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JAPAN AT A STRATEGIC CROSSROADS: NEW SECURITY AND DEFENCE DYNAMICS

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Raymond Yamamoto The Enduring Relevance of Japanese ODA in a Rapidly Changing Global Order

Rui Saraiva Japan at a Strategic Crossroads: Hybridity, Adaptiveness, and Normative Pragmatism

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Japan at a Strategic Crossroads: New Security and Defence Dynamics

Japan is undergoing a profound transformation of its security and defence posture. Against the backdrop of intensifying strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific, growing uncertainty surrounding the regional order, and the emergence of increasingly complex security challenges, Tokyo has progressively reassessed the scope of its strategic responsibilities. The adoption of the 2022 National Security Strategy and subsequent policy developments suggest that Japan is moving beyond the parameters that traditionally defined its post-war security identity. Yet this transformation is neither linear nor complete. Rather, it reflects an ongoing process of adjustment in which new capabilities and partnerships coexist with enduring institutional constraints, normative commitments, and the centrality of the U.S.–Japan alliance.

This special issue, "Japan at a Strategic Crossroads: New Security and Defence Dynamics," explores these developments from complementary historical, theoretical, institutional, and policy perspectives. Taken together, the contributions demonstrate that Japan's emerging strategic role cannot be adequately captured by the conventional notion of military "normalisation." Instead, Japan appears to be developing a more complex and multidimensional security identity.

Tosh Minohara examines this transformation through Japan's evolving security posture under Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi. His contribution situates recent developments within the cumulative reforms associated with the Abe and Kishida administrations and argues that Japan has entered a new phase characterised by accelerated implementation and the externalisation of security policy. Particular attention is given to regional diplomacy, security partnerships, economic security, and the enduring importance of the U.S.–Japan alliance.

The broader instruments of Japanese strategic engagement are explored by Raymond Yamamoto, whose contribution focuses on the enduring relevance of Official Development Assistance in a rapidly changing global order. By placing Japanese development cooperation against the backdrop of profound transformations in the international aid environment, Yamamoto highlights the continued importance of non-military instruments of statecraft and their potential relationship with Japan's wider international role.

Rui Saraiva develops a conceptual interpretation of this apparent duality. His analysis challenges the idea that Japan's expanding defence capabilities necessarily represent a straightforward transition towards military normalisation. Instead, he conceptualises Japan as a hybrid strategic actor, combining hard-security capabilities with development cooperation, human security, and adaptive approaches to peace. The concepts of hybridity, adaptiveness, and normative pragmatism provide an innovative framework for understanding this evolving strategic identity.

Japan's expanding security partnerships are further examined by César Rodrigues, who analyses the EU–Japan Security and Defense Partnership established in 2024. His contribution demonstrates how cooperation between Europe and Japan is evolving from political dialogue towards a more structured and operational relationship, particularly in maritime security, cybersecurity, and responses to hybrid threats and Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference.

The regional security environment is addressed from a historical and geopolitical perspective by Diogo Silva, whose analysis of the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute traces its historical, legal, and political evolution through 2026. By connecting the territorial dispute to contemporary Sino-Japanese relations and the Taiwan issue, the article highlights one of the most enduring sources of strategic tension in Japan's immediate neighbourhood.

Finally, Leandro Silva examines Japan's changing strategic role through Role Theory, comparing the 2013 and 2022 National Security Strategies. His analysis identifies significant changes in Japan's conception of its position, functional responsibilities, and relationships with other actors, while also highlighting persistent role conflict between aspirations for greater strategic autonomy and continued structural dependence on the United States.

Taken together, these contributions point to a Japan at a genuine strategic crossroads: increasingly capable and outward-looking, yet still shaped by the legacies of its post-war order. Japan's future role in the Indo-Pacific will depend not only on its military transformation, but also on how effectively it reconciles defence, diplomacy, development cooperation, strategic partnerships, and normative commitments. Understanding this complex process is essential to assessing not only Japan's trajectory, but also the future configuration of the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

Japão numa Encruzilhada Estratégica: Novas Dinâmicas de Segurança e Defesa

O Japão encontra-se perante uma profunda transformação da sua postura de segurança e defesa. Num contexto marcado pelo agravamento da competição estratégica no Indo-Pacífico, pela crescente incerteza em torno da ordem regional e pela emergência de desafios de segurança cada vez mais complexos, Tóquio tem vindo a reavaliar progressivamente o âmbito das suas responsabilidades estratégicas. A adoção da Estratégia de Segurança Nacional de 2022, bem como os desenvolvimentos políticos que se lhe seguiram, sugerem que o Japão está a ultrapassar os parâmetros que tradicionalmente moldaram a sua identidade de segurança no período pós-guerra. Esta transformação, contudo, não é linear nem está concluída. Trata-se, antes, de um processo contínuo de adaptação, no qual novas capacidades

e parcerias coexistem com constrangimentos institucionais persistentes, compromissos normativos e a centralidade da aliança nipo-americana.

É neste contexto que o presente número especial, "Japão numa Encruzilhada Estratégica: Novas Dinâmicas de Segurança e Defesa", procura analisar as transformações em curso a partir de diferentes perspetivas históricas, teóricas, institucionais e políticas. Considerados em conjunto, os contributos reunidos neste número mostram que o emergente papel estratégico do Japão dificilmente poderá ser apreendido através da noção convencional de "normalização" militar. O que parece estar a emergir é, antes, uma identidade de segurança mais complexa e multidimensional.

Tosh Minohara analisa esta transformação a partir da evolução da postura de segurança do Japão durante o mandato da Primeira-Ministra Sanae Takaichi. O seu contributo enquadra os desenvolvimentos recentes no processo cumulativo de reformas associado às administrações de Abe e Kishida, sustentando que o Japão entrou numa nova fase, caracterizada por uma implementação mais acelerada das reformas e por uma crescente projeção externa da política de segurança. O autor presta particular atenção à diplomacia regional, às parcerias de segurança, à segurança económica e à importância continuada da aliança nipo-americana.

A dimensão mais ampla dos instrumentos de envolvimento estratégico do Japão é explorada por Raymond Yamamoto, que se debruça sobre a relevância continuada da Ajuda Pública ao Desenvolvimento (APD) num contexto de profunda transformação da ordem internacional. Ao analisar a cooperação japonesa para o desenvolvimento à luz das mudanças ocorridas no ambiente internacional da ajuda, Yamamoto evidencia a importância persistente dos instrumentos não militares de atuação do Estado e a sua possível articulação com o papel internacional mais amplo do Japão.

Rui Saraiva propõe uma interpretação conceptual desta aparente dualidade. A sua análise questiona a ideia de que a expansão das capacidades de defesa japonesas represente necessariamente uma transição linear para a normalização militar. Em alternativa, conceptualiza o Japão como um ator estratégico híbrido, capaz de combinar capacidades de *hard security* com a cooperação para o desenvolvimento, a segurança humana e abordagens adaptativas à paz. Os conceitos de hibridismo, adaptabilidade e pragmatismo normativo oferecem, assim, um quadro inovador para compreender a evolução da identidade estratégica japonesa.

A expansão das parcerias de segurança do Japão é analisada por César Rodrigues, que se centra na Parceria de Segurança e Defesa UE–Japão, estabelecida em 2024. O seu contributo mostra como a cooperação entre a Europa e o Japão tem vindo a evoluir de um diálogo predominantemente político para uma relação mais estruturada e operacional, nomeadamente nos domínios da segurança marítima, da cibersegurança e das respostas às ameaças híbridas e à Manipulação e Interferência da Informação Estrangeira (FIMI).

O ambiente de segurança regional é abordado por Diogo Silva a partir de uma perspetiva histórica e geopolítica. A sua análise da disputa Diaoyu/Senkaku acompanha a evolução histórica, jurídica e política desta questão até 2026, relacionando-a com as atuais relações sino-japonesas e com a questão de Taiwan. O artigo evidencia, deste modo, uma das fontes mais persistentes de tensão estratégica na vizinhança imediata do Japão.

Por fim, Leandro Silva analisa a evolução do papel estratégico do Japão através da Role Theory, comparando as Estratégias de Segurança Nacional de 2013 e 2022. A sua análise identifica mudanças significativas na forma como o Japão concebe a sua posição, as suas responsabilidades funcionais e as suas relações com outros atores, ao mesmo tempo que evidencia a persistência de um conflito de papéis entre as aspirações a uma maior autonomia estratégica e a continuada dependência estrutural dos Estados Unidos.

Considerados no seu conjunto, estes contributos permitem compreender um Japão numa verdadeira encruzilhada estratégica: progressivamente mais capaz e orientado para o exterior, mas ainda profundamente marcado pelos legados da ordem de segurança do pós-guerra. O futuro papel do Japão no Indo-Pacífico dependerá não apenas da evolução das suas capacidades militares, mas também da forma como conseguir articular defesa, diplomacia, cooperação para o desenvolvimento, parcerias estratégicas e compromissos normativos.

Compreender esta transformação complexa é, por isso, fundamental para analisar a trajetória estratégica do Japão e para para compreender a futura configuração da arquitetura de segurança do Indo-Pacífico.

Luís Cunha

JAPAN AT A STRATEGIC CROSSROADS: NEW SECURITY AND DEFENCE DYNAMICS

From "Japan is Back" to "Japan on the Move": The Cumulative Transformation of Japan's Security Posture from Prime Minister Abe to Takaichi

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Abstract

Japan's security posture from the 2010s to the present day is best understood as a cumulative transformation rather than a sequence of steady and constant reforms. This essay examines the key developments of the current Takaichi administration while also illuminating the key areas that have been greatly expanded from the past policies of Prime Ministers Abe Shinzō and Kishida Fumio, the two recent prime ministers who have played a pivotal role in shaping Japan's security policy. The essay will show that Japan has moved from the phase of institutional restructuring to one of doctrinal consolidation and, under the leadership of Prime Minister (PM) Takaichi Sanae, is now entering a new phase in which Japan's security policy is rapidly shifting toward accelerated implementation and externalization. This is attested by both intensified regional diplomatic engagements and deeper integration of security partnerships across the Indo-Pacific region. The essay will also show that Japan's next challenge will be to play a more proactive role as a security provider in the Indo--Pacific region while also remaining structurally anchored to the U.S.–Japan alliance and the extended nuclear deterrence that the alliance provides.

Keywords: Abe Shinzō; economic security; Indo-Pacific; Japan's security policy; Kishida Fumio; New FOIP; supply chain resilience; Takaichi Sanae; Three Core Security Documents; U.S.–Japan alliance.

Resumo

O Japão Está de Volta" a "O Japão em Movimento": A Transformação Cumulativa da Postura de Segurança do Japão, de Abe a Takaichi

A postura de segurança do Japão, desde a década de 2010 até à atualidade, é melhor compreendida como um processo de transformação cumulativa, e não como uma sucessão de reformas constantes e graduais. Este ensaio analisa os principais desenvolvimentos ocorridos durante a atual administração Takaichi, procurando, simultaneamente, evidenciar as áreas fundamentais que foram significativamente ampliadas em relação às políticas adotadas pelos primeiros-ministros Abe Shinzō e Kishida Fumio, os dois mais recentes chefes de governo que desempenharam um papel decisivo na definição da política de segurança do Japão.

O ensaio demonstrará que o Japão passou de uma fase de reestruturação institucional para uma fase de consolidação doutrinária e que, sob a liderança da primeira-ministra Takaichi Sanae, está agora a entrar numa nova etapa, na qual a política de segurança japonesa se orienta rapidamente para uma implementação acelerada e para uma crescente externalização. Esta evolução é evidenciada tanto pela intensificação do envolvimento diplomático regional como por uma integração mais profunda das parcerias de segurança em toda a região do Indo-Pacífico.

O ensaio demonstrará igualmente que o próximo desafio do Japão consistirá em assumir um papel mais proativo enquanto fornecedor de segurança na região do Indo-Pacífico, mantendo simultaneamente a sua ancoragem estrutural na aliança nipo-americana e no mecanismo de dissuasão nuclear alargada proporcionado por essa aliança.

Palavras-chave: *Abe Shinzō; segurança económica; Indo-Pacífico; política de segurança do Japão; Kishida Fumio; Novo FOIP; resiliência das cadeias de abastecimento; Takaichi Sanae; Três Documentos Fundamentais de Segurança; aliança EUA-Japão.*

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Introduction

Since coming to office in October 2025 as Japan's very first female prime minister in its constitutional history, Takaichi Sanae has devoted much of her energy to aggressively redefining Japan's security posture. She has actively pursued Japan's defence buildup while also expanding Japan's national security agenda, which is expected to culminate in the revision of the so-called Three Core Security Documents at the end of 2026. With this as a backdrop, this essay will examine these important changes in the area of national security that have accelerated at a breakneck pace after her landslide electoral victory on 8 February 2026, in which she was able to secure a dominant two-thirds supermajority in the all-important lower house of the Japanese Diet.

By examining what Takaichi has accomplished to date, this essay will show not only that the undergoing changes in Japan are significant, but also that they will eventually pave the path for Japan being able to fundamentally alter its security posture from one that has traditionally placed heavy emphasis on exclusively investing in defence (*senshu bōei*) to one that is much more proactive and robust and which, in the future, will finally enable Japan to function as a regional security provider. Furthermore, the essay will show that the changes currently taking place are much greater than just building upon the policies shaped by the late Prime Minister Abe Shinzō. Thus, the oft-used refrain "Japan is back!" by his protégé Takaichi is an understatement of the significant changes that are actually occurring now in Japan in the realm of national security. Japan is not standing idly by content with just being back; it is now actively on the move.

This framing of Japan being merely "back" is inherently misleading because it naturally implies a restoration to a prior strategic equilibrium. The genesis of the phrase "Japan is back" can find its origins in Prime Minister Abe's speech given at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in February 2013. This speech was a reaction to the Nye-Armitage Report, which questioned whether Japan was willing to accept becoming a second-tier country.

Takaichi's use of this phrase is not only to commemorate Abe's achievement but also to bolster the image of her strong connection to the late prime minister. Of course, in either case "Japan is back" was not initially intended as an analytical basis to understand Japan's policy transformation. However, the Japanese public has interpreted this phrase to mean the end of the long "lost decades" that began after the collapse of Japan's bubble economy in the early 1990s. Therefore, while Takaichi is reusing this phrase to reaffirm Japan's commitment to the U.S.–Japan alliance and to show her commitment in continuing Abe's legacy, it does lead to the image that Japan is still where Abe had left it. Nothing can be further from the truth; Japan has not idly stood by since Abe, and it is actually much more than just back.

Japan is a nation on the move, as attested by Japan's security posture that has undergone a massive and cumulative structural transformation.

At this very moment, this transformation is still in the process of continuously evolving as a result of the harsh present-day geopolitical realities that require Japan to adjust. The nation is surrounded by two ambitious major powers, China and Russia that are desirous of altering the existing rules-based global order. In fact, Russia has already resorted to the use of military force in challenging the status quo by invading Ukraine in February 2022. China, the greater economic power and arguably one that possesses a more formidable military, is also not hesitant in making its territorial ambitions over Taiwan clear. Lastly, North Korea, a nation that would be near irrelevant had it not developed its own nuclear arsenal, comprises the final neighboring country that exists as a serious security menace for Japan.

With this in mind, this essay will posit that Japan's security trajectory is best understood as a three-phase transformation: institutional expansion under Abe Shinzō, doctrinal consolidation under Kishida Fumio, and operational acceleration and implementation under the present prime minister, Takaichi. Furthermore, this essay will show that Japan under the helm of Takaichi is no longer primarily engaged in merely redefining its security constraints, but instead has embarked on operationalizing its security architecture in order to preserve its national interests under intensifying regional security challenges as well as increased strategic uncertainty during the presidency of Trump 2.0.

2. The Beginning: PMs Abe, Kishida, and the Revamping of Japan's Security Policy

Abe Shinzō's second administration (2012-2020) undoubtedly marked the beginning of Japan's postwar security transformation and should be viewed as the moment Japan broke away from the shackles of the long-held Yoshida Doctrine, which prioritized economic prosperity over becoming a formidable military power. It was in 2010 that China surpassed Japan in terms of GDP, and soon tensions arose over the Senkakus islands when a Chinese fishing boat rammed a Japanese Coast Guard ship in September of that year (JCG, 2011). As a consequence, Abe moved swiftly in establishing the National Security Council (NSC) in December 2013. This enabled Japan to centralize its strategic diplomatic and national security decision-making within the executive, which served to reduce bureaucratic fragmentation that had historically characterized Japanese foreign and defence policy (Cabinet Secretariat, 2014). It also should not be overlooked that the State Secrecy Law was passed in the same year, with the intent of better protecting classified information

to allow for a more secure intelligence-sharing mechanism with its key allies such as the United States.

The first National Security Strategy announced shortly thereafter introduced the concept of "Proactive Contribution to Peace," redefining Japan as a proactive contributor to regional stability rather than a passive security beneficiary, along with a new version of the National Defense Program Guidelines (MOD, 2014). In addition, Abe moved quickly to replace the rigid blanket ban on weapons export with his hallmark legislation, the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology, which allowed for the first time joint development and exports that supported global peace (MOD, 2014). However, the most consequential shift occurred in July 2014 with the reinterpretation of Article 9 of Japan's constitution, which for the first time allowed limited collective self-defence. Implemented through the 2015 security legislation, this finally permitted Japan a legal pathway to militarily support its sole alliance partner, the United States, albeit under narrowly defined existential conditions (Cabinet Secretariat, 2014).

Two years later, during TICAD VI held in Nairobi, Kenya, Abe proclaimed his Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept, embedding Japan within a broader maritime and economic security architecture that encompassed both the Pacific and Indian Oceans (MOFA, 2016). Hence, Abe's chief legacy lies in expanding Japan's institutional and constitutional limits to a degree not seen since 1960, when his grandfather Kishi Nobusuke boldly revised the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty. In this way, the Abe administration expanded Japan's security architecture through institutional innovation and constitutional reinterpretation, which most notably can be seen in the aforementioned creation of the National Security Council as well as the 2015 security legislation that allowed for collective self-defence.

Furthermore, Abe shifted Japan's defence posture to one that placed more strategic focus on defending the southwestern Nansei Islands as a way to counter rising maritime pressures by China in the East China Sea. It should also not be forgotten that it was Abe who revitalized the Quad by actively working to institutionalize the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between Japan, the U.S., Australia, and India as a counterweight to regional security challenges posed primarily by China. In this way, if one were to look back, it is clear that Abe played a pivotal role in transforming Japan's national security policy into one that more directly and coherently addressed the regional threats the nation faced.

On the other hand, the ensuing Kishida administration (2021-2024) that succeeded the short-lived Suga administration (2020-2021) translated institutional flexibility into formal doctrine and capability development. Prime Minister Kishida continued his predecessor's transformation of national security policy, highlighted by the revision of the National Security Strategy, the commitment to double Japan's defence spending, and the enactment of the Economic Security Promotion Act

(Cabinet Secretariat, 2022). In December 2022, Kishida's cabinet adopted major revisions to the Three Core Documents on Security – National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Program – making a clear break from the traditional postwar self-limitations on defence (Cabinet Secretariat, 2022).

To elaborate further, Kishida authorized Japan to acquire counter-strike capabilities based on long-range cruise missiles, enabling Japan to develop standoff capabilities to respond more effectively to missile threats as well as to strengthen regional deterrence against rising threats from both China and North Korea. To make this possible, he not only increased Japan's defence budget but also made a future commitment to increase defence-related spending to 2% of GDP by fiscal year 2027. In addition, Kishida worked to ease restrictions on lethal defence equipment exports, enabling joint international programs like the U.S. $6.1 billion next-generation fighter jet development with the UK and Italy (Global Combat Air Programme – GCAP). Furthermore, outlays for the Japan Coast Guard – responsible for law enforcement within the EEZ – grew by an astounding 30% (Gresh, 2026).

It was also under Kishida that Japan actively pitched the sale of its state-of-the-art *Mogami*-class to its Quad partner, Australia. The 11-ship deal was finally sealed in April 2026 under Takaichi, as both countries signed a historic U.S. $6.5 billion defence contract in Melbourne. Under the terms of the contract, the first three ships will be built in Japan, with delivery scheduled for December 2029, and the remaining eight will be constructed in Western Australia. Considering Japan's longtime postwar ban on arms exports, this marks an astounding shift in Japan's security posture.

Following on the heels of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kishida also enacted the landmark Economic and Regional Security Promotion Act in May 2022 that aimed to strengthen supply chains, protect vital infrastructure, safeguard sensitive technologies, and promote public-private technology collaborations. This allowed for further integration of industrial policy and supply chain resilience into national security planning. Moreover, in the area of foreign policy, his most notable achievement was to strengthen ties with South Korea. With the support of President Joe Biden, Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol institutionalized security and intelligence cooperation against regional contingencies at the historic Camp David Summit in August 2023.

Therefore, Kishida's security policies, epitomized by the December 2022 revision to the Three Core Security Documents, became a major inflection point, as these documents were clearly cognizant of an increasingly dangerous regional security environment. However, it should be noted that he did not merely continue on the tracks laid by Abe, but extended them in order to establish a more robust and long-term defence policy for Japan. Thus, Kishida played a pivotal role in formalizing and providing the necessary financial resources, which enabled Japan to expand its strategic security posture.

In this manner, Abe and Kishida together laid the foundation for Japan’s contemporary security architecture that centralized executive security coordination, expanded the collective self-defence interpretation as well as counter-strike doctrine, and bolstered economic security integration while also sustaining a positive defence investment trajectory. As we will examine next, these are the facets that comprised the basis for Prime Minister Takaichi’s current ongoing security policy.

3. Moving Further Forward: Takaichi’s Quest for Operational Acceleration and Implementation

Despite being prime minister for less than a year, Takaichi can already boast a remarkable list of key achievements: increasing the defence budget as well as defence capabilities; further strengthening the U.S.–Japan alliance in a period where NATO is struggling to manage its alliance with the United States; advancing Japan’s economic security by bolstering supply chain resilience, bolstering cyber resilience, and creating a new and expanded intelligence council. Moreover, while still a work in progress, she has also made a campaign pledge to revise Japan’s Three Core Security Documents, which are comprised of the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Force Development Plan, by the end of 2026. In this way, Takaichi is actively steering Japan in a direction in which the nation can survive in an increasingly unstable global security environment.

Among her many achievements, in April 2026, Takaichi convened a 15-member panel of experts to finalise the revisions on arms exports (PMO, 2026). At present, she is actively pursuing the development of advanced standoff capabilities while strengthening integrated air and missile defenses, and bolstering warfare capabilities in the space, cyber, and electromagnetic domains. In addition, Takaichi has increased defence spending while striving to expand Japan’s industrial capacity. This can be attested by the fact that Japan’s defence spending has nearly doubled to 2% of GDP, a whole year earlier than initially planned. The prime minister also approved a record-high FY2026 budget allocating a historic ¥9.04 trillion for defence, which is a remarkable 9.4% increase year-on-year (Cabinet Secretariat, 2026). In addition, Takaichi has also instituted a multiyear budget allocation to support defence industrial development – particularly in shipbuilding and aerospace – and has taken concrete steps to eliminate lingering export restrictions on defence equipment with the intent of strengthening strategic cooperation with allies and like-minded partners.

By actively working to strengthen the U.S.–Japan alliance, Takaichi has placed utmost emphasis on promoting further military integration with the United States

to counter the multitude of regional threats. An additional boost for the prime minister was the successful bilateral summit with President Donald Trump, where she was able to establish a solid personal relationship with a mercurial leader. During the summit, the two leaders pledged to usher in a "new golden age of the U.S.–Japan alliance" that would enhance joint deterrence, response capabilities, and interoperability (MOFA, 2026).

Takaichi has also pushed for greater economic and technological security, drawing on her experience as Japan's Minister for Economic Security. This is evidenced by legislation advanced under Takaichi that strengthens the links between basic scientific research and national security. In July 2026, she formally adopted an integrated innovation strategy that seeks to deepen public-sector, academic, and industry partnerships on dual-use technologies. Takaichi has also been a vocal advocate of pursuing initiatives that can secure supply chains for critical materials such as rare earths, and has even proposed screening mechanisms for overseas investments in sensitive domestic sectors. To achieve this, Takaichi is working to revise the Economic Security Promotion Act with the intent on protecting critical supply chains, semiconductors, and advanced AI technologies. In a similar vein, she recently launched Japan's version of the U.S. Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) to be called the Japan Foreign Investment Committee (JFIC), which will serve to screen future foreign investments (Cabinet Secretariat, 2026).

Another matter of urgency for Takaichi is to consolidate Japan's intelligence capabilities to address perceived gaps in intelligence gathering and interdepartmental coordination. To this end, she has initiated the creation of a centralized National Intelligence Bureau that will be chaired by the prime minister herself. The organization will seek to consolidate information gathered across the varying agencies – including the police and defence ministries – to streamline decision-making during a national crisis (Cabinet Secretariat, 2026). Additionally, she has built upon her earlier work establishing a formal "security clearance" system to prevent both intentional and unintentional dissemination of highly sensitive, classified information. This will allow for more seamless intelligence sharing with other intelligence organizations of like-minded partners.

Furthermore, Takaichi has been active in promoting the Synchronized Hybrid Integrated and Enhanced Littoral Defense (SHIELD program) to safeguard Japan's southwestern island chain using multi-layered missile defence and autonomous assets (MOD, 2026). In this way, she has laboured to further lift restrictions on non-lethal defence equipment exports as well as to permit the transfer of lethal arms to the 17 nations that have defence equipment transfer agreements with Japan, such as the UK and Australia. Takaichi is also actively seeking to establish a domestic mass-production base for advanced hardware, including combat drones and

next-generation fighters. Thus, it can be seen that Takaichi is wasting no time in actively building upon the achievements of Prime Ministers Abe and Kishida; Japan is definitely on the move.

In the realm of foreign policy, Takaichi has also actively worked to expand upon Abe’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy in order to further bolster Japan’s strategic global partnerships with the intent to effectively counter regional threats in the Indo-Pacific region. Thus, she has already held high-level summits with India, Vietnam, Australia, and the Philippines. These bilateral summits have focused on maritime security, trusted supply chains, and defence technology cooperation. Her updated Free and Open Indo-Pacific (New FOIP) strategy shifts Japan’s diplomatic focus more toward economic security, technological autonomy, and supply chain resilience.

The New FOIP strategy was unveiled during Takaichi’s official visit to Vietnam. It aims to counter economic coercion and ensure regional stability through three key pillars: building economic infrastructure in the age of AI and data supply chain resilience; expanding the U.S. $10 billion Partnership on Wide Energy and Resources Resilience Asia (POWERR Asia initiative) to secure stable energy supplies and critical minerals while restructuring supply chains away from over-reliance on single nations; promoting the FOIP Digital Corridor Concept, which focuses on undersea cables, Open RAN technology, satellite communications, and all-optical networks (METI, 2026).

Therefore, Takaichi’s FOIP should be viewed as an effort to ensure countries in the Indo-Pacific remain “stronger and more prosperous together” (MOFA, 2026) by prioritizing autonomy and the rule of law, the latter a concept that the present U.S. administration has been much less vocal about. This updated FOIP clearly serves as a pragmatic response to shifting geopolitical dynamics, emerging technologies like AI, and rising protectionism with the aim of deepening trade and economic ties with ASEAN and India (MOFA, 2026).

Takaichi also launched the Japan-ASEAN Co-Creation Initiative for AI and is actively pushing for the expansion of this 12-nation initiative. The U.K. became the latest member to join in December 2024 the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which comprises 14% of global GDP. In Vietnam specifically, Japan has committed to increasing investments and expanding bilateral trade to U.S. $60 billion by 2030. Japan is also in the process of enhancing its maritime security cooperation with other ASEAN partners such as Malaysia and the Philippines through its Official Security Assistance (OSA) as well as Official Development Assistance (ODA). The aim is to assist its ASEAN partners to establish more robust deterrence and resilience capabilities. The prime minister is also pushing for the establishment of a CPTPP office in Tokyo so that Japan can function as the crucial lynchpin in this free trade framework.

Through Japan's proactive engagement with ASEAN, many regional actors are increasingly viewing Japan as a stabilizing security node within the broader Indo-Pacific architecture. In other words, Japan is being increasingly viewed as a provider of capacity-building, maritime domain awareness, and industrial cooperation outside traditional alliance structures. Hence, Japan's emerging role is less one of hierarchical leadership than of a team player, emphasizing mutual connectivity and integration across multiple layers of the regional security architecture. As we have seen, Japan under Takaichi has spared no time in intensifying structured engagements across the Indo-Pacific. These numerous engagements should be understood as all vital components of a broader process of security externalization. Rather than being insular, Japan is deeply embedding itself within a layered regional security system involving maritime cooperation, intelligence sharing, and defence industrial coordination. Collectively, these relationships reflect Japan's growing role as a connective security node that links multiple regional frameworks. Undoubtedly, the desired result is not to replace the U.S. alliance, but rather to further supplement it by increasing the quality and density of regional security linkages that surround it.

Despite these vast changes taking place in Japan's security policy, Takaichi's actions represent a critical shift in emphasis rather than a drastic change in direction. Restated, Japan's basic security architecture forged under Abe remains intact, but the policy focus has moved to accelerated implementation, operational readiness, and externalization. Unmistakably, what has prompted these bolder initiatives are ever-increasing external pressures such as China's rapid military modernisation, North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile development, the long-term implications of Russia's war in Ukraine for industrial mobilization and deterrence endurance, and finally, the volatility of the current Trump administration. However, the key defining feature of these changes is not merely a more acute threat perception but strong political leadership that is pushing for greater acceleration in changing Japan's security posture in order to counter these threats.

4. PM Takaichi and the Implementation and Externalization of Security Policy

A central feature of the Takaichi administration is the acceleration of implementation under the 2022 defence framework. Japan's defence system has historically been constrained by slow procurement cycles, fragmented acquisition processes, and severely limited stockpiles of munitions and other hardware. Cognizant of these deficiencies, Takaichi is striving to overcome these constraints through a more flexible and rapid procurement system, improved readiness metrics, and expanded munitions and drone production.

As such, industrial mobilization has become a central element of Japan’s defence planning. Therefore, defence production is increasingly being treated as strategic infrastructure rather than merely as a component of the procurement system.

A critical but often underemphasized dimension of Japan’s security transformation is the condition of its defence industrial base. While doctrinal reforms have progressed rapidly, industrial capacity remains a binding constraint on sustained operational readiness. This is due to the fact that Japan’s defence production system has historically been optimized for low-volume, high-precision procurement rather than sustained high-intensity output. The shift toward counter-strike capability and prolonged contingency planning necessarily requires a fundamentally different industrial model. Key existing constraints include limited munitions stockpiles relative to scenario-based planning assumptions, fragmented production lines across major defence contractors, procurement cycles that remain slow relative to operational requirements, and dependence on specialized components.

Acutely aware of these limitations, Takaichi has moved to alleviate the obstacles to increased industrial mobilization capacity. She is pressing for a policy that will expand and enhance production scalability, improve supply chain resilience, and incentivize sustained defence manufacturing output. Despite this, structural challenges persist. Japan’s defence industrial base is constrained not only by production capacity but also by workforce demographics, cost structures, and limited export scalability. Naturally, this creates an internal strategic tension in which Japan’s doctrinal ambition increasingly assumes sustained operational capability, while industrial systems remain stubbornly based on legacy production models. Ultimately, the resolution of this tension will not only define Takaichi’s security policy but will also be imperative for the success of Japan’s long-term security posture.

Another Achilles heel of Japan’s security transformation is the tendency to focus on doctrine while underplaying implementation mechanisms. In practice, Japan’s evolving security posture is heavily shaped by bureaucratic coordination structures centered on the Cabinet Secretariat and the National Security Secretariat (NSS). The creation of the National Security Council in 2013 fundamentally altered inter-ministerial coordination by centralizing strategic decision-making within the executive (MOFA, 2013). However, the practical significance of this reform lies not in formal structure, but in the operational authority of the Cabinet Secretariat to coordinate defence, foreign policy, and intelligence priorities.

Under Takaichi’s leadership, implementation pressure has increasingly shifted from doctrinal formulation to execution management. The NSS functions as the primary coordination hub for aligning defence planning, budget execution, and diplomatic signaling. This includes synchronization between the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other relevant ministries in relation to

supply chain security and critical technology protection. In particular, the Ministry of Defense has undergone significant internal reorganisation, particularly in the areas of procurement reform and capability planning. However, significant structural constraints remain. Procurement cycles continue to reflect legacy systems designed for peacetime acquisition rather than sustained contingency operations. Consequently, the current security policy is defined less by new doctrinal innovation than by attempts to compress and accelerate implementation timelines. That being said, one notable feature of Takaichi's security policy is that it tends to place more emphasis on sustainment-based deterrence logic than platform-based defence planning, which had been the norm.

It goes without saying that the U.S.–Japan alliance remains the foundational pillar of Japan's security architecture. However, the alliance is no longer defined primarily by deterrence signaling. Rather, the operational character of the alliance has evolved toward multi-domain integration. Coordination now extends across missile defence, cyber operations, space systems, and joint planning structures. Under Takaichi, alliance management has shifted toward continuous operational synchronization rather than episodic consultation that was typical in the past. However, structural asymmetry persists as Japan is expanding its operational responsibility while simultaneously remaining dependent on U.S. extended deterrence. Despite this, a key breakthrough has been the deepening of joint planning structures and interoperability frameworks, which include enhanced coordination in missile defence, maritime domain awareness, and integrated air and naval operations. The shift toward multi-domain operations reflects broader changes in the strategy of the United States for the Indo-Pacific region, particularly the emphasis on distributed deterrence and integrated command structures.

As we have seen, moving in lockstep with these changes, alliance coordination has increasingly moved toward operational synchronization rather than consultation under Takaichi. This is attested by improved alignment of procurement cycles, joint exercises at scale, and interoperability in emerging domains such as cyber and space. Undoubtedly, the evolution of this alliance coordination is the outcome of changing expectations regarding burden-sharing.

Therefore, Japan's sustained increase in defence spending and the development of counter-strike capabilities should be understood not merely as domestic policy choices, but also as part of broader alliance expectations aimed at strengthening regional deterrence and strategic stability.

Another notable achievement in this regard is the establishment of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) Joint Operations Command (JJOC), located at the Ministry of Defense in Ichigaya, Tokyo. This permanent headquarters was created to centrally unify and command the Ground, Maritime, and Air Self-Defense Forces so they can execute seamless cross-domain operations. This will play a core role in

strengthening Japan’s Indo-Pacific deterrence and disaster-response capabilities. The earliest concept of a joint operations command emerged in 2006 when the Japan Joint Staff Office (JJSO) was created to advise the Minister of Defense. While officials from the Maritime Staff Office noted the necessity of a dedicated joint headquarters for a unified defence system, the JJSO became the *de facto* headquarters, and plans for a separate command were temporarily shelved. Astonishingly, for nearly two decades, the JSDF relied on *ad hoc*, temporary joint commands to handle specific contingencies and large-scale natural disasters, which often complicated operational efficiency (MOD, 2026).

However, geopolitical shifts and increasingly complex security threats made a major restructuring a matter of survival, and the concept was formally revived in December 2022 under Kishida when the Japanese government released its revised National Defense Strategy and Defense Buildup Plan. This led to the official activation of the JSDF Joint Operations Command (JJOC) on 24 March 2025. The new permanent command assumed the key responsibility of managing real-time operations across land, sea, air, cyberspace, and outer space (MOD, 2026).

This structural change allowed the Chief of Staff of the Joint Staff to focus entirely on advising the prime minister and the minister of defense, rather than juggling operational command during emergencies. As of 2026, the JJOC is currently led by Commander Admiral Tawara Tateki and coordinates closely with the U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) and the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) as well as with its like-minded partners in Europe. But despite such deepening operational integration, the U.S. continues to provide extended deterrence guarantees that Japan can in no way independently replicate. This creates a dual structure: increased Japanese operational responsibility that is paired with enduring strategic dependence. In this manner, Japan’s new security posture has nothing to do with an abrupt transition toward autonomy, but rather with providing greater operational contribution within the alliance framework that it is so dependent upon.

Notwithstanding, the credibility of Japan’s deterrence posture will increasingly depend upon its ability to sustain operations over time. Japan’s evolving security role has produced a tiered regional response characterized by adaptation rather than alignment or opposition. Thus, Japan’s security transformation can be understood as both cumulative and coherent, while remaining an ongoing and evolving process.

Looking back, we can see that Abe expanded institutional capacity, whereas Kishida formalized and resourced it. Now, Takaichi is amidst a process of operationalizing and externalizing so that Japan can survive in an increasingly tumultuous regional security environment.

5. Revising the Three Core Security Documents: Takaichi's Near-term Strategic Priority

The defining feature of the Takaichi administration's early security agenda was the decision to prioritize an early revision of Japan's Three Core Security Documents – the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Program of 2022. While these documents were widely regarded as a watershed in Japan's post-war security policy, Takaichi's position is that the rapid deterioration of the security situation has already outpaced key assumptions embedded in the original framework.

In official statements, Takaichi has emphasized three primary drivers of revision. First, the continued acceleration of China's military modernisation, particularly in relation to naval expansion, missile forces, and integrated joint operations capabilities. Second, North Korea's sustained development of ballistic missile systems, including solid-fuel and potentially multiple-warhead technologies. Third, the structural impact of Russia's war in Ukraine, which has reinforced concerns about protracted high-intensity warfare, ammunition consumption rates, and the importance of industrial mobilization capacity (Cabinet Secretariat, 2022; MOD, 2024).

Within this context, Takaichi's strategic rationale should be understood as not a total revamping of the 2022 documents, but instead a starting line in transforming Japan's security posture to one that is much more robust and effective. The 2022 Three Core Security Documents themselves described the international environment as "the most severe and complex since the end of the Second World War" (Cabinet Secretariat, 2022), but Takaichi has interpreted subsequent developments as clear evidence that this assessment no longer accurately reflects the new realities.

Facing an increasingly dangerous security situation, the following three areas have been of particular focus in Takaichi's security policy discussions:

1) **Deterrence posture**: Takaichi has shown a profound interest in strengthening the credibility, survivability, and responsiveness of Japan's standoff and counter-strike capabilities. This includes not only platform acquisition but also command-and-control resilience, targeting integration with allies, and munitions stockpiling.
2) **Defence industrial capacity**: Drawing lessons from Ukraine, Takaichi has placed an increased emphasis on sustained production capacity rather than peacetime procurement cycles. This includes ammunition replenishment rates, supply chain resilience, and defence-industrial coordination with partner States.
3) **Cross-domain integration**: Takaichi has highlighted the need to better integrate cyber, space, electromagnetic, and information domains into conven-

tional force planning to adapt to the increasing complexity of modern multi-domain operations.

While formal revisions to the Three Core Security Documents are currently ongoing, the policy direction thus far indicates continuity with Kishida-era reforms combined with an emphasis on speed of implementation and operational readiness. In this respect, Takaichi’s approach should be interpreted as an adaptive acceleration rather than a wholesale structural redesign. In other words, what is being pursued is a sequence of iterative adjustments rather than the creation of a single comprehensive all-in-one reform package. While the revision of the Three Core Security Documents is unquestionably a vital policy objective, there are a multitude of other policy developments that illuminate the general direction of the administration in the realm of national security. For example, Takaichi has emphasized a strategic reassessment of policy review mechanisms, including the establishment of interagency working groups tasked with evaluating gaps in the implementation of the 2022 Defense Buildup Program. These reviews focus on readiness levels, stockpile adequacy, and procurement timelines, particularly for munitions and standoff systems.

Another indicator of the direction that Takaichi is heading is her emphasis on defence production and industrial resilience. Building on measures initiated under Kishida, the current administration has sought to further stabilize long-term procurement contracts with domestic defence firms while simultaneously encouraging increased production capacity for ammunition and other critical defence components. This clearly reflects a growing concern that Japan’s deterrence credibility depends not only on advanced platforms but also on sustained industrial output that can ensure adequate supplies under conditions of prolonged conflict. To be sure, the lessons of Ukraine have not been lost on Japan.

Another vital policy direction of Takaichi concerns that of alliance coordination, particularly with the U.S. While the U.S.–Japan alliance remains structurally stable, increased attention has been placed on operational integration, including joint planning for contingency scenarios in the East China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific region. This has included discussions on C4 interoperability, logistics coordination, intelligence sharing, and vastly expanded joint exercises. Parallel to these developments, Takaichi has also pushed for Japan’s continued expansion of economic security policy, including measures related to critical infrastructure protection and a more robust supply chain for strategic technologies. These initiatives will build directly on the 2022 Economic Security Promotion Act, but greater emphasis will be placed on implementation and enforcement rather than the mere broadening of existing legislation.

One should be mindful, however, that at the present stage there are no indications of a fundamental doctrinal break from the initial 2022 NSS framework. Instead,

policy progression has taken the form of incremental recalibration, with a focus more on eliminating implementation gaps, increasing operational readiness, and better adapting to new security threats. Therefore, the revision process of the Three Core Security Documents serves as both a policy instrument and as a signaling mechanism to both its friends – particularly the U.S. – and neighboring adversaries that Japan is keenly aware of the current strategic situation and is quickly evolving its policies so that it can more effectively respond to these challenges.

Conclusion

The evolution of Japan's security policy under Prime Ministers Abe, Kishida, and Takaichi should be understood as an incremental build-up or a cumulative transformation rather than as individual developments that took place during each respective administration. In other words, these three prime ministers have all contributed vital layers in shaping Japan's current defence posture that have been mutually complementary and do not possess a competing and divergent strategic logic.

As this essay has shown, Abe's most enduring legacy lies in his bold initiation of a strategic redefinition of Japan's defence posture. By taking the key steps in establishing the National Security Council and reinterpreting collective self-defence, he successfully expanded the conceptual boundaries of Japanese security policy and paved a path toward Japan's being able to take a more proactive strategic orientation (Cabinet Secretariat, 2013; Hughes, 2015). On the other hand, the contribution of Kishida, who succeeded him, was more narrowly focused on institutional consolidation. Through the 2022 Three Core Security Documents, he succeeded in translating Japan's strategic intent into a more coherent doctrine. However, Kishida was not content with stopping there, as under his helm, Japan significantly increased its defence spending as well as obtained counter-strike capabilities for the first time (Cabinet Secretariat, 2022). Hence, this can be viewed as a key phase in which Japan's security policy was transformed from an evolving framework into an operationalized strategy, which was now grounded on a much more solid national strategic foundation.

In contrast, Takaichi's role thus far can be understood as being both adaptive and accelerative. This is because she has not introduced a fundamentally new strategic paradigm for Japan but instead has steadfastly emphasized and pushed for the urgent need to revise, refine, and quickly implement the 2022 framework in response to an increasingly unstable regional environment. Therefore, a natural analytical question would be not if Japan is becoming a more determined and potent military actor – this trajectory is already well established – but rather how

rapidly and in what form will Japan's military capability be realized and operationalized. In this regard, Takaichi's repeated pledge of revising the Three Core Security Documents by the end of 2026 suggests a critical policy shift from one that hitherto emphasized strategic intent to one that places a sharper focus on strategic implementation with an added sense of urgency.

That being said, several key constraints remain. First, Japan's constitutional framework, namely Article 9, will continue to determine the limits of permissible military action, even while the constitutional interpretations of Article 9 have expanded over the years. Second, fiscal pressures associated with sustained defence spending increases will also become a constraint on long-term procurement ambitions. Unquestionably, the rapidly changing national demographics as well as the weak yen will be detrimental in this regard. Third, alliance dependency on the U.S. for extended deterrence will remain a structural *sine qua non* of Japan's security posture for the foreseeable future. Lastly, since Japan's security transformation has been largely driven by the elite-level policy experts from both the civilian and military sectors, a holistic security perception and awareness by the public is still lacking. This can be seen as a possible impediment that will prevent a durable and fully consolidated shift in Japan's security identity.

Public opinion surveys continue to show persistent ambivalence toward constitutional revision, particularly Article 9, with roughly half of respondents remaining cautious or opposed to a formal revision (NHK, 2026). Furthermore, a significant segment of society and certain portions of the political establishment continue to view Japan primarily as a security recipient that should remain dependent on the U.S. for extended deterrence and strategic assurances. This leads one to surmise what portion of the public actually grasps the essence of Japan's major policy changes and embraces Japan's new emerging security posture. It should not go unnoticed that national security remains a sensitive topic in Japan that is seldom taught in schools with an overtly military component. Moreover, JSDF personnel are seldom seen in public with their uniforms, and the majority of the public perceives that the primary function of their "military" is to respond to domestic natural disasters. Of course, one also cannot overlook the fact that Japanese domestic law does not recognize the existence of a full-fledged military, and thus the JSDF is deemed officially as special public employees. This fact is reflected in the nomenclature of their ranks, which makes a clear break from the Second World War and does not conform to international norms. Furthermore, the JSDF even lacks a military tribunal, and its personnel can only be tried in civilian courts. One can only ponder how such a non-traditional institution will fare in an actual full-fledged war.

Taken together, these constraints clearly show that Japan's security transformation remains far from complete. It is still an ongoing process of adaptation and evolution that successive future administrations will need to tackle while also balancing

constitutional constraints, strategic necessity, and alliance management. Of course, the ultimate question becomes: how much time does Japan have left? From this perspective, the true significance of Takaichi's policies perhaps is not that she initiated a new era of Japanese security policy, but that she realized that time is of the essence and thus rapidly pushed the boundaries of the existing framework to one that can better deal with Japan's existential security threats.

To be sure, if Takaichi can gain control of the upper house in the elections scheduled for some time in 2028, she may decide to take even bolder action and go far beyond the implementation of the 2026 Three Core Security Documents by moving toward actual constitutional revision. This would be something that even Abe himself could not accomplish during the zenith of his political power. No doubt, it remains to be seen if Takaichi will actually pursue, let alone succeed, in what will amount to be a massive paradigm shift of postwar Japanese security policy. But at the end of the day, it may very well be an external national security crisis that gives Japan no choice but to abruptly move in that direction regardless of who the prime minister is.

In this way, in the realm of security, Japan's policy trajectory cannot be explained by a mere "Japan is back" remark that has become a trademark phrase of the prime minister. This is because, as we have seen, Japan has been undergoing a layered transformation in its security policy that has now clearly entered a phase of operational acceleration in which the defining feature is the convergence of internal capability expansion along with external network construction. Japan is not just back; it is on the move. Japan is increasingly, albeit cautiously, cognizant of the fact that it will someday need to function as a security provider within the Indo-Pacific region while remaining anchored to the U.S.–Japan alliance in order to maintain maximum deterrence assurances. The ensuing result could be an emergence of a "normal state" that is characterized by an enhanced sense of security agency and a nation that sees itself as a stakeholder in its own national security destiny, as well as the pursuit of further defence integration with the U.S. in order to make the alliance much more robust and mutual.

Undoubtedly, this transition is far from complete, as crucial structural weaknesses still need to be addressed. For example, Japan's operational role is expanding much faster than its industrial capacity base, which leads to a persistent gap between strategic ambition and sustained capacity. This must be resolved if Japan is to attain a more formidable and sustainable security posture. Furthermore, although Japan's future security policy trajectory appears remarkably clear, the nation's underlying societal and security identity foundations have not kept pace with such rapid evolution.

These issues reflect a deeper structural tension in Japan's strategic posture. These need to be resolved, as a healthy democracy necessitates that its citizens understand the fundamental changes in security policy that Japan is currently undergoing.

In turn, this allows Japan to be more effective in pursuing a path in which the country not only becomes a regional security provider but also enhances its deterrence capabilities, thereby deepening defence integration with other like-minded partners, and expanding the operational roles of the JSDF.

While material capabilities and institutional frameworks have moved significantly forward, the domestic consensus regarding the meaning of Japan’s strategic normalization will remain incomplete unless public awareness is increased and the public can grasp the logic and reason behind Japan’s security transformation. This duality is central to understanding the limits of Japan’s ongoing security transformation. In this way, Takaichi’s decisive actions toward revising the Three Core Security Documents inherently reflect a combination of external pressure and internal recognition that will surely require further societal adjustments.

For these reasons, Japan should be more appropriately understood as a nation that is undergoing an extended and transformative strategic transition in which institutional change is increasingly outpacing the consolidation of public opinion. In the end, the trajectory of this transformation will depend not merely on policy implementation at the executive level, but on whether or not a durable domestic consensus can emerge regarding Japan’s security identity as a “proactive security provider” in an ever more volatile Indo-Pacific region.

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The Enduring Relevance of Japanese ODA in a Rapidly Changing Global Order

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Abstract

This article examines the enduring relevance of Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) in a rapidly changing global order. It argues that Japanese ODA has evolved from a postwar instrument of reconstruction and diplomatic rehabilitation into a multilayered and flexible form of statecraft serving diplomatic, economic, and security objectives. Initially shaped by reparations and Japan's regional focus on Asia, ODA contributed to rebuilding trust, securing natural resources, supporting economic growth, and developing regional production networks. Since the introduction of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision under Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, these functions have become increasingly integrated into Japan's strategic policy. ODA now supports regional connectivity, quality infrastructure, economic resilience, maritime security, and the maintenance of a rules-based international order. The article further highlights the growing interaction between ODA and Official Security Assistance (OSA). It concludes that Japan's adaptive use of ODA remains strategically valuable, enabling Tokyo to advance national interests while addressing the developmental needs of partner countries.

Keywords: Official Development Assistance; Free and Open Indo-Pacific; Security; Government; international order.

Resumo

A relevância duradoura da Ajuda Pública ao Desenvolvimento (APD) japonesa numa ordem global em rápida transformação

Este artigo analisa a relevância duradoura da Ajuda Pública ao Desenvolvimento (APD) do Japão num contexto de rápida transformação da ordem global. Argumenta-se que a APD japonesa evoluiu de um instrumento de reconstrução pós-guerra e reabilitação diplomática para um instrumento de ação estratégica multifacetado e flexível, orientado para objetivos diplomáticos, económicos e de segurança. Inicialmente marcada pelas reparações de guerra e pela concentração regional na Ásia, a APD contribuiu para reconstruir a confiança, assegurar recursos naturais, promover o crescimento económico e desenvolver redes regionais de produção. Desde a introdução da visão de um Indo-Pacífico Livre e Aberto (FOIP), durante o mandato do Primeiro-Ministro Abe Shinzō, estas funções foram progressivamente integradas na política estratégica japonesa. A APD apoia atualmente a conectividade regional, infraestruturas de qualidade, resiliência económica, segurança marítima e manutenção de uma ordem internacional baseada em regras. O artigo destaca ainda a crescente articulação entre APD e Assistência Oficial à Segurança (OSA), sublinhando o seu valor estratégico para o Japão.

Palavras-chave: *Ajuda Pública ao Desenvolvimento; Indo-Pacífico Livre e Aberto; Segurança; ordem internacional.*

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Introduction

Under the second Trump administration, Official Development Assistance (ODA) faced unprecedented criticism in the United States. At the center of these critiques, which rapidly spread beyond the United States and resonated with populist movements in other high-income countries, was the claim that ODA – defined by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) as government support provided to developing countries to promote economic development and welfare – had become an instrument primarily serving progressive political agendas rather than the broader national interests of donor states. Most notably, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the central institutional pillar of U.S. development cooperation, was effectively dismantled in 2025 by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) under Elon Musk's leadership. Musk publicly described USAID on the social media platform X as a "criminal organization" and "a viper's nest of radical-left Marxists who hate America," arguing that the agency should be "fed into the wood chipper."[1] Consequently, the total U.S. ODA budget was cut by 56.9%, affecting not only the U.S. but the global aid environment. Total OECD ODA expenditures, compared to 2024 levels, decreased by 23.1%, the largest annual contraction on record, abruptly ending many projects around the world (OECD 2026). Those developments brought fundamental questions about the *raison d'être* of ODA.

To be clear, skepticism toward ODA is not a new phenomenon; it has long been the subject of criticism (see Easterly 2007; Moyo 2009). However, the Trump administration's criticism differed from earlier critiques in important respects. Whereas much of the traditional debate focused on the neocolonial implications of aid or its effectiveness in fostering development, the Trump administration reframed the issue as a matter of national interest, arguing that ODA served solely liberal-internationalist and progressive priorities rather than American strategic or economic objectives. This criticism was quickly adopted by populist forces in other high-income countries, elevating doubt about the domestic utility of foreign aid into a widespread global narrative, influencing many governments' attitudes towards bilateral and multilateral ODA (Haug, Novoselova, and Klingebiel 2025). Against this backdrop, the status and future of ODA in Japan, as the leading donor in Asia, become particularly interesting and relevant.

To better understand the contemporary role of ODA in Japan's foreign policy, this article first traces the diverse functions that development assistance has served since the end of the Second World War. It then examines how ODA has

1 https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1886098373251301427; https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1886307316804263979

been incorporated into the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision (FOIP) advanced by Prime Minister Abe Shinzō in 2016. The analysis concentrates on three primary foreign policy dimensions: diplomacy, economy, and security. For analytical clarity, these aspects are treated separately; however, it is important to emphasize that, in practice, these dimensions are often interconnected and overlap (see Govella 2021).
The basic argument of this article is that Japan's ODA has progressively adopted new functions throughout its postwar history, making it what it is today: a multi-layered and flexible instrument of statecraft capable of adapting to the constantly changing needs of Japan and recipient countries.
By highlighting the range of functions ODA continues to serve for Japan, this article challenges the prevailing perception of development cooperation as an exclusively liberal instrument, arguing instead that it can equally serve the donor's interests. In an era when traditional aid paradigms are increasingly contested, the Japanese case offers important insights into how ODA can be reimagined and reconfigured to remain politically, economically, and strategically relevant, serving the interests of both donors and recipients.

Foundations of Japanese ODA

Understanding the origin of Japan's ODA is central, as it has laid the ideological foundation that continues to influence how the country understands and uses it. Compared with other DAC members, poverty alleviation played only a marginal role in the Japanese government's ODA-related policies and narratives. The reason is that Japan's ODA disbursements began not as a choice but rather as a necessity.
Its origins can be traced to its defeat in the Second World War, culminating in its capitulation on 15 August 1945. In the postwar settlement agreed in the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, Japan was obliged to provide reparations to signatory countries it had occupied or harmed during the war, upon request. This was the case of Burma, the Philippines, Indonesia, and South Vietnam. Although entitled, Cambodia and Laos did not request reparations. On the other hand, Japan provided reconstruction assistance to Thailand, the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Singapore, Malaysia, and Micronesia, even though they were not parties to the peace treaty and, in principle, not eligible. As such, the assistance to those countries was labeled "quasi-reparation" (Hoshiro 2023, 676).
While the reparations Japan provided under the San Francisco Peace Treaty were not ODA in the narrow sense, they laid the conceptual and institutional foundations for it. Due to the lack of capital after the war, reparations were mainly provided in the form of goods and services to support the construction of large economic infrastructure projects (Kato, 2025, pp. 122-123). Four defining features emerged during

this period and continue to exert a strong influence on Japan's ODA. These include a demand-driven approach that emphasises assistance only upon request, a reluctance to impose political conditionality on recipients, a pronounced focus on economic infrastructure as the foundation of development, and a regional concentration on Asia (Fujikura and Nakayama, 2016, pp. 42-44).

The official beginning of Japan's ODA is marked by its accession to the Colombo Plan on 6 October 6 1954, which promoted the economic and social development of Asia and the Pacific. This important day, which marked the beginning of Japan's role as an ODA provider, has been designated by the Government of Japan as "International Cooperation Day." A few years later, Japan joined the first working groups of the Development Assistance Group (DAG), the forerunner organization of the DAC, which was established in 1960 and to which the country was a founding member. Notably, Japan became a member of the DAC four years before becoming an OECD member in 1964 (Führer, 1994, pp. 9, 11).

The Functional Evolution of Japanese ODA

The following three sections trace the shifting priorities of Japan's ODA, adopting an evolutionary perspective before assessing its centrality in FOIP. They examine how Japanese ODA has gradually come to incorporate diplomatic, economic, and security functions. For conceptual purposes, the functions are presented separately; in reality, however, they overlap and are often inseparable.

ODA as Diplomatic Statecraft

The diplomatic function represents the first layer of Japan's ODA and played a particularly important role in the immediate postwar period, beginning with the conclusion of the San Francisco Peace Treaty. By joining the Colombo Plan and the DAC, Japan aimed to demonstrate its commitment to peaceful engagement to the international community and to reestablish itself as a responsible global actor. In the postwar context, ODA was a key instrument in shaping the global view of Japan as a "civilian power," which refrains from using military force in its foreign policy (Maull, 1990).

Additional efforts were needed to reestablish and stabilize its diplomatic relations with neighboring countries, where Japan's image was negatively shaped by the colonial and wartime atrocities, cruelty, and oppression (Singh, 2002, pp. 280-281). For Japan, as an island nation with no significant natural resources, building good relationships with neighboring countries was a precondition for its postwar reconstruction and economic growth. Southeast Asia played a particularly important role for Japan, as ties with China were completely cut following the war (Tarling, 2013, p. 110).

Japan used ODA as an important instrument for restoring its international reputation, presenting itself as a peaceful and reliable partner rather than a resurgent regional power. This approach reflected a keen awareness of lingering sensitivities in Southeast Asia regarding Japan's wartime occupation and postwar economic expansion. The persistence of wartime memories and concerns about Japanese economic dominance became evident during Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei's tour of Southeast Asia in 1974, which was met with widespread protests in several countries. Tanaka faced large-scale protests, especially in Thailand and Indonesia, where demonstrators accused Japan of acting as an "economic animal," prioritizing its own commercial interests while disproportionately benefiting from the region's resources and markets. The large-scale protests reflected broader concerns that Japan's growing economic presence resembled a new form of domination, even if it lacked the military dimension of prewar imperialism. The protests served as an important reminder that economic engagement alone was insufficient to secure regional goodwill. Consequently, Japan had to consistently ensure that ODA was mutually beneficial and that it respected the interests and autonomy of its partners. This approach was later reinforced by the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine, which pledged that Japan would pursue a "heart-to-heart" relationship with Southeast Asia based on equality, trust, and peaceful cooperation (Lim and Nguyen, 2024; Koga, 2017, pp. 1-5; Singh, 2002, pp. 279-283).

Japan addressed regional concerns by adopting, as noted above, a request-based approach to aid provision and by generally refraining from attaching political or economic conditions to assistance. Recipient governments often viewed Japan's emphasis on loans for economic infrastructure as a credible development model because it reflected the country's own postwar experience. Japan had relied extensively on World Bank loans to finance major infrastructure projects during its period of rapid economic growth. These included landmark projects such as the Kurobe No. 4 Hydroelectric Power Station and the Tōkaidō Shinkansen connecting Tokyo and Osaka, both of which became symbols of Japan's successful economic transformation (Fujikura and Nakayama, 2016, pp. 39-41).

Technical assistance constituted another important component of Japan's ODA strategy. Having drawn heavily on technical cooperation to support economic reconstruction at home, Japan emphasized the training of local officials, students, and workers in recipient countries, thereby creating durable human connections that contributed to a more positive perception of Japan (Hansen, 2015).

While it is difficult to measure and establish a direct causal link, there are strong indications that Japan's development support through ODA across Asia, especially in Southeast Asia, had a strong positive impact on Japan's image. Many infrastructure projects supported by Japan in the past have become important symbols of modernization and have left their mark on the collective memory of many

countries. This includes, for example, the Neak Loeung/Kizuna Bridge, the first bridge over the Mekong River in Cambodia, and the Asahan Dam in Indonesia, both projects which were prominently displayed in their respective local currencies. According to *The State of Southeast Asia*, a yearly regional survey conducted by Yusof Ishak Institute (ISEAS), Japan consistently ranks as the most trusted external partner in Southeast Asia, where most of its ODA has been concentrated. In the 2026 survey, 65.6% of respondents said Japan is the most trusted partner, clearly ahead of the U.S. (44%), China (39.8%), and Europe (55.9%). The main reasons stated for the trust are that Japan is a responsible stakeholder that respects and champions international law (41.4%) and that the respondents admire its civilization and culture (14.2%) (Lin et al., 2026).

While the impact has been most significant in Southeast Asia, it has also influenced Japan's image in other regions, including Serbia. In the aftermath of the NATO bombing campaign, Japan assisted the country's postwar reconstruction by supporting the restoration of public transportation systems and other critical infrastructure (Yamamoto, n.d.). While Japan has generally been successful in using ODA to improve its image in recipient countries, notable exceptions can be found in China and South Korea, where collective memories of Japanese wartime aggression continue to play an important role in shaping national identity and perceptions of Japan. In these countries, Japanese ODA has often been viewed less as a symbol of partnership and development cooperation than as a form of compensation for wartime damage. Nevertheless, such cases are exceptions rather than the norm.

ODA as Economic Statecraft

ODA played a central role in Japan's postwar economic growth, which is the second functional layer introduced in this article and is considered the most important in the past (Arase, 1995). While initially forced to provide development cooperation under the reparations obligation imposed by the San Francisco Peace Treaty, Japan quickly came to understand the benefits of ODA in supporting its own economic needs.

In the immediate post-war period, securing natural resources was Japan's leading priority, as its economy then heavily relied on resource-intensive industries. As a resource-scarce country, Japan strategically employed ODA to ensure both access to and a stable supply of key raw materials, including minerals, oil, and gas. A notable early example of this approach is the approximately ¥18 billion loan to India in 1958, Japan's first yen ODA loan, which facilitated iron ore extraction and thereby supported the rapid expansion of Japan's steel industry. This assistance was not limited to the financing of machinery but also included transport and

energy infrastructure (Kato, 2025, p. 124). Numerous similar projects were promoted through ODA across Asia over the following decades to achieve what it failed to do in the past through military means: secure access to essential natural resources.

The importance of ODA in securing natural resource supply was once again highlighted by the 1973 oil shock, exposing Japan's vulnerability to supply chain disruptions. In response to an oil embargo by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries placed on the U.S. and its allies following the Yom Kippur War, Japan expanded its ODA to the Middle East to placate Arab anger and to stabilise energy supplies (Söderberg, 2018, p. 308; Yasutomo, 1989, pp. 492-493). Vulnerability to disruptions was not limited to natural resources. Rising global commodity prices also affected food supply, prompting Japan to use ODA to diversify food sources. Using ODA, Japan backed large-scale agricultural development projects abroad, most notably the transformation of Brazil's Cerrado region into one of the world's leading soybean-producing areas (Kato, 2025, p. 132). Promoting food diversification became even more important considering that its food self-sufficiency rapidly declined after the war to less than 40% in the 1990s, the lowest among developed nations (Suzuki, 2022). In addition to the development of the Cerrado, ODA supported the development of salmon aquaculture in Chile, enhancing Japan's food supply resilience (Farina, 2023).

As the Japanese economy matured, ODA was also used to actively support the relocation of labor-intensive and polluting manufacturing sectors to lower-cost countries, particularly in Southeast Asia. To support the private sector in expanding its production networks across Asia, Japan used ODA to build infrastructure, including power plants and transportation networks (Hatch and Yamamura, 1996). Japanese general contractors, engineering firms, consultants, equipment manufacturers, and trading companies (*sōgō shōsha*) profited directly from those projects as they were often "tied" to them. Consequently, they were able to expand abroad even as domestic demand was slowing (Arase 1994, 172).

The practice of tied aid remained a prominent feature of Japanese ODA until the 1990s, when Japan gradually phased it out in response to international pressure, particularly from the OECD. Although Japan's use of tied aid attracted considerable criticism because it linked development assistance to the procurement of Japanese goods and services, many ODA-funded projects nevertheless generated significant developmental benefits across Asia. Drawing on decades of experience in the region, Japanese agencies and firms developed a strong reputation for the planning and implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects. Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, Japanese policymakers were acutely aware of the need to avoid perceptions of renewed economic exploitation. Consequently, aid was designed to generate tangible benefits for recipient countries while simultaneously

advancing Japan's broader economic and diplomatic interests. Promoting economic growth in developing Asian countries was itself an important objective. Rising incomes expanded markets for Japanese exports and created new opportunities for outward investment, thereby linking regional development to Japan's own economic prosperity.

ODA as Security Statecraft

Security is the third and last functional layer introduced in this article. The importance of ODA to the country's security has been central in Japan, given that its constitution strictly forbids the use of military force in foreign policy, limiting it to self-defense. Recently, the use of ODA and Official Security Assistance (OSA) to enhance the country's security, as elaborated in the next chapter, has attracted significant international attention. That said, security has always been an important consideration in ODA disbursement, particularly when viewed through Japan's comprehensive understanding of security (*sōgō anzen hoshō*). Developed in the mid-1970s, comprehensive security limits security not only to military but extends it to the political and economic spheres (Akaha, 1991). Given that the U.S. has been the primary provider of military security in the past, it is no surprise that Japan focused primarily on the "softer" dimension of security.

In its early phases, using ODA to rebuild stable diplomatic relations with neighboring countries, thereby creating a favorable political environment, was critical to Japan's national security. Using ODA to contain communist expansion was an important means of demonstrating support for the U.S. strategy and thereby ensuring its continued military protection and preventing demands for increased military spending (Söderberg, 2018, p. 309). Indirectly, the use of ODA helped maintain the U.S.-Japan alliance, which has provided the military protection that has been the cornerstone of Japan's security thinking. More directly, ODA contributed significantly to the country's economic security by stabilizing and diversifying the supply chain of essential goods, resources, and food. Overall, these efforts prompted industrialization, trade integration, and regional connectivity, which certainly contributed to the regional stability on which Japan depends.

As for the more traditional understanding of security, Japan has extensively used ODA to ensure the safety and stability of critical maritime trade routes against natural and human threats. Japan has been very active, particularly in Southeast Asia, where its engagement in maritime security dates to the late 1960s. Here, different functions have been added over time. Initially, this included the use of ODA for navigational equipment and surveillance systems to prevent groundings, collisions, and polluting discharges. Threats posed by human activities, specifically

piracy, were addressed at the end of 1999, amid a growing number of incidents, when Japan supported the build-up of maritime law enforcement agencies and their capabilities. The regional coast guard's capabilities also contributed to disaster risk reduction and crisis resilience across the region, strengthening partner countries' capacity to respond to natural disasters and thereby stabilizing the broader regional environment (Bradford, 2020, pp. 87-96).

ODA at the Center of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision

This final chapter is dedicated to exploring the role ODA has been playing in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision (FOIP), introduced by Prime Minister Abe Shinzō in July 2016, which continues to define Japan's foreign policy at the time of this article's publication. While succeeding Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide (16 September 2020 – 4 October 2021), Kishida Fumio (4 October 2021 – 1 October 2024), Ishiba Shigeru (1 October 2024 – 21 October 2025), and Takaichi Sanae (21 October 2025 – Present) had had different foreign policy foci, they all agreed on the core principles of FOIP, namely to 1) protect vital maritime trade routes; 2) support regional economic development; 3) defend a rules-based order.

FOIP reflects Japan's concerns about the regional power transition, marked by China's advance toward regional economic and military supremacy. This foreign policy vision is distinctive in that it does not rely primarily on military balancing. Instead, it seeks to shape the regional order by various means, including ODA, to create an order based on openness, the rule of law, and the free flow of goods, capital, and people. In other words, Japan seeks to persuade regional states that a rules-based order provides the most stable and advantageous environment for economic development and regional cooperation, and that maintaining this order is in their shared interest. This chapter will not delve into the different prime ministers' different foci, but will focus more broadly on how ODA served FOIP in general.

The burst of the bubble economy led to a drastic reduction of the ODA budget. From its former peak of ¥1.1687 trillion in 1997, the ODA budget was halved to ¥550 billion in the early 2010s and has remained at that level to date (MoFA, 2026). For ODA, the 2000s were particularly marked by a period of crisis and reassessment. It was clear that the former period of almost unlimited budgets and generous ODA disbursements, resulting from large economic surpluses, was over. To ensure more strategic disbursement, structural reforms related to ODA gave the prime minister greater control over policies that had previously been dispersed among several ministries (Jain, 2016, pp. 95-99). Interestingly, it was not under the rule of the Liberal Democratic Party but under the short-lived administration of the center-left

Democratic Party of Japan from 2009-2012 that ODA faced drastic reforms, particularly affecting grants-related projects, the element considered most philanthropic in development cooperation. The objective was clear: to provide ODA that serves Japan's national interests, as articulated in the 2015 Development Cooperation Charter, which laid out guiding principles. Following the period of reassessment and reforms, Abe was the prime minister who brought ODA back to the center of Japan's foreign policy (Sasada 2019). ODA has become a key instrument for his administration and subsequent administrations to advance the diplomatic, economic, and security objectives embedded in FOIP.

As for diplomacy, Japan has continued to focus its ODA heavily on Southeast Asia to strengthen regional partnerships, particularly amid rising tensions with China. At the center of its support stand Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, as key maritime states along major sea lines of communication and thus key actors in FOIP, as will be explained later. Within FOIP, ODA has been used not only to solidify existing partnerships but also to extend support for FOIP to new regions, most notably in South Asia (India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka) and the Pacific Island Countries (Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Tuvalu). To some extent, it follows the idea of Kitaoka Shinichi, former president of the Japan International Cooperation Agency, to strengthen the relationships among countries in the Western Pacific region, including Japan, Southeast Asia, and Pacific Island Countries, to create what he calls the Western Pacific Union (WPU) (Kitaoka, 2023). In addition, Japan has continued to create new political alignments in Africa by supporting the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) and expanding its engagement with new partners in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In these contexts, ODA continues to function also as a means of diplomatic outreach and strategic positioning.

In the context of FOIP, promoting economic growth in the region has been playing a central role. As in the past, Japan has been aiming to use ODA to promote economic development, trade integration, and regional connectivity (Gaens et al., 2026). From a geopolitical perspective, economic integration facilitates deeper political integration and stability in the region. It is important to note that the ambition to promote regional growth has been closely linked to supporting the domestic economy (see Pugliese and Insisa, 2017, pp. 93-98), highlighting a continuous approach based on mutual benefit. Japanese companies providing infrastructure and technologies had been facing increasing difficulty winning overseas construction bids due to intensifying competition not only from China but also from South Korea and other new donors (Yamamoto, 2021, p. 230). In 2016, Japan labeled itself a provider of Quality Infrastructure to distinguish itself from other donors, particularly China, whose projects provided under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) often faced financial, implementation, and environmental issues.

To include Japanese companies and technologies in infrastructure projects, Japan relied heavily on tied aid through Special Terms for Economic Partnership (STEP) loans, which it had stopped using in the 1990s following international criticism (Yamamoto, 2022, p. 336). The focus of ODA has been primarily on financing infrastructure systems in energy, telecommunications, transport, and water/sanitation (Yoshimatsu, 2017, p. 494). A frequently cited example of Japan's contribution to high-quality infrastructure development is the Eastern Seaboard Development Program in Thailand. Through a combination of ODA loans, technical expertise, and private investment, Japan supported the development of ports, roads, power facilities, and industrial zones that contributed to Thailand's industrialization and its emergence as a major regional manufacturing hub. It is important to note that the infrastructure system includes not only hardware but also software. The adoption of those systems often leads to a system lock-in that requires reliance on that precise system for expansion, as well as continuous subscriptions to specific parts and maintenance, thereby making it profitable for Japan as well.

As for security, FOIP has placed particular emphasis on maritime security, which is increasingly threatened by China's growing assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea. Consequently, countries that are claimants in the South China Sea dispute located along key maritime routes and strategic chokepoints, including Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, are of particular concern. The Abe Administration was the first to provide ODA more directly to promote the rule-based order that China challenges. He was the first prime minister to systematically support regional coast guard buildup to address China's increasing assertiveness in claiming the South China Sea (Yamamoto, 2016). This was not uncontroversial, despite coast guards being considered civil law-enforcement entities and vessels being delivered unarmed. Not only have they been on the front lines of maritime disputes in the South China Sea, but they also have bulletproof hulls, putting them in the same category as other arms. Still, as civil law enforcement entities, they were eligible as ODA under DAC rules. Given the restrictions on the use of ODA for military purposes, Japan increasingly relied on coast guard capacity building as a means of advancing its security objectives under FOIP. Assistance in the form of patrol vessels, training, and maritime surveillance capabilities enabled Japan to strengthen the maritime resilience of partner countries without violating long-standing constraints on military aid. At the same time, these programs carried an economic component, as the vessels supplied under such initiatives were typically constructed by Japanese shipyards, linking strategic assistance to support for domestic industrial interests (Yamamoto, 2024, pp. 49-55).

From a FOIP perspective, the inability to support foreign militaries posed challenges in protecting maritime trade routes and defending a rule-based order. While Japan supported regional coast guards that stood on the front line of the conflict,

it could not support foreign navies, which stand in the second line. Unable to use ODA to support foreign militaries, Japan has introduced Official Security Assistance (OSA) to extend its security cooperation beyond ODA's developmental mandate. Through the combination of ODA and OSA, Japan has expanded its capacity to contribute to regional security, marking a significant step toward a more integrated form of security-oriented statecraft (Hamada, 2025). Support for foreign militaries has significance beyond the management of maritime tensions. In the disaster-prone Indo-Pacific region, armed forces often play a crucial role in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, making military capacity building relevant not only to security objectives but also to broader human-security concerns.

Despite the growing emphasis on traditional security issues, comprehensive security remains a central element of Japan's regional strategy. OSA has complemented rather than supplanted this approach by adding a more explicit security dimension to Japan's international cooperation. The continuing importance of comprehensive security was highlighted by the Hormuz crisis, which demonstrated the vulnerability of Japan and other Asian economies to disruptions in critical maritime energy routes. Given the deep integration of Asian economies through trade and supply chains, strengthening energy security and economic resilience has become an indispensable component of both regional stability and Japan's broader national security (Yamada, 2026).

Although political support for ODA is strong given its relevance to FOIP, public opinion is comparatively low and has recently declined. The low support is partly a consequence of domestic discourse at the time, in which politicians strongly criticized ODA, particularly because it was largely provided to China, which was increasingly becoming an adversary, overlooking the fact that it also brought great benefits to Japan (Yamamoto 2021). To strengthen public understanding and support, the government has invested in a variety of outreach activities, including the project achieve page *me ni mieruka saito* (Page for the Advancement of Visibility) highlighting ODA achievements, public events such as *Global Festa Japan*, and popular media campaigns featuring characters such as *ODA Man* (Lindgren 2021). However, the success of those campaigns remains limited, making Japan, as well as other countries, vulnerable to attacks from populist political forces. An example is the 2025 scandal related to Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Africa Hometown Initiative that was launched following TICAD 9 in 2025. The initial idea was to strengthen grassroots exchange, human-resource cooperation, and long-term Japan–Africa ties through local-level partnerships. However, the populist party Sanseitō picked up public concerns that the initiative was an immigration or settlement scheme, politicizing the issue. The misinformation was further amplified by Elon Musk's comment on X, stating: "If this continues, there will be no Japan,

just some islands where Japanese people used to live."[2] The local governments were overwhelmed by public complaints, and for the first time, there had been public protests in front of the JICA Headquarters in Kojimachi, Tokyo. Despite the government's best efforts to deny those facts, it was unable to stop the spread of misinformation, ultimately leading to the program's end (Inoue, 2025).

Conclusion

This article has examined the evolution of Japanese ODA through a functional lens, tracing its changing roles across different historical phases. Focusing on three core dimensions – diplomatic, economic, and security –, this article has shown how ODA has been progressively adapted to serve both Japan's national interests and the evolving needs of recipient countries. Rather than undergoing a process of replacement, Japanese ODA has incorporated new functions over time while retaining earlier ones, developing into a layered and highly flexible instrument of statecraft.

As demonstrated, Japan has effectively utilized ODA across multiple domains. In diplomatic terms, it has helped rebuild trust and foster long-term partnerships. Economically, it has supported the development of regional production networks while advancing Japan's own economic interests. More recently, ODA has taken on an increasingly explicit security role, contributing to maritime stability, crisis resilience, and the maintenance of a rules-based international order. This ability to operate simultaneously across these domains has enabled Japan to deploy ODA strategically and adapt it to diverse regional contexts.

The result is a multilayered policy instrument that functions as a highly versatile toolbox. Japan can selectively emphasize different aspects of ODA depending on its own and the strategic and developmental needs of specific partner countries. For instance, ODA continues to play a central role in establishing and deepening partnerships in regions such as Oceania, Africa, and South America. Its economic dimension remains particularly relevant for rapidly growing economies, while its security-related functions have become increasingly significant in countries where maritime tensions are more pronounced.

Given its continued strategic value, it is unlikely that Japan will substantially reduce its ODA commitment, even in a global context where aid budgets are under pressure. On the contrary, ODA is likely to gain further importance as shifts in global development policy create new opportunities and challenges. In doing so, Japan not only reinforces its own regional influence but also mitigates the risk of a growing

2 https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1964370655983386636?lang=da

imbalance in China's favor. However, to do so, Japan also needs to ensure that the public understands the interconnectedness of Asia's and Japan's economies, as well as the benefits that ODA brings to both Japan and recipient countries.

Ultimately, the Japanese case demonstrates that ODA remains far more than a traditional tool of development cooperation. As a layered and adaptive instrument of statecraft, it continues to play a central role in shaping regional order and sustaining Japan's position as a trusted and influential partner in a changing global landscape.

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Japan at a Strategic Crossroads: Hybridity, Adaptiveness, and Normative Pragmatism

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Abstract

Since the adoption of its 2022 National Security Strategy and through to the April 2026 cabinet decision which marked the most extensive liberalisation of Japan's arms export rules in decades, Japan has undertaken the most significant transformation of its defence and security strategy since 1945. While many observers read these developments as Japan's "normalisation" as a military power, this article argues that Japan is better understood as a hybrid strategic actor that has layered hard security capabilities onto a still-active foundation of pragmatic development cooperation, human security promotion, and adaptive peace approaches. Drawing on a protection-empowerment reading of human security, adaptive approaches to peace, and a complex-systems understanding of resilience and social cohesion, and using case illustrations from Mindanao and Cabo Delgado, the article advances three concepts that capture Japan's contemporary security identity: hybridity, adaptiveness, and normative pragmatism.

Keywords: Japan; National Security Strategy; human security; protection-empowerment nexus; adaptive peace approaches; JICA; Indo-Pacific; Official Security Assistance; hybrid strategic actor; normative pragmatism.

Resumo

O Japão numa encruzilhada estratégica: Hibridismo, adaptabilidade e pragmatismo normativo

Desde a adoção da Estratégia de Segurança Nacional revista em dezembro de 2022 e até à decisão do Conselho de Ministros de abril de 2026 que constituiu a mais ampla liberalização das regras de exportação de armamento em décadas, o Japão iniciou a mais significativa transformação da sua estratégia de defesa e segurança desde 1945. Apesar de muitos observadores interpretarem estes desenvolvimentos como a "normalização" do Japão enquanto potência militar, este artigo defende que o Japão é melhor compreendido como um ator estratégico híbrido, que acrescentou capacidades de segurança dura a uma base ainda ativa de cooperação pragmática para o desenvolvimento, promoção da segurança humana e abordagens adaptativas à paz. Recorrendo a uma leitura da segurança humana como nexo de proteção e capacitação, a abordagens adaptativas à paz e a uma compreensão sistémica de resiliência e coesão social, e através dos casos de Mindanau e Cabo Delgado, o artigo propõe três conceitos que captam a identidade de segurança contemporânea do Japão: hibridismo, adaptabilidade e pragmatismo normativo.

Palavras-chave: *Japão; Estratégia de Segurança Nacional; segurança humana; nexo de proteção e capacitação; abordagens adaptativas à paz; JICA; Indo-Pacífico; Assistência Oficial de Segurança; ator estratégico híbrido; pragmatismo normativo.*

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1. Introduction

In December 2022, the Japanese government adopted three landmark strategic documents – the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the Defense Buildup Program (DBP) – that collectively represent the most far-reaching reconfiguration of Japan's security strategy since the end of the Second World War. The decision to acquire counterstrike capabilities, to double defence spending to approximately two percent of GDP by fiscal year 2027, and to invest heavily in cyber, space, and intelligence domains signalled to the international community that Japan's era of strategic restraint had entered a new phase (Johnstone, 2024; Kanehara, 2023). The trajectory has continued to accelerate. In April 2026, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's cabinet approved the most extensive overhaul of Japan's arms export rules in decades, formally lifting the prohibition on the transfer of lethal weapons to seventeen partner countries with which Japan has signed defence equipment and technology transfer agreements (*The Japan Times*, 2026; Reuters, 2026).

For many analysts, these developments confirm a long-anticipated trajectory: Japan's "normalisation" as a military power, with the progressive reinterpretation of the constitutional and political constraints that had defined its security identity for nearly eight decades (Samuels, 2007; Oros, 2017; Green, 2001; Midford, 2011; Liff, 2019). The normalisation thesis, in its classical formulation, predicted that Japan would gradually acquire the full range of military capabilities and policy prerogatives expected of a major power, shedding the exceptionalism that had confined its strategic role since 1945 (Samuels, 2007). More recent scholarship has refined this argument, showing that normalisation has proceeded through institutional layering and incremental reinterpretation rather than through wholesale constitutional revision (Oros, 2017; Liff, 2019; Hornung, 2022). Yet this reading, while capturing an important aspect of the transformation, overlooks a parallel policy dimension. Even as Japan has accelerated its hard security buildup, it has not abandoned its long-standing commitment to human security, development cooperation, and peacebuilding. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) continues to operate extensive programmes grounded in human security, adaptive peacebuilding, social cohesion, and quality infrastructure across more than 150 partner countries worldwide. Japan's normative contribution to international peace – rooted in the concept of human security championed by Sadako Ogata and Amartya Sen (2003) and further refined in the protection-empowerment framework articulated by Caballero-Anthony, Mine, and Ishikawa (2024) – remains an active, evolving component of its foreign policy architecture.

This article addresses a question that the normalisation thesis alone cannot answer: how does Japan reconcile an unprecedented hard security buildup with its legacy

as a peace and development actor, and what does this coexistence tell us about Japan's evolving strategic identity? Rather than treating the hard security turn as a replacement of Japan's softer instruments, the article proposes that Japan is best understood as a hybrid strategic actor – one that has layered hard security capabilities onto a still-active foundation of pragmatic development cooperation, human security promotion, and adaptive peacebuilding. Drawing on complexity thinking and the adaptive peacebuilding framework (De Coning, Saraiva and Muto, 2023), it argues that this coexistence is not contradictory but reflects an adaptive response to a complex, multi-threat security environment in the Indo-Pacific.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets out the theoretical framework and methodology. Section 3 examines the multi-threat environment that has driven Japan's strategic recalibration. Section 4 analyses the hard security turn embodied in the 2022 strategic documents, the creation of Official Security Assistance (OSA), and the more recent April 2026 liberalisation of the arms export regime under the Takaichi government. Section 5 turns to the persistence of Japan's soft security and peacebuilding engagement, focusing on JICA's distinctive interpretation of human security as a twin pillar of state-led protection and community-level empowerment, on the broader logic of normative pragmatism that frames Japan's soft security engagement, and on illustrative cases from Mindanao and Cabo Delgado. Section 6 discusses the tensions and potential sustainability of the hybrid model. Section 7 concludes with implications for the study of middle-power security strategies and for Japan's partners in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, including the European Union and Portugal.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The study of Japan's security policy has long been framed by two competing interpretive lenses. The first – the normalisation thesis – argues that Japan has been progressively shedding its post-war pacifist constraints to become a "normal" military power, capable and willing to use force in pursuit of national interests (Samuels, 2007; Oros, 2017). The second – the civilian power thesis – holds that Japan's identity is fundamentally defined by its commitment to non-military instruments of statecraft, including economic diplomacy, development assistance, and multilateral cooperation (Berger, 1998). Each lens captures an important dimension of Japanese strategic behaviour, but neither, on its own, adequately accounts for the post-2022 reality in which Japan simultaneously pursues counter-strike capabilities and sustains one of the world's most extensive peacebuilding and human security programmes.

The concept of a hybrid strategic actor, as employed in this article, refers to a state that deliberately maintains and deploys an integrated portfolio of hard and soft security instruments, adapting each to the specific requirements of context rather than treating them as sequential stages in a linear trajectory of strategic evolution. This usage departs from the more familiar application of 'hybrid' to non-state actors that blend conventional and irregular tactical methods (Hoffman, 2007; Murray and Mansoor, 2012), and from the 'hybrid warfare' literature that conceptualises hybridity as an adversarial modality. In the study of Japanese foreign policy, however, the term has surfaced intermittently to capture the duality of Japan's reliance on military alliance politics and on economic and developmental statecraft (Samuels, 2007; Green, 2001), yet it has not been systematically theorised as a coherent strategic identity in its own right.

More recent scholarship has moved in this direction. Oros (2017) argues that Japan's security renaissance involves a process of institutional layering, in which new capabilities are added onto existing structures without fully displacing them. Smith (2015) demonstrates that Japan's foreign policy is continuously shaped by the simultaneous management of alliance imperatives, on the one hand, and regional economic interdependence, on the other – a dual orientation that resists reduction to either pure balancing or pure economic diplomacy. Hughes (2015) captures the Abe Doctrine precisely as a synthesis of realist balancing and normative entrepreneurship, while Liff (2019) shows that Japan's post-2014 defence policy evolution has proceeded through incremental reinterpretation rather than through the abandonment of constitutional constraints or civilian norms. What these accounts share, implicitly or explicitly, is the recognition that Japan's strategic behaviour cannot be adequately explained by any single theoretical tradition. What this article adds is a positive framework for understanding this layering not as transitional incoherence – a state caught between identities – but as an adaptive, potentially sustainable and pragmatic strategic identity that reflects the complexity of the security environment Japan inhabits. In addition, this article proposes a hybrid actor framework that draws on three interlocking theoretical traditions to explain the coexistence of hard and soft security instruments within a single strategic identity.

The first is the concept of human security, as developed by the Commission on Human Security (Ogata and Sen, 2003) and further theorised by Tanaka (2019). Tanaka's framework identifies three interconnected systems – physical, living, and social – as sources of threats to human well-being. This analytical structure provides a lens through which Japan's security engagement can be understood not merely as state-centric defence but as a broader commitment to protecting individuals and communities from diverse forms of insecurity. More recent scholarship has refined the concept by foregrounding what Caballero-Anthony, Mine and Ishikawa (2024) describe as the "protection-empowerment nexus" – the recognition that human

security cannot be sustainably achieved through top-down state protection alone, but requires the parallel cultivation of bottom-up empowerment processes that strengthen the agency of individuals and communities. Human security, in this reading, bridges development and security without militarising the former, and provides the conceptual scaffolding for Japan's distinctive contribution to international peace.

The second theoretical anchor is complexity thinking and adaptive peacebuilding, as elaborated in De Coning, Saraiva and Muto (2023). Adaptive peacebuilding treats conflict-affected environments as complex adaptive systems characterised by non-linearity, emergence, and feedback loops. Rather than imposing predetermined solutions, adaptive peacebuilding emphasises context-sensitivity, local ownership, and iterative adjustment. Applied to Japan's strategic identity, this lens suggests that the coexistence of hard and soft instruments is not a contradiction to be resolved but an emergent property of a complex adaptive system in which different instruments respond to different dimensions of the security environment.

The third is the concept of social cohesion and resilience, as explored in De Coning, Saraiva and Muto (2025). This work distinguishes between horizontal social cohesion – trust and cooperation across communal, ethnic, and religious divides within a society – and vertical social cohesion – trust between citizens and state institutions – and argues that both dimensions must be cultivated simultaneously through participatory, locally owned processes. Resilience-building, in this framework, is not a residual or reactive measure but a fundamental instrument for navigating the unprecedented levels of uncertainty and volatility that characterise contemporary conflict environments. From this perspective, community resilience and social cohesion offer more sustainable pathways to preventing violent extremism than exclusively security-first approaches. This theoretical strand reinforces the argument that Japan's peacebuilding engagement is not merely a legacy of the past but an active, theoretically grounded response to contemporary security challenges.

The fourth theoretical anchor is the realist tradition in alliance politics and deterrence theory, as applied to the structural conditions that have shaped Japan's hard security choices (Walt, 1987; Green, 2001; Smith, 2015). From this perspective, Japan's acquisition of counterstrike capabilities, its doubling of defence spending, and the creation of the OSA framework are not aberrations from a pacifist baseline but rational responses to shifts in the distribution of power in Northeast Asia: China's sustained military modernisation and grey-zone operations, North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes, and the growing uncertainty surrounding the reliability of American extended deterrence. Realist analysis predicts that secondary states facing rising threats will balance – internally through armament, externally through alliances, or both – and Japan has pursued all three strategies simultaneously (Walt, 1987; Smith, 2015). The deepening of the US-Japan alliance,

the expansion of security partnerships with Australia, the Philippines, India, and the United Kingdom, and the acquisition of autonomous strike capabilities all fit this structural logic.

What the hybrid actor framework adds to this realist baseline is the recognition that Japan's balancing behaviour is not occurring in a vacuum stripped of normative and institutional constraints. Rather, it is layered onto a foreign policy architecture that retains strong domestic constituencies for human security, constitutionally grounded restraint, and development cooperation. The realist lens thus provides the theoretical vocabulary for the hard side of Japan's hybridity – why the hard security turn has occurred and why it is likely to persist – while the three traditions already outlined provide the vocabulary for the soft side. The framework's analytical claim is that these two dimensions are not mutually exclusive: deterrence and human security address different but interconnected dimensions of the same complex security environment, and their coexistence is an emergent property of Japan's strategic system rather than a contradiction to be resolved through theoretical elimination.

Together, these four lenses – human security understood as a protection-empowerment nexus, adaptive approaches to peace, social cohesion and resilience, and realist alliance politics and deterrence – provide the conceptual architecture for understanding Japan as a hybrid strategic actor: a state that operates simultaneously across the spectrum of hard and soft security, adapting its instruments to the specific requirements of different contexts and threat environments.

2.2. Methodology

The analysis rests on three methodological components. The first is a policy document analysis of Japan's principal strategic texts – the 2013 and 2022 National Security Strategies, the National Defence Strategy, the Defence Buildup Program, the 2023 revised Development Cooperation Charter, the OSA framework documents, and the April 2026 cabinet decision on arms exports – examined for their substantive content and for what they reveal about the conceptual relationship between security and development in Japanese strategic thinking. The second is a structured literature review engaging established theoretical traditions on Japan's strategic identity, including the normalisation and civilian power theses, and more recent contributions on human security, adaptive peacebuilding, and resilience that together provide the conceptual scaffolding for the hybrid actor framework proposed here.

The third component is an illustrative case analysis drawing on structured fieldwork. Cases from Mindanao (Taniguchi, 2022) and Cabo Delgado, Mozambique

(Saraiva, 2023; 2025) are used not as full comparative case studies but as structured illustrations that ground the theoretical argument in empirical evidence. Both cases draw on in-depth fieldwork interviews conducted between 2020 and 2023, as well as on participant observation during the author's research fellowship at the JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development (JICA-ORI). The author acknowledges the methodological implications of this insider perspective and has sought throughout the analysis to balance privileged access with critical reflexivity and triangulation against official documentation and independent secondary literature.

3. The Multi-Threat Environment: Why Japan Shifted

Japan's 2022 strategic recalibration did not occur in a vacuum. It was driven by a convergence of threats and structural shifts in the international order that, taken together, constituted the most challenging security environment Japan had faced since the early Cold War. Understanding this multi-threat context is essential for appreciating why the hard security turn occurred and why, even within this context, the peacebuilding dimension of Japan's foreign policy has remained relevant.

The most consequential driver has been the accelerating assertiveness of China. Beijing's sustained military modernisation, its grey-zone operations around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, and the growing prospect of a Taiwan contingency have transformed the strategic calculus in Tokyo. The 2022 NSS explicitly identifies China as posing "the greatest strategic challenge in ensuring the peace and security of Japan" – the strongest language ever used in a Japanese strategic document regarding its neighbour (Government of Japan, 2022a). For Japanese planners, the combination of China's expanding naval capabilities, its nuclear arsenal modernisation, and its willingness to use economic coercion has created a situation in which diplomatic and economic instruments alone are no longer considered sufficient to maintain deterrence (National Institute for Defense Studies, 2024).

North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes constitute a second, more immediate existential dimension. The unprecedented pace of ballistic missile testing in 2022 and 2023 – including missiles overflying Japanese territory – underscored the direct physical threat to the Japanese homeland. North Korea's continued development of tactical nuclear weapons and submarine-launched ballistic missiles has further complicated Japan's deterrence calculations and provided a powerful domestic argument for the acquisition of counterstrike capabilities.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 served as a catalytic event in Japanese strategic thinking, even though Russia is not Japan's primary security

concern. Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's widely cited formulation – that "today's Ukraine could be tomorrow's East Asia" – captured the perception in Tokyo that the European war had demonstrated the fragility of the post-war international order and the willingness of a nuclear-armed power to use force to alter borders, reinforcing the view that European and Asian security theatres are increasingly interconnected (Kanehara, 2023; Johnstone, 2024). The Ukraine war also reactivated the Northern Territories dimension of Japan-Russia relations. Tokyo aligned itself with the G7 sanctions regime while retaining strategic energy interests in the Sakhalin-2 LNG project (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023; Gas Outlook, 2025), and Moscow suspended peace-treaty negotiations in response to Japan's 2022 sanctions. While official bilateral dialogue remains frozen, individual parliamentarians have made unofficial visits to Moscow without government endorsement (*The Japan Times*, 2025). A fourth, more diffuse driver is the growing uncertainty surrounding the reliability of the United States as an alliance partner. While the US-Japan alliance remains the cornerstone of Japan's security architecture, successive cycles of American domestic politics have raised questions in Tokyo about the durability of extended deterrence commitments. The result has been a gradual push toward greater strategic autonomy within the alliance framework – not a decoupling from Washington, but a hedging strategy that seeks to ensure Japan can defend itself even in scenarios of reduced American engagement.

4. The Hard Security Turn: From Abe's Proactive Pacifism to Takaichi's Arms Export Liberalisation

4.1. The Abe Foundations and the Three Strategic Documents of 2022

The 2022 reconfiguration cannot be properly understood without locating it within the longer institutional and doctrinal trajectory initiated under Prime Minister Shinzō Abe. The first National Security Strategy of 2013 – adopted shortly after the establishment of the National Security Council and accompanied by the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets – already articulated the principle of "Proactive Contribution to Peace" (*積極的平和主義, sekkyokuteki heiwashugi*), often translated as proactive pacifism. This concept reframed Japan's international role as one of active engagement in the maintenance of regional and global peace through expanded security cooperation, while preserving the formal commitment to a peace-oriented Constitution (Government of Japan, 2013; Hughes, 2015). The 2014 cabinet decision on the limited reinterpretation of Article 9 to permit the exercise of the right of collective self-defence under specific conditions, and the 2015 security legislation that operationalised this reinterpretation, completed

the doctrinal scaffolding upon which the 2022 documents would later be built. Abe also opened, but did not conclude, the political debate on the formal revision of Article 9 of the Constitution – a debate that has continued under successive administrations and that frames the boundaries of the current transformation.

The three documents adopted in December 2022 thus represent both a watershed and a continuation. The National Security Strategy establishes the overarching strategic framework, explicitly linking Japan's security to the stability of the broader international order and identifying the defence of the rules-based system as a core national interest. The National Defense Strategy translates this vision into military planning, while the Defense Buildup Program specifies the capability investments required over the following five years (Government of Japan, 2022a; 2022b; 2022c).

Several departures from previous policy are particularly significant. The most notable is the acquisition of counterstrike capability – the ability to strike enemy missile launch sites in the event of an imminent attack – which represents a fundamental reinterpretation of Japan's exclusively defence-oriented strategy. Equally consequential is the commitment to raise defence spending to approximately two percent of GDP by fiscal year 2027, effectively doubling the defence budget from its long-standing level of around one percent. Additional priorities include the development of cyber defence capabilities, the expansion of space-based surveillance, the strengthening of intelligence functions, and the modernisation of Japan's defence industrial base (Kanehara, 2023).

4.2. Official Security Assistance (OSA)

Perhaps the most institutionally innovative element of Japan's new security architecture is the establishment of Official Security Assistance (OSA) in April 2023. Unlike Official Development Assistance (ODA), which is governed by the principle of non-use for military purposes, OSA provides a dedicated framework for the provision of defence equipment and military infrastructure to partner countries. The creation of OSA represents a formal acknowledgement that Japan's traditional development cooperation instruments were insufficient to address the security capacity needs of its Indo-Pacific partners (Maya, 2025).

OSA's initial recipients have included the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, with plans to expand to approximately twelve recipient countries by fiscal year 2026. The proposed budget for FY2026 stands at 18.1 billion yen, more than double the previous year's allocation, reflecting the programme's rapid institutional growth. While OSA's scope was initially limited to non-combat activities – maritime surveillance, territorial monitoring, humanitarian assistance, and peacekeeping capacity –

its creation marks a significant institutional bridge between Japan's security and development cooperation agendas (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023a).

4.3. The Revised Development Cooperation Charter

The revision of Japan's Development Cooperation Charter in June 2023 further reflects the evolving relationship between development and security policy. The revised Charter introduces a more explicit recognition of the security dimensions of development cooperation, acknowledging that sustainable development cannot be achieved without stability and that Japan's development instruments should contribute to the maintenance of a free and open international order. While the Charter preserves the formal prohibition on the use of ODA for military purposes, its language represents a notable shift toward the securitisation of development cooperation, raising questions about the operational boundaries between ODA and the newly created OSA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023b).

4.4. Constitutional and Domestic Constraints

It is important to note that Japan's hard security turn, while substantial, continues to operate within significant constitutional and domestic constraints. Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which renounces the use of force as a means of settling international disputes, has been progressively reinterpreted rather than formally amended. Public opinion, while increasingly supportive of a stronger defence strategy in light of perceived threats, remains cautious about the pace and scope of militarisation. These constraints function as a moderating force that distinguishes Japan's security transformation from the unrestricted military buildups of other major powers and helps explain why the peacebuilding and human security dimensions of foreign policy have been preserved rather than discarded.

4.5. The Continuing Trajectory: From Patriot Re-Exports to the 2026 Lifting of Lethal-Arms Restrictions

The most recent expansion of the hard security agenda has occurred under Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, who took office in October 2025 at the head of a coalition between the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Nippon Ishin no Kai, following the departure of the LDP's long-standing partner Kōmeitō (East Asia Forum, 2025). The coalition secured a decisive majority in the February 2026 general election

(Council on Foreign Relations, 2026). Takaichi has openly positioned herself as a successor to Abe's strategic vision, and her early government has moved decisively to operationalise that legacy in the domain of defence equipment transfers.

The trajectory toward arms export liberalisation had already accelerated under Kishida. In December 2023, Japan revised the Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology and their Implementation Guidelines, allowing for the re-export of licence-produced Patriot air defence missiles to the United States – a decision implemented in November 2025 that constituted Japan's first transfer of finished lethal weapons since 1945. In April 2026, the Takaichi cabinet approved the most extensive overhaul of these rules in decades, formally lifting the prohibition on the export of finished lethal equipment – including fighter jets, missiles, and warships – to seventeen partner countries with which Japan has signed defence equipment and technology transfer agreements, a list that includes the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and India (Government of Japan, 2026; The Japan Times, 2026; Reuters, 2026; Stimson Center, 2026). Three principles continue to constrain transfers – strict end-use screening, controls on third-country transfers, and a ban on sales to countries involved in active armed conflict – but the symbolic and operational distance between contemporary practice and the post-war arms export prohibition is now considerable.

This further liberalisation has been politically contested. The departure of Kōmeitō from the ruling coalition in October 2025 removed a long-standing moderating influence on defence policy, and the LDP-Ishin coalition's subsequent victory in the February 2026 general election – with a combined 352-seat majority in the House of Representatives – has provided the parliamentary basis to advance further security-related legislation, including coalition-agreed deliberations on the revision of Article 9 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026; *The Diplomat*, 2026). Yet the broader institutional direction is unmistakable: the OSA framework, the revised Development Cooperation Charter, and the 2026 export rules together constitute a coherent architecture of security cooperation that links the capacity-building of partner forces, defence industrial development, and the projection of Japanese influence through hardware as well as through diplomacy. The continued vitality of Japan's soft security agenda, which the next section examines, must therefore be understood not in isolation from the hard security turn but in active coexistence with it.

5. The Persistence of Soft Security and Peacebuilding: JICA's Human Security Approach

While the previous section documented Japan's turn toward hard security, this section examines the dimension of Japan's strategic identity that the normalisation

thesis tends to overlook: the continued vitality of its peacebuilding and human security engagement. Far from being a residual legacy of the post-war era, Japan's soft security instruments represent an active, theoretically grounded, and institutionally robust component of its contemporary foreign policy.

The focus on JICA in this section requires explicit justification. Japan's security policy is, of course, not monolithic: the Ministry of Defense, the Self-Defense Forces, the National Police Agency, the Japan Coast Guard, and an expanding private defence industrial sector all play significant roles in the hard security domain, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, JICA, and a range of non-governmental and civil society organisations contribute to the soft side (Hughes, 2015; Oros, 2017). JICA is emphasised here for three reasons. First, it is the institutional locus of Japan's distinctive interpretation of human security and adaptive peacebuilding, and its programmatic reach – across more than 150 partner countries – makes it the single most important vector of Japan's soft security engagement. Second, JICA's recent institutional evolution – including the coordination between its peacebuilding portfolio and the OSA framework, the integration of resilience and social cohesion into its Global Agenda, and its growing research engagement with security-sensitive topics such as preventing violent extremism – makes it a site where the hard-soft boundary is actively being negotiated rather than statically maintained. Third, the author's sustained research access to JICA-ORI, including participant observation during a research fellowship between 2019 and 2023 and continued affiliation in 2024 and 2025, provides empirical depth that would be difficult to replicate for other agencies. The argument advanced here is not that JICA is the only relevant actor in Japan's hybrid security architecture, but that it is the most theoretically and empirically informative one for understanding the soft side of that hybridity and the mechanisms through which soft and hard instruments interact.

5.1. Pragmatic Foreign Policy and JICA's Distinctive Interpretation of Human Security

A useful starting point for understanding the persistence of Japan's soft security engagement is the observation that, for much of the post-war period, Japanese foreign policy has been characterised by a pragmatic and problem-solving disposition rather than by grand normative ambition. Constitutional constraints, alliance dependence on the United States, and a domestic political culture sceptical of overt military projection have together produced a foreign policy style that prioritises incremental adjustment, technical cooperation, and the cultivation of long-term relationships through development assistance. As Jain (2026) argues, the trajectory

from Abe's "proactive pacifism" to the Kishida and Takaichi recalibrations is best understood as a movement of pragmatism replacing earlier idealism, rather than a wholesale abandonment of Japan's distinctive diplomatic identity. Within this pragmatic disposition, however, Japan has produced one significant normative contribution to international policy discourse: the concept of human security.

Japan's engagement with human security dates to the late 1990s, when the Commission on Human Security, co-chaired by Sadako Ogata and Amartya Sen, articulated a vision of security centred not on the state but on the individual – the right of all people to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair (Ogata and Sen, 2003; United Nations General Assembly, 2012). This normative commitment has since become deeply embedded in Japan's development cooperation architecture, particularly within JICA, which renamed its research arm the JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development in recognition of Ogata's foundational contribution.

Japan's interpretation of human security is, however, distinctive. Rather than choosing between the narrow "freedom from fear" tradition associated with Canada and the broader "freedom from want" tradition associated with the United Nations Development Programme (1994), Japan and JICA have consistently articulated human security as a twin pillar of state-led protection and community-level empowerment. This protection-empowerment nexus, articulated as an institutional recommendation in an earlier policy note (Muto et al., 2018) and recently elaborated in detail by Caballero-Anthony, Mine and Ishikawa (2024), recognises that the state retains an irreducible responsibility to protect individuals from acute physical and existential threats, while simultaneously acknowledging that sustainable human security cannot be achieved without strengthening the agency of communities and individuals to shape their own futures. As the editors of the latter volume observe, conventional human security literature has tended to focus on top-down protection at the expense of bottom-up empowerment processes; Japan's contribution has been to insist on the necessary integration of both.

Tanaka (2019) identifies three interconnected systems – physical, living, and social – as sources of human security threats, demonstrating that comprehensive security requires engagement across all three. Military instruments alone cannot address pandemics, food insecurity, or governance failures; Japan's investment in disaster risk reduction, public health, and conflict prevention through JICA is thus a complementary engagement with dimensions of insecurity that hard security cannot resolve. This combination of substantive human security commitment and pragmatic, problem-solving implementation can be understood as a form of "normative pragmatism": the consistent operationalisation, through technical cooperation, capacity-building, and long-term partnership, of a normative framework that prioritises the protection and empowerment of individuals and communities. Prag-

matism in style, human security in substance – this combination is, to a significant degree, what differentiates Japan's soft security engagement from the more securitised development cooperation models of other major powers. It also resonates with the broader pattern of human security norm diffusion in East Asia, where comprehensive, people-centred conceptualisations of security have been embraced, modified, and operationalised across the ASEAN Plus Three region (Mine, Gómez and Muto, 2019).

5.2. Adaptive Peacebuilding and Social Cohesion

Japan's peacebuilding engagement has increasingly been informed by the concept of adaptive peacebuilding, which represents a departure from the top-down, blueprint-driven approaches that characterised earlier international peacebuilding practice and that have been theorised in detail in both English and Japanese-language scholarship (Shinoda, 2003). Adaptive peacebuilding, as elaborated in De Coning, Saraiva and Muto (2023), draws on complexity science to argue that conflict-affected environments are complex adaptive systems in which outcomes are emergent, non-linear, and impossible to predict with certainty. Effective peacebuilding, in this framework, requires context-sensitivity, iterative learning, local ownership, and the ability to adjust interventions in response to feedback from the environment.

JICA's Global Agenda for Peacebuilding (JICA, 2025) frames its engagement around a human security approach that combines protection, empowerment, and solidarity, committing the organisation to community-led activities in fragile contexts (JICA, 2024; 2025). Recent JICA-ORI research – including multi-year projects on adaptive mediation, adaptive peacebuilding, and preventing violent extremism in which the author participated – argues that determined-designed, security-first approaches are less effective than adaptive, locally owned interventions that strengthen social cohesion and resilience (De Coning, Muto and Saraiva, 2022; De Coning, Saraiva and Muto, 2023; 2025).

On the basis of participant observation conducted during the author's research fellowship at the JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development between 2019 and 2023, and continued visiting fellowship in 2024 and 2025, it is possible to notice a gradual but unmistakable integration of adaptive peace approaches into JICA's existing peace epistemology and operational practice. This integration is visible across the agency's broader peace-related portfolio – anchored in human security and quality infrastructure investment and operationalised through mediation support, peacebuilding programming, and a growing area of research and indirect operational engagement with the prevention of violent

extremism – and is reflected in the increased emphasis on community-embedded interventions in fragile contexts, in the growing reliance on iterative learning and feedback within project implementation cycles, and in the framing of resilience and social cohesion as primary outcome categories rather than as secondary effects of security or development interventions. By prioritising resilience and social cohesion over kinetic or determined-designed responses, JICA's peace-related programming increasingly reflects a distinctive Japanese approach that favours sustainable, community-owned solutions over short-term security gains.

5.3. Quality Infrastructure: A Pragmatic Competitive Instrument with a Peace Dimension

A further distinctive element of Japan's soft security contribution is the concept of quality infrastructure. Unlike conventional infrastructure development, which tends to prioritise cost efficiency and speed of delivery, Japan's quality infrastructure approach emphasises inclusiveness, environmental sustainability, resilience, and the long-term developmental impact of infrastructure investments from the design stage onward. This approach, championed by JICA and endorsed at the G7 and G20 levels, represents a form of structural peacebuilding – the idea that the physical and institutional infrastructure of a society can be designed in ways that reduce the risk of conflict and promote social cohesion (JICA, 2023).

Quality infrastructure also operates as a pragmatic competitive instrument for Japanese development cooperation. In a global infrastructure market increasingly shaped by the financing capacity and rapid-deployment models of emerging donors, JICA's emphasis on transparency, environmental and social safeguards, and life-cycle economic efficiency provides a distinctive value proposition for partner-country governments and international financial institutions. At the same time, the same design principles tie infrastructure investment to the broader human security and peace agendas: well-designed infrastructure expands access to basic services, reduces communities' exposure to climate and conflict-related shocks, and contributes to the structural conditions in which sustainable development can take hold.

5.4. Case Illustrations: Mindanao and Cabo Delgado

Adaptive peacebuilding can itself be understood as the operational expression, within the peace and conflict resolution domain, of the same pragmatism and problem-solving disposition that characterises Japan's broader foreign policy.

By treating conflict-affected environments as complex adaptive systems and prioritising iterative learning, and locally owned solutions over predetermined templates, it shares the analytical logic that this article has identified as central to Japan's hybridity as a strategic actor. The cases that follow illustrate not only this approach in operation, but also the deeper coherence between Japan's normative pragmatism in foreign policy and its hybrid strategic identity.

The two cases of Mindanao in the Philippines and Cabo Delgado in Mozambique have been selected because both are conflict-affected contexts in which Japan has simultaneously pursued soft-security peacebuilding while the broader international response – and, in the Philippine case, Japan's own OSA provision and naval cooperation – has been dominated by security-first approaches. They thus illustrate not only Japan's adaptive peacebuilding method but also the hybrid condition itself: the coexistence of hard and soft instruments within a single strategic portfolio, deployed to different but complementary ends in the same operational theatre.

In Mindanao, the Philippines, the long-running Bangsamoro peace process has benefited from adaptive mediation strategies that prioritised local ownership and direct dialogue between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), culminating in the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro and the subsequent creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). As documented in detail by Taniguchi (2022), Japan's contribution to this process – channelled primarily through JICA – has been distinctive in its adaptive mediation approach, evolving from outsider mediator to insider partner of the Bangsamoro authorities and accompanying the peace process across multiple stages with flexible, context-sensitive support rather than imposing predetermined templates. This insider mediation, Taniguchi argues, contributed to building trust among the parties, strengthening both vertical and horizontal relations across communal and confessional lines, and increasing the sense of ownership of the peace process. JICA's engagement in Mindanao has consistently operated within the framework of human security, integrating quality infrastructure (roads, water supply, and agricultural support), governance support to BARMM transition institutions, and community-level peacebuilding into a single architecture. Subsequent JICA-ORI research has documented how this long-term, multi-instrument accompaniment functions as a necessary complement to security-led responses. Hard security operations against fragmented violent extremist groups are structurally limited unless embedded within community-owned prevention strategies that work with traditional and religious leaders and address socio-economic grievances (De Coning, Saraiva and Muto, 2025). This soft-security engagement has occurred in parallel with, and partly underwritten by, Japan's provision of coastal surveillance assets to the Philippines under OSA and the expansion of bilateral naval

cooperation (Maya, 2025). The coexistence of these instruments – hard security for maritime domain awareness and deterrence, soft security for community resilience and governance – is the empirical core of Japan's hybrid identity: not a sequential evolution from one to the other, but their simultaneous deployment in mutually reinforcing roles.

In Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, the rise of the Mashababos insurgency since 2017 has confronted the Mozambican government and its international partners with a peace and security crisis whose root causes are profoundly socioeconomic, ethnic, and historical, and which the author has examined in depth on the basis of field-work conducted between 2020 and 2023 (Saraiva, 2023; 2025). The insurgency has compounded a wider transition in Mozambican peacebuilding, in which the determined-designed liberal peacebuilding model that prevailed after the 1992 General Peace Agreement has given way to more adaptive, context-specific approaches – most visibly in the 2019 Maputo Accord for Peace and Reconciliation, mediated through the adaptive, nationally owned process facilitated by Swiss Ambassador Mirko Manzoni (Saraiva, 2023).

From 2017 to 2023, however, the predominant response to the Mashababos insurgency itself – including the deployment of the Rwanda Defence Force, the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), and the European Union Training Mission (EUTM), and the contracting of private security companies – has prioritised stabilisation and the recapture of territory. While these efforts have produced tactical gains, in-depth interviews with local experts converge on the conclusion that they have been unable to address the underlying drivers of the insurgency: longstanding marginalisation, ethnic inequalities between the Makonde, Mwani, and Macua communities, weak governance, and the perverse effects of natural-resource extraction in one of the country's least developed provinces (Saraiva, 2023; 2025).

Within this complex environment, JICA has been operating along lines that closely reflect its twin-pillar interpretation of human security. Because of security constraints in Cabo Delgado proper, JICA's programming has concentrated on the neighbouring provinces of Nampula and Niassa – addressing the socio-economic root causes of the conflict at its margins through support to fishery value chains in Memba, Nacala-Porto, and Nacala-a-Velha; through the dissemination of the "One District, One Product" model and the *kaizen* continuous-improvement approach in support of small and medium-sized enterprises; and, in Cabo Delgado itself, through the construction of bridges along the N380 road network that improve connectivity and basic living conditions for communities exposed to both insurgent violence and economic marginalisation (JICA, 2020; Saraiva, 2025). JICA has also collaborated with the MASC Foundation and with what the author has elsewhere conceptualised as "localised international non-governmental organisations"

(L-INGOs) – most notably the Community of Sant'Egidio, with its BRAVO and DREAM programmes addressing birth registration and HIV/AIDS, and the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), with its village development organisations and the participatory "map of dreams" methodology – to channel resources to community-embedded peace and development work that the Mozambican state and its security partners have been unable to deliver (Saraiva, 2023).

The case has acquired a bilateral and trilateral dimension since 2025. On 11 September 2025, Japan and Portugal upgraded their relationship to a Strategic Partnership, with memoranda between JICA and Camões identifying coordination in Portuguese-speaking countries as a priority (Government of Portugal and Government of Japan, 2025). In northern Mozambique, the geographic overlap between JICA's programming and the EU-funded Mais Emprego programme – implemented by Camões in Cabo Delgado and Nampula – creates conditions for trilateral cooperation even where formal joint programming has yet to be established (Camões, 2024).

The Cabo Delgado case demonstrates with clarity that Japan's soft security engagement is neither marginal nor symbolic. It is operationally consequential, even in the most challenging environments, and it pursues a logic that is distinct from – though increasingly entangled with – the security-first approaches of other international actors. In Mozambique, Japan's soft-security programming operates in an environment where other partners – including the Rwanda Defence Force, SAMIM, and the European Union Training Mission – have deployed explicitly military responses. Japan has not matched these with comparable hard security instruments. However, the 2025 Strategic Partnership with Portugal, which includes explicit coordination on security and development, suggests the emergence of a hybrid architecture in which Japan's soft instruments are embedded within a broader allied security framework (Government of Portugal and Government of Japan, 2025). Japan's distinctive contribution is not the provision of hard security but the insistence that sustainable stabilisation requires the community-level, empowerment-oriented work that military operations cannot deliver – an approach that acquires strategic value precisely because it addresses the gaps left by security-first interventions.

6. The Tension and the Synthesis: Is the Hybrid Model Sustainable?

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that Japan simultaneously pursues hard security modernisation and soft security engagement. The critical question is whether this hybrid model is sustainable or whether internal tensions will ultimately force a choice between the two tracks.

The most immediate tension concerns the relationship between ODA and OSA. The creation of OSA as a separate instrument was designed in part to preserve the integrity of Japan's development cooperation by maintaining a formal distinction between development and security assistance. However, the practical boundaries between the two are likely to become increasingly blurred, particularly in contexts where both instruments are deployed simultaneously. There is a risk that the securitisation of Japan's international engagement – even if institutionally compartmentalised – could erode the trust and perceived neutrality that have historically enabled JICA to operate effectively in conflict-affected environments. If partner countries come to perceive Japan's development assistance as instrumentally linked to its security agenda, the effectiveness of its peacebuilding programmes could be undermined. The April 2026 liberalisation of arms exports has only sharpened this tension, since recipient countries of Japanese OSA and ODA are now also potential clients for Japanese defence hardware.

A second tension relates to domestic resource competition. Japan's commitment to doubling its defence budget places significant fiscal demands on a government already managing substantial public debt and the costs of an ageing society. Whether Japan can sustain both a dramatically expanded defence strategy and robust ODA and JICA operations will depend on political choices about budgetary priorities that are by no means predetermined. History suggests that in periods of fiscal pressure, development cooperation budgets are more politically vulnerable than defence budgets, which could gradually shift the balance of the hybrid model toward its harder elements. The post-October 2025 political realignment, in which the more defence-permissive Nippon Ishin no Kai replaced Kōmeitō as the LDP's coalition partner, together with the coalition's substantial parliamentary majority secured in the February 2026 general election, increases rather than reduces this risk: Ishin's defence-policy platform is markedly more permissive than Kōmeitō's, and the coalition has the political room to act on its preferences (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026).

A third area of tension involves the perceptions of Japan's partners, particularly in the Global South. Japan has long enjoyed a reputation as a trusted, non-threatening development partner – a perception that has been a significant strategic asset. The hard security turn, while primarily directed at the immediate threats in Northeast Asia, inevitably affects how Japan is perceived globally. Partner countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America may view the expansion of OSA, the securitisation of development cooperation, and the new arms export framework with ambivalence, particularly if they perceive Japan as using development instruments to advance its geopolitical interests rather than responding to their development needs.

The fact that hard and soft security instruments serve different functions in different contexts – deterrence and military preparedness in Northeast Asia, human

security and peacebuilding in the Global South – means that their coexistence is not inherently contradictory. Rather, it reflects the multi-dimensional nature of the security environment to which Japan is responding. The sustainability of the hybrid model will depend less on eliminating these tensions than on managing them: maintaining institutional firewalls where necessary, ensuring transparency in the distinction between ODA and OSA, and continuing to invest in the credibility and operational independence of JICA's peacebuilding programmes.

7. Conclusion

Japan stands at a strategic crossroads, but the metaphor is misleading if it implies a binary choice between paths. The evidence presented in this article suggests that Japan's crossroads is better understood as a junction where multiple paths run in parallel – where the pursuit of hard security capabilities coexists with, rather than displaces, a sustained commitment to human security, adaptive peacebuilding, and quality infrastructure.

The hybrid strategic actor framework proposed here offers a more nuanced understanding of Japan's evolving security identity than either the normalisation thesis or the civilian power thesis can provide alone. Japan is neither simply becoming a "normal" military power nor remaining a purely civilian one. Instead, it is developing a distinctive model in which hard and soft security instruments are deployed in parallel, adapted to the specific requirements of different contexts and threat environments, and connected by an overarching commitment to both national defence and the promotion of human security in the broader international order.

This model is not without risks. The tensions between securitisation and development credibility, between defence spending and ODA budgets, and between strategic ambition and partner country perceptions are real and will require careful management – particularly in the context of the more permissive arms export regime that the Takaichi government has put in place. Yet these tensions are inherent to the complex, multidimensional security environment that Japan must manoeuvre through, and the ability to operate across the full spectrum of hard and soft instruments – adapting them to the specific requirements of different contexts – is itself a strategic asset rather than a contradiction.

For Japan's partners – including the European Union and Portugal, with their own commitments to comprehensive security approaches and, in Portugal's case, to long-standing engagement with the Lusophone world, including Mozambique – Japan's experience with this hybrid model offers analytically relevant insights, particularly when facing the parallel challenge of combining credible security

commitments with sustained development cooperation in increasingly contested environments. As the Indo-Pacific continues to evolve as the defining theatre of twenty-first-century geopolitics, the capacity to combine credible deterrence with genuine engagement in human security and adaptive peace and development approaches may prove to be not a contradiction but a strategic necessity. Japan's experience in navigating this dual imperative will be instructive for any state seeking to maintain relevance across the full spectrum of contemporary security challenges.

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East meets West? The EU-Japan Security and Defence Partnership in a changing international environment

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Abstract

This article examines the 2024 Security and Defence Partnership (SDP) between the European Union (EU) and Japan. It argues that the agreement represents a qualitative transformation in the bilateral security relationship, elevating their engagement from a broad political dialogue to a structured, operational framework that covers a broad range of traditional and non-traditional security domains. Drawing upon policy documents, official statements, and existing scholarship on EU-Japan relations, the article reviews the background of bilateral security engagement. It analyses the geopolitical, strategic, and normative drivers behind the Partnership. It analyses three case studies – maritime security, cybersecurity, and hybrid threats, including Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) – to illustrate the ongoing implementation efforts under the SDP. The article concludes that while the Partnership is still emerging and subject to limitations and constraints, it signifies a significant step in EU-Japan security cooperation, providing a model for security arrangements with like-minded partners.

Keywords: European Union; Japan; Security and Defence Partnership; Indo-Pacific; Security cooperation.

Resumo

Oriente encontra Ocidente? A Parceria de Segurança e Defesa UE-Japão num contexto internacional em transformação.

Este artigo analisa a Parceria para a Segurança e Defesa (SDP) de 2024 entre a União Europeia (UE) e o Japão. Argumenta que o acordo representa uma transformação qualitativa nas relações bilaterais de segurança, elevando-as de um diálogo político para um quadro estruturado e operacional sobre vários domínios de segurança tradicionais e não tradicionais. Com base em documentos e na literatura sobre as relações UE-Japão, o artigo analisa a evolução da relação de segurança e examina os fatores geopolíticos, estratégicos e normativos subjacentes à Parceria. São analisados três casos – segurança marítima, cibersegurança, e ameaças híbridas – para ilustrar os esforços de implementação da SDP. O artigo conclui que, embora a Parceria esteja numa fase inicial e sujeita a limitações, constitui um passo significativo na cooperação de segurança entre a UE e o Japão, proporcionando um modelo para acordos de segurança com parceiros like-minded.

Palavras-chave: *União Europeia; Japão; Parceria para a Segurança e Defesa; Indo-Pacífico; Cooperação de segurança.*

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Introduction

In recent years, the security engagement between the European Union (EU) and Japan experienced significant developments. Following decades of limited cooperation focused primarily on economic relations and diplomatic exchanges, the two actors are today expanding their partnership into the security domain, formulating approaches on both policy and working levels in response to a changing international environment. A major step in this engagement took place on 1 November 2024, when the European Union and Japan signed a Security and Defence Partnership (SDP), a comprehensive agreement for strengthening cooperation across a broad range of related areas (EEAS, 2024c). While the implementation of the SDP is still largely at the policy level and its accomplishments remain limited, the Partnership offers today concrete cooperation frameworks with tangible operational potential, marking a significant leap from previous bilateral security arrangements (Heng, 2025).

The EU-Japan security dialogue was traditionally characterized by a "capability-expectations gap" between the relationship's potential and what it actually delivered (Tsuruoka, 2008; Jingkai and Paul, 2025). For decades, economic interests primarily drove Europe's interactions in the Asia-Pacific, whereas Japan viewed the EU as a secondary actor in the region with a limited, non-military security role. Cooperation initiatives reflected mutual lack of interest, and many attempts at a stronger bilateral security engagement were often broad and unremarkable (Berkofsky, 2018, 2012). With the SDP, however, the EU and Japan adopted a new policy and discursive posture, highlighting the convergence of threat perceptions and geopolitical interests. The two sides declared that the security of Europe and the Indo-Pacific is interlinked and pledged to uphold and strengthen the free and open international order. They also committed to cooperate in several concrete security and defence areas, including non-traditional domains such as cybersecurity and hybrid threats.

This paper argues that through the 2024 Security and Defence Partnership, the security dialogue between the EU and Japan evolved from a broad political partnership into a more practical, substantive security relationship. It claims that while the SDP still consists largely of a policy coordination structure, it represents a transformative step towards practical cooperation by creating an institutionalized, security-oriented dialogue and by establishing functional cooperation frameworks, some of them close to "hard" security topics. The paper finds that although the SDP offers a promising platform for EU-Japan security and defence relations, the future of the partnership will depend on factors such as each side's strategic priorities, geopolitical developments, and capabilities.

The article begins by reviewing how the EU-Japan security dialogue evolved, revisiting the creation of the SDP and analysing the main drivers behind today's

cooperation. It then looks at three cooperation tracks – maritime security, cybersecurity, and hybrid threats including FIMI – as case studies of EU-Japan cooperation under the Partnership. The paper also assesses the limits and constraints of the SDP and concludes by reflecting on the significance of the Partnership amidst the growing centrality of the Indo-Pacific.

Evolution of the EU-Japan security dialogue

The history of EU-Japan security relations was a decades-long process of convergence, influenced by a combination of world events, internal and external politics, and geopolitical transformations, that eventually produced today's alignment in security and defence. Bilateral relations between European institutions and Japan started in 1959 when the Japanese prime minister travelled to Brussels and appointed Japan's ambassador to Belgium and to the three European Communities (EC) (de Prado 2017, p. 435). Official diplomatic ties were established in 1974 with the opening of the EC delegation in Tokyo. Between the 1960s and 1970s, relations were primarily driven by economic interests and characterized by trade frictions. Dialogue on security was limited and took place in the form of broad political consultations, sometimes within a trilateral framework with the United States (Mykal, 2012, 2.3).

The end of the Cold War brought a new geopolitical reality and changes to the security ties between the EC (later EU) and Japan. On 18 July 1991, the two sides signed The Hague Declaration, a treaty that emphasized "common values and shared interests" and the institutionalization of regular political exchanges (MOFA, 1991). Through this document, Brussels and Tokyo agreed to expand their cooperation beyond trade and into peace and security, human rights, and non-traditional security areas, among other areas, reflecting their aspiration to become global actors in the post-Cold War era. Notable examples of this agenda included Brussels' non-proliferation involvement regarding North Korea's nuclear and missile programs (Howard, 1997; Wagner, 2001) and Japan's cooperation with the EU on stability, disarmament, and post-conflict reconstruction in the Western Balkans and in post-Soviet countries (Berkofsky, 2007, p. 11). Nevertheless, security was neither a distinctive nor a fully developed feature of the relationship.

On 8 December 2001, Japan and the EU adopted the Joint Action Plan for EU-Japan Cooperation, titled "Shaping Our Common Future". Aimed at addressing the lack of progress following The Hague Declaration, the agreement sought to "tap the unrealized potential for cooperation" based on a four-pillar framework: peace and security, economic and trade partnership, global and societal changes, and bringing together people and cultures (Watanabe, 2013, 5; MOFA, 2001). The Action Plan

proposed engagement on post-9/11 security topics such as terrorism and violent extremism, listing 100 actions of possible collaboration. Once again, Japan and the EU were unable to extend their cooperation beyond initial outlines – the exception being naval cooperation in the Gulf of Aden – and both sides failed to initiate a common security agenda. Engagement became mostly symbolic, and the momentum for security cooperation faded into a state of "benign neglect", with few tangible results (Nishida, 2024, p. 4).

The security partnership made slow but ultimately meaningful progress in the 2010s. Japan wanted to elevate relationships across Europe, with Prime Minister Shinzō Abe looking to raise awareness on East Asian security, especially in matters concerning China and the East China Sea disputes. Tokyo viewed Europe as a "norm-setting" power, but the EU was reluctant to be outspoken against China and remained largely indifferent to Asian security (Carteny and Di Stefano, 2023, p. 417). The Russian annexation of Crimea allowed Tokyo to assert that the security of Asia and Europe is common and interlinked, arguing that Russia's unilateral actions set a dangerous precedent for the East Asian context (Nishida, 2024, p. 5), an argument that would be repeated years later.

After years of intermittent exchanges and a total of 13 negotiation rounds since 2012, in April 2018 Japan and the EU reached another understanding through the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), a binding document aimed at relaunching strategic cooperation across several areas, including security (D'Ambrogio, 2019, pp. 4-5). The SPA was signed and adopted on 17 July 2018 (EEAS, 2019) and was the first-ever framework of its kind between the EU and Japan.[1] Scholars and policymakers viewed it with optimism, hoping it would provide the "long-awaited breakthrough of EU-Japan political and security cooperation in the years ahead" (Berkofsky, 2018). The SPA projected political and sectoral cooperation in 40 areas. It also emphasized shared norms and values in an increasingly hostile external environment, reflecting contextual changes such as the rise of China and Beijing's assertive behaviour, Russian hybrid threats, and President Trump's "America First" policy (Kirchner and Dorussen, 2021, p. 3). However, the SPA was once again mostly cooperative and declaratory, encouraging broad consultations but not creating a specialized defence track. Its scope was too vast and limited the potential for focused security and defence outcomes. Moreover, even though the Agreement was an improvement from previous iterations, questions remained about how to actually achieve its implementation (Berkofsky, 2020; Legrand, 2018). An important leap would be taken in 2024 with the creation of the SDP, a document specifically dedicated to security and defence.

1 The SPA was adopted in parallel with a similar agreement focused on economy, the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA).

The 2024 EU-Japan Security and Defence Partnership

On 1 November 2024, the EU and Japan announced in Tokyo the inauguration of the SDP, amidst a context characterized by grave security and geopolitical transformations. It was the first partnership of its kind between the EU and an Indo-Pacific country. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell declared that Japan was the EU's closest partner in the Indo-Pacific and that the new agreement opened a new chapter in bilateral relations – one that "was not about trade or economics […] but about security and defence" (EEAS, 2024b). The Partnership came after the ratification of the SPA by EU Member States earlier that year,[2] and moved EU-Japan security ties from a broad political alignment to a structured cooperation framework with concrete security and defence work streams. It also established regular mechanisms for consultation and coordination. In addition, the SDP assumed a bolder discursive posture, with references to both normative and strategic rationales. The document explicitly mentioned the defence of the rules-based international order, the growing interconnectedness of European and Indo-Pacific security, and the need to respond jointly to emerging threats, including cyberattacks, hybrid coercion, economic security risks, and challenges posed by "unilateral attempts to change the *status quo* by force" (EEAS, 2024c) – a euphemism fit for countries like China and Russia.

A common security agenda build-up

The SDP reflected the EU and Japan's increasingly pragmatic understanding of the world. Over the last decade, official security and defence documents by both actors evolved from broad, idealistic statements into a progressively realistic and pragmatic understanding of international security problem, that called for closer strategic cooperation, greater military preparedness, and a more active role in addressing emerging security challenges.

In the case of the EU, progress towards pragmatism can be seen from the 2016 Global Strategy, launched to replace the outdated European Security Strategy from 2003. The Global Strategy was criticized from the outset for its lack of concrete goals (Bargués, 2022, p. 2). However, it sought to improve defence and security by promoting strategic autonomy, resilience, multilateralism, and more robust responses to crises and threats. It also identified Asian security tensions as a direct concern for Europe. In 2021, the EU Indo-Pacific (IP) Strategy, which barely discussed hard security matters in the region and the ways the EU could contribute to addressing them (Samaan, 2024), signalled Asia's growing relevance in Brussels' political and strategic calculus. More recently, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the

2 The SPA had been provisionally applied since 2019.

EU adopted the Strategic Compass (2022), a more pragmatic framework focused on threat analysis, rapid deployment, and resilience. The document acknowledged the relevance of the Indo-Pacific and identified Japan as a preferential partner in the region (European Council, 2022; Benaglia and Crosson, 2022). Meanwhile, the EU Member States France, Germany, and the Netherlands adopted their own Indo-Pacific strategies, confirming on their national levels the strategic importance of engaging closer with Asia and its geopolitics (Samaan, 2024).

As for Japan, official security and defence policy took a sharper turn in recent years. For decades, Japan maintained an exclusively defence-oriented posture, in line with the country's constitutional pacifism, particularly through Article 9, under which Tokyo renounced war as a sovereign right and banned maintaining a war potential. External security was solely guaranteed by the U.S.–Japan Security Alliance. An initial change came with the 2013 National Security Strategy (NSS), which prescribed a more integrated, comprehensive, and proactive approach to regional and global security challenges. Then, in 2016, Prime Minister Shinzō Abe unveiled the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) concept, which sought to advance stability, connectivity, and the rule of law across the Indo-Pacific region. It reflected a more outward-looking strategic discourse that progressively identified the EU as a like-minded partner. In 2022, Japan's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy adopted a more operational and urgent discourse, portraying the country's security environment as increasingly severe whilst confirming European countries as like-minded partners (MOFA, 2022; MOD, 2022). At the same time, security legislation was reinterpreted to allow the limited use of collective self-defence, defence expenditure was increased, military export restrictions have been relaxed, and recent debates about constitutional revision – particularly the amendment of Article 9 – suggest that Tokyo is willing to become a more active and outgoing security and defence actor (Bosack, 2026).

Drivers of cooperation

The adoption of the SDP was the culmination of a long historical and institutional process between the EU and Japan. However, their security and defence engagement was also accelerated by a set of contextual factors that made closer cooperation necessary. As shown by the two actors' strategic documents, a build-up of shared threat perceptions and strategic priorities progressively took place in their strategic calculus and pointed them closer towards cooperation. This reality helped Tokyo and Brussels to overcome longstanding hesitations about bilateral security engagement and search together for effective solutions to mutual security challenges. Such drivers of cooperation can be divided into three main categories: (i) geopolitical shifts; (ii) convergent security threats; and (iii) shared norms and values.

Geopolitical shifts. Today, the EU and Japan are navigating a complex reality (Tomkin, 2025; Pejsova, 2024). The global geopolitical landscape is shifting towards the Indo-Pacific, where economic, technological, and military power are becoming increasingly concentrated. The rise of multipolarity, persistent regional conflicts and tensions, and the erosion of the postwar international is fuelling declining confidence in established multilateral institutions. This trend coincides with the rise of revisionist powers, particularly China and Russia, but also the unpredictable behavior of the United States, a longstanding European and Japanese ally. The PRC's military build-up, political assertiveness, growing economic influence, and dominance in several critical technologies pose significant challenges to regional and global stability. The U.S., in turn, adopted under President Trump's second mandate a more volatile and transactional approach to trade, alliances, and international commitments, prompting allies and partners to reassess established assumptions about Washington's reliability on a scale that is unprecedented. American unilateral military interventions also aggravated geopolitical uncertainties and initiated perilous notions about unilateral military action. Together, these factors helped change Tokyo's and Brussels' strategic calculus, incentivizing them to diversify their security partnerships and to further explore bilateral cooperation.

Convergent security threats. For many decades, the strategic contexts of Europe and Japan were seldom shared, and their perceived top security priorities did not coincide. However, the last few years changed that assumption. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a turning point in European security, created a precedent for illegal aggression in other parts of the world. The aggression was viewed in Tokyo with apprehension, with Prime Minister Kishida stating that "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow" (AFP, 2022). China's "no-limits" partnership with Russia, in turn, provided Moscow with a much-needed lifeline, revealing a Moscow-Beijing strategic alignment while adding a global dimension to the conflict (Yeh, 2026). Similarly, North Korea's involvement in Ukraine showed that an Asian actor can directly participate in a European war (Hird et al., 2024). Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs – a longstanding concern for Japan – remain unchecked and are possibly bolstered by Moscow, potentially leading to proliferation risks in other parts of the world, including the Middle East, with implications for Europe (Crawford et al., 2026).

China also became a central theme in the EU-Japan security agenda. Beijing's assertiveness in the East China Sea, territorial disputes, and claims over Taiwan are a central concern for Japan, but they have also become relevant for Europe. China's military build-up challenges U.S. strategic superiority, especially in East Asia, putting into question U.S. political and defence commitments at a time they are no longer taken for granted. When it comes to Taiwan, an incident in the Strait could involve Japan militarily and provoke disruptions to global trade and critical supply chains, generating security and economic repercussions for Europe (Maremonti, 2026).

In that perspective, China has also become a challenge in terms of economic security, since Europe and Japan are exposed to Beijing's coercive trade practices, dependencies in critical supply chains, and superiority in many advanced technologies. Chinese leverage over rare earths, semiconductors, and key industrial components is increasingly weaponised against liberal societies, turning trade diversification, resilience, and autonomy into a shared priority for the EU and Japan (Ng, 2026).

An additional domain in the EU-Japan's security agenda is hybrid threats. In addition to economic coercion, Brussels and Tokyo look at cyberattacks, FIMI, espionage, foreign malign influence and interference, and threats to critical infrastructure and technologies as threats that undermine national (and regional) security and attack the integrity of democratic societies and institutions. States like Russia and China are perceived as actors employing hybrid methods in persistent and coordinated manners, exploiting vulnerabilities in open and free societies to advance strategic objectives below the threshold of armed conflict. Such threats have been visible both in Japan and in the EU, for example, in the form of disinformation campaigns, interference with democratic processes, and contamination of internal politics, as well as cyber intrusions targeting public institutions, strategic communications systems, or research networks (EEAS, 2026a; Lee, 2026; Yomiuri, 2025).

Shared norms and values. Despite the growing fragmentation of the liberal world order and the rise of revisionism, the EU and Japan continue to stress their normative role as "one of the basics of their influence and legitimacy on the global scene" (Niquet, 2021, 1). Instead of abandoning the values and institutions of the rules-based international governance, Tokyo and Brussels maintain a firm discursive approach to rationales such as the rule of law, fundamental freedoms, democracy, and human rights, reaffirming their commitments as like-minded partners to address common challenges. Such a posture stands in contrast with other international players and creates a situation in which Japan and the EU have to double down on their normative efforts in order to "preserve the very framework that ensures their long-term interests" (Pohlkamp, 2025). Maintaining the liberal democratic order has therefore become a crucial *raison d'être* for EU-Japan security engagement, with the SDP emerging as an important instrument to that objective (Atanassova-Cornelis and Pejsova, 2026).

2024 EU-Japan SDP – Features, Components, and Areas of Cooperation

The 2024 EU-Japan SDP was the first partnership of its kind concluded between the EU and an Indo-Pacific country. Instead of merely reaffirming broad commitments as in the past, the document highlighted a joint strategic vision and created a framework for sustained cooperation across a range of both traditional and emerging security domains. It went beyond previous engagements by focusing specifically

on security and defence, defining concrete fields of cooperation, and establishing structured channels for dialogue and consultation.
The SDP begins by acknowledging "Europe and the Indo-Pacific are highly interconnected and interdependent", and that the two actors face an "increasingly challenging and interlinked security environment." It reaffirms the EU and Japan's shared commitment to the rules-based international order, emphasizing the centrality of international law, the United Nations Charter, and the promotion of values such as the rule of law, human rights, territorial integrity, and fundamental freedoms. The document also states that relevant security domains are "no longer limited to traditional military and defence-related topics" and include non-traditional domains. Drawing upon their respective strategic documents, Tokyo and Brussels affirm their intention to "seize the momentum" for cooperation and seek to "further develop, deepen and strengthen" their cooperation on security and defence (EEAS, 2024c, paras 1-4). In doing so, the SDP establishes a general framework that is geared towards improving cooperation. It includes the following (EEAS, 2024c, paras 5-9):

- Setting up dialogue mechanisms to provide steering and oversight, with an emphasis on using existing high-level meetings and upgrading informal consultations to structured dialogue summits.
- Enhancing engagement on matters related to economic security and economic resilience under the international rules-based system.
- Exploring options for a joint Agreement on the Security of Information.
- Further developing cooperation on security and defence, including through expanding capacity building and support to partner countries.
- Cooperating in multilateral fora and engaging with like-minded partners.

Finally, the SDP proposes eleven areas of cooperation ranging from traditional security topics to emerging and unconventional threats. It combines political dialogue, operational cooperation, capacity-building, and closer coordination on regional and international issues. The proposed topics include maritime security, cyber and hybrid threats, space security, non-proliferation and disarmament, economic security, crisis management, and conflict prevention, among others (EEAS, 2024c, paras 10-32). While some of these tracks have not yet been developed from the policy level, some domains are already being pursued practically, albeit to different degrees. To illustrate the convergence of security agendas and the operationalization efforts of the 2024 SDP, three case studies are particularly relevant: maritime security, cyber issues, hybrid threats including FIMI.

Maritime Security

The first area of cooperation mentioned in the SDP is maritime security. According to the Agreement, the EU and Japan decided to deepen exchanges in this domain,

"aiming at promoting an open and rules-based maritime regional security architecture", with an emphasis on maintaining "secure sea lines of communication [SLOC] and freedoms of navigation and overflights, in accordance with international law" (EEAS, 2024c, para. 11). To that end, the two parties agree to enhance their engagement through "promoting concrete naval cooperation", conducting activities such as joint exercises and port calls, and "exploring cooperation in the framework of the EU's Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP)"[3] and with capacity building of third countries (EEAS, 2024c, para. 12).

Maritime security is the most "hard security" area covered in the SDP and a field in which the EU and Japan have collaborated for many years. Bilateral cooperation dates back to 2014, when the Japanese Self-Defence Forces (SDF) and the European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR – Operation Atalanta) conducted their first joint exercise in the Gulf of Aden. Since then, there have been more than 20 joint maritime exercises between Japan and the EU, with regular operational contacts and joint ports of call. An Administrative Agreement between EUNAVFOR and the SDF was also signed in 2023 to facilitate communication, coordination, and practical naval cooperation (EEAS, 2023). Individual Member States have themselves conducted joint activities with Japanese vessels. This contributed to improving maritime interoperability and trust between Japan and the EU (Benaglia and Crosson, 2022, pp. 6-7; Pardo and Pejsova, 2024, pp. 21-23).

Historically, most of the EU-Japan maritime security cooperation has taken place in the Indian Ocean and on anti-piracy and missions to secure SLOC. However, in recent years, the geographical focus of this cooperation expanded towards the western Pacific and East Asian waters, with an emphasis on capacity building and freedom of navigation under international law. Since 2020, naval forces from European countries like Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and France – the latter a resident Indo-Pacific power – have deployed in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and other parts of the western Pacific, individually or jointly with Japan and other regional partners (Berkofsky, 2025b, 2025a). Concurrently, security initiatives like CRIMARIO[4] and ESIWA[5], two EU-sponsored programs for security and defence cooperation in Asia and the Indo-Pacific, have been helpful coordination and capacity-building instruments for EU-Japan maritime cooperation. Their accomplishments include collaboration with Southeast Asian countries on maritime governance, information sharing, and training, among others (Expertise France, 2026).

EU-Japan maritime cooperation has continued since the SDP was signed. The two sides revisit the issue regularly through the now structured dialogue on security and

3 The CMP is a foreign policy tool designed to maximize the operational coherence of Member States' assets in critical maritime regions.

4 Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific, launched in 2015.

5 Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia, launched in 2020.

defence. France, Germany, and the Netherlands occasionally send naval assets to East Asia; the discursive posture about freedom of navigation in the region remains strong, and EU-funded programs for maritime security are being renewed (Jarkovský, 2025). Despite the EU's limited capability in comparison with local actors – particularly China – maritime engagement with Japan and like-minded countries is admittedly increasing, providing an important step towards asserting freedom of navigation and the rules-based international system (Nishida, 2024, pp. 9-10).

Cyber issues

The EU and Japan have been holding regular Cyber Dialogue meetings since 2014. Under the SDP, the two actors proposed to collaborate further, namely by "enhancing regular exchanges on the cybersecurity threat landscape, respective approaches, and practical cooperative efforts" on diplomatic responses to malicious cyber activities. They also agreed to cooperate on cyber capacity building and to coordinate in international fora in matters of cyber governance (EEAS, 2024c, paras 15-16). This commitment comes at a time when threats in the cyber landscape are exponentially increasing. Not only are they borderless and used by state and non-state actors, but they are also aggravated by technological advances such as artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, expanding digital infrastructures and networks, and growing dependency on digital platforms (Bell, 2025).

In that context, the EU and Japan, two highly digitalized societies, share common threats and the incentives to collaborate. For many years, Japan has lagged behind in cybersecurity awareness despite increasing cyberattacks, particularly from Russian and Chinese threat actors (Nishimura, 2026). Operations such as Volt Typhoon and Salt Typhoon, or the Chinese-backed group MirrorFace, successfully targeted critical sectors in Japan, including telecommunications, major companies, infrastructure, and key utilities, exposing their vulnerabilities (Tomkin, 2025, pp. 19-20; REACT 2026). Europe also faces significant challenges in this domain, with a mix of high-volume, high-impact threats like ransomware, cyberattacks, and cyber operations from actors associated with Russia and China, as well as non-state actors, targeting European public administration, transportation, finance, and critical infrastructure across the EU (ENISA, 2025).

Bilateral engagement on these issues has gained traction in recent years. In 2022, the two actors launched the "EU–Japan Digital Partnership", under which they began collaborating in areas such as digital connectivity, cybersecurity, AI, 5G technologies, quantum computing, and semiconductor supply chain (Pardo and Pejsova, 2024, p. 16). The 6th EU-Japan Cyber Dialogue, held in Tokyo in November 2024, expanded this agenda and gathered senior stakeholders from both sides, giving it a renewed orientation under the SDP (EEAS, 2024a). The 2026 7th EU-Japan Cyber Dialogue, in

turn, was built explicitly on the first SDP summit in the previous year to advance cooperation on the evolving cyber threat landscape and on responses to malicious cyber activities. Through these efforts, Brussels and Tokyo increased their exchanges on cyber threat assessments, responses, and best practices, policy and regulatory developments, as well as crisis management and cyber defence. Information-sharing on product security, resilience, and protection of critical infrastructures has also improved. Lastly, the two sides pledged to coordinate positions internationally and to improve cooperation with international and regional partners within global cyber governance frameworks (European Commission, 2026).

The Partnership was therefore a turning point for EU-Japan cyber engagement. By pursuing a cyber issue track through the SDP, the EU and Japan raised their engagement in the field from a simple policy dialogue to strategic and practical cooperation. Similarly, this collaboration and its achievements mean that cyber matters are no longer purely a technical matter for both actors, but instead a major security issue to both parties, for which cooperation within a strategic framework is not only necessary but indispensable.

Hybrid threats and FIMI

Another example illustrating EU-Japan cooperation under the SDP pertains to hybrid threats and FIMI. Through the Agreement, the two sides decided to "deepen research and study on hybrid threats, including through close cooperation between academic institutions, think tanks, and centres of excellence on both sides." The SDP specifically mentions the Strategic Communications Education and Research Unit (SCERU) at the University of Tokyo, a project supported by EU-funded ESIWA, as a platform for enhanced cooperation. There is also an agreement to share "best practices in developing strategies and policies, including diplomatic responses", to participate jointly in exercises, and to proactively exchange information on matters related to FIMI (EEAS, 2024c, paras 17-19).

In the EU, Russian hybrid activity has increased greatly in recent years, with European countries subject to constant and systematic hostile actions combining cyber-attacks, disinformation, and drone incursions, among other activities. Moscow's invasion of Ukraine increased the scale and complexity of that threat. The EU is also increasingly targeted by China, through an approach that privileges cyber activities, economic and technological leveraging, and large-scale influence and interference operations (Tóthová and Engel, 2026). In Japan, Russian hybrid actions include cyber activities, FIMI, grey-zone military operations (sometimes in collusion with China), and espionage (MOD, 2025). However, China is probably Japan's most persistent hybrid threat, employing coordinated cyber, FIMI, economic, military, and influence activities below the threshold of armed conflict (Naito, 2025; Tatsumi

et al., 2025). Those actions take place alongside East Asian growing tensions and territorial disputes (MOD, 2025).

In this context, FIMI emerged as a central topic in the EU-Japan security agenda. Moscow's activities, more visible in Europe, are particularly sophisticated and aggressive, looking to undermine support for Ukraine, fragment the cohesion of opponent countries, polarize societies, and erode societal resilience and democratic institutions. Russia typically follows a chaotic and disruptive approach intended for short-term gains, leveraging a vast, state-sponsored ecosystem aided by proxy agents. Chinese FIMI, on the other hand, has increased considerably in recent years. Beijing primarily seeks to shape opinions, silence criticism, project a positive image of the PRC and its system of governance, and promote narratives aligned with Chinese strategic goals. It also acts more persistently in East Asia (Voo, 2024; Aoi et al., 2026), relying on a long-term, holistic approach that employs mainstream media – namely Chinese state outlets – co-opted elites, academia, cyber activities, economic levers, and self-censorship to gradually convert public and political discourse in its favour (Girardi et al., 2025, 6-8; EEAS, 2026a). This reality is further complexified by Russia-China collusions and the growing centrality of the Indo-Pacific.

Following the adoption of the SDP, EU-Japan engagement on hybrid threats and FIMI advanced considerably, indicating that cooperation on FIMI has become institutionalized rather than informal and episodic. On 11 June 2025, the two actors held their first Security and Defence Dialogue, agreeing to cooperate on areas including hybrid threats and FIMI (MOFA, 2025). Shortly after, at the 30th EU-Japan Summit (23 July 2025), in Tokyo, they launched a dedicated dialogue on FIMI as a standalone theme of the security partnership (European Commission, 2025).[6] Lastly, on 3 June 2026, the EU and Japan held their first Dialogue on FIMI, gathering senior officials from the Japanese central government, including security and intelligence agencies, alongside the EEAS, to discuss approaches to detecting and countering FIMI and to identify areas of cooperation (MOFA, 2026). Meanwhile, ESIWA-supported SCERU in Tokyo continues a high-level academic dialogue that enables much-needed exchanges among professionals and experts in the field.

Limits and Constraints

Despite the progress made towards a deeper EU-Japan security and defence cooperation, the partnership remains subject to a number of structural, political, and operational constraints that may impact its implementation and limit its long-term strategic significance. They can be categorized into four main types: institutional limitations, strategic divergences, capabilities, and political uncertainty.

6 At the second Security and Defence Dialogue (17 May 2026), FIMI also featured as one of the notable discussion topics between the parties (EEAS, 2026b).

With regard to institutional aspects, an initial limitation comes from the non-binding, dialogue-based nature of the SDP itself. Unlike NATO and the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance, the SDP does not stipulate mutual defence commitments nor enforceable legal obligations in case of conflict. The Partnership also does not establish permanent military or civilian operational structures, instead offering a framework for dialogue and cooperation that is voluntary and does not provide the security guarantees or enabling mechanisms typically associated with formal defence alliances. This structural ceiling means that EU-Japan cooperation under the SDP has a limited scope when it comes to operational mandate and measures, and that its implementation depends on sustained political commitment and the willingness of both sides to attain concrete actions.

As for strategic divergences, important differences remain in the strategic priorities of the EU and Japan despite the alignment of recent years. The EU is primarily focused on regional issues such as Russia's war against Ukraine, instability in the Middle East, pressures from the Southern Neighbourhood, and North-Atlantic and Arctic security. Japan, in turn, is more concerned with China's assertiveness and military build-up, territorial disputes in East Asia, a contingency involving Taiwan, as well as North Korea's nuclear and missile programs (Büyükarslan, 2025, p. 7). Consequently, Brussels and Tokyo's top security agendas are distinct to a large extent – both geographically and in their subjective importance – overlapping largely on complementary, non-military, and non-traditional issues that often receive less political attention than core security interests. The role of the U.S. is another key factor to consider, since most EU countries are NATO members, and the Atlantic Alliance remains the backbone of European security despite Washington's unpredictable foreign policy lately. A similar logic applies to Japan, with the Security Alliance with the U.S. keeping the sole formal guarantee against external threats. European countries and Japan are thus likely to continue prioritizing security relations with Washington rather than shifting their preferences towards each other (Niquet, 2024, pp. 9-10; Tomkin, 2025, pp. 18-19).

A similar logic applies to capabilities. Despite growing cooperation under the SDP, military asset deployment and joint activities remain more episodic than routine. And even though civilian cooperation has expanded considerably, much of it continues to rely on consultations, information exchanges, and capacity-building rather than integrated operational activities. This could be challenging given the difficulties and perhaps domestic reservations from both sides about pursuing interoperability, information sharing, and concrete know-how exchanges. The civilian component of the partnership has also grown at a faster pace than the military side, and the uneven development of cooperation areas may lead to the abandonment of some of its fields, undermining the value of the Agreement as a whole. Likewise, it is important to note that even though Europe and Japan are investing substantially in security and defence – with record defence budgets and

ambitions for military strategic autonomy – the main reason for those efforts is not the SDP nor EU-Japan cooperation, but rather the immediate threats the two actors face in their respective regions. Maintaining continuous security and defence cooperation, especially with military assets, may therefore prove expensive and politically difficult to sustain in the long term.

Finally, the continuing development of the EU-Japan security and defence cooperation is subject to political uncertainty. The SDP resulted from a Brussels-Tokyo consensus, but internal politics on each side are subject to changes, potentially impacting the relevance attributed to the Agreement and its implementation. The EU is not a unitary actor, and, in addition to its own democratic institutions, domestic politics in Member States can be a major factor of divergence, for example, by affecting national foreign policy priorities regarding China and Russia. The need for political consensus among the member states, as well as Brussels' complex institutional decision-making processes, can also hinder swift policymaking and implementation. When it comes to Japan, a similar logic of internal politics applies, with Tokyo having to balance its security needs with the country's constitutional pacifism, domestic politics, and societal reluctance to militarism and conflict. The U.S. stands once again as a crucial variable, since Washington's foreign policy and defence commitments to traditional allies can strongly impact demand in Brussels and Tokyo for closer security cooperation between Japan and the EU. The evolving international security environment, at last, especially developments involving China and Russia, may too reinforce or constrain the drive for a stronger bilateral security relationship.

Conclusions

The 2024 EU-Japan Security and Defence Partnership represented a major transformation in the bilateral security relationship. After decades of engagement focused mainly on economic interests, and a security cooperation agenda that was mostly symbolic and produced limited outcomes, Brussels and Tokyo established a structured and increasingly operational security partnership that marked a new chapter in their evolving relationship. Even though the SDP is not a formal security alliance and cooperation is still at a nascent stage, it signifies a qualitative shift from an *ad hoc* political dialogue into an institutionalized framework with concrete areas of cooperation and tangible outcomes, as shown in the maritime, cyber, and hybrid threats domains. This cooperation was driven by a combination of geopolitical, security, and normative factors, with the convergence of European and Indo-Pacific security emerging as a catalyst for closer cooperation between the two actors. Progress in EU-Japan security and defence will depend, however, on the evolution of internal and external contextual factors. Notwithstanding, the basis for a solid

and meaningful partnership is well established through the mechanisms and the practices pursued since 2024.

The SDP also signals the growing significance of the Indo-Pacific in the international security landscape. The Partnership creates space for the EU to act as a credible security actor in the region and to go beyond its traditional normative and economic role. It also highlights Japan's more proactive and outward-looking posture amidst a challenging regional context that is deteriorating the rules-based, multilateral world order that allowed Tokyo's pacifist posture for decades.

Agreements with other countries similar to the SDP, like the ones the EU signed in the meantime with India and South Korea, are also a possibility. The SDP could become a model for future EU security partnerships with other countries from Asia and other continents, particularly among nations facing challenges similar to the ones affecting Europe and Japan. The SDP also shows that, as an alternative to great power competition, middle powers can develop purposeful partnerships based on common security interests. They can do so by pursuing non-traditional agendas and areas of cooperation, which, coincidentally, are assuming today a higher relevance in the international security landscape. The coming years will reveal whether the EU-Japan SDP will indeed evolve into an active, operational partnership or if it will remain confined in bilateral politics and dialogue without delivering its full potential. Future research should assess the implementation of the Partnership across its cooperation tracks and evaluate the extent to which political commitments by Brussels and Tokyo have actually translated into meaningful and operational cooperation. Such studies could determine, through more sustained and substantive analysis, whether the SDP truly represented a major upgrade in EU-Japan security engagement or ultimately followed the same pattern of stagnation of previous attempts.

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The Diaoyu/Senkaku Dispute: From the 19th Century to 2026

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Abstract

This article aims to contribute to an informed discussion by providing a comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of the territorial dispute between China and Japan over a group of islands in the East China Sea, known as the Diaoyu Islands in China and the Senkaku Islands in Japan. It identifies and contextualizes the historical, legal, and political factors that have shaped the emergence and evolution of the dispute, as well as its current dynamics, including some of its implications for the Taiwan issue. The analysis also highlights the complexities that continue to hinder a peaceful and mutually acceptable resolution.

Keywords: Sino-Japanese relations; territorial disputes; East China Sea; Diaoyu; Senkaku; Taiwan; cross-strait relations.

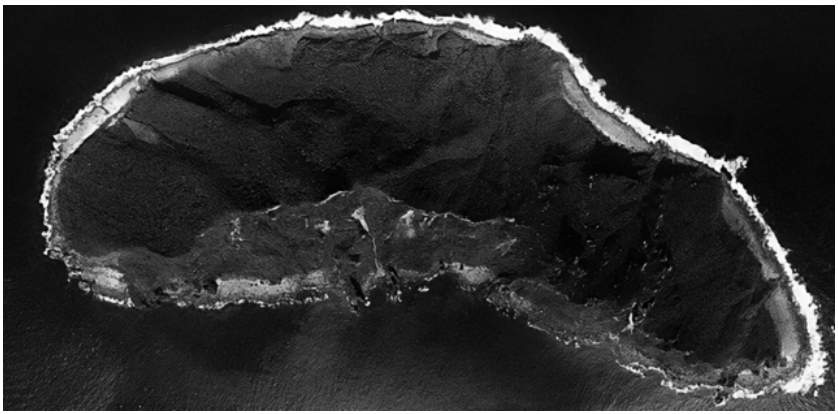
Resumo
A disputa Diaoyu/Senkaku: do século XIX a 2026

O presente artigo visa contribuir para uma reflexão fundamentada assente numa informação abrangente e atualizada acerca da disputa territorial entre a China e o Japão sobre um conjunto de ilhas no Mar Leste da China, apelidadas de Diaoyu na China e de Senkaku no Japão. Esta análise consiste na identificação e contextualização de vários elementos históricos, legais e políticos que conduziram à formação da disputa e aos seus contornos atuais, incluindo certas implicações para a questão de Taiwan, os quais tornam complexa uma resolução pacífica e consensual da mesma.

***Palavras-Chave**: Relações Sino-Japonesas; disputas territoriais; Mar da China Oriental; Diaoyu; Senkaku; Taiwan.*

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Aerial photo of the main Diaoyu/Senkaku Island[1].



This article[2] aims to provide context and a well-founded analysis of the dispute over the islands known as Diaoyu in China and Senkaku in Japan, including the historical, geographical, political, and legal factors that have led to the current state of this conflict. The article begins with a summary of the current state of the dispute and the importance of Sino-Japanese relations, then moves on to an explanation of its historical context, after which it outlines the legal arguments of both sides of the conflict and concludes with an update on recent developments, as well as a forward-looking perspective on the issue.

China and Japan are two neighboring countries with a long and complex shared history, with the origins of their relationship dating back about a millennium and a half. The continuing complexity of this relationship today and the potential developments that may occur in the future are of interest and importance not only to the two countries. They are the two largest economic powers on their continent, ranking first and second, respectively, in terms of economic size in Asia, and are the second and fourth largest economies in the world (Forbes India, 2024). In a military power *ranking*, they were classified as having the third and seventh most powerful armies in the world, respectively (Global Firepower, 2026). Based on these data, it is clear why Sino-Japanese relations attract attention and analysis not only in the context of East Asia or even Asia as a whole, but also in a global context. That is

1 Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Senkaku-uotsuri.jpg (Image usage required statement: "Made based on National Land Image Information (Color Aerial Photographs), Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism" (Japan).

2 This article is an updated and substantially expanded version of the literature review included in the book *Chinese and Japanese Strategic Narratives: The Diaoyu-Senkaku Dispute* (Silva, 2022), also by the author of this article.

why a territorial dispute between the two countries – which has been ongoing for decades and has escalated in recent years – deserves due attention.

On the one hand, the mutual cultural and economic contributions between the two countries are immense. It was through China that various cultural elements were introduced that have become important parts of Japanese identity, namely religious (such as Buddhism), culinary (*ramen*, *gyoza*), architectural and linguistic elements; the term *"kanji*" is used for the characters used in Japanese writing literally means "Han characters," a reference to their Chinese origin (Ng 2020, pp. 34 and 60). The construction of both the ancient Japanese capitals of Nara and Kyoto was inspired by the ancient Chinese capital of Chang'an (Dreyer, 2016, p. 11), etc. Modern Japanese cultural products, such as *manga* and *anime*, are also extremely popular in contemporary China and have influenced the style of Chinese media production itself (Wu 2021; Saito 2017). Currently, China is Japan's largest trading partner (Export Import Data A, 2025)[3] , while Japan is China's third-largest economic partner (Export Import Data B, 2025).

On the other hand, despite these positive aspects, there is also a history filled with rivalry, war, resentment, and pain. One of the earliest recorded instances of Japan going to war against another country was when Japan and China clashed in Korea (660-663 CE), with Japan supporting the Kingdom of Baekje and China supporting the Kingdom of Silla (the latter of which would emerge victorious and become the first kingdom to unify Korea). Since most Japanese wars in the following centuries were fought solely among the Japanese, it is noteworthy that two major exceptions to this rule before the modern era would involve China. The first exception was the Mongol invasion by the Yuan Dynasty of Kublai Khan, who ruled China at the time but failed in the attempt to expand his empire into Japan (Cartwright, 2019); the second was another war fought over the fate of Korea, in which the Japanese leader Hideyoshi attempted to conquer Korea, declaring plans to subsequently conquer China (a plan known as *Kara Iri*, literally "Entry into Tang"), although neither of these ambitions was realized by him (Hur, 2021). Finally, in 1894, a new war broke out over control of Korea; it is precisely the outcome of this war that lies at the root of the current territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.

To understand the so-called "First Sino-Japanese War", one must first understand the power imbalance between the two countries at the time. Sino-Japanese relations dated back at least to the fifth century (Fogel, 2009; Jacques, 2013; Dreyer, 2016), but the massive influx of European and American powers during the nineteenth century had a dramatic and irreversible effect on the East Asian nations. China and

3 Although the U.S. is also considered the biggest trading partner depending on the parameters chosen – namely, the specific year and whether or not the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region is counted as a separate trading partner from mainland China.

Japan responded differently to the threat posed by the West. While Japan took steps to emulate the Western colonial powers with such success that it would eventually establish its own colonial empire, China fell into disfavor and repeatedly failed to resist foreign intrusion in a series of collectively traumatic events between 1839 and 1949, later referred to as "the Century of Humiliation." This sequence of indignities inflicted upon China continues to influence, to this day, the way it interacts with the rest of the world, especially when it perceives its sovereignty to be threatened (Kaufman, 2011).

The Chinese regard the First Opium War (1839-1842), between China and the British Empire, as the beginning of the century of humiliation, and consider the end of the Chinese Civil War, with the victory of the Communist Party of China (CPC), as its conclusion. China's defeat in the Second Opium War (1856-1860) only made the situation worse. In the course of these wars, China was forced to make various concessions to foreign powers, including the loss of Hong Kong and the payment of heavy indemnities (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). China realized that it had been drawn into a new international system in which the Western powers held the advantage, and although its rulers attempted some "self-strengthening" reforms, these ultimately proved insufficient to prevent the decline and fall of the Chinese imperial system. For this reason, it stands in contrast to the Meiji Restoration in Japan.

Japan did not have its own Opium Wars, but it did experience a similar "awakening": the arrival of the "black ships" led by American Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry in 1853. Perry's imposing ships, the implicit threats, and the demands imposed (namely, the opening of Japan to foreign trade) brought an end to three centuries of Japanese isolation and led to a revolution that centralized national power, with the emperor in the capital, and ushered in the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912), which modernized Japan in all areas: political, economic, technological, and social (Fujimoto, 2003). Japan's development as a modern nation-state enabled it to triumph over its former "mentor" when they met again on the battlefield in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), a war, once again, over control of Korea (Goto-Jones, 2009, pp. 42-51). The result was a complete Japanese victory; in the aftermath, Japan was granted control of Korea, Taiwan, and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands (2009, pp. 63-66).

The disputed islands are collectively known as Diaoyu in Chinese (or Tiaoyutai in Taiwan, whose government also claims the islands), Senkaku in Japanese (or Yukubajima/Iigunkubajima in Okinawan dialects), and Pinnacle Islands in English. The territory consists of five uninhabited islands and three barren rocks located in the East China Sea.

Geographic location of the islands[4].



The Chinese claim is that the islands have been part of its territory for centuries. To that end, China cites what it considers to be credible evidence, such as: a) a book from the Ming Dynasty published in 1403 to demonstrate that China had already discovered and named the islands "Diaoyu" in the 14th century; b) Qing Dynasty records that referred to the islands as strategic coastal defense zones under Taiwan's jurisdiction; and even c) maps by English and French cartographers that depicted the islands as an extension of Taiwan. As such, China's position is that, in geographical, historical, and legal terms, the territory of the islands rightfully belongs to it (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2012; Sato and Chadha, 2022).

Japan rejects this position. It acknowledges that most of the documents presented by China are genuine and that, in fact, it was China that named the islands. But it cites international law in asserting that neither the discovery of territory nor geographical proximity constitutes, in and of itself, evidence of territorial sovereignty. It also expresses skepticism, in particular, regarding conclusions based on maps, rejecting the notion that the depiction of the islands on maps constitutes proof that they belonged to the Chinese Empire. Consequently, Japan claims that, according to its government, surveys conducted a decade before the islands were incorporated into Okinawa Prefecture following the First Sino-Japanese War, the islands were *terra nullius* until the 19th century (i.e., they belonged to no one). Japan further emphasizes that these surveys, which legitimize its sovereignty over the islands,

4 Image adapted from Jackopoid (2013).

were conducted in accordance with standards deemed appropriate under international sovereignty laws (Sato and Chadha, 2022).

Notwithstanding the opposing positions maintained by China and Japan, it is generally accepted that the Treaty of Shimonoseki, signed in 1895 following the First Sino-Japanese War, consolidated Japan's control over the islands (Naarajärvi, 2017, p. 165).

After losing the First Sino-Japanese War, China's humiliation continued in various forms, such as with its defeat in the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), in which China was defeated by a coalition of foreign powers, including Japan, and the long period of chaos that followed the 1911-1912 revolution, which overthrew the Chinese monarchy and established the Republic of China (Mitter, 2016, pp. 28-29).

With a weakened and divided Republic of China and a rising Japan, the stage was set for the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), which eventually became a theater of World War II. Given that this theater of war began before Germany's invasion of Poland, one could even argue that it was the true beginning of World War II (Sun et al., 2019).

Japanese aggression and the war crimes committed throughout this war remain fresh in the memory of the affected countries. The cruel events of the war (such as the "Nanjing Massacre" perpetrated by the Japanese) and the perception that Japan has never properly apologized for its role in them[5] continue to strain Japan's relations not only with China but also with other former victims of Japanese occupation, such as Korea (Murthy, 1982, p. 366). The outcome of the war is well known: Japan's imperial ambitions were brought to an end by its defeat and subsequent occupation by the United States, whereas China regained most of its lost territories and resumed its civil war (Goto-Jones, 2009, pp. 76-86). In 1949, the victorious Communist Party of China (CPC) proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), while the Kuomintang (KMT) government retreated to Taiwan, where it continued to operate under the official name of the Republic of China (ROC)[6]. This moment was seen as the end of the Century of Humiliation. However, the Century of Humiliation would continue to haunt the Chinese collective memory (Kaufman,

5 The core of the ongoing debate is not whether Japanese officials have apologized for Japan's actions during the war (they have done so multiple times), but rather whether the extent and sincerity of those apologies are sufficient. Authors such as Yamazaki (cited in Krebs, 2007) argue that Japanese apologies have been numerous and sincere in ways disingenuously downplayed by Japan's critics; critics such as Dahlstrom (2015) acknowledge the apologies but maintain they did not go far enough, particularly regarding legislative measures and the way those war crimes are portrayed in Japanese textbooks and media.

6 For the sake of simplicity and reflecting its common modern appellation, this article will continue to refer to the government of the Republic of China as Taiwan; the People's Republic of China will be referred to alternately as China (its common shorthand) or PRC (primarily to distinguish the two governments).

2011). In fact, this collective trauma was invoked in the context of the dispute over the islands, notably in 2012 in two articles published by China's largest state-run English-language newspaper, the *China Daily*:

– "Japan took control of the islands when China was distracted by domestic and foreign troubles in the late 19th century. But China is no longer the weak country it was then."
– "Long gone are the days when the Chinese nation was subject to bullying and humiliation from others. The Chinese government will not sit idly by watching its territorial sovereignty being infringed upon." (*China Daily*, in Silva, 2022, p. 43).

The temporary occupation of Japan by the United States in the postwar period was followed by a close alliance between the two countries, in which (partly due to restrictions related to World War II that prevented Japan from having a strong army of its own) Japan had to rely on U.S. troops to ensure its security (Goto-Jones, 2009, pp. 89-100). Although the United States does not officially take sides regarding the legitimacy of the claim to the islands, it has pledged to support Japan in the event of any armed attack on its territory (Manyin, 2016).

From the Chinese perspective, the origins of the current dispute lie in the period of Japanese occupation, specifically due to the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty. This treaty stipulates that the islands south of 29 degrees north latitude would remain under U.S. military control. This arrangement was made without consulting either the government of the PRC or that of the Republic of China (Taiwan), neither of which subsequently recognized U.S. administration of the islands as legitimate. When the U.S. occupation came to an end in 1972, administrative control of the islands was transferred to Japan, a move that both the PRC and Taiwan continue to regard as invalid.

A 1970 report, which highlighted the potentially abundant natural resources in the area around the islands, only served to complicate the situation (Naarajärvi, 2017, p. 165).

The diplomatic and legal *status quo* that emerged – and which persists to this day – was as follows: Japan, having *de facto* control of the islands, has not expanded its administrative control and denies the existence of the dispute altogether; on the other hand, China claims the islands but has neither taken Japan to an international court nor made any military attempt to seize control of the islands in a way that would provide Japan with a *casus belli* (Sato and Chadha, 2022).

The dispute remained largely dormant between the two governments for the rest of the 20th century; nevertheless, incidents occurred that exacerbated tensions, notably in 1978 and 1996, as will be explained in the next paragraph (Pacific Atrocities Education, 2019; SCMP Reporter, 2012; Council on Foreign Relations,

2024). It should be noted that, on the Chinese side, the first wave of the popular movement (led by civilians rather than official government members) to claim the territory of the islands – which would become known as the 保钓运动 (*Baodiao Yundong*, literally "movement to defend the Diaoyu Islands," commonly abbreviated to *Baodiao*), did not begin in territory controlled by the PRC, but rather in Hong Kong (then controlled by the United Kingdom), in Taiwan, and even among the Chinese community in the United States (Duan and Hao, 2025). Indeed, the perception that Taiwan had failed in its attempt to persuade its American ally to grant it control of the islands was used as a means of legitimizing the CPC government in the face of its KMT rivals in Taiwan, including in the eyes of various Chinese immigrants living abroad who supported the *Baodiao* cause (Eng, 2017, p. 4). This PRC strategy continues to this day, as will be expanded upon later here.

In 1978, about 100 Chinese ships sailed near the islands, and Japanese nationalists built a lighthouse on one of the islands. In 1996, several incidents occurred: on 14 July, members of the right-wing group *Japanese Youth Association* landed on one of the islets and built a lighthouse there, sparking a series of protests from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan; on 26 September 1996, Hong Kong activist David Chan drowned after jumping into the waters around the islands during a pro-China protest; on 29 September, tens of thousands of people gathered for a candlelight vigil in Hong Kong's Victoria Park to mourn Chan's death and protest Japan's claim to the islands; finally, on 7 October 1996, three activists from Hong Kong and Taiwan landed on the islands. These events placed particular pressure on the Chinese government because they occurred very close to the date of Hong Kong's handover in 1997; at an internal meeting, then-Chinese President Jiang Zemin declared that "the pro-Diaoyu movement in HK must not "degenerate" into "criticisms of and demonstrations against perceived Chinese inaction towards Japan," and "must not affect the territory's peaceful transition to Chinese rule" (*South China Morning Post* in Duan, 2018, p. 14). To this end, the PRC formally supported the Hong Kong protesters, praising them for their "patriotism," and organized a military exercise as a "warning" to Japan (2018, p. 13).

The events of this decade were significant for the development of the dispute. While on the Chinese side there was a public rapprochement between the PRC and the *Baodiao* civil movement, on the Japanese side the government "increased its *de facto* control over the islands" and officially recognized the lighthouse as Japanese state property. Outside these two countries, these events led to greater clarity on the part of the U.S. regarding its interpretation of the dispute and its security obligations within it; more specifically, the U.S. emphasized its support for the Japanese position and stated that its alliance with Japan includes the defense of the islands' territory, a move that paved the way for greater U.S. future involvement in the dispute (2018, p. 15).

The dispute escalated in 2010 when a Chinese fishing vessel collided with a Japanese coast guard patrol boat in the disputed area, and Japanese authorities detained

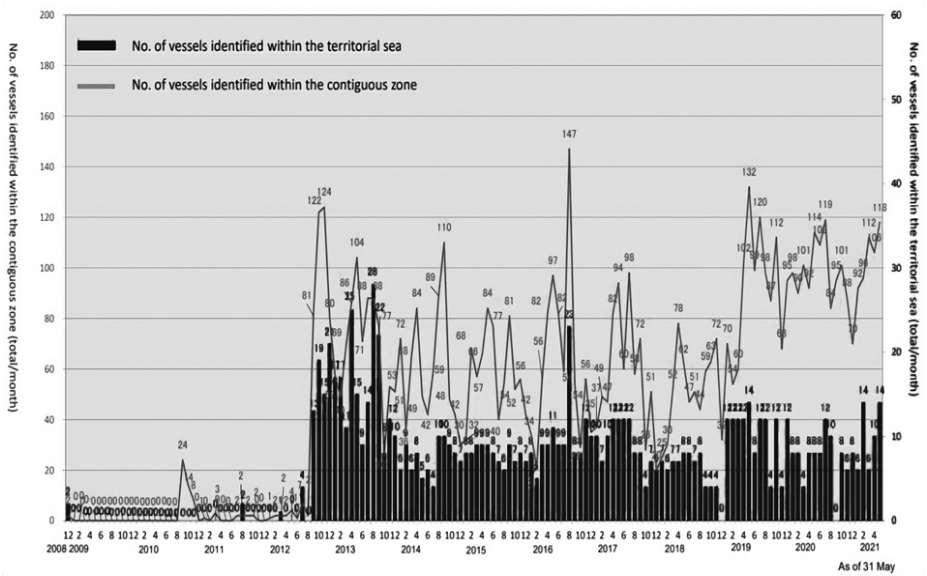
the captain of the fishing vessel for 17 days (Kolmaš, 2018). On the Chinese side, the detention sparked mass protests. In Japan, the governor of Tokyo (who will be the focus of the following paragraph) compared China to "gangsters", and the general narrative from the Japanese government and media was one of condemnation of China's behavior, which they portrayed as illegal and aggressive; this condemnation was harsher than it had been in the past. In response, China retaliated with criticism, sanctions, and protests organized by its citizens (Kolmaš, 2018).

The ensuing diplomatic dispute would be even more intense and exacerbated by one of Japan's most controversial nationalist figures: Shintarō Ishihara, governor of Tokyo from 1999 to 2012. As the leader of right-wing nationalist parties such as the Rising Sun Party and the Japan Restoration Party, even before 2012, his name was already associated with controversy for various reasons; he had been accused of xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia, militarism, and justifying the actions of the Empire of Japan against Asian countries such as Korea (Yamaguchi, 2022; Adelstein, 2022). However, in the context of the territorial dispute over the islands, it was his prior stance toward China – including actions such as denying the Nanjing Massacre, inviting the Dalai Lama and the President of Taiwan to visit Tokyo, and using the term "*Shina*," considered pejorative toward China in Japanese – that likely made his actions regarding the islands more concerning, both from China's perspective and from that of members of the Japanese government who wanted to avoid antagonizing China (Larimer, 2000; Adelstein, 2022).

In June 2012, Ishihara announced that the Tokyo Metropolitan Government would purchase three of the islands in order to protect them, while also hinting at the possibility of "developing" the islands – that is, building infrastructure to solidify Japanese control over them – a move that would further upset China (Eldridge, 2022). The Japanese government now found itself in a difficult situation: blocking the purchase would make it appear weak in the eyes of the domestic public, but allowing Ishihara to go through with the purchase (and possibly build infrastructure on the islands) would draw China's wrath. Meanwhile, both Chinese and Japanese nationalists carried out a series of increasingly provocative symbolic actions to defend their countries' sovereignty. Around the same time that Ishihara announced his intention to purchase the islands, dozens of Japanese activists (including lawmakers) landed on the islands; on 4 July, a fishing boat carrying Taiwanese activists entered the islands' waters and was detained by Japanese authorities; on 13 July, Chinese-Americans protested outside the Japanese consulate in Los Angeles; in August, 14 activists from Hong Kong landed on the islands and were also arrested by Japanese authorities; several prominent Chinese politicians (including those from Macau and Hong Kong) officially reaffirmed Chinese sovereignty over the islands (Hollihan, 2014b, pp. 85-87). The seriousness and potential consequences of the dispute were becoming increasingly clear.

Faced with growing pressure both domestically and internationally, the Japanese government opted for a solution it considered a compromise between the two nationalisms, announced on 10 September: it would purchase the islands itself and prevent the construction of any infrastructure on them, thereby attempting to address China's objections in a more diplomatic manner than Ishihara might have done. It turned out, however, that China was not impressed by the compromise; it only grew more enraged, and, just as in 2010, Japan was subjected to sanctions, boycotts (which reduced trade between the two countries), and protests (some of which were violent and resulted in the destruction of Japanese property). The Chinese government dispatched ships from the Maritime Surveillance Agency (MSA) to the waters surrounding the disputed area, bringing them dangerously close to U.S. and Japanese operational zones at a time when diplomatic relations were deteriorating (Hollihan, 2014a; Hafeez, 2015). September 2012 marked "the largest anti-Japanese protests since China and Japan normalized diplomatic relations in 1972" (SCMP Reporter, 2012).
Although the protests eventually subsided, they marked a turning point in the dispute, and the situation never returned to the previous status quo, as illustrated in the following chart:

Number of Chinese government vessels and other ships that entered Japan's contiguous zone or violated the territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands[7]



7 Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Available at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page23e_000021.html (Accessed: 16 July 2025).

The 2021 chart highlights two key points regarding the evolution of the presence of vessels in the area.

On the one hand, while 2012 saw an exponential escalation of tensions and confrontations beyond anything experienced in the previous decade, the record high number of Chinese vessels identified by the Japanese government within its territorial waters occurred the following year. On the other hand, following this peak, tensions persisted but entered a relatively stable phase. Although bilateral relations never returned to the relative "calm" of the previous decade, the dispute did not escalate to levels comparable to those observed in 2013 during the remainder of the 2010s. The principal exception was a temporary spike in the number of vessels entering the territorial waters in August 2016.

This stability was even considered "surprising" by some observers, such as Duan and Hao (2025).

The beginning of the current decade (the 2020s) can also be considered the start of a new phase in the territorial dispute, marked by two events: the decision by the Ishigaki municipal government to change the name of the islands' administrative zone in 2020; and, with more severe military implications, the 2021 decision to place the Chinese Coast Guard under the command of the People's Armed Police and thus authorizing it to use military force.

In 2020, the Ishigaki City Council (from the Okinawa Prefecture) changed the name of the administrative subdivision to which the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands were attributed, from "Tonoshiro" to "Tonoshiro Senkaku." The municipality officially justified this decision as a measure to avoid administrative confusion, given that another area bears a similar name (Kyodo, 2020); however, contradicting this explanation, Taiwanese media (including Taiwan's largest news agency, 中央通訊社/Central News Agency/CNA) reported on a telephone conversation between the mayor of Ishigaki (Yoshitaka Nakayama) and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Center in Naha[8], during which a different explanation was provided. According to the CNA report, the center reportedly cautioned Yoshitaka that, although it was a municipal decision, it could have negative implications for friendly relations between Taiwan and Japan; Yoshitaka reportedly responded that "the cause [of this decision] stems from the frequent entries and exits of Chinese government vessels into the waters around the Diaoyu Islands, as well as the expulsion of Japanese fishing boats (about 30 cases last year [2019] and already 10 since the beginning of

8 The centers designated as "Taipei Economic and Cultural Centers" function as the administrative equivalent of Taiwanese embassies or consulates in countries that do not officially recognize its government (which currently includes all countries in the world except for 12: Belize; Guatemala; Haiti; Paraguay; Saint Kitts and Nevis; Saint Lucia; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; Eswatini; the Marshall Islands; Palau; Tuvalu; and the Vatican).

this year [2020]), which provoked a strong reaction from the local population, leading to the reopening of this old case as a form of retaliation"[9] (CNA, 2020). Regardless of whether the Ishigaki City Council's original official justification was credible or not, it is unlikely that protests from Taiwan or the PRC – which were predictable given the highly contentious nature of the dispute – would not have occurred. Zhao Lijian of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticized the measure for "seriously provoking China's territorial sovereignty" (Tuan, 2024, p. 80).

In Taiwan, however, the response was more divided. Although, at the local level, both major parties in the Taiwanese municipality of Yilan (to which, according to Taiwan's claims, the islands belong) condemned the name change (with particular support from local fishermen, who consider the islands their traditional fishing grounds) and retaliated by renaming the island region "Toucheng Diaoyutai," on the national stage, there was less consensus. The KMT, as the opposition party, pressured President Tsai Ing-wen (from their main political rival, the Democratic Progressive Party) to visit the islands and "take all necessary measures" to defend Taiwan's sovereignty; Tsai, on the other hand, while agreeing that the islands belong to Taiwan, opted for a more conciliatory approach and proposed the joint development of the islands together with the other governments (Chang, 2020).

Taiwan's response to this event is a microcosm illustrating the different Taiwanese perspectives on the issue of the "Tiaoyutai" islands. The emergence of a democratic multiparty system in Taiwan in the 1990s gave rise to political polarization between the "blue coalition" led by the Republic of China's founding party (KMT), and the "green coalition," led by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The blue coalition is considered more conservative, more closely associated with a Chinese identity, more compatible with the PRC's "one country, two systems" framework for Taiwan and China, and more willing to maintain friendly relations with the PRC. The green coalition is considered more progressive, more closely associated with a Taiwanese identity, more comfortable with the idea of Taiwan as an independent nation (some of its members even support a formal declaration of independence), and more cautious toward the PRC (and closer to PRC's rival countries such as the U.S. and Japan). Consequently, the KMT takes a more assertive stance on the issue of the disputed islands, while the DPP, although generally also maintaining that the islands belong to Taiwan, is more reluctant to directly confront Japan, and its supporters even accuse the focus on the dispute of being an attempt by the PRC to promote Chinese identity and unification between Taiwan and the PRC. In fact, members of the Green Coalition who are explicitly in favor of formal independence – such as former Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui – reject even Taiwan's claim to

9 Translated from Chinese.

the islands and support the Japanese position. For its part, the PRC views Taiwan's less assertive stance with disapproval as part of a process of de-Sinicization and separatism, just as it views comments on the islands by figures such as Lee Teng-hui as attempts to attract attention and support for the separatist cause (Duan, 2018, p. 11).

Thus, given the situation in Ishigaki in 2020, although President Tsai Ying-wen reiterated that the disputed islands belong to Taiwan, her party's foreign policy – which is more focused on a united front with Japan in the face of pressure from the PRC – has moderated its stance on the dispute. For its part, the KMT – whose former leader (Ma Ying-jeou, Tsai's predecessor as president of Taiwan) had promoted a rapprochement between Taiwan and the PRC in the face of Japan – criticized Tsai's stance as "weak" (Chang, 2020). As previously mentioned, the PRC has capitalized on these internal disagreements within Taiwan and the sentiments of Taiwanese citizens with a stronger Chinese identity – who felt more resentment toward Japan – to position itself as a defender of the sovereignty and dignity of the Chinese people everywhere, even offering to send patrol boats to protect Taiwanese fishermen in the disputed areas. It can therefore be understood that the PRC's interests in the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands are not merely related to the territory of the islands themselves, but extend beyond it, intersecting with the issue of Taiwan; the defense of sovereignty over the islands may also serve as a mechanism to legitimize the CPC in the eyes of the Taiwanese and to weaken the pro-independence position and its alliance with Japan (Duan, 2018, p. 12).

Given that this aspect lends even greater importance to the dispute in the eyes of the PRC, the PRC's decision in January 2021 to place the China Coast Guard (CCG) under the jurisdiction of the People's Armed Police (PAP) becomes even more understandable. To fully comprehend the significance of this development, one must consider that it occurred – not coincidentally – following a series of other reforms undertaken by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the end of the previous decade to centralize power directly in his own office of the President of China/General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. Specifically, while the PAP has always been a paramilitary organization – established in 1982 with the primary objective of maintaining domestic order and the secondary objective of, when necessary, serving as a support force for the People's Liberation Army (PLA, the CPC's main military branch) – it was, however, also an organization of a semi-civilian nature, with its leadership shared between the (civilian) State Council, and the Central Military Commission (CMC). Between 2017 and 2018, Xi Jinping placed the PAP entirely under the control of the CMC[10] (Wuthnow, 2019). In other words, with

10 Since the 1990s, every President of China has also simultaneously served as the president of the CMC.

the integration of the CCG into the PAP in 2021, the PAP took on an undeniably military character and was effectively authorized to use military force in the waters claimed by the country, including the waters surrounding the disputed islands (Kotani, 2026). The Japanese government criticized the law that enabled this development, arguing that it contains "problematic provisions in terms of their inconsistency with international law. Sources of inconsistency include, among others, ambiguity as to geographical areas the CCG Law applies and how the rules governing the use of weapons are implemented" (Ministry of Defense of Japan, n.d.). Implicit in this criticism is the idea that, due to ambiguous maritime jurisdictions, the authorization granted to CCG patrol boats to use armed force to attack Japanese vessels they deem to be in violation or to compel them to undergo inspection will inevitably lead to further conflicts in the disputed areas (Kotani, 2026).

Still in 2021, Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi reaffirmed in an interview the idea of a "red line" around the islands and their maritime zones, which Japan would not allow China to cross, assuring that Japan was in the process of "working to expand its self-defense forces by increasing weapons and equipment, including the addition of F-35 fighter jets, converting warships into aircraft carriers, and building destroyers, submarines, and new missile developments"; he admitted, however, that Japan did not yet have the capacity to fully keep pace with China's military budget increases (Nguyen, 2024, p. 80; Lendon and Essig, 2021).

These tensions continued to escalate in the following years. In 2023, Chinese government vessels set a new record by operating in the contiguous zone on 352 of the year's 365 days (Takahashi, 2024).

That record was surpassed again in 2024, with 355 consecutive days, and in 2025, with 357 consecutive days (Takahashi, 2026). According to Tuan (2024, p. 80), "Chinese military aircraft also approached this area many times, forcing Japan to dispatch fighter jets to keep watch".

Although it has not gone so far as to build artificial islands near the disputed islands (as was the case in the South China Sea disputes with Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam), China has been constructing artificial buoys in the area, which were discovered in 2016, 2018, 2023, and 2024; according to Japanese sources, these buoys violate international law by entering Japan's Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), are connected to satellites to which they transmit information (intended to facilitate the operations of Chinese patrol boats), and have been equipped with "automatic identification systems (AIS) and a complex array of cameras, sensors, antennas, satellite transponders and other devices possibly for collecting and transmitting data on foreign vessels' movements, water temperature, ocean currents, weather, etc." (Kurosaki, 2025; *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2023).

It is not surprising that China refused to remove these buoys when Japan demanded it, arguing that they were lawful under international law; but it may be surprising

that China did eventually remove some of the buoys on one occasion (albeit under the pretext that they had already served their purpose and could never have been considered illegal under international law). An analysis of the reason behind this decision may shed light on the future development of this dispute. The buoys were removed in February 2025, the month following Donald Trump's return to power and during the brief tenure (from October 2024 to October 2025) of Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishida, who was known (and, domestically, criticized) for his more conciliatory approach toward China. On the one hand, Shigeru's diplomacy yielded a few gestures of apparent goodwill from China, such as the lifting of the ban on seafood exports to China and increased cultural and tourism exchanges. On the other hand, Donald Trump's return to power and the uncertainty it caused may have been seen as an opportunity to alienate Japan from its traditional ally in favor of China. At the same time, an interest in stable trade relations with Japan would be of significant importance to a China "faced with a flattening domestic economy and the looming threat of U.S. tariffs" (Aoyama, 2025).

This economic point can be seen as supporting the analysis of authors such as Duan and Hao (2025, pp. 66-69), who – rejecting the notion (proposed by some observers of China) that the PRC adopts a more aggressive stance toward other countries to distract its population during times of internal crisis – argue that, on the contrary, given how much economic growth and prosperity matter to its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens, it is precisely during times of internal difficulty that it needs to rely on trade stability. This need will motivate the PRC to moderate its foreign policy toward its neighboring trading partners; conversely, periods of economic growth and internal stability will have been accompanied by greater assertiveness toward its neighbors. Duan and Hao (2025, pp. 60-62) attribute to this dynamic the reason that, for example, the PRC reduced its support for the civilian protesters of the *Baodiao* movement; in contrast to the controlled and premeditated actions by government agents (i.e., boat patrols, buoys, etc.), the *Baodiao* activists likely appeared too unpredictable and volatile.

Without removing, but rather adding, complexity to this dynamic (not only on China's side, but also because economic concerns will be a motivating factor for Japan), leadership changes in both countries will always have the potential to affect the dispute. It has already been mentioned how Xi Jinping altered the role of the CCG, which was used as justification for a larger defense budget on the Japanese side; and how Kishida's diplomacy encouraged greater Chinese restraint. Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi – who, years before taking office, was already known for openly regarding China as "a threat" requiring the strengthening of Japan's defense – not only quickly reversed the conciliatory tendencies of her immediate predecessor Kishida, but also went even further than expected. In October 2025, amid growing tensions between the PRC, the United States, and Taiwan, Takaichi stated

that a military escalation in Taiwan would be "an existential threat" that could justify the mobilization of the Japanese armed forces. Despite her clarification that the comment should not be understood as a change in Japanese policy toward China and that she would not make similar hypothetical comments again, these remarks represented a departure from the strategic ambiguity of past Prime Ministers. Much as China's furious reaction a decade before during the nationalization of the islands, China retaliated with harsh criticism and economic sanctions (Fukuta and Sakaki, 2025). To date, Sino-Japanese relations have not yet recovered to the level they were at before the comments on Taiwan, which implies that tensions regarding the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute will not subside anytime soon; the opposite tendency is more likely.

Two other aspects could influence the future of the dispute and thus should be mentioned. First, the Taiwan issue and the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue are now difficult to entirely separate. This is not only because of implications/reactions to Takaichi's comment, nor solely because of Taiwan's internal political divisions regarding the islands and how the PRC might take advantage of them, but also for geographical reasons: "The Senkaku/Diaoyu lie within the strategic first island chain stretching from Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines. The string of islands is controlled by U.S. allies and contains the expansion of China's growing naval power." (Howe, 2026). More specifically, in the event of a military confrontation between Taiwan and the PRC that would draw the U.S. and its allies into the conflict, control of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands would serve as a link in this "first island chain" intended to act as a countermeasure against China in such a scenario (Lema et al., 2025).

Second, in February 2020, U.S. President Joe Biden stated that "US security guarantees apply to Japan's administration of the disputed Senkaku Islands" (Harding, Sevastopulo, 2020); in other words, a military maneuver by China within the disputed territory could trigger direct military conflict between China and the U.S.; Biden made a similar statement again in 2024 (Feng, 2024). His successor, Donald Trump, reaffirmed this position in 2025 in a joint statement with Prime Minister Ishiba (The White House, 2025).

The long-term impact of these factors, as well as the outcome of the dispute and the future of Sino-Japanese relations in general, remain to be seen. On the one hand, despite the growing military presence near the islands, tensions have not yet resulted in the use of direct force. Analysts such as Professor Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi view China's strategy as one of "patience" without direct confrontation; they will continue to increase pressure on the Japanese side, which in turn will continue to resist this pressure despite its relatively limited response capabilities (Ryall, 2024). In 1978, Deng Xiaoping told Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda: "There's probably insufficient wisdom to resolve this issue in our generation, but with the next generation likely to be wiser than us, they will probably be able to find some

resolution to the issue" (Ikeda, 2013). Although tensions have escalated since then, and an official statement of this kind regarding the conflict is unlikely in the current context, there may nevertheless be merit in the idea that the conflict will remain relatively static in its current form until future generations are able to resolve it.
On the other hand, in 2021, the former NATO Supreme Commander identified the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands as one of four *hotspots* where a war between China, the United States, and their respective allies could break out (Stavridis, 2021).
How likely is it that this spark could trigger a Third Sino-Japanese War – or, in the most pessimistic scenario, a Third World War? It is to be hoped that heads will remain cool, that the well-being of people and the economic and cultural benefits between the two countries will be considered more important than control over a few uninhabited islands, and that the risk of a conflict capable of dragging not only the two countries back into war but also the rest of the world will continue to be viewed as too high a price to pay.

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Reconfiguring Japan's Strategic Role in a Decade of Change

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Abstract

This article analyses the reconfiguration of Japan's strategic role through a comparison of the 2013 and 2022 National Security Strategies, drawing on Role Theory, specifically the concepts of role conception, role change, and role conflict as developed by Holsti and Harnisch et al. The analysis demonstrates that the 2022 National Security Strategy evidences a reconfiguration of how Japan perceives its role across three identified dimensions: position, functional commitments and alter structure. This transition remains incomplete, as evidenced by the tensions and ambiguities that persist within the documents, most notably the assertion of greater autonomy alongside the maintenance of structural dependence on the alliance with the United States and the introduction of new military capabilities framed within an exclusively defensive policy, which role theory identifies as role conflict.

Keywords: Japan; role theory; National Security Strategy; role conflict; Indo-Pacific

Resumo
Reconfigurando o papel estratégico do Japão numa década de mudanças.

Este artigo analisa a reconfiguração do papel estratégico do Japão através da comparação das Estratégias de Segurança Nacional de 2013 e 2022, recorrendo à Role Theory, especificamente os conceitos de role conception, role change e role conflict desenvolvidos por Holsti e Harnisch et al. A análise demonstra que a Estratégia de Segurança Nacional de 2022 evidencia uma reconfiguração da forma como o Japão perceciona o seu papel nas três dimensões identificadas: posição, compromissos funcionais e atores em relação aos quais o Japão define o seu papel (alters). Esta transição permanece incompleta, evidenciada pelas tensões e ambiguidades persistentes nos documentos, como a afirmação da vontade de assumir maior autonomia, concomitante à manutenção de uma dependência estrutural em relação à aliança com os Estados Unidos, novas capacidades de caráter militar enquadradas em linguagem de defesa exclusiva, algo que a teoria interpreta como role conflict.

Palavras-chave: *Japão; role theory; Estratégia de Segurança Nacional; role conflict; Indo-Pacífico.*

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Introduction

In December 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida simultaneously revised, for the first time, three key strategic documents that form the basis of Japan's national security and defence policy: the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy and the Defense Buildup Program (Kishida, 2022). First formulated during the tenure of Shinzō Abe in 2013, these documents underwent a comprehensive review in response to the severity of the security environment surrounding Japan and to assert the country's primary responsibility for its own defence (Yasuaki, 2023).

The significance of this revision has not gone unnoticed: several authors have classified the changes contained within these documents as "pivotal… [With] important ramifications for regional and global security" (Hughes, 2024, p. 183), "pathbreaking" (Hornung and Johnstone, 2023), "strikingly ambitious" and "remarkable" (Liff, 2023, p. 63), as well as "transformational" (Matsuda, 2023, pp. 85, 96).

Both the regional and international contexts lead policymakers to describe the security environment as the "most severe and complex since the end of World War II", which, in turn, demands the adoption of more concerted and detailed efforts to strengthen Japan's security policy (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2022, p. 4).

These assessments converge on the significance of the transformation but tend to focus on its material dimensions, such as defence spending, new capabilities, and alliance management. Less attention has been paid to a prior question: how has Japan reconfigured its own role in the international system and what does this reconfiguration reveal about the kind of actor Japan is becoming? Thus, it is not the intention of this article to detail what caused these policy changes to be considered so historical. Instead, it aims to analyse how Japan attempted to redefine, through these documents, its role in the international system.

To do so, this article draws on role theory, more specifically on the concept of national role conception developed by Holsti (1970) and later expanded by Harnisch et al. (2011). Role conceptions encompass policymakers' own definitions of the functions and commitments appropriate to their state's position in the international system, as well as their perception of what other actors expect of them (Holsti, 1970, pp. 245-246). Unlike analyses focused on material capabilities or structural pressures, this framework captures the identity dimension of Japan's transformation: not only what Japan is doing differently, but also how it is reconceiving what kind of actor it is and in relation to whom.

The analysis focuses on Japan's National Security Strategies (NSS) of 2013 and 2022, which are the highest-level documents in which Japan formally articulates its

strategic identity[1]. As Holsti (1970, p. 256) observed, and as Breuning (2011, p. 23) later confirmed, based on his work, official foreign policy statements represent the outcome of internal government debate and thus capture the role conceptions of the foreign policy elite responsible for how the state behaves internationally. Nabers (2011, p. 81) also states that "political articulations" shape roles and identities, and Cantir and Kaarbo (2012, p. 7) claim that the behavior of countries on the international stage is decided by "policy elites", even if there are internal disagreements. According to Wehner and Thies (2014, pp. 13-14), it is the responsibility of leaders, whether presidents or prime ministers, to resolve these disagreements regarding the national role conception, acting as "referees" among the various groups that make up a country's society. The comparison between the two documents, separated by a decade of significant geopolitical change, allows for a mapping of how Japan's role conception has evolved and where it remains contested.

As the first NSS, the 2013 document serves as a pertinent starting point for this type of analysis; the 2022 NSS, in turn, contains the most significant changes to Japan's security policy and thus provides a natural endpoint for this analysis. This period also coincidentally represents a decade of significant shifts in the international security environment and includes a major transformational event – Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The article argues that the 2022 NSS evidences a reconfiguration of Japan's role conception from a configuration combining some of the roles first outlined by Holsti (1970), such as "faithful ally", "protectee" and "defender of the faith" towards one that incorporates elements of the "independent" and, potentially, the "regional protector" ones, within a broadened multilateral normative coalition. This reconfiguration remains contested, as evidenced by the tensions and ambiguities that persist within the document itself, most notably the simultaneous declaration of Japan's primary responsibility for its own defence and the continued dependence on American extended deterrence.

Following this introduction, a brief theoretical framework will be presented, followed by the empirical analysis comparing the role conceptions in both documents. Finally, a conclusion will summarize the main arguments.

The analysis maps Japan's role conception across three dimensions. The first concerns how Japan defines its position in the international system, which is the ego component in Harnisch's (2011, p. 8) sense, encompassing the state's self-perception

1 The focus on the NSS, rather than the broader set of security documents produced in both periods, reflects the distinction between role conception, which operates at the level of strategic identity (Frank, 2011, p. 132), and role enactment, which refers to the actual foreign policy behavior (Harnisch, 2011, p. 9; Breuning, 2011, p. 26). The NSS are an appropriate object for the former.

and identity. The second relates to the functions and commitments Japan considers appropriate to that position, deriving from Holsti's notion of role conception as encompassing the "decisions, commitments, rules, and actions suitable to their state" (Holsti, 1970, pp. 245-246) and the functions it should perform in the international system. The third encompasses the actors in relation to whom Japan constructs its role, which constitutes the alter component, capturing both partners of reference and sources of external expectation (Harnisch, 2011, p. 8). These three dimensions are an operationalization of Holsti and Harnisch's frameworks, proposed here to map the evolution of Japan's role conception between 2013 and 2022. The 2013 NSS serves as the starting point for this analysis, not as a fixed reference, but as the role conception against which the changes introduced in 2022 can be identified and assessed.

Role Conception: Abe's Japan

The National Security Strategy of 2013, released during the administration of Shinzō Abe, is particularly consequential given that it is "…the first comprehensive and strategic policy document to be compiled by the Government of Japan" (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2013), laying out, for the first time in a single document, intentions and approaches to contributing to peace, in other words, outlining the role it intends to play on the international stage, characterized by a greater degree of proactivity, providing the baseline for this comparison.

Japan defines itself, in this document, primarily as a country compliant with international law and fundamental values, which has adopted a pacifist stance and an exclusively defensive security policy since its defeat in World War II, as the only country to ever have nuclear weapons dropped on its territory, and as a "proactive contributor to peace" (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2013). These constitute essential aspects of Japan's role in the world: a pacifist state with a defence-oriented security policy, a staunch defender of the international order, the heir to a complicated legacy derived from the experience of the war, as the only victim of the most powerful man-made weapon in human history, which also serves as a moral ceiling for its military actions, and as a nation that wishes to take action on the international stage to further peace.

Therefore, it is possible to see that Japan's position as presented in 2013 works within a duality. On one hand, the pacifist stance adopted since 1945 defines what Japan is (a "peace-loving nation"), simultaneously justifying and constraining what Japan does/can do. Pacifism is not presented as a policy choice subject to revision but as a constitutive characteristic of Japan's identity, one that has "garnered significant praise and respect from the international community" and that

Japan "must continue" to uphold (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2013). On the other hand, the unique moral authority derived from being the only country to have suffered nuclear bombardment in wartime functions as a moral ceiling on Japan's military ambitions. It is precisely because Japan understands, from direct experience, what war means, that it can credibly lead international efforts towards disarmament and achieve its goal of "a world free of nuclear weapons" (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2013). Together, these elements construct a role conception in which Japan's legitimacy in the international system derives from restraint instead of power.

It is significant, however, that the 2013 NSS does not treat this pacifist identity as a limitation to be overcome, but as a resource to be deployed. The concept of "Proactive Contribution to Peace", which serves as the document's central framing device, is precisely an attempt to expand Japan's international role without rupturing its pacifist identity. The document expresses Japan's intention to do more, as befits a country that is "an economic power with strong economic capacity and high technological capabilities"[2] (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2013), but always in a manner that is "consistent with the principles of international cooperation" and, once again, "as a peace-loving nation" (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2013). This tension, between the wish and the willingness to do more and the pressure to remain within the constraints of a pacifist identity, is the first signal of the role conflict that becomes fully visible in 2022, whereby the ego self-conception of autonomy and the alter expectation of alliance loyalty are simultaneously present and contradictory within the same document (Nabers, 2011, p. 76). In 2013, it is managed through the framework of the alliance with the United States of America (hereinafter referred to as the "alliance"), "the cornerstone of Japan's security" (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2013), which allows Japan to contribute to regional security without assuming autonomous military functions. In 2022, as that framework is put into question, the tension can no longer be contained within the same conceptual formulation.

In relation to its functional dimension, the position that Japan finds itself in translates into three types of commitments considered appropriate. The first is contributing to peace in the region, particularly through the alliance, which provides both deterrence and operational structure through which Japan fulfils its security obligations. The second is participating in United Nations' peacekeeping operations, which allows Japan to exercise its commitment to international peace without

2 It is precisely because Japan "continued to punch below its weight" in terms of military power in a way that is not commensurate with its economic development in the post-war period, as well as the fact that it rejected "its sovereign right to wage wars and to use force or the threat of force as means of settling international disputes" (Hagström, 2014, p. 127), that Japan is considered an abnormal state.

assuming independent military functions[3]. The third is leading international efforts towards a denuclearized world, a function that derives directly from Japan's identity as the only victim of nuclear war.

It is noteworthy to mention that none of these functions is autonomously assumed by Japan; each is exercised through, or in relation to an external structure, either the alliance with the U.S., in the case of its contribution to regional security or the preference for multilateral frameworks instead of acting unilaterally. It constitutes a functional dependence that defines its role conception, reflecting a Japan that defines its contributions relationally rather than autonomously.

In 2013, the NSS conceptualises Japan's role in relation to a dominant *alter*, the United States, whose centrality constitutes the defining feature of Japan's role conception. The alliance is not merely a security arrangement; it provides the overarching structure around which Japan's security policy is organised and through which the country's security identity and functions acquire meaning. Both threat reduction – "prevent the emergence and reduce direct threats to Japan, through strengthening the Japan-U.S. Alliance..." (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2013) – and deterrence – "Japan ensures its national security by enhancing deterrence through the strengthening of its own defence capability, as well as by the deterrence of the Japan-U.S. Alliance, including the extended deterrence provided by the U.S." (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2013) – are therefore conceptualised primarily within the framework of the alliance, rather than solely in terms of Japan's autonomous capabilities.

The almost 900 word section dedicated to strengthening the alliance is itself evidence of this centrality: the United States is not simply a partner among others; the alliance is the organising principle of Japan's role conception as a whole.

Two secondary alters emerge from the document's assessment of the security environment in Section 2 – Security Environment and Challenges in the Asia-Pacific Region, in which the tensions and issues that have an impact on Japan's security environment are described: North Korea and China.

North Korea's provocative rhetoric and military actions, some of them directed towards Japan, such as its ballistic missile development and nuclear programme, are classified as "a serious challenge to the entire international community", which "aggravate the threat to the security of the region" (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2013). North Korea is presented as a challenge to the international community, not as a bilateral threat to Japan specifically. This positions Japan as part of a

3 The "PKO Law", which provides the "legal basis for SDF [Japan's Self-Defense Forces] participation in all UN peacekeeping operations" (Ishizuka, 2023, p. 257), was enacted following backlash against Japan's "chequebook diplomacy" during the Gulf War. This concept refers to the application of economic means for the promotion of interests and the conduct of diplomacy, despite pressure from the U.S. to join the coalition in the fight against Saddam Hussein's regime (Wright, 2016, pp. 19-20).

broader international response rather than as an independent actor facing a bilateral threat, which is consistent with the relational character of its functional commitments, as previously mentioned.

China, in turn, is described as increasing its military power without transparency and forcibly attempting to change the *status quo* in the region through its assertiveness in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, as well as intruding on Japan's territorial waters and airspace, particularly around a group of islands, the Senkaku/Diaoyu, which have been a source of dispute between the two countries for half a century (Grieger, 2021). In Japan's perspective, this constitutes "an issue of concern" for itself and for the international community at large, notably not a direct threat, and certainly not an existential challenge to the international order itself. Japan is careful to present China as a problem to be addressed within the existing framework, not as a challenger to that same framework. Taiwan, for instance, is mentioned in 2013 only as a cross-strait relationship with potential for both stability and instability, simply a regional dynamic to monitor rather than a direct implication for Japan's security posture.

In order to verify the extent to which Japan's role conception corresponds to established role types in the literature, the following table presents a summarised version, developed by Sampson and Walker (1987, p. 116) of Holsti's (1970) original typology of national role conceptions, which serves as the reference for the classification that follows.

Table 1
Summarized version by Sampson and Walker (1987, p. 116), of Holsti's (1970) original typology of national role conceptions

Type	Description
1. Bastion of revolution-liberator	Organize or lead various types of movements abroad
2. Regional leader	Lead states in a particular region or cross-cutting subsystem
3. Regional protector	Provide protection for adjacent regions
4. Active independent	Cultivate self-determination and relations with many states and occasional interposition into bloc conflicts
5. Liberation supporter	Support liberation movements without assuming formal responsibilities
6. Anti-imperialist agent	Act as an agent of "struggle" against this evil
7. Defender of the faith	Defend value systems (rather than specified territories) from attack
8. Mediator-integrator	Reconcile conflict between other states or groups of states
9. Regional-subsystem collaborator	Honor far-reaching commitments to cooperative efforts with others
10. Developer	Assist underdeveloped countries with special skills
11. Bridge	Act as a translator or conveyor of messages
12. Faithful ally	Support the policies of another government
13. Independent	Determine your own national interests rather than support others
14. Example	Promote prestige and influence by domestic policies
15. Internal development	Pursue involvement with other states only to further domestic development
16. Isolate	Minimize external contacts of any variety
17. Protectee	Affirm the responsibility of other states to defend them

The role conception that emerges from the 2013 NSS is consistent with several of the national role types identified by Holsti (1970). At its core, Japan positions itself as the "faithful ally", which is a state that supports the policies of another government, organizes its security around that relationship, delegating some of its functions to that bilateral relationship, and defines its own role in relation to its central ally, as well as "defender of the faith", establishing its role in terms of protecting universal values and the rules-based international order. These two roles are complemented by a "regional-subsystem collaborator" dimension, evident by Japan's commitments to multilateral frameworks across the Asia-Pacific, such as APEC, EAS, ASEAN+3, ARF, and ADMM-Plus, plus a "developer" dimension, expressed through its use of official development assistance and human security principles as instruments of foreign policy. Underlying all of these, however, there is a "protectee" role, since Japan's security ultimately depends on American extended deterrence, including nuclear, which Japan actively works to maintain and strengthen.

These roles are not independent, but mutually reinforcing categories of a single coherent role conception. Japan's commitment to universal values and the rules-based international order is expressed primarily through the alliance with the United States, which simultaneously provides the extended deterrence that makes Japan's pacifist identity and its Three Non-Nuclear Principles sustainable without causing Japan to be strategically vulnerable. The "faithful ally" role enables the "protectee" role, since U.S. protection of Japan depends on Japan assuming its share of the commitment *vis-à-vis* the alliance. The "protectee" role makes the "defender of the faith" role credible, demonstrating that Japan can be a reliable defender of the international order and universal values given that, as a protectee, it has no power or willingness to oppose them. Both the "developer" and "regional-subsystem collaborator" roles give Japan a constructive international presence that reinforces its legitimacy as a peace-loving nation. The alliance underpins Japan's role conception and creates the framework that gives coherence to that conception.

The 2022 Transformation: Kishida's Japan

The 2022 National Security Strategy, launched during Fumio Kishida's administration, opens with an explicit acknowledgement of what the 2013 document could not have anticipated: that the free and stable international order Japan had committed itself to defending was no longer guaranteed by interdependence alone. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February of that year, an act by a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council against the fundamental principle of the

prohibition of the use of force, the very body holding "primary responsibility of maintaining international order and peace" (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, 2022), demonstrated that the rules-based order could be violated by the actors charged with upholding it.

As a result, Japan takes it upon itself to "protect its own national interests, including the peace, security, and prosperity", promising to profoundly transform its security policy (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, 2022). This singular event functions in the document as justification for the urgency of revision of the documents previously formulated by Shinzō Abe: if the international order cannot protect itself, Japan cannot rely on it, or on others, to protect Japan.

The response articulated in the 2022 NSS reconfigures Japan's role conception in ways that are both continuous and discontinuous with 2013. On one hand, the continuity is visible in Japan's reaffirmation of its commitment to universal values, its exclusively defensive security policy, its "proactive contribution to peace" and the Three Non-Nuclear Principles. These elements are present in both documents, constituting essential aspects of the identity that the 2022 NSS is careful to maintain, alongside the changes it introduces. The discontinuity is, on the other hand, equally evident: whereas in 2013, Japan's security is framed as a function of the alliance, in 2022, the document asserts "the primary responsibility for defending Japan lies with itself" (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, 2022). This is significant, since it demonstrates a fundamental reorientation of the functional dimension of Japan's role conception, moving away from the "faithful ally" type identified in Holsti (1970), in which security is organized around the alliance, towards a configuration that incorporates elements of the "independent" role, without fully corresponding to it.

This reorientation is most clearly evidenced by two main shifts: the first concerns deterrence, which is almost exclusively associated to the Japan-U.S. alliance, including American extended nuclear deterrence, in 2013: "Japan ensures its national security by enhancing deterrence through the strengthening of its own defence capability, as well as by the deterrence of the Japan-U.S. Alliance, including the extended deterrence provided by the U.S." (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2013), and is reconfigured in 2022 as a responsibility of Japan itself. While mentions of deterrence in the context of the alliance persist, reflecting the continuity that the document is careful to maintain, the dominant framing shifts from the alliance as the source of deterrence to Japan as its primary agent, demonstrating a qualitative shift in how Japan conceptualises the source of its own security. Quantitatively, this shift is also visible: whereas the 2013 NSS dedicated nearly 900 words to the alliance and its centrality to Japan's security, the 2022 NSS reduces this to two brief sections of approximately 100 words each, which is a reduction that is not merely quantitative in nature but also reflects a reorientation of the entire architecture of Japan's role conception.

This shift is further evidenced by Japan's acknowledgement, in the 2022 NSS, that even though its alliance with the U.S. remains "the cornerstone of [its] national security policy", it is "increasingly difficult" for the United States to deal with security threats and protect the international order, particularly due to countries that do not share the fundamental values underpinning their relationship and aim to increase "their own national interests at the expense of others" (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, 2022). Japan is not only assuming greater autonomy but also explicitly basing it on the perceived limitations of its primary ally, redefining its role conception through a reassessment of what the U.S. can and cannot be relied upon to do.

The second shift concerns functional commitments. The introduction of counterstrike capabilities represents the most consequential change in what Japan considers an appropriate function for its state to perform. For the first time, Japan claims the right to strike an opponent's territory as a necessary measure of self-defence, a function that was explicitly excluded from its role conception in 2013. This is also a direct consequence of Japan assuming the responsibility for deterrence, since counterstrike capabilities are designated as "a key to deterring invasion against Japan…that leverage stand-off defence capability and other capabilities" (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, 2022), thus framing them as an extension of the deterrence logic. Japan is expanding what it considers appropriate action while simultaneously basing that expansion in continuity with its established identity and also maintaining a red line: "striking first at a stage when no armed attack has occurred remains impermissible" (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, 2022), which means that, despite the significant developments in Japan's functional commitments, the constraint of a purely defence-based framework persists. This constraint is evidence of the role conflict that characterizes the 2022 role conception: Japan is asserting new functions while remaining bound by the identity that has defined it since 1945.

Regarding Japan's alters, the 2022 NSS presents a more complex and differentiated picture than its predecessor. Despite the more muted references to the alliance with the United States, the U.S. remains dominant, playing an "indispensable role" for both Japan's and the region's security. The dependence on American extended deterrence, including nuclear, is maintained. This persistence of the United States as a primary *alter*, even as its centrality diminishes, shows that, while Japan wishes to assert greater autonomy in its role conception, it remains dependent on the very ally whose reliability it now implicitly questions. This is role conflict in the precise sense described by Nabers (2011, p. 76).

There are, nevertheless, significant changes in the secondary *alters* that have a direct impact on Japan's security environment. North Korea, considered the most urgent threat to Japanese security in 2013, is relegated to second place in 2022, after China. Russia, described as a potential security partner in 2013, gains prominence as a direct challenge following its invasion of Ukraine, with the 2022 NSS noting the

strengthening of Russian-Chinese strategic coordination and its implications for the Indo-Pacific region.

The most consequential modification in Japan's *alter* structure, however, concerns China. Classified simply as an "issue of concern" in 2013, China becomes "an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge" for Japan's security in 2022. This shift reflects a fundamental change in how China functions as an alter in Japan's role conception. In 2013, China was a source of tension to be managed within the existing order. In 2022, China is a challenger to that order itself and, therefore, a challenge to the role conception that Japan had built around defending it (the "defender of the faith" role). The Kishida administration draws a direct parallel between Russia's actions in Ukraine and the prospect of China acting similarly in Taiwan, a connection that is implicit but discernible in the document's structure. The situation in Taiwan receives significantly more attention in 2022 than in 2013: whereas the 2013 NSS merely noted the deepening of cross-strait relations and their potential for both "stability and potential instability" (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2013), the 2022 NSS is considerably more assertive, indicating "mounting concerns" regarding the relationship between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait and the intensification by China of "its military activities in the sea and airspace surrounding Taiwan" (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, 2022). Taiwan thus emerges as a new securitized space in Japan's role conception, going from merely a regional issue to a situation that has direct implications for Japan's own security perimeter.

Beyond the United States, one of the most significant shifts in Japan's alter structure between 2013 and 2022 concerns the function of "like-minded countries" as a strategic category. In the 2013 NSS, the formulation "countries with which it shares universal values and strategic interests" (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2013) appears mainly as a descriptive label for specific bilateral partners: South Korea, Australia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and India each receive dedicated sections with bilateral commitments. Japan is simply classifying its partners without organising its security posture around them.

In the 2022 NSS, by contrast, the concept of "like-minded countries" emerges as a category that is directly associated with functions previously reserved for the bilateral alliance. Deterrence, for instance, which is framed in 2013 almost exclusively as a property of the Japan-U.S. alliance, as aforementioned, is in 2022 explicitly assigned to Japan acting "together with its ally, the United States, and like-minded countries and others" (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, 2022). The reinforcement of Japan's defence architecture, the transfer of defence equipment and technology, as well as the building of multilayered deterrence networks are all framed through this broader coalition rather than through the bilateral relationship on its own. The Quad partnership, which includes Japan, the United States, Australia, and India, is presented as a parallel mechanism to the alliance for achieving regional

security objectives, with Japan "deepening cooperation with like-minded countries through the Japan-U.S. Alliance as a cornerstone and through efforts such as the Japan-U.S.-Australia-India Quad partnership" (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, 2022). Furthermore, the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific[4] organizes the entire regional security framework of the 2022 NSS around a community of "like-minded states" rather than around a bilateral relationship.

This represents a significant shift in the alter dimension of Japan's role conception: where 2013 used normative concepts to describe Japan's bilateral relationships, 2022 uses them to define a collective security framework within which Japan positions itself. This does not change the status of the United States as Japan's dominant alter, but it does indicate a change in the alter structure, from a mainly bilateral orientation to one in which a multilateral coalition plays an increasingly central role in how Japan defines its functions, its deterrence posture, and its position in the international system.

Despite stability being an intrinsic characteristic of roles, they are nevertheless "sensitive to situational context and time" (Aggestam, 2006, p. 23). A role conflict occurs, for instance, when role conceptions are "incompatible or contradictory to one another" (Aggestam, 2006, p. 22). Collectively, these transformations, whether in Japan's position, its functional commitments, or it`s alter structure, constitute a process that Harnisch et al. (2011, p. 253) would situate between role learning and role transformation. Role learning involves "change of foreign policy goals" while identity remains stable; role transformation involves "change of identity and thus interests". The shifts evidenced in the 2022 NSS exceed role adaptation but fall short of completed role transformation, since Japan's pacifist identity, though contested, has not been reformulated. Foreign policy goals have changed significantly, but the identity that anchors Japan's role conception remains under negotiation rather than reconstituted. This process of role change is driven by a combination of external and internal pressures: altered role expectations from allies and partners, as well as shifting domestic perceptions of Japan's security environment, a combination that makes the process of role change more complex precisely because it generates contradictory pressures that resist resolution (Frank, 2011, p. 132). Japan's self-perception shifts from a state whose security derives from the alliance to one that assumes primary responsibility for its own defence; its functional dimension now includes counterstrike capabilities that were previously excluded; and, finally,

4 This concept was evidently absent from the 2013 NSS, since this document predates the formulation of the FOIP vision, having been first presented by Shinzō Abe at the 6th Tokyo International Conference on African Development in August 2016. This strategy adopts the idea that a "free and open maritime order" is key to realizing peace and prosperity for the international community. This maritime order should be, in Abe's perspective, promoted from the Pacific to the Indian Oceans, encompassing several nations (Yoshimatsu, 2019).

its alter structure expands from a chiefly bilateral framework centred on the United States to one in which a group of "like-minded countries" progressively plays a more important role, redefining the framework within which Japan positions itself and exercises its functions.

The apparent contradictions that run through the 2022 NSS are not incidental inconsistencies but evidence of the role conflict, as previously described. Two main specific tensions illustrate this conflict. First, Japan asserts primary responsibility for its own defence while maintaining dependence on American protection. Here, the ego expectation of autonomy and the alter expectation of alliance loyalty coexist without resolution. Second, while "like-minded countries" emerge in the 2022 NSS as an increasingly central normative category, associated with functions previously reserved for the alliance, the United States remains explicitly "the cornerstone of Japan's national security policy". Japan increasingly invokes a normative coalition to frame its security commitments but continues to depend on the bilateral relationship as the structure through which those commitments are exercised. Third, counterstrike capabilities are introduced within a framework that simultaneously reaffirms an exclusively defensive policy and maintains the identity-based limitation that previously excluded it.

These tensions are evidence not only of the fact that the reconfiguration is incomplete, but also of the reason why it is so. The role conflict that runs through the document is precisely the mechanism that prevents consolidation at either degree of role change. Contradictory expectations arise from various stakeholders: domestic audiences that have historically not been supporters of major reforms in the area of security (O'Shea and Maslow, 2024, p. 656); the United States as the primary ally; regional neighbours concerned about Japanese rearmament (Hughes, 2017, p. 126; Nam, 2017, pp. 412-413); and also the broader international community. These actors, each possessing distinct stakes in the evolution of Japan's military architecture, pull in opposing directions, suspending Japan between role learning and role transformation without allowing for the consolidation of either.

The 2022 role conception represents a partial but significant departure from its 2013 configuration. The "faithful ally" dimension persists but is discursively diminished. The "defender of the faith" and "regional-subsystem collaborator" roles continue but are reoriented around the FOIP vision and a broader coalition of "like-minded countries". Most significantly, the "protectee" dimension is explicitly contested: Japan's assertion that "the primary responsibility for defending Japan lies with itself" is a direct challenge to the assumption that other states bear responsibility for Japan's defence. The extended deterrence dependence, however, persists in the same document, which constitutes a clear piece of evidence of role conflict, since Japan is simultaneously asserting independence from and dependence on the United States within the same strategic document.

This emerging role conception resists clear classification within Holsti's typology. Where Japan's 2013 role conception combined the various aforementioned roles into a coherent and mutually reinforcing system based on the bilateral alliance, the 2022 configuration incorporates elements of the "independent role", in its assertion of primary responsibility for its own defence, and potentially "regional protector", particularly in its expanded security perimeter and concern for Taiwan's stability. However, it does not fully correspond to either, since it neither openly assumes the "independent" characteristic of definition of its "own national interests rather than support others" nor does it pledge to completely undertake the role of "regional protector". The explicit contestation of the "protectee" dimension is perhaps the most consequential shift: by assuming the primary responsibility for its defence, Japan presents a direct challenge to the assumption, central to the 2013 role conception, that another state bears ultimate responsibility for Japan's security. This is, nonetheless, incomplete, since the dependence regarding extended deterrence persists, which is precisely what role conflict would predict. As a whole, this suggests that Japan is becoming a kind of actor that the existing literature has not yet appropriately managed to theorize: a state that wishes to assume a growing strategic autonomy, not as a truly independent actor but as a leading member of a normative coalition, redefining its role within a collective framework rather than outside it.

Conclusion

The comparison between Japan's National Security Strategies of 2013 and 2022 reveals a reconfiguration of Japan's role conception that goes beyond the material transformation that the existing literature has demonstrated. While previous analyses have mostly focused on defence spending, new capabilities, and the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance, this article has argued that what is taking place is a qualitative shift in how Japan conceives of its own position, functions, and reference partners in the international system. Role theory, and specifically the framework developed by Holsti and Harnisch et al., is uniquely positioned to analyse this shift.

In 2013, Japan's role conception formed a coherent and mutually reinforcing configuration: a faithful ally that organized its security around the alliance with the United States, a protectee that depended on American extended nuclear deterrence, a defender of the faith that defined its role in terms of protecting universal values, a regional-subsystem collaborator committed to multilateral frameworks, and also a developer who used development assistance and human security principles as instruments of foreign policy. These roles did not function independently,

however; they were held together by the alliance, which provided the structural condition that made the entire configuration coherent and Japan's pacifist identity sustainable.

By 2022, this configuration had been fundamentally challenged. Japan's assumption of responsibility for its own defence, the introduction of counterstrike capabilities, the shift of responsibility for deterrence from the alliance to Japan itself, and the broadening of the alter structure from a bilateral framework centred on the United States to one in which "like-minded countries" play an increasingly constitutive role: together, these shifts are integral to a process that Harnisch et al. (2011, p. 253) would place between role learning and role transformation, going beyond a simple adaptation of instruments but falling short of completed identity reformulation, since Japan's pacifist identity, though contested, has not been replaced. The emerging role conception incorporates elements of the "independent" role and, potentially, "regional protector", even though it ends up not fully corresponding to either, which may suggest that Japan is becoming a kind of actor that Holsti's typology, developed in 1970, did not anticipate and does not adequately capture.

This reconfiguration is, however, incomplete. The tensions that run through the 2022 NSS, such as the wish for greater autonomy in matters of defence asserted alongside strong dependence on American security, the concept of "like-minded countries" emerging as an increasingly central normative category while the bilateral alliance with the United States remains the framework through which Japan's security commitments are exercised, the introduction of counterstrike capabilities within a structure that simultaneously reaffirms an exclusively defensive policy are evidence of role conflict. Japan is simultaneously managing contradictory expectations from various internal and external audiences. Role theory accounts for this during such a transition, in which there is evidence of reconfiguration, although not yet completely consolidated.

This has direct relevance for the Indo-Pacific security architecture within which Japan is situated. An actor involved in an unresolved role conflict sends contradictory signals to the external environment, creating genuine difficulty in assessing what to expect from Japan for other actors in the region. Once this conflict is fully resolved, whether in the direction of greater strategic autonomy or closer reintegration within the bilateral alliance framework, there will be direct consequences for the credibility of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, for the functioning of the Quad, as well as for Japan's relationships with partners such as South Korea, for whom Japan's militarisation threatens to reopen historical wounds that prevent a closer relationship. These questions exceed the scope of the present investigation but constitute a compelling line of research for future development. The announced revision of Japan's strategic documents by Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, following her party's victory in February 2026 (D'Ambrogio, 2026), may provide further

evidence whether Japan's role conception is consolidating towards either of the paths and thus whether the role conflict identified in this analysis is moving towards resolution or persistence.

This article has demonstrated that the transformation visible in Japan's 2022 NSS cannot be adequately understood through the lens of material capabilities alone, as other theories have put forward as an explanation. Role theory reveals that what is in question is not only what Japan can do but also what Japan conceives itself to be. This reconfiguration, still contested and unresolved, is reshaping the foundations of Japan's interaction with the international system in ways whose full implications remain, at this historical turning point, yet to be determined.

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	99	Outono	Segurança para o Século XXI
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