022, p. 1). On 13 January 2023, the Nara District Public Prosecutor's Office announced that it indicted him of homicide and violation of the Firearms Act. The motive and background of the incident have not been officially confirmed, as the case has not yet gone to trial as of the time of writing this manuscript.¹

Former or current Prime Minister assassinations are unprecedented in post-World War II Japan, although six assassinations of Prime Ministers took place before the war, the most recent being that of Makoto Saito in February 1936.

Definition of police accountability

De Boer (2021) argues that accountability can be defined as 'a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her

conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor may face consequences' (De Boer 2021; Bovens 2007, p. 450). An actor and a forum can also be called agents and principals. His study points out that accountability requires a social relationship between an account giver and an account holder. Takahashi (2015) and others note that the core elements of this relationship are answerability and sanction (Takahashi 2015, pp. 19, 24–25). Answerability can be defined as 'the obligation of public officials to inform about their activities and to justify them' (Schedler 1999, p. 26). An agent (or actor) informs a principal (or forum) about its conduct, who evaluates that conduct and may sanction or reward according to its judgment (De Boer 2021). In a democratic political system, people are principals, while public actors such as elected legislators and government agencies are agents; the former holds the latter accountable. Many studies acknowledge that accountability is crucial for the police in a democratic society (UNODC 2011, p. 9; Walker and Archbold 2020, p. 10).

Chain of accountability

Research on accountability varies, ranging from comprehensive studies of a society or an organization to technical or narrow studies of individual behavior. This study focuses on the institutional challenges in the police system in Japan, specifically the chain of accountability within the police system.² De Boer (2021) outlines the primary argument for the chain of accountability in democratic governments as follows. First, accountability flows upward through a hierarchy, with public servants accountable to their minister, the minister accountable to Parliament, and Parliament accountable to the voters during elections. Second, accountability functions correctly when each actor functions accountable to their superior, creating a single chain of accountability from policy implementers to voters.³ Similarly, Walker and Archbold (2020) explain a chain of accountability in the U.S. police system.

Law enforcement agencies are ultimately accountable to the public through the political process, by which elected officials translate the will of the public into public policy. Through their control of budgets and appointments, elected officials exercise control and oversight of the law enforcement agencies. Mayors appoint police chiefs, governors appoint the heads of state police agencies, and the president appoints the attorney general and the director of the FBI (Walker and Archbold 2020, p. 11).

Although this model is a simplified and ideal representation, and actual situations in different communities may differ in complexity, the underlying assumptions of this illustration are: 1) The chain of police accountability establishes a link between the public, who serves as the primary principal, and the police, who act as the agent. 2) If any part of the chain has deficiencies, such as insufficient sanctioning powers or gaps between answerability and sanctions, overall police accountability can become weak. 3) When police accountability is weak, the public may not get the explanations they want, or the actors the public believe should be punished may not receive the sanctions they deserve. 4) The longer and more complex the chain of accountability, the higher the likelihood of flawed or problematic elements in the chain.

Japan's post-war police system

The police system in Japan was overhauled entirely after World War II with the Police Act (PA) in 1947. The revised PA of 1952 established the framework for the current police system based on two main principles: democratic police administration and political neutrality (National Police Agency 2004, p. 68). Figure 1 provides an overview of current Japan's police system. Each of Japan's 47 prefectures has a local police force (PA, Article 36). However, the National Police Agency (NPA), as a part of the central government, is responsible for setting policies on police affairs and coordinating the activities of the prefectural police forces. The Public Safety Commission (PSC) system supervises the police at both national and local prefectural levels.

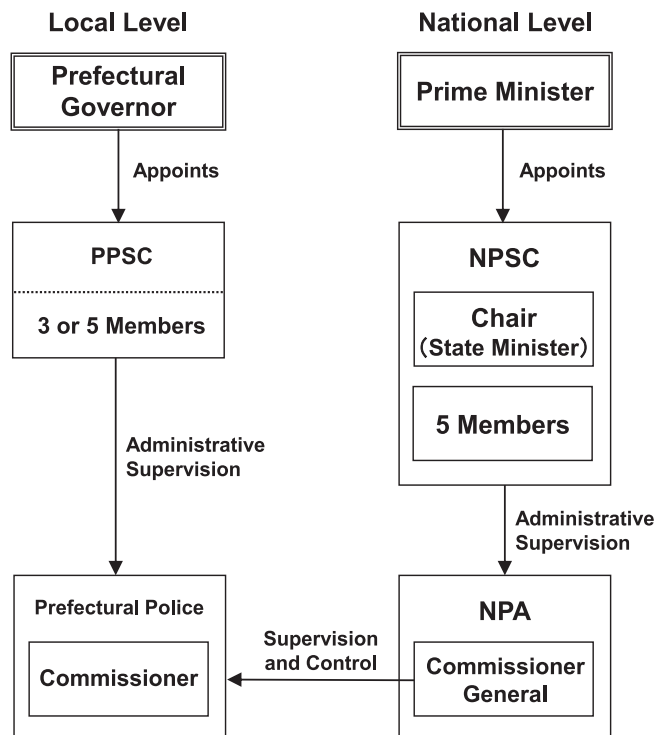


Figure 1 Japan's police structure (Source: NPA 2020, p. 3).

The NPSC appoints the NPA commissioner-general with the approval of the Prime Minister. The NPSC appoints the commissioner of each prefectural police with the consent of the respective PPSC, while the appointment of the commissioner general of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police also needs the approval of the Prime Minister. PPSC: Prefectural Public Safety Commission; NPSC: National Public Safety Commission; NPA: National Police Agency.

Democratic police administration: A mixture of nominal decentralization and quasi-centralization

Article 92 of the Constitution of Japan, enacted in 1946, advocates decentralization and, in light of the experiences before and during the war, aims to prevent abuse of authority while ensuring that the administration fully reflects the people's will. The idea comes from the democratic thought that was not fully realized in prewar and wartime Japan. Based on this idea,

one of the essential concepts behind the current police system for democratic administration is the decentralization of power to local prefectures. There are 47 prefectures in Japan. In principle, the local police of each prefecture are independent of the central government and responsible for conducting police affairs within their jurisdiction (PA, Article 36).

Despite the nominal principle of decentralization, PA allows some national-level institutions to exert some influence over local prefectural police forces. This mechanism is intended to adjust the inefficiencies caused by excessive decentralization (Tamura 2022, pp. 15–17). First, the National Public Safety Commission (NPSC) is responsible for police administration matters. PA grants the NPSC the almost exclusive authority to appoint, dismiss, and discipline the commissioners and senior officers (above the rank of senior superintendent) of all prefectural police forces (PA, Article 49 (1), Article 50 (1), Article 55 (3) and Article 56).⁴ Second, under the supervision of the NPSC, the NPA is responsible for policy planning for the police administration and coordinating trans-prefectural police operations (Tamura 2022, pp. 489–505). The NPA also controls and supervises the prefectural police forces under its jurisdiction (PA, Article 16 (2)). Third, certain expenses of the prefectural police are financed from the national budget (PA, Article 37). In summary, under the principle of decentralization, with some exceptions, the involvement of national agencies in prefectural police is indirect, through the personnel, budgets, and setting standards for police activities (Tamura 2022, p. 497).⁵

Thus, Japan's police system combines a nominal decentralized local prefectural police system with a de facto quasi-centralized national police system. The former is for democracy, while the latter is for efficient operation.⁶

Political neutrality of the police through the National Public Safety Commission mechanism

Police in Japan are outside the direct command of political leaders such as cabinet ministers, prefectural governors, or municipal mayors. Instead, they are under the supervision of the PSC. PSCs are collegial bodies composed of members who are public representatives. PA stipulates that each local prefecture has a prefectural PSC (PPSC), which supervises the prefectural police (PA, Article 38 (1)).

At the national level, the NPSC supervises the NPA (PA, Article 5 (4)). Its chair is the cabinet minister, appointed and dismissed by the Prime Minister (PA, Article 6 (1)). As is customary in Japan's parliamentary system, an elected member of the Diet is appointed to this position, although this is not mandatory. The Prime Minister appoints the other five NPSC members with the Diet's consent (PA, Article 7 (1)). Each non-chair member's tenure is five years, with the possibility of one reappointment (PA, Article 8). PA carefully defines the requirements for NPSC members to exclude any political or partisan nature, except to keep the chair for the cabinet minister (PA, Articles 7 (4) (5) and 9). Typically, non-chair members are drawn from the legal profession, media, academia, business, and the like, but never politicians. Similarly, at the local level, the governor of each prefecture appoints the members (three or five) of the PPSC with the consent of the prefectural assembly (PA, Article 39 (1)). Each member's tenure is three years, with the possibility of two reappointments (PA, Article 40). The chair is elected by the members of the PPSC (PA, Article 43 (1)). As with the NPSC, PA carefully specifies the requirements for PPSC members to exclude any political or partisan character; politicians cannot be elected either (PA, Article 39 (2) (3) and 41).

The PSC system is designed to ensure the political neutrality of the police. First, the NPSC and PPSCs supervise the police and exercise other powers independently, without being subject to the direct control and supervision of political leaders such as the Prime Minister or prefectural governors (Tamura 2022, p. 387). This differs significantly from the system in some other countries, where national police forces are under the direct control of the cabinet minister in charge of internal affairs or justice, and local police forces are under the direct control of elected local political leaders (such as state governors and municipal mayors).

Second, PSC's 'supervision' over the police does not mean direct command and control of individual cases, only setting general policies for the management of the police (Tamura 2022, pp. 395–397, Ogino 2010, p. 122).⁷ In other words, the PSC's authority to supervise the police is interpreted narrowly. In addition, although the PPSC in each prefecture supervises the prefectural police force, it has virtually no power to appoint, dismiss, or discipline the prefectural police commissioner it supervises. Instead, the NPSC holds these powers despite the nominal principle of a decentralized police system. This design also implies that the PPSC's sanctioning power over the prefectural police commissioner is limited.⁸ This indicates a discrepancy between the mission and authority of the PPSCs.

Third, PA provides vital protection for the status of each member of the NPSC and the PPSCs. While the Prime Minister or the governor of each prefecture has the authority to select and appoint these members, the appointing authority cannot arbitrarily dismiss them unless certain conditions stipulated by the law are met, such as severe mental or physical disorder, and serious misconduct (PA, Articles 9 and 41); (the exception is the NPSC chair, a cabinet minister). This design implies that the appointing authority's sanctioning power over NPSC or PPSC members is only partial.

These systems based on 'mistrust of politics and politicians' come from Japan's unique historical background. In Japan's previous police system before and during the war, the minister of internal affairs and prefectural governors directly controlled the police, often abusing these powers. Postwar historical reviews have suggested that such a system was vulnerable to politicization and that this was one of the significant factors that led the country to militarism. Based on the lessons learnt, the new postwar police system, especially the PSC mechanism, does its best to ensure the political neutrality of the police (Tamura 2022, pp. 387–391).

A chain of police accountability

As a result, the accountability of the Japanese police system is institutionally and logically weaker than in the United States and other Western developed countries. First, in Japan, the commissioner of each prefectural police force is responsible for maintaining public safety and investigating crimes within their jurisdiction (PA, Articles 36 and 48). However, even if the local public is not satisfied with the performance of the local police or their explanations, it is almost impossible for them to hold prefectural police commissioners accountable through local voting (i.e. sanctioning) rights. This is because PA grants prefectural-level local actors (such as prefectural governors and the PPSCs) almost no sanctioning powers (i.e., to appoint, dismiss, or discipline) over the prefectural police commissioners. In other words, these local actors are virtually excluded from the chain of police accountability, mainly due to the PSC system's deliberate exclusion of political influence.

Second, PA grants the NPSC the sanctioning authority over prefectural police

commissioners despite the nominal principle of the decentralization. From the public's perspective, it can be arduous for them to hold prefectural police commissioners accountable through the NPSC and its secretariat, the NPA.⁹

Thus, the two major distinctive features of the Japanese police — the PSC system to ensure the political neutrality of the police and the mixed system of decentralization and centralization — are logically structured to sacrifice democratic accountability.

Actions of the primary actors after Abe's assassination:

An analysis of accountability

This section provides an overview of the actions taken by primary actors in the chain of police accountability immediately after the assassination. This study focuses on the actors' external communications and the sanctions faced, because answerability and sanctions are the core elements of the accountability concept. Two groups of actors are targeted: those at the local level in Nara Prefecture (the Prefecture Governor, the Nara PPSC, and Nara Prefecture Police Commissioner) and those at the national level (the Prime Minister, NPSC, and NPA commissioner-general (NPA-CG)). The study period covers the time from the day of the incident, 8 July, to 25 August, when the NPA released its review report.

The study relies primarily on public documents published by each actor, including press conference transcripts and minutes of meetings held by the NPSC and the Nara PPSC.¹⁰ Media reports and the author's interviews with some officials were used as secondary sources only when necessary to identify actors' informal activities. Tables 1 and 2 summarise the survey results.

Table 1 Official press conference on Shinzo Abe's assassination held by major political leaders and police executives.

	National Level			Local Level: Nara Prefecture		
	Prime Minister	NPSC Chair	NPA-CG	Governor	PPSC Chair	Police Commissioner
8 July	△*	x	x	x	x	x**
9 July	x	x	x	x	x	○
12 July	x	○	○	x	x	x
13 July	x	○	○	x	x	x
24 Aug						
25 Aug	x	○	○	x	x	○

Source: Author.

Note: Circles indicate that each actor actively participated in an incident-specific press conference. Cases in which actors passively responded to questions about the incident at regular or routine media briefings are omitted. NPSC: National Public Safety Commission; PPSC: Prefecture Public Safety Commission; NPA-CG: National Police Agency Commissioner-General

* Prime Minister Kishida held a brief press conference on the incident. However, his primary purpose was to deliver a political statement.

** Nara Prefecture Police held a press conference on the matter on the evening of the same day. However, the Police Commissioner did not attend.

Table 2 The punishments imposed on the main actors involved.

National Level	Official (Legal) Punishment	Unofficial (Political) Punishment
Prime Minister	x	x
NPSC Chair	x	x
NPA Commissioner-General	x	Voluntary resignation*
Local Level: Nara Prefecture	Official (Legal) Punishment	Unofficial (Political) Punishment
Prefecture Governor	x	x
Nara PPSC Chair	x	x
Nara Prefecture Police Commissioner	Disciplinary salary cut imposed by the NPSC	Voluntary resignation**

Source: The author.

Note: * The NPA-CG avoided clarifying the reason for his resignation, stating, 'It is a good time to renew the minds of the NPA staff'.

** The Nara Prefecture Police Commissioner clearly stated he was resigning taking liability for the assassination incident.

Phase I (8–12 July)

Among the significant actors, only Prime Minister Fumio Kishida held an official press conference on the day of the incident (8 July), the first around 2:45 p.m. and the second around 7 p.m., both relatively short ones at his official residence. The primary purpose was to convey a political message; he did not touch on the details of the incident or the responsibility for the failure of security operations.^{11, 12}

At the local level, officials of Nara Prefecture Police held a press conference at 9:30 p.m. the same day (for about 1 hour and 15 minutes), mainly on the technical matters of the investigation and security arrangement; Nara Prefecture Police Commissioner did not attend.

On 9 July at 4:30 p.m., the day after the incident, Tomoaki Onizuka, Nara Prefecture Police Commissioner, held his first press conference since the incident (for about 40 minutes) and admitted his responsibility for the security failure.¹³ On 12 July, four days after the incident, Satoshi Ninoyu, the NPSC Chair (a member of the House of Councillors and a cabinet minister), held his first official press conference on the incident: the first around 10:45 a.m. (for about five minutes), and the second one at around 5:30 p.m. (for about 20 minutes) after the NPSC meeting (NPSC Minutes and Press Conference Transcript, 12 July 2022).

The first time Itaru Nakamura, NPA-CG, attended an official press conference on the case was on 12 July, four days after the incident, at a joint press conference with the NPSC Chair after the NPSC special session (for about 20 minutes starting at 5:30 p.m.), where it was revealed that the NPA had made its first official report on the assassination case to the NPSC at the special meeting, that it had established a special task force to review the incident, and that the NPSC had approved the review plan (NPSC Minutes and Press Conference Transcript, 12 July 2022). According to official records, Nara Prefecture Governor and the Nara PPSC Chair did not convene any official conference focusing on this incident during this period (8–12 July).

Phase II (13 July–24 August)

In this period, official records indicate that the NPSC held 10 regular and special sessions at which the NPA reported on the work of its review task force. After each session, the NPSC Chair and the NPA-CG held a joint press conference (NPSC Minutes and Press Conference Transcript, 14 July–23 August 2022).

Local official records show that neither Nara Prefecture Governor and the PPSC nor Nara Prefecture Police actively explained the assassination case to the public. During this period, the Nara PPSC held eight regular and special sessions. Official records indicate that the Nara PPSC repeatedly ordered Nara Prefecture Police to cooperate fully with the NPA's review work. However, there is no evidence that the PPSC has conducted its own proactive and independent review of the incident (Nara PPSC Minutes, July–August 2022).

Phase III (25 August)

At the NPSC session on 25 August, the NPA submitted its final version of the review report on the incident. At the same time, the NPSC decided to impose disciplinary measures of a three-month's pay cut and a one-month's pay cut on the commissioner and the director of the security division, respectively, of Nara Prefecture Police.

On the same day, the Nara Prefecture Police Commissioner held a special press conference to announce that he had accepted liability for the incident and submitted his resignation to the NPSC and the NPA, which was accepted. Then, at a press conference following the NPSC meeting, the NPA-CG announced he had submitted his voluntary resignation to the NPSC, which the NPSC had accepted. However, as to the exact reason for his resignation, the NPA-CG only said, 'It is a good time to renew the minds of the NPA staff.' When asked by the press, 'Is it correct to say that you are resigning to take liability for this issue?', the NPA-CG replied, 'There can be various interpretations,' avoiding a clear answer.

Note that none of the NPA officials has still been formally disciplined. The NPA-CG stated at a press conference on 25 August: 'The NPA was not directly involved in this specific security operation in Nara, and there was no discussion (at the NPSC) that any individual NPA official should take liability (NPSC Minutes and Press Conference Transcript, 25 August 2022).

Discussion

Appropriateness of the timing of the explanation to the public concerning the developments in the situation

The public had questions about the delay in explaining the incident. At the local level, the first press conference by the Nara Prefecture Police Commissioner took place at 4:30 p.m. on 9 July, almost 30 hours after the incident. At the national level, the NPSC Chair and the NPA-CG held their first official press conference on the incident on 12 July, four days later. Some perceived these actions as too late. For example, at the NPSC meeting on 14 July, a committee member pointed out that the Nara Prefecture Police Commissioner should have held a press conference on the day of the incident. During the 12 July press conference, a reporter asked the

NPA-CG why he had waited four days, implying that his public explanation was slow in coming (NPSC Minutes and Press Conference Transcript, 12 July and 14 July 2022).

Example of the Boston Marathon terrorist attacks

In comparison, the Boston Marathon terrorist attacks occurred in the U.S. on 15 April 2013, at approximately 2:45 p.m.. The first official press conference was held at 4:50 p.m., about two hours after the incident, attended by the Governor of Massachusetts, the Boston Police Commissioner, and others. On the same day, prominent local political leaders and law enforcement officials, including the Massachusetts State Governor, the Boston City Mayor, the Boston Police Commissioner, and the Chief of the FBI's Boston field office, held at least four formal press conferences. At the national level, then U.S. president Barack Obama held an emergency press conference in Washington, D.C., at 6:10 p.m. the same day (Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency 2014, pp. 19-23).

Activities of the NPA-CG

During the 12 July press conference, asked about the timing of the conference, the NPA-CG provided the following response in summary: (1) The NPA was immediately occupied with collecting and analysing information related to the incident. (2) The NPA had just completed its initial report to the NPSC, and the NPSC approved the NPA's incident review plan. (3) Taking these circumstances into consideration, the NPA has determined that it was appropriate to hold a press conference at that timing (NPSC Minutes and Press Conference Transcript, 12 July 2022). This statement indicates that the NPA-CG's priority was to fulfil his answerability to the NPSC, which holds primary supervision and sanctioning power over the NPA and the NPA-CG.

Activities of the Nara Prefecture Police Commissioner

As described above, the NPA-CG and the NPA were preoccupied with preparing their report to the NPSC immediately after the incident. They prepared it by communicating with the Nara Prefecture Police and the Commissioner for several days after the incident. A former NPA official familiar with the situation at the time confirmed this.¹⁴ the NPSC has primary sanctioning authority over the Nara Prefecture Police Commissioner, and the NPA serves as the NPSC secretariat. Additionally, it is standard practice for the NPA to draft personnel decisions issued by the NPSC. In these circumstances, it is understandable that the Nara Prefecture Police Commissioner would prioritize fulfilling his answerability to the NPSC through the NPA channel.

Comparison between the Nara case and the Boston case

The first public communications of the Nara Prefecture Police Commissioner and the NPA-CG appear to have been delayed, compared to the response during the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing in the U.S.. Nonetheless, the actions taken by the NPA-CG and the Nara Prefecture Police Commissioner immediately following the incident can be deemed reasonable when evaluated in the context of the chain of accountability in Japan, which involves answerability and sanctions. The same is true in both countries: police officials prioritized

reporting and answering to the primary sanctioning authority for themselves in the chain of accountability. The distinction lies in the form of the accountability chain in the two countries.

Local law enforcement executives in Boston may have prioritized responding to elected local political leaders, as they have primary sanction authority over law enforcement agencies. Also, the political leaders have direct accountability to the public for supervising police matters. As a result, elected local political leaders may have considered it appropriate to hold press conferences with law enforcement executives promptly to answer to the public. In other words, the heads of U.S. police agencies are more likely to be answerable to the public by fulfilling their answerability to their primary account-givers (elected political leaders). The clear and direct chain of accountability in the U.S. police could have facilitated the rapid responses to the public.

By contrast, the chain of police accountability is longer and more complicated in Japan, making it institutionally challenging for the Japanese police to effectively communicate their answerability to the public through the established chain of accountability. In the Nara case, the actions of the NPA-CG and the Nara Prefecture Police Commissioner may have been different if the NPSC, which holds primary sanctioning authority, had directed them to furnish explanations to the public immediately. However, it is unrealistic to expect the NPSC to have the incentive to take such actions, as the institutional chain of accountability connecting the NPSC and the public is long and complicated. NPSC members' status is strongly protected from possible sanctions. A former NPA official also confirmed that no specific instructions to take an action came from the NPSC.¹⁵

The distinction in responsibility between national and local entities

The public may question why, despite such a major nationwide incident, only local prefectural police officers were formally disciplined, while NPA officials were exempted from punishment. For instance, one reporter raised this issue at the 25 August press conference on the resignation of the NPA-CG. At the NPSC meeting on July 12 and August 4, some members also requested the NPA to scrutinize the institutional relations between national and local levels under the current police system (NPSC Minutes and Press Conference Transcript, 12 July, 4 August, 25 August 2022).

Some argue that these official disciplinary actions are rational consequences of the nominally decentralized present police system. Official records indicate that most NPSC members and NPA-CG took this assumption for granted. For example, at the NPSC meeting on 19 July, one member pointed out that the NPSC had no supervising authority over the operations of the prefectural police. Also, at the 25 August press conference, the NPA-CG clearly stated that the NPA was not directly involved in the security measures taken by Nara Prefecture Police; thus, no NPA official needed to be formally disciplined (NPSC Minutes and Press Conference Transcript, 19 July, 25 August 2022).¹⁶

By contrast, it is theoretically possible that the NPA-CG and other NPA officials could have faced formal disciplinary actions for the failure of the security measures for the Prime Minister.¹⁷ However, the NPSC, which has primary disciplinary authority over the NPA-CG, did not take formal disciplinary action against it. If the public were dissatisfied with this situation, in theory, NPSC should have provided a clear explanation and response within the chain of accountability to resolve the discrepancy in public perception. However, there are no records of the issue in its official minutes, nor is there any record of the NPSC Chair's press conference

explaining the matter. The reason for the insufficient explanation has remained unclear. It is possible that the law provides crucial protection for the status of NPSC members; the Prime Minister, the primary account giver to the NPSC, might not be able to ensure NPSC's answerability due to his limited sanctioning authority over it.

Differences in the responsibility of elected political leaders and of non-elected officials

The public may question why, despite such a severe incident, only senior police officials were ultimately punished, while elected political leaders, whether official (legal) or unofficial (political), were exempted. Security measures are indeed technical matters, and police executives should bear primary responsibility for the operational failure. However, the question remains whether some political leaders also should be liable for their roles in supervising police affairs.

At the local level, elected political leaders, including the Nara Prefecture Governor, are virtually separate from the chain of police accountability. Thus, they are considered to be cleared of any official and unofficial (i.e. legal and political) punishment. By contrast, at the national level, the Prime Minister and the NPSC Chair (cabinet minister) are the actors in the chain of police accountability. The latter might be held responsible politically (rather than legally) for this incident. In the aftermath of the assassination, former Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori made the assertion in a media interview that the NPSC Chair should assume responsibility for the matter and resign.¹⁸ The notion was also put forth by several other political leaders in an informal context.¹⁹ Following a similar precedent, Prime Minister Kishida, who is a primary account giver over the NPSC Chair, could have asked the NPSC Chair to tender his resignation.²⁰ However, it did not occur, and the NPSC Chair stayed in the position. From the perspective of a chain of police accountability, if the public were dissatisfied with this situation in theory, the Prime Minister should have provided a clear explanation and response within the chain of accountability to resolve the discrepancy in public perception. However, there is yet no official record of this. The reason for the Prime Minister's insufficient explanation has remained unclear. This situation might be related to the fact that, under the current parliamentary cabinet system, it is not easy for the public to ensure the answerability of the Prime Minister and cabinet ministers.

Challenges for the NPSC system: Tug of war between police political neutrality and democratic accountability

The situational analysis suggests that the institutional challenges within the chain of police accountability may play a role in all the three issues examined, regarding the public dissatisfaction with assigning responsibility for the security failure. The points worth noting are as follows.

First, this conclusion does not claim to prove a causal relationship between the two (i.e. accountability challenges and public dissatisfaction). Other factors could contribute to the latter. Nevertheless, the analysis based on the 'chain of police accountability' framework provides a logical and robust explanation for the observed circumstances, indicating that these issues may be more institutional than accidental.

Second, two of the three cases addressed suggest that NPSC is one of the key players in improving overall police accountability in Japan. The current police system grants the NPSC many immunities for the sake of the political neutrality of the police. A possible side effect of this is that the NPSC may have difficulty ensuring its accountability, especially answerability, since accountability is an interaction between answerability and sanctions in theory. For example, publicly available NPSC meeting minutes are only short abstracts. In addition, when asked during press conferences about the details of the meetings, the NPSC chairpersons have, in some cases, responded that full disclosure of the discussion details is inappropriate to prevent possible attrition in candid discussions (NPSC Minutes and Press Conference Transcript, 21 July 2022). Thus, further exploration of the balance between NPSC's reluctance toward more transparency and its responsibility of answering to the public is necessary.

Conclusion

This study examines the institutional challenges to counter terrorism accountability in the Japanese police. The research centres on a case study: the assassination of Shinzo Abe. The assassination's aftermath raised concerns about the delay in disseminating information about the incident and about the selective disciplinary action that primarily targeted local prefectural police officers, while exempting officers from the national agency and elected political leaders. The specific research question was, whether the accountability issues surrounding Abe's assassination mentioned above are coincidental or inevitable outcomes resulting from institutional challenges in the police? This study hypothesized that these challenges are institutionally inherent in the chain of accountability of the police system; the analysis predominantly utilizes a qualitative approach based on publicly available records.

The key findings that support the hypothesis are as follows. 1) The institutional challenges in the 'chain of police accountability' may be contributing to public dissatisfaction with the responsibility for the security failure in the incident. 2) The NPSC, which oversees the police, is a key player that can improve the chain of police accountability. While the findings illuminate the institutional challenges of police accountability in Japan, they are limited by the scope of a single case study and the use of publicly available records. Therefore, caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings beyond this context.

Despite these limitations, the study is the first comprehensive attempt to examine the chain of accountability in Japan's police system and identify the specific institutional challenges to police accountability. The findings contribute to the existing literature on police accountability in Japan and have important practical implications for enhancing police accountability in the country. For instance, further research on the NPSC system in the context of democratic accountability, such as exploring the balance between the political neutrality of the police and the NPSC's responsiveness to the public, can be helpful. Additionally, future studies should consider broader and more diverse case studies to attain a more comprehensive understanding of the institutional challenges of police accountability in Japan.

On 15 April 2023, while the incumbent Prime Minister Fumio Kishida was giving a campaign speech, a member of the audience threw an explosive device at him. The incident ended without any damage, but the circumstances of police accountability (e.g. explanations to the public and punishment of those responsible for security failures) were similar to those in the

Abe assassination case. The repetition suggests that the issue of police accountability in Japan is not accidental but institutional.

Notes

- 1 According to some media reports, the perpetrator's mother was a member of the Unification Church, and her large donations to the organization led to a breakdown in the family relationship and the perpetrator's deep resentment towards the organization. These reports suggest that the perpetrator perceived Abe as a prominent political patron of the Unification Church, strengthening his resentment towards Abe (*Asahi Shimbun Newspaper*, 7 January 2023. Jūgeki chokugo ni katatte ita 'fukai kankei' kyōdan-mei o fusesuzukeata keisatsu no uchimaku [The perpetrator mentioned Abe's deep connection with the cult immediately after the shooting, 'the inside story of the police who kept hiding the cult name']). Note that the organization is designated a legitimate non-profit organization under Japan's Religious Incorporated Organization Law.
- 2 Several studies have analyzed the practical and tactical aspects of police accountability, including the examination of external monitoring entities, complaint review processes, information disclosure mechanisms, incidents of excessive force, police training programs, and the utilization of body-worn cameras by law enforcement officers (UNODC 2010, pp. 5–10, James, 2020, Archbold 2021, pp. 1666–669).
- 3 Peters (2014) also mentions that 'The assumption in democratic governments is that civil servants within a public organization are accountable to their superiors within the organization and that as a whole they are accountable to their minister, and that the minister is accountable to parliament' (Peters 2014, p. 217).
- 4 Strictly speaking, the PPSC of each prefecture also has the authority to consent to the appointment of a prefectural police commissioner by the NPSC and to make recommendations to the NPSC regarding the dismissal and discipline of a prefectural police commissioner (PA, Article 49 and 50). However, no known cases exist where PPSCs have invoked these powers.
- 5 Note that NPA's practical influence over the prefectural police may be more significant than what the system shows. This is because NPSC has virtually exclusive authority to sanction (appoint, dismiss, and discipline) the commissioners of the prefectural police forces. The NPA has the functions of the secretariat of the NPSC (PA, Article 13). For example, according to official records, the NPA drafts all personnel decisions issued by the NPSC and the NPSC merely confirms these proposals. Moreover, most of the prefectural police commissioners appointed by the NPSC come from the NPA. It is not an exaggeration to say that the positions of prefectural police commissioners are, in fact, part of the NPA's personnel rotation mechanism. An earlier study points out that the NPA has indirectly but substantially achieved effective control over local prefectural police nationwide through such a personnel mechanism (Ichise 2017, pp. 70–71).
- 6 The complexity and uniqueness of the system are due to its complex historical background (National Police Agency 2004, p. 68, Tamura 2022, pp. 11–17). The concept of a centralized police system originated from the French police system imported in the late 19th century and prevailed in Japan until the end of World War II. By contrast, the idea of a decentralized system originates from the American police system imported after the war. The latter was somewhat forcefully 'grafted' onto the former under the exceptional historical circumstance of defeat in the war.
- 7 These 'general policies' mean 'rules for the management of affairs and other basic directions or methods that police forces should follow in handling their business,' according to Article 2 (3) of the Operational Rules of the National Public Safety Commission (Ogino 2010, p. 122).

- 8 At the national level, the NPSC supervises the NPA and has the authority to appoint, dismiss, and discipline the NPA-CG (PA, Article 16 (1)).
- 9 This is due to the very long chain of accountability from the public to the NPSC and the solid protection of the position of the NPSC members by the PA. The Prime Minister appoints NPSC members with the Diet's consent (PA, Article 7). The NPSC, in turn, appoints the NPA-CG with the permission of the Prime Minister (PA, Article 16). The Prime Minister is selected by a vote of the Diet members under the parliamentary cabinet system, not by a direct vote of the people. In sum, all these actors who have direct or indirect authority to sanction prefecture police commissioners are not subject to the direct vote of the public. In addition, the PA provides vital protection for the status of each member of the NPSC. Although the Prime Minister can choose and appoint these members, it's legal authority to dismiss committee members (except for the NPSC Chair) is minimal. In other words, the Prime Minister's sanctioning power over the NPSC is only partial.
- 10 The NPSC Session Minutes Archive <https://www.npsc.go.jp/act/index.html> The NPSC and the NPA Press Conference Transcripts Archive <https://www.npsc.go.jp/notice/briefing/index.html>; The Nara PPSC Session Minutes Archive https://www.police.pref.nara.jp/kouaniin/kaisai_kekka.html.
- 11 'The Prime Minister expressed deep condolences to Mr. Abe and encouraged the public to remain calm and continue the election campaign', The Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 8 July 2022; Press Conference by the Prime Minister on the Attack Perpetrated against Former Prime Minister ABE Shinzo, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202207/_00002.html; Press Conference by Prime Minister Kishida on the Passing of Former Prime Minister ABE Shinzo, The Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 8 July 2022, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202207/_00004.html
- 12 According to some media reports, the NPSC Chair, Satoshi Ninoyu, briefly responded to informal media inquiries that evening. However, he did not mention the incident's details or the security operations' responsibility (*Yomiuri News Web*, 8 July 2022). <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/20220708-OYT1T50248/>
- 13 *NHK News Web*, 9 July 2022. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20220709/k10013710041000.html>
- 14 Author's private interview with a former NPA official.
- 15 Author's private interview with a former NPA official.
- 16 Note that such an official logic contradicts several actions of those involved. First, the national institutions (NPSC and NPA) were central in reviewing this incident. By contrast, the Nara PPSC and the Nara Prefecture Police, despite their nominal jurisdiction over this incident, virtually gave up taking any initiative role in the review. Second, the NPA-CG voluntarily resigned after the review. It can be inferred that the NPA-CG felt he had to take political liability, although he refused to admit it formally. This situation may suggest that the NPSC members and the NPA-CG may, in fact, genuinely recognise the problem (of the ambiguity in the distinction in responsibility between national and local entities).
- 17 Within its jurisdiction, the NPSC establishes a standard guideline for the dignitary protection activities of prefectural police nationwide, as outlined in Article 5 (4) of the PA. At the time of the assassination, the guideline had not been reviewed for several decades. Although the NPSC and its secretariat, the NPA, were not directly involved in the specific protective activities for Abe, they could have been held officially responsible, based on the legal framework for official sanction, for their failure to review the guideline appropriately and subjected to disciplinary action.
- 18 *Asahi Shimbun Newspaper*, 2 August 2022.
- 19 Author's private interview with a former NPA official.
- 20 As a precedent, on 12 October 1960, the leader of the largest opposition party at the time (Inajiro

Asanuma) was stabbed to death by an audience member during a political speech in Tokyo. The then NPSC Chair (Iwao Yamazaki) tendered his resignation at the request of the then Prime Minister (Hayato Ikeda), taking political responsibility. The NPA-CG and Tokyo Metropolitan Police Commissioner were cleared of any legal and political responsibility.

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2025
Meiji Journal of Governance Studies
Vol.11