

The Weekly Observer

April 20-24, 2026

The 221st edition of the weekly newsletter aggregating news on Japanese politics. This week focuses on the GOJ's expansion of defense equipment exports, the GOJ's policies to address supply chain bottlenecks related to the Middle East, the first business delegation coordinating a visit to China, the first change in JSDF officer titles since its founding, the Japan Growth Strategy Council's discussions on cross-cutting issues, the intelligence reform bill passed in the Lower House, the first six months of the Takaichi Cabinet, Takaichi's decision to not visit the Yasukuni Shrine, the GOJ effectively blocking Makino Milling's buyout, the LDP's proposed AI White Paper update, the yen depreciating to threshold levels, the Monthly Economic Report for April, and more.

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I. News of the Week

1. Japan Expands Defense Exports to Lethal Weapons

- On Tuesday, the GOJ [partially revised](#) the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology and its corresponding implementation guidelines.
- The GOJ [scrapped](#) the five permitted categories of exports — rescue, transport, vigilance, surveillance, and minesweeping — to allow for the export of finished lethal weapon products.
- Any “weapons” under the JSDF Act will now be permissible for sale. Lethal weapons will be approved by the National Security Council (NSC) on a case-by-case basis and sold to any country with a defense equipment transfer agreement with Japan. There are currently seventeen countries that have such agreements with Japan (Canada waiting to take effect, Spain and Finland in negotiation).
- The GOJ will not permit in principle exports to countries in active conflict. However, exceptions will be made by the NSC “in cases where there are special circumstances, taking into account Japan’s security needs.”
- Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae posted on X that “No country can now safeguard its own peace and security on its own; it needs partner nations to support one another in the area of defense equipment.” She emphasized that “there is absolutely no change in our commitment to upholding our history as a peaceful nation and our fundamental principles.”
- Opposition parties had [mixed responses](#) to the change. Democratic Party for the People (DPFP) leader Tamaki Yuichiro welcomed the move as “supporting defense industry growth,” while Centrist Reform Alliance (CRA) Secretary General Shina Takeshi said that a lack of parliamentary oversight (ex post facto notification) could “undermine the very foundation of our nation as a peaceful state.”

2. GOJ Continues to Work on Addressing Supply Chain Bottlenecks

- On Friday, Takaichi [revealed](#) during the ministerial meeting concerning the Middle East situation that there has been progress in securing an alternative supply route that bypasses the Strait of Hormuz, and that the GOJ is [on track to secure](#) crude oil for May equivalent to approximately 60 percent of last year’s total.
- She instructed her Cabinet to make every effort to ensure a stable supply of essential goods to medical facilities and other critical locations, including by addressing bottlenecks in the distribution system.

- The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) [announced](#) that it will release approximately 5.8 million barrels of crude oil (20 days' worth) from national strategic reserves starting May 1 as part of the second round of releases to secure oil supply. Meanwhile, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kihara Minoru [said](#) that the GOJ has no plans to formulate a supplementary budget to suppress gasoline prices, as the FY 2026 reserve fund in addition to last year's supplementary budget will suffice.
- On Tuesday, Takaichi held a summit telephone call with Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum, agreeing to promote energy cooperation in light of the current situation. Japan is [expected to import](#) one million barrels starting July. Takaichi had a phone call with the leaders of [Qatar](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#) this week as well.
- The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) [submitted](#) a second round of emergency recommendations to Takaichi that points out that there is a "significant gap" in the supply of fuel and supplies on the ground. The LDP proposed accelerating measures such as securing alternative suppliers, flexibly utilizing oil reserves, and resolving bottlenecks in the supply of essential goods in the short term. In the long term, the LDP proposes considering necessary measures to ensure the stable use of sea lanes if obstacles to freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz persist even after a formal ceasefire is established.
- On Wednesday, Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) Kaneko Yasushi [revealed](#) that four Japanese crew members from Japanese-affiliated vessels that had been stranded in the Persian Gulf due to the de facto blockade of the Strait of Hormuz have disembarked. Kaneko also [revealed](#) on Tuesday that there are more than one thousand crew members aboard the forty-two Japanese-affiliated vessels stranded in the Persian Gulf. Twenty of them are Japanese.

3. Foreign Policy Developments

- On Friday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) [announced](#) that President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. will pay a state visit to Japan from May 26-29. This will be the first state visit [since](#) Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's in March 2025.
- The MOFA [announced](#) that State Minister for Foreign Affairs Kunimitsu Ayano will visit the United States and France from April 26-30. She will attend the Eleventh Review Conference of the Parties to the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the G7 development ministers' meeting.
- On Thursday, the GOJ [notified](#) the Lower House Steering Committee that Takaichi will be traveling to Vietnam and Australia from May 1-5. Takaichi will [announce](#) a revamped "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" vision in Vietnam, with a renewed focus on economic security including critical supply chain resilience and energy security.

- On Wednesday, Takaichi [held](#) a summit meeting with President Jakov Milatović of Montenegro in a commemorative year marking the twentieth anniversary of diplomatic relations. She stated that Japan will continue to support Montenegro's nation-building efforts and its EU accession under then-Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's "Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative."
- *Jiji* [reported](#) that a delegation of The Association for the Promotion of International Trade led by former Speaker of the Lower House Kono Yohei plans to visit China from June 21-24, in what is expected to be the first business delegation visit to China since Takaichi's Taiwan contingency remark in November 2025. The delegation last visited Beijing in 2025 and met with Premier Li Qiang.
- On Monday, Minister for Foreign Affairs Motegi Toshimitsu [held](#) the Tenth Japan-U.K. Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue in Tokyo. The ministers agreed to continue advancing comprehensive and concrete cooperation, such as strengthening the resilience of supply chains for critical minerals. They also agreed on further accelerating progress on the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP), a cornerstone of bilateral security cooperation.

4. Defense/Security Developments

- *Yomiuri* [reported](#) Saturday that the JSDF will change its rank designation for the first time since its establishment in 1954. The chiefs of staff — who serve as the top commanders of the JGSDF, JMSDF, and JASDF, respectively — will be designated as "general," while all other generals will be designated as "lieutenant general," and a one-star general will be designated as "colonel," in accordance with the titles used in the armed forces of other countries.
- On Friday, the GOJ [announced](#) that the first expert panel session concerning the revision of the three strategic national security documents will be held on April 27. The group, which [includes](#) fifteen former GOJ officials, academics, and media executives, will meet once a month and plans to finalize recommendations in the fall.
- On Wednesday, the LDP Research Commission on Security [compiled](#) key points of its recommendations to the GOJ concerning the three strategic security documents for the first time. Under the heading "New Modes of Fighting," the document cited the use of AI, the defense capabilities of unmanned assets such as drones, and the strengthening of Japan's ability to sustain operations over the long term in the event of a crisis.
- On Monday, the JSDF [fully participated](#) for the first time in Exercise Balikatan, the multi-national military exercise hosted by the United States and the Philippines. The JSDF dispatched 1,400 personnel in the hopes of deepening multilateral cooperation

with an eye toward China's expanding maritime presence, as the situation in the Middle East may weaken U.S. deterrence in Asia.

- On Sunday, the Ministry of Defense (MOD) [announced](#) that North Korea launched multiple ballistic missiles that landed outside Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). South Korean media [suspects](#) that it may have been a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM).
- The Eastern Theater Command of the Chinese People's Liberation Army [announced](#) that a naval task force had passed through waters north of Amamioshima, Japan, on the same day and conducted training exercises in the Western Pacific. This may be a countermeasure in response to the passage of a JMSF destroyer through the Taiwan Strait on April 17.

5. Japan Growth Strategy Council Sets Direction for Cross-Cutting Issues

- On Wednesday, the GOJ's Japan Growth Strategy Council [convened](#) to discuss the directions for addressing the eight cross-cutting issues that have been designated separate from the seventeen strategic sectors driving Japan's economic growth.
- The Council [identified](#) accelerating investment in the field of AI — which currently stands at less than one-hundredth of the level in the United States — as the top priority for realizing the growth strategy.
- The Council also confirmed plans to establish a national certification for household support services and aims to hold the first certification exam by the fall of 2027. Establishing a national certification will help alleviate this resistance to use such services (psychological) and help prevent employees from leaving their jobs due to caregiving responsibilities or childbirth.
- Takaichi [instructed](#) officials to accelerate discussions on expanding the discretionary work hours system, taking into account actual conditions on the ground and the perspectives of both labor and management. The issue has been pushed by Takaichi as a way to encourage longer working hours for those who desire it, but has been opposed by labor on grounds that it would lead to long overtime hours.
- The Council's talent development subcommittee will [soon release](#) a vision plan, which includes creation of a program to support universities with strong research capabilities that contribute to the growth of the seventeen strategic sectors, as well as measures to promote re-skilling.

- Meanwhile, the startup policy promotion subcommittee is [considering the introduction](#) of a program to support early-stage companies by purchasing products developed by startups, encouraging new businesses in strategic sectors.

6. Intelligence Reform Bill to Be Enacted This Year

- On Thursday, the Lower House [passed](#) legislation that would establish a National Intelligence Council and Secretariat as part of sweeping intelligence reform. This is considered a central aspect of Takaichi's "nation-dividing" agenda.
- The bill was supported in the Lower House by the ruling parties, the CRA, the DFPF, *Sanseitō*, and Team Mirai. This is expected to help the ruling parties meet the majority threshold to pass/enact the bill in the Upper House.
- The bill establishes an intelligence counterpart to the National Security Council, placing intelligence on equal footing with the national security apparatus. The Secretariat will be formed by the reorganized Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office (CIRO) and headed by the Cabinet Intelligence Officer.
- Takaichi explained that the GOJ will "strengthen our efforts to prevent crises before they occur and strategically safeguard the safety of our citizens and the national interest by making decisions based on higher-quality and more timely information."
- The opposition parties expressed concerns over the infringement of privacy and the collection of politically motivated intelligence. An accompanying non-binding resolution [requests](#) "due consideration" for privacy and political neutrality.

7. Takaichi Cabinet Turns Half-a-Year Old

- On Tuesday, Takaichi [held](#) a press conference to reflect on her first six months in office, stating that she has strived since day one to "fulfill every promise" made to the Japanese citizens, especially around making the country stronger.
- The prime minister has enjoyed historically high approval ratings, though she faces a myriad of challenges from foreign policy to surging living costs to facing opposition resistance in the Diet. She will need to handle these issues carefully to ensure popular support continues for her administration.
- There are several key pieces of legislation in discussion or enacted in the Diet that highlight the administration's priorities:
 - The Upper House has [decided](#) to begin deliberations on the intelligence reform bill on May 8.

- The Lower House Committee on Health, Labor and Welfare [passed](#) proposed amendments to the Health Insurance Act on Friday that would require patients prescribed “OTC-like medications” — which have ingredients and effects similar to over-the-counter drugs — to pay an additional copayment.
- The Lower House [began deliberations](#) on the proposed amendments to the Personal Information Protection Act on Tuesday, which would relax regulations on the collection of personal information for AI development and impose fines on businesses that infringe on individual rights, such as selling large amounts of personal information for profit.
- The Upper House [passed/enacted](#) proposed amendments to the Passport Act, lowering the cost of ten-year passports from approximately ¥16,000 to ¥9,000 and five-year passports to ¥4,500 for all age groups starting July. The GOJ aims to offset the increase in the international tourist tax levied on *all* individuals departing the country from ¥1,000 to ¥3,000 per person starting July.
- The Upper House [passed/enacted](#) proposed amendments to extend the establishment of the Fund Corporation for the Overseas Development of Japan’s ICT and Postal Services Inc. (JICT) by ten years. This keeps in mind investments in long-term projects like undersea cables and data centers overseas.
- The Upper House [passed/enacted](#) proposed amendments to the Act on Special Measures for Strengthening Financial Functions, extending the period for injecting public funds to improve the financial health of regional banks and credit unions and the grant program providing subsidies for bank restructuring from the end of March 2026 (scheduled end).

8. Key Political Developments

- On Friday, the working group of the National Conference on Social Security [heard](#) from the GOJ that major manufacturers would be able to implement modifications of checkout systems at supermarkets and other retailers within five to six months once the consumption tax cut on food and beverages is implemented. Expert panel members [proposed](#) on Tuesday that the refundable tax credit should be implemented solely as a benefit linked to income without combining it with tax credits as a way to reduce administrative costs.
- The LDP [began discussions](#) on the second capital initiative, a policy agreement made with the Japan Innovation Party at the end of March. Some within the party remain wary that the proposal only has Osaka in mind. Meanwhile, the two ruling parties also [discussed](#) the proposal to reduce the number of Lower House seats by forty-five seats. The LDP remains skeptical about reducing seats only in proportional representation.

- The cross-party Upper House Reform Council [agreed to discuss](#) electoral reform such as correcting the “voting disparity” and resolving the “unreasonable aspects” of district consolidation. The Council aims to compile its thoughts next year ahead of the next Upper House election in 2028.
- On Thursday, the Lower House Commission on the Constitution [held](#) a focused session on the emergency situations clause for large-scale disasters and other emergencies. While the LDP proposes extending the terms of Diet members “around one year” should an election be difficult to organize during an emergency, the CRA [opposes](#) the idea of strengthening Cabinet authority in times of a crisis.
- On Tuesday, Takaichi [offered](#) a sacred “masakaki” branch at the altar of the Yasukuni Shrine during the annual spring grand festival in the name of “Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae.” She decided not to visit the shrine, while State Minister of Economic Policy and Finance [Kiuchi Minoru](#), LDP General Council Chair [Arimura Haruko](#) and others visited the shrine. China [protested](#) the offering as a “desecration of historical justice,” while South Korea [expressed](#) “deep disappointment and regret.”
- *Mainichi* [reported](#) Monday that the GOJ plans to postpone submission of anti-espionage legislation to crack down on intelligence activities by foreign powers. While the GOJ aimed for submission this year, it plans to convene an expert panel in the summer to address deep concerns over violations of freedom of expression.

9. GOJ Recommends Suspension of Makino Milling Buyout

- On Thursday, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kihara Minoru [confirmed](#) media reports that the GOJ had recommended the suspension of a proposal by MBK Partners to acquire Makino Milling Co. on grounds that the deal could jeopardize national security.
- The Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Act (FEFTA) [designates](#) “core business sectors” vital to Japan’s national security and requires prior screening when foreign investors acquire shares in companies covered under the designated sectors. Machine tools have been designated as a dual-use industry.
- MBK Partners, one of the largest independent North Asian private equity firms, presented itself as a “white knight” to Makino Milling Co., which had received a hostile takeover bid from NIDEC Corp. in April 2025. The company had been cleared for the buyout by U.S. and Chinese authorities in January. Japan was the last hurdle before completing the buyout to make Makino Milling a wholly owned subsidiary.
- MBK Partners has ten days to respond to the recommendation. The GOJ has the authority to suspend the deal if MBK rejects the recommendation. It has only used this authority once in 2008.

- *Nikkei* [reported](#) later the same day that Japanese investment management firm Nippon Sangyo Suishin Kiko (NSSK) is offering to acquire Makino Milling. NSSK had proposed a buyout back in April 2025 when NIDEC made a hostile takeover attempt. It aims to take advantage of the GOJ's recommendation to suspend the deal.

10. Economic Security and Tech Developments

- *Yomiuri* [reported](#) Friday that the GOJ plans to promote the use of dual-use technologies by startups by creating a framework to allow government agencies to conduct pilot implementations within their respective operations. The GOJ aims to finalize plans in its growth strategy. It aims for ¥1 trillion in deals within five years.
- *Asahi* [reported](#) Wednesday that the LDP's updated "AI White Paper" — soon to be submitted to the GOJ — proposes the creation of an "AI Special Administrative Council" to review legal systems and advance administrative reform as the nation turns toward an AI-driven society. The LDP [proposes](#) stronger measures under the AI Act against unscrupulous businesses, including the introduction of new penalties.
- On Tuesday, Minister for Digital Transformation Matsumoto Hisashi [announced](#) that the GOJ drafted a set of common standards across various industries to strengthen cybersecurity measures for companies handling critical infrastructure. The standards — to begin operation in October — will require firms to 1) revamp risk awareness, 2) address supply chain risks, 3) mitigate the impact of attacks and establish business continuity measures, 4) implement countermeasures based on latest technologies like AI, and 5) strengthen public-private partnerships.
- The GOJ [adopted](#) the Circular Economy Action Plan, which targets ¥1 trillion in public-private investment by 2030 in facility development and technological innovation to strengthen the recycling of critical minerals, plastics, and other materials. This would [reduce](#) Japan's reliance on overseas resources and strengthen economic security by increasing domestic production of recycled materials.
- *Nikkei* [reported](#) that the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) will explore requiring social media service providers to implement age restrictions at the time of sign-up and establishment of a system to assess risks associated with each platform as a way to tackle underage social media addiction. MIC Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa [said](#) Friday that the ministry will proceed with the matter in coordination with the Children and Families Agency.
- On Monday, the LDP [requested](#) that the GOJ take measures against sophisticated cyberattacks in response to the emergence of high-performance AI in the United States like Anthropic's Claude Mythos model. The party proposes establishing a system in which technology companies and financial institutions collaborate to

inspect software vulnerabilities. The LDP's proposal [states](#) that “we must build an AI nation capable of succeeding in the industrial sector,” noting that it is “not realistic” to achieve full domestic production across all areas necessary for operating AI.

11. Key Economic/Financial Developments

- On Friday, the yen [depreciated](#) to ¥159 to the dollar. Minister of Finance Katayama Satsuki said that authorities in Japan and the United States will maintain close coordination, recognizing that certain aspects are strongly influenced by speculative movements. This coincided with the Nikkei Stock Average [reaching](#) ¥60,000 for the first time in history on Thursday.
- Katayama [decided](#) during a meeting with the Bank of Japan (BOJ) and the heads of Japan's three mega banks that a new working group would be established to discuss risks related to Anthropic's new Claude Mythos model. There are concerns that if exploited, vulnerabilities that developers may be unaware of could be used to inflict damage on financial systems.
- On Thursday, the Ministry of Finance's Fiscal System Council [argued](#) that business structuring, such as the consolidation of the defense industry, is an “effective means” of curbing production costs. Regarding the nationalization of manufacturing facilities, the Council called for legislation to clearly define the sectors where a stable supply of defense equipment would be difficult to maintain without government involvement.
- On Wednesday, the METI's Industrial Structure Council [presented](#) draft interim findings, [proposing](#) a “new investment framework” separate from regular spending for the Takaichi Administration's crisis management and growth investments.
- On Tuesday, Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Akazawa Ryosei [informed](#) Ogasawara Village Mayor Shibuya Shozo that the GOJ will conduct a literature review for the selection of a final disposal site of radioactive waste. Shibuya effectively approved the survey, [stating](#) that it would help “deepen discussions” on the matter among village residents.
- *Nikkei* [reported](#) Monday that the GOJ will set a goal to improve labor productivity by 15 percent over the next five years. The GOJ will encourage measures to increase the proportion of people whose wages rise through re-skilling or changing jobs. It will also promote investments in labor-saving technologies to facilitate sustained wage increases.

12. State of the Economy

- On Friday, the MIC [announced](#) that the consumer price inflation rate in FY 2025, excluding fresh food, was 2.7 percent, the [fourth consecutive year](#) that the price hike exceeded the BOJ's targeted 2 percent. Meanwhile, the CPI excluding volatile fresh food items in March increased 1.8 percent from the same month last year to 112.1, the [second consecutive month](#) that the growth rate fell below 2 percent as GOJ utility subsidies suppress energy prices.
- The BOJ [announced](#) that the services producer price index (SPPI) in March increased 3.1 percent from the same month last year to 113.5, a 0.4 point growth rate increase from February. Overseas freight transport [increased](#) significantly following the de facto blockade of the Strait of Hormuz.
- On Thursday, the GOJ's Monthly Economic Report for April [maintained](#) the assessment that the economy is "recovering at a moderate pace, while attention should be given to the effects caused from the situation in the Middle East" for the twentieth consecutive month. The GOJ [upgraded](#) its assessment on capital investment to "picking up" for the first time in seven months.
- On Wednesday, the Ministry of Finance (MOF) [announced](#) that Japan ran a ¥1.71 trillion trade deficit in FY 2025, the [fifth consecutive month](#) in deficit and a 68.4 percent reduction in the deficit owing largely to an increase in exports of semiconductor-related products and non-ferrous metals. The trade surplus with the United States fell 22.1 percent due to the tariffs to ¥6.99 trillion.
- The MOF [released](#) its Economic Report for April, maintaining the assessment that the economy is "gradually recovering," though adding the expression that there is a need to "closely monitor the impact of the situation in the Middle East." The assessment was [maintained](#) for the eleventh consecutive quarter.
- On Tuesday, the BOJ [released](#) its "Senior Loan Officer Opinion Survey on Bank Lending Practices at Large Japanese Banks," which [found](#) that the diffusion index indicating the strength of demand for funds among individuals rose five points to five, the highest level in four-and-a-half years. Meanwhile, the BOJ also [found](#) that the average forecast of individuals predicting price levels five years from now [hit](#) a record high of 10.3 percent (since comparable statistics became available in September 2006).

II. Public Opinion Poll

- A FNN/*Sankei* poll [released](#) on Monday found that the Takaichi Cabinet's approval rating was 70 percent, up three points from March, while disapproval was 25 percent, down three points.

- 54 percent of respondents said that they somewhat approve of the GOJ's economic policy/inflation relief measures; 21 percent said they somewhat disapprove; 14 percent said they approve; and 10 percent said they disapprove.
 - 42 percent of respondents said that they somewhat approve of the GOJ's foreign and security policy; 24 percent said they approve; 20 percent said they somewhat disapprove; and 12 percent said they disapprove.
 - 52 percent of respondents said that they believe the GOJ's response to surging crude oil prices has been insufficient, while 40 percent said they believe it has been sufficient.
 - 76 percent of respondents said that they do not support America's response to the Middle East, while 18 percent said they support the United States.
 - 43 percent of respondents said that they believe the consumption tax cut on food and beverages should be zero for two years; 26 percent said there is no need for a tax cut or cash handout; and 25 percent said there is no need for a consumption tax if there is an equivalent cash handout.
 - 65 percent of respondents said that they believe there should be some restrictions on prosecutor's appeal against the opening of a retrial; 20 percent said it can remain the same; and 9 percent said it should be prohibited.
 - On amending the Constitution:
 - 59 percent of respondents said that they support inserting the JSDF into the language of the Constitution, while 31 percent said they oppose it.
 - 66 percent of respondents said that they support the emergency situations clause, while 26 percent said they oppose it.
 - 54 percent of respondents said that they support scrapping at-large constituencies in the Upper House, while 30 percent said they oppose it.
 - 83 percent of respondents said that they support enhancing education, while 11 percent said they oppose it.
 - 36 percent of respondents said that they believe female members of the Imperial Household remain members of the Household even after marriage, while their husbands and children do not become members of the Household; 30 percent said they should leave the Household; and 29 percent said husbands and children should also become members of the Household.
 - 58 percent of respondents said that they support admitting male descendants of former Imperial families into the Imperial Household to secure the number of family members, while 32 percent said they oppose it.
- The survey also collected data on the latest approval ratings of political parties.

Political Party	Approval Rating (%)
Liberal Democratic Party	33 (+1.2)

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Centrist Reform Alliance	3.2 (-2.5)
Japan Innovation Party	3.6 (-0.1)
Democratic Party for the People	4.1 (-0.7)
Japan Communist Party	2.2 (+0.5)
Reiwa Shinsengumi	0.8 (-0.5)
Suffrage Party (Sanseitō)	4.1 (-1.2)
Japan Conservative Party	0.9 (-0.8)
Socialist Democratic Party	0.3 (± 0)
Team Mirai	1.4 (-2.3)
Constitutional Democratic Party	1.8 (+0.1)
Komeito	1.2 (± 0)
Independent (No Party)	39.2 (+4.7)