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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