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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