The TPP Debate in Japan: Reasons for a Failed Protest Campaign

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Abstract:
The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal has provoked one of the fiercest debates in Japanese politics in recent years. The highly influential lobby group JA-Zenchu (Central Union of Agricultural Co-operatives) has been the most vehement opponent of the TPP; but their efforts failed to prevent Japan’s current prime minister, Shinzo Abe, from joining the ongoing negotiations in the summer of 2013. There are also several other opposition groups, ranging from labor unions and the Japan Medical Association to members of Japan’s two main parties, the LDP and the DPJ. However, these groups were not able to form a larger and unified protest movement and therefore could not reach their political goal. This article will analyze the reasons why the vocal anti-TPP campaign was ultimately unsuccessful. In order to understand the behavior of the involved actors and groups, the article will focus on their diverse interests and motivations that reflect the comprehensive nature of the proposed trade agreement.

Key words: TPP, Japan, trade policy, JA-Zenchu

Introduction
The politics of trade policy in Japan are a controversial matter, especially since Japan started to establish a network of bilateral free trade agreements more than ten years ago. The reasons behind this policy shift are manifold. Previous research has shown that political as much as economic and geo-strategic interests have been major driving factors. Mireya Solis’ analysis of Japan’s Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) policy as a reaction to competitive challenges in multiple areas is the most comprehensive recent work on the topic. In theory, Japan’s approach is multilayered, combining bilateral, regional and multilateral elements in its trade policy. In reality, however, the focus has clearly been on Japan’s EPAs and more recently on bigger and more comprehensive plurilateral trade projects, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) or the agreement with the European Union (EU).

Many policy makers and interest groups still favor Japan’s traditional trade policy approach, centered on the multilateral World Trade Organization (WTO) and its forerunner the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). In the past this system made it possible for Japan to exclude many of its agricultural products from tariff reduction. As a result, Japan’s rice market, for example, is currently still protected by a 778 percent tariff on imported rice that exceeds the minimum market access guaranteed through the WTO. Many officials in Japan’s trade-related ministries as well as politicians from its two biggest parties, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), are also critical of the further proliferation of bilateral and regional agreements. The leading actor in this broad and heterogeneous group is the Central Union of Agricultural Co-operatives (JA-Zenchu), Japan’s most influential agricultural organization with nearly 10 million members. Its opposition stems mainly from...
a conviction that bilateral and plurilateral agreements harm Japan’s sensitive agricultural industry and will eventually destroy the livelihood of many farmers.

On the other hand, many individuals and organizations promote and support Japan’s new trade policy. Keidanren, the country’s top business association, and the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry have been calling for bilateral trade agreements since the late 1990s. The resulting antagonism between, generally speaking, more outward-looking and export-oriented large corporations versus more inward-looking and protectionist small-scale farmers has dominated the political discussion on this issue and has also hindered Japan from reforming its agricultural sector.

The question of how much Japan should open up its markets to foreign countries, companies, and investors is at the core of this argument. Aya Takada and Yuriy Humber conclude that “while Keidanren backs exporters who say that Japan needs accords like the TPP, JA Group says the accord will kill domestic agriculture.” This antagonism also exists on the ministerial level. The traditional opposition between the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), both staunch defenders of their constituencies’ vested interests, further aggravated this trend. The Japanese public, too, has been more or less evenly split between supporters and opponents of Japan’s participation in the ongoing TPP negotiations, making it a challenging area for politicians to win broad approval among the electorate. Cory Wallace recently noted that the “public debate surrounding Japan’s proposed entry into the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) remains as heated and confused as ever.”

As a result, most Japanese governments since the late-1990s have been hesitant to fully engage in the politics of EPAs, instead trying to balance the opposing interests of protectionist farmers and free trade advocates. Although Japan’s trade bureaucrats have started to consider EPAs as a possible supplement to its foreign economic policy, the government’s official position is still marked by a high level of indecisiveness in the field of trade policy. The failure to formulate and implement a more coherent strategy has brought criticism from academics and policy experts who see Japan falling behind in what has become a global race for bilaterals.

While this conflict continued to smolder in the background, Japan has slowly expanded its EPA network in recent years. As of February 2015, Japan has concluded a total of 14 agreements with countries in Asia, Europe and Latin America since its first agreement with Singapore in 2002. An agreement with Australia, which went into force in January 2015, marks the latest extension to Japan’s EPA network. Being Japan’s first agreement with a major food producer, it is of high importance. In addition, Japan is currently holding talks with several other countries, such as Canada and Colombia, and signed an agreement with Mongolia in February 2015.

Larger and more comprehensive plurilateral agreements are currently drawing more attention, in particular the US-driven TPP, but also the Regional
Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the negotiations with the EU. Japan is in the remarkable situation of being involved in several major negotiations without aggressively following a comprehensive trade policy strategy. This is in stark contrast to Singapore, Mexico and other countries that try to position themselves as regional hubs in the ever-expanding global network of bilaterals. Japan is also in a position where its leaders can deliberate on which trade project should be prioritized. This is an advantageous situation, as its two main trade projects in the Asia-Pacific region, TPP and RCEP, promote very different approaches on trade liberalization and the abolition of non-trade barriers. The two agreements also take different geopolitical positions towards China, either integrating it further into the regional and global trade system by promoting the RCEP or containing China’s rise through the conclusion of the TPP. In particular the TPP has become an indicator of Japan’s overall foreign-policy realignment with the US. In comparison to other agreements, the TPP has sparked by far the largest national debate in Japan. That debate, and in particular JA-Zenchu’s role as the most influential TPP opponent, is the focus of this article.

The TPP Discussion: Pros and Cons in a Heated Debate
Although Japan’s earlier EPAs all faced some domestic opposition at the time of their proposal and during negotiations, the debate regarding Japan’s possible entry into the TPP created an unprecedented level of conflict. Emphasizing the importance of this trade initiative and its far-reaching political and economic consequences, supporters and critics alike stepped up their lobbying efforts. Subsequently, numerous articles, press releases and books on the issue were published by pro- and anti-TPP groups. The debate soon grew highly emotional, as both sides argued that nothing less than the future of Japan rested on the outcome of this decision. When the government published a first outline of its future trade policy in late 2010, which also stressed the importance of the TPP, JA-Zenchu was quick to release its own report highlighting the negative impacts of joining the agreement. JA-Zenchu published papers and advertisements in which it turned the TPP debate into a decision on Japan’s national identity:

If Japan signs the TPP while ignoring the differences in land conditions and the volume of agricultural production among the negotiating countries, Japanese agriculture will no longer be able to fulfill all of its diverse roles, placing the livelihoods of a wide range of people at risk. (…) Now is the time to think about what Japan should do to achieve sustainable agricultural development, so that the Japanese people will be able to maintain their national identity.

The TPP and its encompassing debate mark a turning point not only in Japan’s changing trade policy approach, but also in the genesis of a broader protest movement. According to Aurelia Mulgan, the growing opposition to the TPP played an important role in reviving the influence and leverage of JA-Zenchu: “The TPP in fact revived Nokyo’s [Japan Agricultural Cooperatives] political fortunes and provided an issue whereby it could reconnect politically with farmers.” JA-Zenchu, long known for its protectionist stance on trade policy, soon became the leader of this growing, yet only loosely organized, movement.
of farmers, citizen rights groups and other interest groups that opposed the TPP. Although united in their protest against the TPP, the diversity of member organizations with different political agenda and at times contradictory interests has also made it difficult to initiate a wider social movement.

The business world has painted a very different picture regarding the impact of the TPP on the Japanese economy. Keidanren was quick to amplify TPP’s impact for Japanese companies and consumers, but unlike JA-Zenchu, most business representatives stress its positive economic effects and believe that joining the TPP is necessary in order to keep up with other nations with an extensive network of free trade agreements.

If Japan fails to join the TPP or is slow in doing so, the resulting competitive disadvantage would not only lead to a decline in Japanese companies’ sales in TPP member countries, but might also necessitate the transfer to TPP member countries of production bases for finished products and essential components that embody Japan’s advanced technologies. This would be a grave situation for Japan both as a nation built on trade and investment and as a nation built on technology, and might even shake the foundations of the Japanese economy.

In the absence of reliable data on the economic impact of Japan’s earlier EPAs, three studies on the potential impact of joining the TPP were published by the MAFF, the METI and the Cabinet Office, which reflect diverging political standpoints within the government on this controversial topic. These three datasets, each coming to a different conclusion, only added to the confusion about the TPP and underlined the government’s difficulty to find a coherent approach on trade policy. Whereas the MAFF estimated a loss of 3.4 million jobs if Japan joins the TPP, the METI predicted the creation of over 800,000 jobs. The Cabinet Office’s forecast was less dramatic, expecting an additional 0.54% GDP growth in 10 years. It is highly problematic to compare these numbers, as each study conveniently picked industry sectors that are expected to suffer, or contrarily to benefit, from the TPP in order to best support their stance. Based on such contradicting estimations, the TPP has become a watershed issue for Japanese domestic politics, with the debate taking an unprecedented harsh tone.

The Emergence of Japan’s Anti-TPP Protest Movement

Against the background of Japan’s entry into the TPP negotiations in 2013, the next section will briefly illustrate the emergence of Japan’s anti-TPP protest movement. A special focus will be given to the role that JA-Zenchu took on in this movement. This will be followed by an analysis on why this broad and vocal protest movement ultimately failed to prevent Japan’s government from joining the negotiations.

JA-Zenchu—the Linchpin of Japan’s Anti-TPP Movement

In the case of Japan, domestic politics are pivotal in the formation of trade policy and the agricultural sector occupies a crucial role in this process. Mulgan has exposed the immense importance of the agricultural sector in Japanese politics in her landmark study, “The Politics of Agriculture in Japan.” Her work...
demonstrates that Japanese farmers exert substantial political power due to their high level of organization and a voting system that is skewed to their favor. In Mulgan’s own words:

The agricultural sector has been too electorally powerful, too highly organised, too visible publicly and too well represented in the Diet and in the ruling party for the government to ignore the political ramifications of any major decision on agricultural policy.  

As a well-organized and powerful organization, JA-Zenchu has been able to mobilize its members and directly influence politicians and other policy makers on trade-related matters thanks to its connections to ministerial officials, farmers and politicians with close links to the agricultural industry. In the course of the TPP debate, JA-Zenchu succeeded in collecting over 11 million signatures for a petition against Japan’s entry into the TPP in less than a year. This was a truly remarkable feat, seeing that there were only 2.6 million commercial farmers in Japan in 2010. This demonstrates JA-Zenchu’s success in mobilizing a broad anti-TPP alliance beyond its core rural constituency. However, JA-Zenchu’s strong engagement in the TPP debate is not surprising, as Japanese farming households are expected to be most affected by the TPP. JA-Zenchu has tried to establish itself as an opinion leader in the national discussion surrounding this trade agreement.

In order to safeguard its own and its members’ interests, the organization is deeply involved in Japan’s trade policy making. To this end, JA-Zenchu also reached out to many other stakeholders, such as Japan’s Consumers Union and the Japan Medical Association (JMA), by organizing workshops and meetings on the issue. However, it was determined not to be perceived as anti-free trade and overly protective of vested interests, but rather as a defender of Japan’s national interest. This allowed JA-Zenchu to connect and collaborate with other protest groups which do not reject EPAs per se but rather oppose TPP’s unprecedented comprehensive and ambitious liberalization model.

An integrating approach made JA-Zenchu the leader of the emerging alliance of diverse groups opposing the TPP. As a result, the office of the anti-TPP group “Network to Protect Japan’s Food, Livelihood and Lives against the TPP” was set up at the JA-Headquarters, indicating the influence JA-Zenchu had in forging this alliance. The group was comprised of cooperatives from several industries. According to its official website the following organizations are listed as members: JA-Zenchu, National Chamber of Agriculture, National Federation of Fisheries Cooperatives Associations, National Federation of Forest Owner’s Cooperative Association, Seikatsu Club Consumers’ Cooperative Union, Daichi wo mamoru kai (Group to Protect the Earth), Palsystem Consumers’ Cooperative Union, and the Japan Dairy Council. Mulgan further explains that JA-Zenchu was also able to forge an alliance with the construction industry by visiting factories and businesses in Tokyo to point out how the TPP would cause an inpouring of cheap labor from abroad and therefore bring about negative effects for local workers.

JA-Zenchu also succeeded in creating ties with leaders in Japan’s medical and healthcare sector. On January 25, 2012, the two leaders of JMA and JA-
Zenchu held a joint news conference to express their opposition against the TPP, and the JMA representative, concerned over the effects of the TPP on Japan’s medical system, spoke out against the introduction of market principles to the Japanese system of universal healthcare. However, other organizations have also led cooperation between different anti-TPP groups. For example in October 2011, leaders of the JMA, the Japan Pharmaceutical Association and the Japan Dental Association met politicians of the Democratic Party of Japan to express their discontent with the government’s handling of the TPP issue.

Megumi Naoi and Shujiro Urata offer another explanation on why the anti-TPP movement was able to integrate so many different groups and organizations. According to them, uncertainty about the potential effects of the TPP led many people to feel that they might be negatively affected by the agreement. This group of “uncertain losers” then became the target of JA’s well-organized anti-TPP campaign, creating the fundament for a broad coalition of people who felt uneasy about the TPP and were in particular afraid that the agreement may have negative implications for their own job security.

**Overview of Anti-TPP Protests**

Protests by Japanese farmers and employees of JA-Zenchu began when former Prime Minister Naoto Kan declared his interest in joining the TPP negotiations in 2010. In February 2011, 300 people came together at a Japanese university in what Maslow calls “the beginning of intensified local protest against the TPP.” The distinctive feature of this emerging protest movement is its heterogeneity. It encompassed traditional as well as progressive farmers, other civil rights groups such as the Consumers’ Cooperative Union, and anti-globalization activists. The concern that Japan’s entry into the TPP would lead to a lower food self-sufficiency rate and negatively affect Japan’s rural areas were the main driving force at this early stage of protests.

Although critics of the TPP in Japan were successful in building a broad coalition by demonstrating that the TPP might affect various aspects of Japan’s economy, the protest of local farmers can be seen as the core of the anti-TPP movement in Japan. Protests in Hokkaido, one of Japan’s foremost farming regions, played a particularly important role, as local farmers were especially concerned about the looming effects of joining the TPP. The prefectoral government in Hokkaido was also the first prefecture to publish an assessment of the potential effects of the TPP on the region’s agricultural sector. According to a report by the Tokachi General Subprefectural Bureau, up to 40,000 jobs in the subprefecture would be in danger due to the TPP. The outlook for Tokachi seems particularly severe as the local farm-related transport and logistics industry is expected to be strongly affected by a weakened agricultural industry.

The anti-TPP protests in Hokkaido serve as an exemplary case for the importance of local-level protests. The regional branch of JA-Zenchu, the Hokkaido Prefectural Union of Agricultural Cooperatives, was particularly successful in mobilizing its members when it organized large protest marches in Sapporo to demonstrate against Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s decision to join

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the TPP negotiations. The protests proved effective, and at the height of the domestic debate over the TPP, the Hokkaido Prefectural Assembly as well as the Sapporo City Assembly expressed their clear opposition to the TPP in January 2011. In March 2013, when Abe was expected to announce his decision on the TPP question, 1500 farmers gathered in Sapporo to express their discontent with Abe’s position. As expected, protests further intensified after Abe declared Japan’s entry to the TPP and around 7000 farmers took to the streets to protest against the ongoing TPP negotiations later that summer. As in the rest of Japan, the protest movement in Hokkaido also consisted of many interest groups. This included the Hokkaido Economic Federation, the Hokkaido Consumers Association, the Hokkaido Medical Association and members of several political parties.

As a reaction to this growing opposition, the national government decided to hold meetings at the local level in order to explain its trade policy and particularly the consequences on the local economy to their constituencies. In April 2013, nine such meetings were held in Hokkaido. Japan’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) also organized countrywide briefings and information sessions on the TPP to allay the concerns of company leaders. Pro- and anti-TPP groups alike ran campaigns on the local and national level, keeping the TPP issue on the political agenda.

### Japan’s Entry into the TPP Negotiations: Defeat for Its Agricultural Lobby?

Despite its comprehensive media campaign and success on the local level, the anti-TPP movement ultimately failed to prevent Japan’s government from joining the TPP negotiations. In fact, while dominating the domestic debate on trade policy for many years, Japan’s highly influential farming lobby could only delay the country from entering the TPP talks. JA-Zenchu’s extensive lobbying efforts did however prompt Prime Minister Abe to deviate from his non-exceptional approach and exclude over 500 Japanese farm products from the TPP negotiations in 2013. Abe promised to protect Japan’s five “sacred” agricultural categories, which are rice, wheat, dairy, sugar and meat, in return for JA-Zenchu’s acceptance of his pro-TPP policy. In this respect, the agricultural lobby still reached its goal of protecting Japan’s agricultural industry despite Japan’s joining the TPP negotiations.

There are several explanations on why Abe was able to push through with the TPP despite domestic opposition. First of all, an increasing number of Japanese policy makers deemed it advantageous to join the negotiations at an early stage. They understood that it is to Japan’s benefit to be involved in the TPP talks in order to draft chapters on certain policy issues. This was preferable to being confronted with a more or less finalized agreement, which can only be accepted or rejected in its entirety later on. This assumption proved to be correct,

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as of February 2014, only eight out of the 29 chapters of the TPP were agreed upon by the involved negotiating teams.39

One important reason behind Abe’s success lies in the changing demographics of Japanese farmers, who are now on average 66 years old.40 Japan’s rural areas are particularly affected by an aging population, shrinking birth rates and an ongoing migration to urban areas. The agricultural sector has declined in importance and JA-Zenchu is consequently losing influence and political clout.41 This ongoing transition has also caused a shift of interest, with farmers now increasingly lobbying for policies that allow them to maintain their current welfare levels, instead of seeking traditional prize subsidies or higher tariffs to protect their businesses. The introduction of an individual farm household income-support system through direct payments in order to stabilize farmers’ income, reflects this shift of farmer’s interests.

**DPJ’s Policy towards the TPP**

In order to better understand why Abe was able to make a decision in the TPP debate, the following section will compare his trade policy approach with the previous DPJ governments. The subsequent paragraph will then focus on the trade policy of the second Abe government.

The landslide victory of the DPJ in the 2009 parliamentary elections raised expectations for a profound policy transformation in Japan. The DPJ, however, disappointed most such hopes for policy change, prompting Kenji Kushida and Phillip Lipsy to make a crushing assessment: “not only did the DPJ implement few of its promised reforms, but it implemented very little of anything.”42 Did the DPJ perform any better in the area of trade policy?

Since its formation in 1998, the DPJ has followed a pro-free trade and pro-liberalization agenda. With a majority of its voters and supporters coming from urban areas, this approach reflected the political and economic interests of most of its constituency.43 Its election victory in 2009 accordingly raised expectations that the new DPJ government would be able to break free from the “iron triangle,” which had dominated trade policy under the conservative LDP and follow a determined free trade approach instead. In fact, however, the opposite occurred. Although the DPJ campaigned on a policy platform, which was very different to the LDP’s platform in 2009, the increase of DPJ voters in rural areas led to a rising influence of the farming industry on the party’s policy-making once they were in power.44 And although the DPJ had started out with the promise to strengthen the power of politicians while restricting the influence of bureaucrats, the agricultural lobby was still too strong to allow the DPJ governments to go ahead with its plan of joining the TPP.

The trade policy of the three DPJ administrations between 2009 and 2012 did not deliver many tangible outcomes. Its three Prime Ministers, Yukio Hatoyama, Naoto Kan and Yoshihiko Noda, concluded only two EPAs during their time in power and were not able to initiate new trade agreements. One major reason...
for this was certainly the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, which prompted the government to sideline discussions on the TPP and postpone the decision on Japan’s membership. Although the DPJ successfully placed the topic on the political agenda in a prominent 2010 speech, the TPP debate soon became overshadowed by the immediate crisis response in the disaster-hit zone. These efforts were followed by large-scale cleanup and reconstruction projects in the Tohoku region, which demanded the full attention of the central, regional and local governments. In addition, with the nuclear catastrophe unfolding, the formulation of a new energy policy became the top priority for the national government.

Another reason for DPJ’s unsuccessful trade policy was the lack of consensus on trade policy within the party. All three DPJ prime ministers faced strong opposition from their own party members, who were organized in several informal groupings. TPP-critics within the DPJ also teamed up with politicians from other parties to form the “National Council to Study the TPP,” which held workshops and lectures on the TPP. According to Mulgan, this group comprised around 180 members and acted as a counter movement to the pro-TPP camp in the government.

LDP’s Trade Policy Approach

When the LDP under Abe returned to power in December 2012, it was widely believed that the agricultural lobby would further strengthen its influential position on Japan’s trade policy. But contrary to these expectations, Abe was able to achieve where the DPJ had struggled. He declared Japan’s intention to join the ongoing TPP negotiations.

Abe certainly profited from his predecessors’ efforts to establish the TPP issue on the political agenda and convince opposed policy makers and citizens. However, the main reason for the surprising turn in Japan’s TPP policy has its roots elsewhere. Abe’s strong leadership skills and his high approval ratings at the beginning of his second term as prime minister made it possible for him to unilaterally decide the controversial TPP issue. In contrast to the previous DPJ governments, he succeeded in integrating the decision on the TPP into his overall policy approach. Portraying the TPP as an integral part of his “abenomics” policy approach made it increasingly difficult for his opponents to openly criticize his pro-TPP stance. Abe further successfully presented the TPP as an indispensable precondition for overall structural and agricultural reform. A Japanese government official, summarizing Abe’s approach, was quoted as follows in an article by Mitsuru Obe in the Wall Street Journal: “The TPP is an important tool for Mr. Abe, but it’s still just a tool. He won’t let it dictate his policy, which is to produce positive outcomes that would strengthen his political power.”

Abe’s prowess was not the only reason for the sudden breakthrough in the TPP debate. JA-Zenchu also shifted its position on the subject and understood that its leverage and influence is decreasing as a result of Japan’s shrinking
population of farmers. Increasing numbers of farmers were also turning their backs on JA-Zenchu, as some small-scale farmers started to venture into new ways of marketing and selling their rice directly to local consumers. Against this background, it might have seemed more promising for JA-Zenchu to negotiate a compromise that satisfied farmers to a certain degree, instead of finding itself in a less powerful situation later on. The organization therefore adapted its strategy on the TPP, so that it was at least able to negotiate substantial carve-outs for some agricultural commodities. That way, JA-Zenchu still fulfilled its political goal of protecting Japanese agriculture, despite joining the TPP.

Abe’s handling of the TPP issue demonstrates how overarching political and economic interests prevailed over local protests. Ultimately Japan’s local protest movement, although well organized and powerful, was not able to hold sway against the national pro-TPP coalition. And although the anti-TPP protest movement was also partly inspired by the anti-nuclear demonstrations, which gained momentum after the Fukushima disaster, it failed to establish a permanent coalition between these two social movements to challenge the government’s position on the TPP. From the perspective of the Japanese civil society engaged in anti-TPP protests and anti-nuclear demonstrations, this has to be seen as a missed opportunity. Japanese farmers, who were among the most affected group of the nuclear catastrophe, took their anger to the streets and protested against how the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) handled the situation. JA-Zenchu also criticized the government for their role in the Fukushima accident and even promoted the “denuclearization” of Japan. However, they ultimately did not develop a comprehensive strategy of protest that would combine trade issues with energy policy.

Recent Developments and Outlook

In May 2014, the Regulatory Reform Council, an advisory panel to Prime Minister Abe, suggested a sweeping reform of the semi-public JA-Zenchu. Aiming to reduce the power of JA-Zenchu and to make local and regional agricultural cooperatives more independent from the centralist organization, along with proposed tie-ups with the private sector to increase competitiveness, were among the main points of the reform proposal. With these policy recommendations, a reform process of the Japanese agricultural system has been initiated. Although some far-reaching recommendations, such as the abolishment of JA-Zenchu, were scrapped after consultations with LDP politicians and MAFF officials, this proposal is still highly significant. It marks the first time that an official government document called for systematic changes of the mighty JA-Zenchu.

After lengthy deliberations between JA-Zenchu and the government, February 2015 marked a major turning point in the role of JA-Zenchu in Japanese agricultural and trade policy. The organization under its president, Akira Banzai, accepted the government’s reform proposal: “We intend to embrace
reform with a view to increasing the income of farming households.\textsuperscript{54} The Abe administration revoked JA’s political influence by abolishing the so-called gentan system and by stipulating a reform schedule for the organization itself.\textsuperscript{55} In fact, the conflict of interest between LDP and JA-Zenchu had already been looming for some time. JA Hokkaido, for example, refrained from endorsing political candidates for the general elections in July 2013, lamenting that none of the parties reflected the anti-TPP interests of local farmers.\textsuperscript{56} However, in the parliamentary elections in December 2014 neither the TPP nor trade policy in general have played major roles.\textsuperscript{57}

The reorganization of JA-Zenchu seems drastic, but ultimately it is the result of a compromise, which becomes apparent when considering the timeline of the proposed reforms. The organizational reform of JA-Zenchu and the abolishment of the gentan system are scheduled for 2019, and will therefore not directly influence the ongoing TPP negotiations. However, the reform highlights Abe’s determination to press ahead with restructuring Japan’s agricultural sector and therefore has at least an important symbolic meaning for Japan’s current negotiation partners.

Considering these recent developments, in hindsight it might have been a smart move for JA-Zenchu to more fully exercise its power and influence before being restricted by any reform. On the other hand, this reform should not be overestimated regarding its direct impact on trade policy-making. The JA-Zenchu is still the most powerful and best organized interest group in Japanese politics and will continue to be highly influential.
Notes


21 Ibid., 645.


24 Refer to the website of the Network to Protect Japan’s Food, Livelihood and Lives against the TPP (日本の食と暮らし・いのちを守るネットワーク), “about this Website (当HPについて),” accessed February 26, 2015, http://www.think-tpp.jp/about.html.


29 Ibid., 336.


31 Ibid.

32 Okinawa also experienced large protests. Similar to other prefectures, the anti-TPP protests there have been driven by a group of organizations, such as the Okinawa Union of Agricultural Cooperatives, the Okinawa Medical Association, the Okinawa Medical Cooperatives and Okinawa Federation of Democratic Medical Institutions. See Maki Miyatake, “Who Has Sovereign Power in Japan? For Whom is TPP Being Promoted?,” article on the Symposium for Regeneration of Health Care, Food, Security, Housing and Environment from Local Communities: Looking Toward Future of Okinawa, Haebaru Town, Okinawa (April 14, 2013), accessed March 13, 2015, http://www.min-iren.gr.jp/?p=11802.
Kuno and Naoi, “Framing Business Interests,” 12.


Another example of JA’s localized anti-TPP campaign can be seen in their TV advertisements starring a local TV celebrity from Kumamoto. See “An Agricultural Cooperative in Kumamoto to Air a TV Commercial in a Kumamoto Dialect Opposing TPP,” Japan Agricultural News (July 27, 2013), accessed February 24, 2015, http://english.agrinews.co.jp/?p=819.


For more information on Abe’s handling of Japan’s five “sacred” agricultural products, see Jonathan Soble and Shawn Donnan, “Japan Politicians Criticize Shinzo Abe’s Trade Pact Push,” Financial Times (October 14, 2013), accessed September 26, 2014, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/476ebfc4-34a8-11e3-801446eab9de.html#axzz3EOINnNnB.


Mulgan, Politics of Agriculture in Japan, 649.


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The rice acreage reduction program was originally set up in the 1970s.


References


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