

Japan's Regional Foreign Policy Since 2012

Strategic Realignment and Expanding Partnerships
in the Indo-Pacific



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Presa Universitară Clujeană

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in the Indo-Pacific**

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Preface

This book began its life as my doctoral thesis at the “International Relations and European Studies” Doctoral School, Faculty of European Studies, Babeş-Bolyai University, under the coordination of Professor Valentin Naumescu. While the current book is not a direct replica of the original thesis, its analytical core remains intact. My goal in this version was to create an accessible story to readers interested in understanding Japan’s foreign policy journey.

My background in Japanese linguistic studies gradually evolved into a wider interest in the country’s role in international politics. The period between 2012 and 2024 has been one of extremely rapid change, not just for Japan but for the entire world. Building on this, I set out to understand the nature of these changes and how Japan managed to balance its own strategies in a complex regional landscape.

The chapters that follow are guided by this objective – to trace Japan’s journey through periods of political stability and instability, cooperation and competition, uncertainty and adaptation. The goal was not to create universal laws, as, in international relations, things are fluid and often unpredictable. Rather, the value I was seeking was an understanding of where Japan has been, and the factors that will shape its future direction.

I am deeply grateful to my family and friends for their support throughout this journey. Their encouragement helped me go through numerous drafts and revisions. I can even say that this book exists thanks to their support.

Cluj-Napoca, Romania

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List of Abbreviations

- ACPHEED** – ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases
- ACSA** – Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement
- ADB** – Asian Development Bank
- ADIZ** – Air Defense Identification Zone
- ADMM-Plus** – ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus
- AEP** – Act East Policy
- AHA Centre** – ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management
- AJCCBC** – ASEAN–Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Centre
- AJCEP** – ASEAN–Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership
- AJMDEC** – ASEAN–Japan Ministerial Dialogue on Environment and Climate Change
- AOIP** – ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific
- APEC** – Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
- ARF** – ASEAN Regional Forum
- ASEAN** – Association of Southeast Asian Nations, comprising Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.
- ASEAN+3** – ASEAN plus China, Japan, and South Korea
- ATLA** – Acquisition, Technology & Logistics Agency
- BMD** – Ballistic Missile Defense
- BRI** – Belt and Road Initiative
- BRICS** – intergovernmental organization comprising, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (as founding members), alongside Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia
- CAF** – China–ASEAN Investment Cooperation Fund
- CCP** – Chinese Communist Party
- CDPJ** – Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan
- CEC** – Cooperative Engagement Capability

- CEPA** – Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement
- CoRE** – Japan–US Competitiveness and Resilience Partnership
- CPTPP** – Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
- CSD** – Collective Self-Defense
- DELSA** – Disaster Emergency Logistics System for ASEAN
- DND** – Philippines Department of National Defense
- DPJ** – Democratic Party of Japan
- EAI** – East Asia Institute
- EAMF** – Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum
- EAS** – East Asia Summit
- ECS** – East China Sea
- EPQI** – Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure
- EU** – The European Union
- EV** – Electric Vehicle
- FDI** – Foreign Direct Investment
- FOIP** – Free and Open Indo-Pacific
- FTA** – Free Trade Agreement
- FY** – Fiscal Year
- G6** – The Group of Six (the name of the group based on its composition in 1975, when Japan joined)
- G7** – The Group of Seven (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, the US)
- G8** – The Group of Eight (G7 plus Russia)
- G20** – The Group of Twenty
- GDP** – Gross Domestic Product
- GHQ** – General Headquarters
- GNP** – Gross National Product
- GSOMIA** – General Security of Military Information Agreement signed between Japan and South Korea
- HA/DR** – Humanitarian Assistance / Disaster Response
- ICBM** – Intercontinental Ballistic Missile
- IDF** – India Development Forum

IISS – The International Institute for Strategic Studies
IPEF – Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity
IRT – International Relations Theory
ISR – Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance
JAIF – Japan–ASEAN Integration Fund
JAROKUS – Japan–South Korea–US trilateral format
JASCA – Japan Association for Smart Cities in ASEAN
JAXA – The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency
JASDF – Japan Air Self-Defense Force
JBIC – Japan Bank for International Cooperation
JCG – Japan Coast Guard
JENESYS – Japan–East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths
JGSDF – Japan Ground Self-Defense Force
JICA – Japan International Cooperation Agency
JIDP – Japan–India Digital Partnership
JIMEX – Japan–India Maritime Exercise
JMSDF – Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force
JNR – Japanese National Railways
JSDF – Japan Self-Defense Forces
JSG-CS – Japan–India Joint Study Group for a Comprehensive Study
JSP – Japan Socialist Party
LDP – Liberal Democratic Party
LEP – Look East Policy
MACM – Maritime and Aerial Communication Mechanism
MAHSR – Mumbai–Ahmedabad High Speed Rail (infrastructure project)
MELCO – Mitsubishi Electric Corporation
METI – Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry
MJC2015 – Mekong–Japan Cooperation
MMEA – Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency
MOD – Japanese Ministry of Defense
MPAC – Master Plan on Connectivity
MRRV – Multi-Role Response Vessel

MSCIP – Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project
NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDPG – National Defense Program Guidelines
NDS – National Defense Strategy
NGOs – Non-Governmental Organizations
NPT – Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
NSC – National Security Council
NSS – National Security Strategy
ODA – Official Development Assistance
OECD – Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSA – Official Security Assistance
PCG – The Philippines Coast Guard
PKF – Peacekeeping Force
PKOs – Peacekeeping Operations
PQI – Partnership for Quality Infrastructure
QI-ESG – Global Facility to Promote Quality Infrastructure Investment for Environmental Preservation and Sustainable Growth
Quad – Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Japan, US, Australia, India)
R&D – Research and Development
RAA – Reciprocal Access Agreement
RCEP – Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
ROK – Republic of Korea
SAR – Search and Rescue
SCAP – Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers
SCS – South China Sea
SDF – Self Defense Forces (shortened version from JSDF)
SDP – Social Democratic Party
SOFA – Status of Forces Agreement
SLOC – Sea-Lanes of Communication
SPACE – Strategic Program for ASEAN Climate and Environment
THAAD – Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (US missile Defense system)
TICAD – Tōkyō International Conference on African Development

TOR – Terms of Reference

TPP – Trans-Pacific Partnership

TSCF – Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework

UGV – Unmanned Ground Vehicle

UK – The United Kingdom

UN – The United Nations

UNICORN – United Combined Radio Antenna

UNSC – The United Nations Security Council

US – The United States of America

VCG – Vietnam Coast Guard

Introduction

Japan's Geopolitical Reality

When we think about Japan, we often imagine *anime*, *manga*, cherry blossoms and a high-tech society. But beyond these cultural symbols, Japan also embodies a nation navigating some of the most complex diplomatic challenges in the Asia-Pacific region. In the last twelve years, Japan's regional foreign policy has undergone significant transformations, shaped both by internal shifts and external pressures.

The period was packed with a variety of diplomatic forces, ranging from an increased security-oriented focus to multilateral cooperation. In the regional environment, Japan has found itself in a complicated dynamic, influenced by China's rapid rise as a global power, North Korea's consistent provocations and shifting US priorities in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, internal leadership changes have also influenced how Japan responds to these challenges.

The book attempts to explore how and why these transformations took place, examining key internal and international factors that have shaped Japan's post-2012 foreign policy evolution and in what ways they redefined its regional leadership.

Within this context, the analysis is guided by Social-Constructivism as a theoretical reference point. The book moves beyond simple timelines and descriptions, examining strategies through the interpretation of policies, discourses and institutional mechanisms within a historical and geopolitical context. In examining the *why* and the *how* behind Japan's evolving security and foreign policy, it traces political leadership styles, domestic and international normative frameworks and wider geopolitical shifts within Japan's policy and strategic evolution.

Based on the hypothesis that Japan's foreign policy has indeed changed in the last twelve years, the general framework for analysis was guided and shaped by three central research questions:

- A. In what ways did Japan's historical legacies, political structures and evolving national identity shape its foreign policy horizon?
- B. How did Japan's foreign policy evolve in the 2012–2024 timeframe in response to both domestic changes and international transformations?

- C. How have these transformations impacted Japan's relationships with five key regional actors, particularly China, South Korea, ASEAN, India and the United States?

What the Literature Says

Naturally, as topics of high interest, the transformations within Japan's foreign and domestic politics have been the subject of extensive scholarly debate. A significant corpus of works has provided detailed accounts of Japan's historical transformations¹. While they focus on historical approaches to Japan's evolving political structures and foreign interactions, the book integrates these historical insights into a broader international relations-centered framework, by examining the impact of domestic changes and historical narratives on Japan's current security and policy discourse.

The shift in Japan's security posture, particularly during the 2010s, has been another major focus of academic research. The literature has provided valuable insights into how Japan's security strategies have evolved under the premiership of Shinzō Abe². Most of these works, however, generally frame these transformations through theories that are grounded in material factors and material analysis, military capabilities and economic power. While these perspectives are crucial for understanding security transformations, they tend to overlook the softer elements of international politics, such as ideas and identity. Plus, security is also treated as a state-centric concept.

The book attempts to bridge these gaps by deconstructing Japan's approach towards regional politics and security, at the intersection of economic, environmental and human-related challenges. Moreover, Japan's security evolution is also deeply influenced by ideational shifts, including changes in political leadership, public perception, policy framing and discourses. This also applies to Japan's pacifism, originally coined to express a rejection of militarism, but one which no longer fits given the context. For example, Abe's policies leveraged a new discursive

¹ See Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; Shinichi Kitaoka, *The Political History of Modern Japan: Foreign Relations and Domestic Politics*, New York: Routledge, 2018.

² For reference, Michael J. Green, *Line of Advantage. Japan's Grand Strategy in the Era of Abe Shinzō*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2022; Kenneth B. Pyle, "Japan's Return to Great Power Politics: Abe's Restoration" in *Asia Policy* vol. 13, no. 2, April 18, 2018.

framework, highlighting defense expansions not as a departure from pacifism, but as a necessary adaptation process. This offers a Socially-Constructed view on security itself, including more debated concepts, such as *economic security*, *human security* and *gray-zone challenges*.

In regard to the case studies, the majority of the literature focused on thematic analyses, that offer specific case-based (e.g., Japan–China relations) or even domain-based (e.g., Japan–India economic relations) evolutions of relations³. Given that most of the works are unidimensional or case-specific, they offer a targeted perspective or single-lens analysis, deep in analytical material but fragmented across domains. The book attempts to offer a wider, granular understanding of security, economic, human and diplomatic transformations experienced by Japan in its relations with the five actors mentioned above. By structuring each case study around key thematic pillars (such as security, economy, diplomacy), the work offers a comprehensive and multimodal perspective on Japan’s evolving regional foreign policy horizon. Multimodality here refers to the integration of distinct but interconnected perspectives, moving beyond a traditional materialist interpretation. In doing so, the integrated approach attempts to bridge gaps in the literature, creating a framework for comparing Japan’s foreign policy across multiple contexts and domains.

Lastly, relevant literature also focused on overarching policy visions, emphasizing key strategic priorities, such as Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), infrastructure cooperation, maritime security, foreign aid and space cooperation⁴. The present research integrates this broader framework with an in-depth specific engagement analysis, that focuses on Japan’s evolving relationships with China, South Korea, ASEAN, India and the US.

What This Book Adds to the Debate

The academic contribution of the book can be divided into three significant elements, which come from its multimodal approach (integrating various narratives

³ For example, Ryosei Kokubun, “From the ‘1972 System’ to ‘Strategic Mutual Benefits’ – Japan’s Foreign Policy toward China” in *Japan and the World, Japan Digital Library*, March 2017; Eun A. Jo, “Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean–Japanese Relations” in *International Organization* 76, no. 4, 2022.

⁴ Mainly the work of Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, *Japan’s Asian Diplomacy. Power Transition, Domestic Politics, and Diffusion of Ideas*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

into a comparative framework): the focus on softer elements of international politics, the comparative case-base pattern and the expansion of the analysis beyond the Abe Era (2012–2020).

It is clear that the return of Shinzō Abe as the prime minister of Japan in 2012 initiated a new foreign policy horizon, marked by a more proactive and strategically coherent approach. But these changes cannot be interpreted in isolation. Hence, the book argues that Japan's regional priorities are shaped by two forces: by Tōkyō's own aspirations for a heightened role in the Indo-Pacific (usually defined as *agency*) and by the changing nature of regional security threats (usually defined as *structure*). The key contribution is its emphasis on how Japan's foreign policy and security horizons are not merely reactive to external pressures, but are actively shaped by a plethora of dynamics, including political stability, leadership shifts and regional motions.

Another distinctive feature of the study is the broader temporal scope, as most analyses extensively focus on Abe's second term (2012–2020). On the domestic front, Abe's re-election contrasted with the period immediately preceding it, by bringing forth stability and continuity, ending a six-year period of frequent leadership changes that had weakened Japan's strategic coherence (2006 and 2012). In his efforts towards reaching this stability, Abe initiated key economic and political changes whose impact also expanded into public perceptions on national security. However, the present research also follows the Suga, Kishida and Ishiba administrations, which have each left their imprint on Japan's Indo-Pacific strategies, especially in the case of engagement nuances. For the first time in the postwar era, Japan moved away from a strictly reactive security role, breaking historical taboos – at least normatively.

At the regional level, the book provides a case-by-case exploration of Japan's bilateral and multilateral engagements, moving beyond broad theoretical or thematic interpretations. Here, The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy acts as a unifying concept throughout the book. Introduced in 2016 under Abe's leadership, the FOIP sought to institutionalize Japan's foreign policy priorities under a coherent umbrella vision. The case-by-case exploration examines the practical implementation of the principles highlighted within FOIP strategy throughout Japan's relations with China, South Korea, ASEAN, India and the US. These case studies are structured around key pillars, which allow for comparative insights into Japan's interactions

with different actors. These transformations also reflect Tōkyō's acknowledgement that its traditional policy tools, such as its Official Development Assistance (ODA) and the extensive economy-driven practices, are no longer sufficient in a dynamic context. The 2012 escalation of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute and China's 2013 declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over parts of the East China Sea showcased the widespread perceptions that Beijing was a strategic competitor to Japan and the liberal order it is embedded into.

The last chapter of the book looks to the future, exploring the 2024 political changes and their significant importance for Japan's regional strategies. In October 2024, Japan entered a phase of political uncertainty. The resignation of Kishida and the election of Shigeru Ishiba's minority government highlight a context shadowed by instability and declining public approval ratings in the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan's (LDP) capacity to govern. Based on Ishiba's own policy nuances, the relative fragmentation of politics and the current geo-political shifts, Japan's future role in the Indo-Pacific balance of power could come under question. Based on these factors, the book argues that this very intersection of domestic political changes and global security realignments will most likely determine Japan's role on the Indo-Pacific stage moving forward.

Defining Research Boundaries

While the book attempts to position itself as a comprehensive analysis, it also presents several challenges, facing three deliberate scope limitations.

First, in terms of temporal limits, the analysis is mainly conducted on post-2012 developments in Japan's regional engagement and domestic normative and policy changes. Even if a historical background is provided for analytical context and the case studies reference developments pre-2012, the bulk of the analysis is conducted on post-2012 changes.

Second, in terms of geographic scope, the book concentrates on Japan's regional focus (in general) and its relations with five actors (in particular). While it is generally considered that these five actors hold central importance for Japan's strategies, other important players (regional and international) are briefly mentioned or generally addressed.

Third, in terms of theoretical perspectives, the theoretical lens used for the analysis is Social-Constructivism. The design of the theoretical part is a comparative

approach between Realism, Liberalism and Social-Constructivism, to, first, create a framework for the development of Social-Constructivism as a significant theory of International Relations and, second, to showcase that, in spite of popular belief, the ideas-oriented approach takes into consideration material concepts, such as *power, interests and security*.

While the analysis incorporates some quantitative data sources, they are used in support of various qualitative arguments (including analyzing the depth of economic engagement between Japan and various actors) and not in quantifying strategic influence. All in all, the goal is interpretation rather than statistical prediction.

Based on the factors mentioned above, the book is not exhaustive in nature. Given the dynamic nature of international relations, Japan's regional foreign and security policies continue to change. For this reason, the findings of policy interpretation and case studies might not be generalizable. However, the goal is not universal applicability, but rather a contextually-grounded analysis of Japan's foreign policy in the post-2012 and pre-2025 regional framework. Hence post-2024 developments may alter the conclusions of the book. At the end of 2024, elections and geopolitical transformations remain ongoing research variables. Although the analysis has extensively explored Japan's FOIP vision, future research could focus on its long-term evolution and effectiveness, especially as regional dynamics change. With growing uncertainty at least during the 2nd Trump Administration (in the 2025–2029 period), it is rather unclear and hard to predict how Japan will manage its alliance with the US. For this reason, future research could assess Japan's alliance balancing strategies, between a more independent approach, or a largely aligned approach. This balancing could prove a problematic topic, especially in cases in which the partners' policy horizons diverge significantly.

Roadmap of the Book

Under the idea that the three research questions act as guiding pillars, they shape the design of the book, which unfolds in three interconnected parts.

Part I sets the historical and theoretical foundations needed for understanding contemporary dynamics. The historical part traces Japan's post-war transformation, focusing on how institutions, political culture and public expectations shaped its foreign policy trajectory during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods. In addition, it also introduces a concise theoretical analysis of International Relations

Theory, providing a targeted comparison of three fundamental theories: Realism, Liberalism and Social-Constructivism.

Part II sets out to understand why 2012 represents a pivotal year for Japan's foreign (and domestic) policy. The strategic shift is analyzed both through domestic leadership changes and through regional transformations that virtually pushed Tōkyō to develop a more structured and proactive foreign policy vision.

Part III makes up the core of the book, which attempts to trace Japan's engagement with five key regional actors. Even though these five case studies are explored through a similar, bilateral format, the analysis extends to encompass multilateral and minilateral formats, virtually highlighting that Japan's role has evolved within the regional dynamics. The final chapter tries to look ahead and assess how various rounds of elections organized in 2024 might alter the region's security architecture.

Methodological Considerations

The study mainly employs a qualitative approach to provide a comprehensive overview of Japan's evolving foreign policy directions. As the name suggests, the focus is on the *quality* of the data analyzed, rather than its *quantity*. While some quantitative indicators are used (such as trade numbers, investment statistics and public opinion surveys), they primarily serve to support existing qualitative arguments, rather than to provide causal connections based on numeric trends.

Given the complexity of the topic, the research integrates primary sources (mainly policy documents, official statements and government white papers) with secondary data sources (including books and academic journals) to offer a nuanced understanding of Tōkyō's strategic trajectory.

For data selection criteria, the sources were selected due to their relevance to Japan's foreign and security policy. As such, a focus on *practicality* guided data collection, to avoid an excessively abstract analysis of the facts, more typical of Social-Constructivism. In terms of primary sources, data varies from government and political documents, including *National Defense Program Guidelines*, *Defense White Papers*, *Diplomatic Bluebooks*, *Summit Statements*, to bilateral and multi-lateral agreements, such as *Security Treaties*, *Strategic Partnership Agreements*, *Trade Agreements* and public opinion surveys, mainly *the Genron Japan–China Opinion Survey* and *Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Survey*. Secondary sources include books, journal articles and policy analyses, which provide interpretation and context of Japan's policies.

Building on these sources, the research is based on three major research strategies. First, the book begins by focusing on Japan's historical evolution, seeking to understand how various post-World War II milestones (both in terms of domestic and international politics) shaped Japan's foreign policy horizon.

Accompanying historic contextualization, the book widely applies content analysis to primary and secondary sources to identify and trace shifts in Japan's security discourse, policy narratives and strategic goals. In this sense, key thematic approaches include Japan's post-2012 expanding role in Asia, the extensive

institutionalization of its economic, diplomatic and security initiatives and its role in Great Power politics.

Lastly, through a comparative case study method, the book traces Japan's relations with five partners around various analytical pillars. These case studies are selected based on Japan's key strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific, focusing both on geopolitical proximity and diversity in regional relations. In line with the Social-Constructivist approach, the qualitative approach of analyzing norms, historical memory and overall political evolutions proves appropriate for the complex topic at hand. Moreover, the comparative case studies approach offers a structured but diverse understanding of Japan's regional engagements. Finally, content analysis of primary sources ensures a policy-centered approach, preventing over-reliance on secondary interpretation.

1.

Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy: Japan's Path from 1945 to 2024

As perspectives and expectations of foreign policies are fundamentally linked to domestic politics, it is important to understand shifts and dynamics in Japanese internal politics beginning with the end of the Second World War. Naturally, such a long period of time witnessed significant changes throughout actors and factors. Specifically, large-scale structural dynamics (i.e., the *macro* level), such as the alignments generated by the start of the Cold War with its numerous connotations and outcomes and the recent and gradual degradation of fragile security guarantees in the Indo-Pacific were accompanied by internal shifts in ideology, mentalities and political culture (i.e., the *micro* level). However, these two co-constitutive elements are not to be perceived as isolated pieces, but rather as deeply intertwined.

Ultimately, Japan has been constantly affected by the global and regional dynamics, while domestic directions, tensions and fractures, whether ideological, social or political, have had a significant impact on the articulation of its foreign policy strategies. Therefore, analyzing the transformations of the Japanese political stage (and system) is essential in order to fully understand and interpret its external policy orientations.

The American Occupation: 1945–1952

The Occupation Agenda and Early Policies

In the aftermath of World War II, Japan was placed under the American Occupation (1945–1952), led by General Douglas MacArthur as the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), also known in Japan as the General Headquarters (GHQ). Institutions like the Allied Council for Japan and the Far Eastern Commission provided support and consultation for the SCAP's reconstruction efforts. These collective efforts actually revolved around the SCAP and, implicitly,

General MacArthur, acknowledged, through his charismatic nature, as the mastermind of the Occupation. The initial purpose of the SCAP was to dismantle Japan's wartime nationalism. Accordingly, it focused on the "removal and exclusion of undesirable personnel from public office"⁵. Democratization and state-building became the SCAP's top priority, as it used liberal rhetoric to disarm and demilitarize Japan. These strategies changed with the start of the Cold War, as the priority became building up Japan as a liberal pillar in East Asia to counter the communist wave in the region. The Occupation witnessed major transformations of the Japanese political system itself, with measures ranging from educational, legal, economic and social reforms to constitutional revision. In this sense, "Japan's internal governance during this period was essentially diplomacy: diplomacy undertaken with the United States"⁶, as interactions with other states remained extremely limited. Thus, during the Occupation, the "SCAP ruled indirectly, implementing changes through the existing Japanese bureaucracy"⁷.

Timeframe	Prime Minister	Party
●1945 	Higashikuni	Independent
●1945–46 	Shidehara	Progressive Party
●1946–47 	Yoshida	Liberal Party
●1947–48 	Katayama	Socialist Party
●1948 	Ashida	Democratic Party
●1948–54	Yoshida II–IV	Democratic Liberal Party

Figure 1: Japanese Prime Ministers during the Occupation Period

Note: Roman numerals indicate cabinet numbers

⁵ *General Headquarters – Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers. APO 500 – 4 January 1946*, The National Diet Library, p. 1, <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/pid/9885619/1/1>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶ Shinichi Kitaoka, *The Political History of Modern Japan: Foreign Relations and Domestic Politics*, New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 145.

⁷ Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 234.

The Path Towards the Peace Constitution: 1945–1947

The Higashikuni (August 17th, 1945 – October 9th, 1945) and Shidehara (October 9th, 1945 – May 22nd, 1946) cabinets marked the initial post-surrender governance. During Shidehara's tenure, major disarmament and demilitarization efforts were undertaken, including political purges. The SCAP directly disbanded the military forces and focused on repatriating overseas personnel and civilians (which consisted of almost 10% of Japan's population at that time, namely approximately 6.5 million⁸). Additionally, the major reforms spearheaded by the SCAP had been started during the Shidehara cabinet. Notable was the Humanity Declaration issued by Emperor Hirohito in 1946, which humanized the Emperor and facilitated subsequent constitutional reforms⁹.

The most influential element envisioned during the Shidehara Government is represented by an aspect directly related to Kijūrō Shidehara himself. Shidehara served two terms as Foreign Minister (1924–1927 and 1929–1931) in a tumultuous period of foreign policy. Ultimately, he was considered a remarkable politician for his doctrine, that was a liberal, non-interventionist approach, especially towards China. Accordingly, he “followed a policy of international co-operation and conciliation (*kyōchō gaikō*)”¹⁰. Therefore, Shidehara's pacifism hangs at the border between idealism and pragmatism, aspects that played a fundamental role for the drafting of the new constitution. As a pro-West and, implicitly, pro-US foreign minister elite, Shidehara “is considered to be the spiritual father of article 9 of the after war constitution of Japan”¹¹. The ‘no-war’ Article 9, paired with the shifts in the symbolic meanings of the Emperor represents fundamental achievements of the Shidehara Government. However, Shidehara did not see these changes to fruition, as the Progressive Party (*Nihon Shinpotō*) was unsuccessful in forming a majority after the 1946 April elections. The following Yoshida Government (1st Yoshida Government, May 22nd, 1946 – May 24th, 1947) was instrumental in

⁸ Kenneth G. Henshall, *O Istorie a Japoniei: De La Epoca De Piatra La Superputere*, București: Artemis, 1999, p. 177.

⁹ *Ningen Sengen*, it was the imperial rescript issued by Emperor Hirohito at the request of the SCAP.

¹⁰ Klaus Schlichtmann, “The Ethics of Peace: Shidehara Kijūrō and Article 9 of the Constitution” in *Japan Forum* 7, no. 1, 1995, p. 45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09555809508721527>.

¹¹ Patrick Hein, “Realpolitik versus Principled Politics: Nitobe, Shidehara, Shirasu and the Hollowing out of the Japanese Peace Constitution” in *East Asia* 26, no. 4, 2009, p. 287, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-009-9093-0>.

adopting the Post-War constitution, promulgated in November 1946 and taking full effect in May 1947. The Constitution, which remains in effect today, was fundamentally designed by a committee within the SCAP, representing the pinnacle of the process of democratization. It redefined the Emperor's role, enshrined human rights and liberties and introduced the renunciation of war in Article 9, shaping Japan's domestic and foreign policy landscapes up to the present day.

In Transition – Shifting Political and Global Dynamics: 1947–1952

George F. Kennan published his article, *The Source of Soviet Conduct* in the July 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs* magazine, under the pseudonym 'X', highlighting the intensification of ideological and political competition within the international system. It called for a "policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counter-force at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world"¹². This ideological shift started to influence American strategies in Japan.

Internally, following increased labor and social chaos, the Yoshida I Government faced declining popularity. In May 1947, the Socialist Party (*Shakaitō*), led by Tetsu Katayama, formed a coalition government alongside the Democratic Party (*Minshutō*) and the National Cooperative Party (*Kokumin Kyōdōtō*). However, factional strife and economic difficulties led to the collapse of the Katayama government (May 24th, 1947 – March 10th, 1948). Ashida Hitoshi, the head of the Democratic Party, replaced Katayama as the leader of the coalition. The new Ashida Cabinet (March 10th, 1948 – October 15th, 1948) was backed by the same triple coalition, however it lasted only 8 months due to the outburst of the *Showa Denkō* (Showa Electricity) corruption scandal.

The shifts in the dynamics of the international system also meant fundamental changes within occupation strategies. In this sense, the new policy directions are commonly known as the *Reverse Course*¹³. This reorientation focused on two primary dimensions: economic stabilization (postwar economic recovery became primordial) and political alignment (amidst the global expansion of communism). In this sense, "America's policies toward Japan made a clear shift toward fostering

¹² George F Kennan (X), "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" in *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 4, July 1947, p. 581, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20030065>.

¹³ See also, Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 154 and Frank Gibney, *The Pacific Century: America and Asia in a Changing World*, New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1992, p. 198.

Japan as a partner”¹⁴. The American objective in Japan transformed, as it was trying “to keep Japan and its great industrial potential out of the hands of the Soviets and the Chinese Communists and [...] to utilize Japan ultimately as the anchor of an island chain of U.S. allies off the Asian mainland”¹⁵. Accordingly, in order to stabilize Japan, the American policymakers had to make it economically self-sufficient. As a consequence, economic recovery became a primordial requirement, setting the standard for other regional actors. The Yoshida II cabinet (October 15th, 1948 – February 16th, 1949) oversaw these strategic changes. In 1949, the government started implementing various policies to stimulate economic growth, such as the Dodge line, named after the American banker Joseph Dodge. Its main goal was addressing inflation and stabilizing the Yen. As a consequence, this economic policy generated serious short-term hardships, such as economic slowdown, increased unemployment and limited investment. These economic hardships would actually prompt significant social unrest, especially throughout the Japanese Communist Party (*Nihon Kyōsantō*). This led to a second major problematic aspect present during the Reverse Course, namely the expansion of communism in the regional context. The increased public support and the results of the 1949 elections raised concerns within the government and the Occupation authorities. In light of the Communist Party's violent acts, the government, backed by the SCAP, took measures to suppress communist activities. Consequently, this period marked a significant juncture in Japanese politics, with the government's response reflecting the broader context and the interplay between domestic dynamics and geopolitics.

The Dodge line set the stage for another event that would play a much more significant role in Tōkyō's spectacular economic recovery: the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Most importantly, the event triggered transformations in the Japanese economy and in its relationship with the US. Fundamentally, the war enhanced Tōkyō's strategic importance for American interests. Given the precarious economic conditions prior to the Korean War, Yoshida allegedly described the conflict as “a gift of the gods”¹⁶. In order to establish a reliable supply hub close

¹⁴ Kitaoka, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

¹⁵ Gibney, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

¹⁶ Maeda Riichi, “Yoshida-san to Kankoku” in *KK 295:16*, September 1970, Shinobu, IV, 1151, quoted in John W. Dower, *Empire and Aftermath: Yoshida Shigeru and the Japanese Experience, 1878–1954*, Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1979, p. 316.

to the conflict, the American authorities employed special procurement (*tokujū*) orders for Japanese companies, “consisting primarily of motor vehicles, textiles and communications equipment”¹⁷. Subsequently, this period marked the emergence of the post-war export-oriented economy, the industrial modernization and the technological developments that would lay the foundation of Japan's economic miracle. The Korean War also redirected material resources and strategic considerations from Japan towards the war effort. The transformations that manifested during the Reverse Course had brought forth the need to reevaluate the domestic state of affairs, namely the Occupation. The signing of the Treaty of San Francisco in September 1951, effective April 1952, formally marked the end of the American Occupation. The Treaty of San Francisco, alongside the Japan–US Mutual Security Treaty, positioned Japan as a strategic Cold War player under the US' nuclear umbrella¹⁸. Naturally, the Treaty attracted criticism, being deemed a “betrayal of [...] sovereignty”¹⁹. In addition, it also led to other uncomfortable debates around Japanese rearmament. However, “Yoshida's path of prioritizing the economy and adopting only minimal rearmament would serve as the basis for Japan's postwar development”²⁰. With this newfound stability and the protective umbrella of the US, Japan embarked on an era of remarkable economic growth.

The High Growth Era – Japan's Economic Miracle: 1952–1980

The Yoshida doctrine, emphasizing economic liberalization, security dependence on the US and a low-profile foreign policy, proved to be the cornerstone for Japan's post-war recovery.

From 1952 to 1980, Japan experienced a series of transformative events that (re)shaped its social, political and economic landscapes. During this period, ten prime ministers headed the country, each leaving a more or less significant mark on Japan's evolution.

¹⁷ Curtis Andressen, *A Short History of Japan: From Samurai to Sony*, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2002., p. 125.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 125.

¹⁹ Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

²⁰ Kitaoka, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

Timeframe	Prime Minister	Party
●1948–54 	Yoshida II–IV	Democratic Liberal Party
●1954–56 	Hatoyama	Japan Democratic Party; later, Liberal Democratic Party
●1956–57 	Ishibashi	Liberal Democratic Party
●1957–60 	Kishi	Liberal Democratic Party
●1960–64 	Ikeda	Liberal Democratic Party
●1964–72 	Satō	Liberal Democratic Party
●1972–74 	Tanaka	Liberal Democratic Party
●1974–76 	Miki	Liberal Democratic Party
●1976–78 	Fukuda	Liberal Democratic Party
●1978–80	Ōhira	Liberal Democratic Party

Figure 2: Japanese Prime Ministers during the High Growth Era

The 1950s (1952–1960) were characterized by the consolidation of the economy and of the political establishment. Specifically, it witnessed the dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party (*Jiyūminshutō*) LDP as a unifying force of various conservative factions. The 1960s (1960–1972) brought significant economic development, albeit marred by social turmoil, especially following the 1960 revision of the Japan–US Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. Throughout the decade, Japanese politics were impacted by the Vietnam War (in terms of regional dynamics) and high political fragmentation. Lastly, the 1970s (1972–1980) saw a period of remarkable urbanization and economic growth. During this period, Tōkyō's economy emerged as the second largest. However, such an intensity of development also brought up environmental problems and widespread socio-economic disparities among the population.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Revised Security Treaty: 1952–1960

Aside from his defining doctrine and stance on rearmament, “Yoshida’s other major political achievement was to solidify conservative control of the government”²¹. Adding to the political turbulence, “the return of prewar politicians who had been purged during the Occupation”²² precipitated fears of authoritarianism within public opinion. Hatoyama Ichirō, Ishibashi Tanzan and Kishi Nobusuke had all of them been purged from political life by the SCAP. Incidentally, they opposed numerous of Yoshida’s reforms and political ideas, including the passive stance on rearmament and Japan’s relationship with (or dependence on) the US. In 1954, Hatoyama became prime minister as the head of the Democratic Party (*Nihon Minshutō*), initiating a distinct trajectory in Japan’s political and international evolution. Hatoyama pursued a more assertive and intense foreign policy, emphasizing Tōkyō’s sovereignty. Amidst fears of the potential undoing of the progress of postwar reforms under the political leadership of the Democratic Party, there was a significant increase in public support for Japan’s Socialist Party (*Nihon Shakaitō*). Notably, the substantial support received from the people enabled the Socialist Party to effectively block any attempts of constitutional revision in the Diet²³. In this dynamic context of 1955, the conservative Liberal Party (*Jiyūtō*) and the Democratic Party (*Nihon Minshutō*) merged and formed the Liberal Democratic Party – LDP (*Jiyūminshutō*). The unification was meant to create a stable political force and it succeeded in establishing a long and rather uninterrupted rule in Japanese politics. Moreover, it emphasized “the public’s desire for stability and continuity”²⁴ in the aftermath of divisive early postwar politics.

Hatoyama’s tenure also laid the groundwork for the LDP’s enduring dominance in domestic politics, showcasing *factionalism* as a trait of the political system. In this sense, “[t]he primary opposition to the government is found within the LDP itself”²⁵, and so, this phenomenon displays the interplay of various political factions, each with its specific set of priorities. Hatoyama opposed Yoshida’s foreign policy

²¹ James L. Huffman, *Japan in World History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 114.

²² Kitaoka, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 158.

²⁴ Andressen, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 130.

directions, advocating for a more independent and action-inclined strategy. This was in part a reaction to the loss of sovereignty during the Occupation, as Japan was fundamentally dependent on the US. Subsequently, Hatoyama was a proponent of rearmament “for the defense of Japan as well as the maintenance of international peace and security as a member of the international community”²⁶. Throughout this effort as a revisionist, Hatoyama ultimately attempted to revise the constitution, however his efforts remained futile. Internationally, this period brought into light Japan's increasing involvement in international organizations, as the prime minister “and his allies wanted to chart an independent course from the Americans”²⁷. This more balanced foreign policy posture endorsed by the government also meant improving relations with the Soviet Union. These efforts materialized in the 1956 ‘Joint Declaration by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Japan’ through which it was agreed that “the restoration of diplomatic relations between them would contribute to the development of mutual understanding and co-operation between the two States in the interests of peace and security in the Far East”²⁸. In December 1956, Japan also succeeded in joining the UN. These foreign policy decisions exemplify Tōkyō's means of pursuing a more autonomous foreign policy.

Following Hatoyama's departure from office and the Ishibashi Cabinet's short-term, Nobusuke Kishi became prime minister on the February 25th, 1957. With Kishi's declaration of a “‘New Era in Japan–U.S. Relations’”²⁹, this period signaled a turning point in US–Japan relations. As Japan pursued a security treaty reform, focusing on a more equitable partnership with its ally, internal opposition to the treaty significantly increased, being catalyzed by these reform efforts. Additionally, this period was defined by Kishi's Diplomacy of Reconciliation³⁰. During his visits to 14 countries in the Asia-Pacific, Kishi “apologized for Japan's wartime deeds and invited Asian leaders to join hands and set forth on a peaceful

²⁶ Daisuke Akimoto, *Japanese Prime Ministers and Their Peace Philosophy: 1945 to the Present*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, p. 85.

²⁷ Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

²⁸ *Joint Declaration by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Japan*, The World and Japan Database – Database of Japanese Politics and International Relations, October 19, 1956, <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/docs/19561019.D1E.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

²⁹ Kitaoka, *op. cit.*, p.159.

³⁰ Fujita Yukihiisa, “Prime Minister Kishi's Diplomacy of Reconciliation” in *Japan Echo*, 2006, <https://y-fujita.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/20060728.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

road to prosperity”³¹. This commitment to reconciliation was also visible with the signing of the Japan–Australia Commerce Agreement in July 1957, considered “a foundation for the development of the postwar Japan–Australia relationship in the Cold War era”³². On the regional stage, the Kishi cabinets not only focused on mending strained relations, but it also set the stage for a new era of cooperation. Nonetheless, a setback occurred in 1958 when China dropped its relations with Japan. China viewed Kishi’s conciliatory policy, the visit to Taiwan, and the resettling of relations with the US as intrusive actions.

Internally, Kishi’s focus on economic consolidation was evident with the 1957 New Long-Range Economic Plan, which outlined an ambitious goal of achieving a GDP annual growth rate of 6.5%, expectations that were surpassed with an impressive 9.9% growth³³. Lastly, one of the most controversial moves of the Kishi cabinets was the revision of the Japan–US Security Treaty. The 1951 Treaty allowed the US to keep military facilities within Japan, but not clearly mentioning any obligations on the American side to defend the country or consult with Japanese authorities in the event of a military threat. This 1960 revision was a catalyst for the protests which painted the 1950s and early 1960s, expressed in the symbolic name of the protests: The Anpo Protests³⁴, which grew to become the largest protests in Japan’s modern history. The main aspects which fueled the process were the lack of democratic debate with treaty’s adoption and concerns about potential security-related implications. What is clear, however, is that these “nation-wide anti-treaty protests toppled the government, even though the new treaty made the relationship more nearly equal”³⁵. Given the shifts in the political landscape of 1960, the resignation of prime minister Kishi opened the door for a new era under the leadership of Hayato Ikeda. The Ikeda I cabinet formed on the 19th July 1960 inherited both the economic momentum set in motion by the New Long-Range Economic Plan and also the lingering social repercussions of the Anpo Protests.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

³² Akimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

³³ Shinji Yoshioka and Hirofumi Kawasaki, “Japan’s High-Growth Postwar Period: The Role of Economic Plans,” *Economic and Social Research Institute – ESRI Research Note No.27*, August 2016, p. 11.

³⁴ The name *Anpo* is a shortened version of the term “security treaty” – *Anzenhoshōjōyaku* (安全保障条約) – *Anpo* (安保).

³⁵ Huffman, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

Economic Consolidation and Geopolitical Shifts: 1960–1972

The more assertive approaches adopted throughout the Hatoyama and Kishi administrations, particularly their pursuit of constitutional revision, had lasting impacts on domestic politics. Given that “the Kishi cabinet was viewed as too pushy, [...] leaders of the LDP afterward tended to avoid addressing constitutional revision or security matters”³⁶. This shift actually indicated an extensive focus on more pragmatic and economically-oriented political agendas, as the stage recalibrated towards economic consolidation and social stability.

The 1960s are usually perceived as the Golden Years of Japan's modern history, marked by a close collaboration between bureaucracy and the business environment³⁷, crucial to Japan's rapid economic growth. Ikeda introduced the renowned ‘income doubling plan’, a commitment to economic prosperity for the general public. This plan also included “a comprehensive strategy for modernizing Japanese agriculture and industry”³⁸. All in all, the main focus was on consolidating industrial infrastructure to promote social wellbeing. Through such an approach, Ikeda skillfully avoided a political crisis, fueled by the Anpo Protests. This focus towards the public wellbeing came as an outcome of “confrontational fatigue”³⁹, a weariness developed from persistent ideological fights on the political stage. Consequently, Ikeda's focus was on addressing rifts in the public perception and so the government adopted low-posture politics, as it “intended to restore confidence in the Diet, avoiding issues upon which there was no possibility of party consensus”⁴⁰.

Internationally, Japan also adopted a modest position, focusing instead on economic development. A tangible reflection of this was the establishment of the 1961 Japan–US Joint Committee on Trade and Economic Affairs, with nine meetings held between 1961 and 1973. This platform was instrumental in Japan's admission to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in April 1964. The 1960s also saw a reset of economic relations between Japan and China, while security matters remained rather sensible. This period

³⁶ Kitaoka, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

³⁷ Andressen, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

³⁸ Yoshioka and Kawasaki, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

³⁹ Masahide Shibusawa, *Japan and the Asian Pacific Region: Profile of Change*, New York: Routledge, 1984, p. 23.

⁴⁰ Chalmers A. Johnson, “‘Low Posture’ Politics in Japan” in *Asian Survey* 3, no. 1, 1963: p. 17, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3024647>.

also witnessed China's heightened focus on military consolidation⁴¹, culminating in 1964 with its first successful test of a nuclear bomb.

Following Ikeda's stepdown, Eisaku Satō assumed the position of prime minister on November 9th, 1964. Satō continued the focus on economic prosperity. The administration faced emerging geopolitical challenges, including the escalation of the conflict in Vietnam, the changing dynamics within Asia and the shifts in US policy. Internally, the new cabinet continued to focus on economic growth, especially driven by industries such as automobiles and electronics. The economic policies of the late 1960s encouraged exports and industrialization which, paired with hyper-urbanization, would generate severe environmental and social hardships. In this sense, the Satō cabinet issued a series of anti-pollution measures, aimed at addressing the challenges that accompanied Japan's rapid growth. However, the measures proved limited and inefficient, as they barely addressed the effects of unsustainable economic practices, rather than their causes⁴². Additionally, the 1960s witnessed a heightened period of activism, manifesting multiple dimensions. The Anpo Protests, triggered by the new Japan-US Security Treaty of 1960 represented a first episode of public dissatisfaction. The dissent reverberated through subsequent years, having been catalyzed around the Citizen's League for Peace in Vietnam in 1965 (the *Beheiren* movement⁴³). They advocated for peace, calling for direct actions by citizens. Also, the *Beheiren* gained attention for secretly helping American soldiers who deserted while stationed in Japan⁴⁴. As the political landscape changed, environmental movements gained momentum as people's concerns about the ecological effects of Japan's rapid extension grew. However, the effects of pollution-generated diseases were evident since the 1950s⁴⁵, but these issues garnered significant attention in subsequent years, after several waves of protests

⁴¹ Akira Iriye, "Chinese-Japanese Relations, 1945–90" in *The China Quarterly* 124, 1990: p. 627, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0305741000031428>.

⁴² Ichiro Sumikura, "A Brief History of Japanese Environmental Administration: A Qualified Success Story?" in *Journal of Environmental Law* 10, no. 2 (1998): p. 241.

⁴³ The term *Beheiren* (ベ平連) is a shortened version of the phrase *Betonamu ni Heiwa wo! Shimin Rengo* (ベトナムに平和を！市民連合) – literally translated as 'Peace to Vietnam! Citizen Union'.

⁴⁴ Chushichi Tsuzuki, *The Pursuit of Power in Modern Japan: 1825–1995*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 409.

⁴⁵ For example, the Minamata Disease whose symptoms have been identified since 1956. The Minamata Disease is a neurological disease, caused by high doses of mercury released through factories' wastewater in the Minamata Bay.

and famous lawsuits. Adding to this social turmoil, the university protests of 1968–1969 also contributed to the broader atmosphere of activism and demand of societal change. *Zengakuren* (the All-Japan Federation of Students' Self-Governing Associations) as a student organization established in 1948 became a recurrent driving force of these movements.

As mentioned earlier, despite Japan's focus on economic prosperity, Satō's leadership saw Japan navigating complex geopolitical landscapes. Satō's administration formally normalized relations with South Korea, through the signing of the Treaty on Basic Relations in 1965⁴⁶. The normalization also showcased a significant step in Japan's efforts to reconcile with its neighbors, but it came under severe criticism, especially from the domestic audience in South Korea. Moving forward, 1965 also saw the escalation of the Vietnam War, and Japan found itself in quite a delicate position, given its alliance with the US. Japan benefited economically from the war, even though it was not directly involved. Nonetheless, there was significant opposition for the war among the Japanese public, despite the government's official support for the US. Accordingly, the war "posed a danger of potentially fierce domestic polarization"⁴⁷ and, thus, sparked widespread anti-war sentiments that reverberated across various segments of the Japanese society. Commencing in 1970, the negotiations for the reversion of sovereignty in Okinawa began. These efforts culminated in the agreement for the reversion of Okinawa⁴⁸, issued in June 1971. Despite the ongoing maintenance of US military bases, the return of Okinawa symbolized a move towards increased Japanese sovereignty, officially ending the US occupation of the island. However, this period witnessed the so-called "Nixon Shocks", a series of economic and strategic measures announced by US President Nixon in 1971. Foremost, strategically, he announced that the US and China "were seeking rapprochement and that he would be visiting Beijing the following year"⁴⁹. Such a decision introduced a new player in the region, altering the strategic

⁴⁶ *Japan and Republic of Korea. Treaty on Basic Relations*, United Nations Treaty Collection, 1965, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20583/volume-583-I-8471-English.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴⁷ Shibusawa, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁴⁸ *Agreement Between the United States of America and Japan Concerning the Ryukyu Islands and the Daito Islands*, The World and Japan Database – Database of Japanese Politics and International Relations, 1971, <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/docs/19710617.T1E.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴⁹ Kitaoka, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

balance. This meant that Japan had to carefully manage its relations with both the US and China. Moreover, as this decision was unilateral and without prior consultation, it meant that the US did not consider Japan an equal partner⁵⁰. Secondly, economically, Nixon put an end to a fixed yen-to-dollar exchange rate of 360 to 1. Moreover, paired with a 10% import surcharge announced by Nixon, the value of the yen became subject to market forces, making Japanese exports more expensive and harder to sell for US consumers.

Lastly, a distinguishing characteristic of the period was Satō's Three Non-Nuclear Principles, announced in 1967, which prohibit the production, possession and introduction of nuclear weapons in Japan. This standpoint was further strengthened with the signing of Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1970⁵¹. Consequently, this stance on nuclear policy reiterated Tōkyō's adherence to the Yoshida Doctrine – relying on the US for security under Washington's nuclear umbrella. In 1970, the Japan–US Security Treaty had been automatically extended, without any social upheaval. Subsequently, after approximately eight years and three cabinets, Satō resigned, and Kakuei Tanaka assumed the position of prime minister on July 7th, 1972.

Factionalized Cabinets and Economic Slowdown: 1972–1980

The election of Kakuei Tanaka as the head of the LDP represented a more dynamic electoral process through his rivalry with Takeo Fukuda (who would become prime minister in 1976), in what is known as the 'Kaku-Fuku War'. His ambitious 'Archipelago Rebuilding Plan'⁵² sought to address Japan's rapid economic growth challenges, including urban-rural disparities and environmental issues. His administration sought to balance Japan's rapid industrial growth with social considerations. While Tanaka initially enjoyed widespread popularity, his "domestically focused policy based on the assumption of high growth was unsustainable as the international environment changed suddenly and drastically, eventually becoming his downfall"⁵³. In this sense, his tenure was fundamentally defined by the challenges of the early 1970s. A persistent issue throughout his

⁵⁰ Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

⁵¹ Akimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

⁵² See also, Kakuei Tanaka, *Building a New Japan: A Plan for Remodeling the Japanese Archipelago*, Tōkyō: Simul Press Inc., 1973.

⁵³ Kitaoka, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

mandate was the linger of political corruption. Moreover, Tanaka was characterized as practicing “money politics”⁵⁴, securing the influence of his LDP faction and consolidating his position. On a contrary trend to the previous period, economic slowdown characterized Tanaka’s premiership. Partly a natural consequence of Japan’s catching up with the West, the slowdown was exacerbated by the 1973 Oil Shocks resulting from the Yom Kippur War. In addition, Tanaka’s ‘Archipelago Rebuilding Plan’, which emphasized public investment, contributed to increased expenditure. Consequently, Japan witnessed negative growth and high inflation rates for the first time in decades. Internationally, the major achievement of the Tanaka cabinet was the normalization of relations with China in 1972⁵⁵. The People's Republic of China (PRC) was recognized as the sole government of China, Japan “severing diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan”⁵⁶. This move encouraged the development of economic relations in the 1970s, with China becoming one of Japan’s most important trade partners. Japan was virtually treading on the track set-up by the US, but this did not completely eliminate occasional strains in Tōkyō-Washington relations. For resource security⁵⁷, Japan adopted a more practical approach to its foreign policy in reaction to the Yom Kippur War (favoring Arab nations over Israel). This was also complemented by increased trade tensions with the US, stemming from perceived disparities in trade and economic practices. Nonetheless, the US remained the cornerstone of Japan’s foreign policy, being in line with the Yoshida Doctrine⁵⁸.

Although this period was marked by significant diplomatic and social achievements, it was also characterized by severe political challenges. Most importantly, the LDP faced consistent criticism (both internally and externally), reflecting a growing discontent within society. This political unrest culminated with the infamous Lockheed corruption scandal⁵⁹, leading to the resignation of prime minister Tanaka in December 1974. In the wake of this scandal, the LDP

⁵⁴ Tsuzuki, *op. cit.*, p. 425.

⁵⁵ Through the signing of the ‘Joint Communiqué of the Government of Japan and the Government of the People's Republic of China’ on September 29, 1972.

⁵⁶ J. A. A. Stockwin, *Governing Japan: Divided Politics in a Resurgent Economy*, 4th ed., Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008, p. 68.

⁵⁷ Tsuzuki, *op. cit.*, p. 425.

⁵⁸ Akimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁵⁹ For an analysis of structural corruption during the Tanaka cabinet, see also Chalmers A. Johnson, “Tanaka Kakuei, Structural Corruption, and the Advent of Machine Politics in Japan,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 12, no. 1 (1986).

found itself deeply caught in factional conflicts. The post-Tanaka era, marked by the administrations of Takeo Miki (December 9th, 1974 – December 24th, 1976), Takeo Fukuda (December 24th, 1976 – December 7th, 1978) and Masayoshi Ōhira (December 7th, 1978– July 17th, 1980), was emblematic of these internal struggles highlighting the height of factionalized cabinets. As cabinets dominated by factions, they mainly ‘fought’ “to criticize one another’s administrations as the cabinets weakened amid the worsening international situation”⁶⁰. Notably, prime minister Takeo Miki, referred to as “clean Miki”⁶¹, sought to reform the reputation of the LDP, aiming to purify the political landscape. However, his efforts to cleanse the party were constrained by several factors, including economic hardships (soaring inflation, economic slowdown) and internal challenges within the party. Despite its short timeframe, Miki’s tenure was marked by two notable normative policy achievements. First of all, the administration successfully ratified the NPT treaty in 1976 (signed under prime minister Eisaku Satō). Second of all, through a series of defense ministers’ meetings, the Miki cabinet effectively limited defense spending to 1% of the Gross National Product (GNP). This was one of Japan’s self-binding measures of hard power, having a substantial and long-lasting influence⁶². A significant event that occurred under Miki was Japan’s admission to the Group of Six (G6) in 1975, which signaled the nation’s emergence as a major economic force.

Following the 1976 elections, Miki resigned, assuming responsibility for the loss in support. Accordingly, he was replaced by Tanaka’s rival, Takeo Fukuda. Fukuda’s administration prioritized economic stabilization, a general trend visible throughout Masayoshi Ōhira’s tenure as well. The GNP growth rate improved, rising from -0.2% in 1974 to 5.2% in 1979⁶³. In addition, the Fukuda Doctrine marked a significant shift in Japan’s regional and international priorities. Formulated in 1977 during his visit in Manila, the Fukuda Doctrine is developed around three tenets: a commitment to peace, mutual understanding and constructive cooperation with Southeast Asian nations. By shifting away from a strictly economic strategy, it played a key role in bolstering Japan’s diplomatic connections throughout

⁶⁰ Kitaoka, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

⁶¹ Tsuzuki, *op. cit.*, p. 426.

⁶² Kenneth B. Pyle, “Japan’s Return to Great Power Politics: Abe’s Restoration” in *Asia Policy* vol. 13, no. 2, April 18, 2018, p. 75.

⁶³ Tsuzuki, *op. cit.*, p. 430.

Asia⁶⁴. Expanding on the normalization of relations during the Tanaka era, the signing of 'The Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and the People's Republic of China' in 1978 reinforced this position.

However, during the internal LDP presidential elections of 1978, Fukuda was defeated by Masayoshi Ōhira. Ōhira's administration brought forth a significant diplomatic vision, centered around the "'pacific basin cooperation concept' [...]" with a focus on the significance of Asia Pacific region in the future"⁶⁵. The geopolitical turmoil of the Cold War provided Japan with an opportunity to more clearly defines its identity as a member of the West, as "Ōhira chose cooperation with the United States as the paramount objective"⁶⁶. Domestically, however, the administration faced substantial internal struggles. Factionalism persisted throughout the LDP, impeding coherent policy-making and creating political instability. Ōhira's tenure came to an abrupt end in 1980 with his unexpected death. In a more symbolic way, this event seemed to unify the party, as the LDP "secured its safest majority since 1969"⁶⁷ in the lower house. The conclusion of this period set the stage for the beginning of Zenko Suzuki's administration on July 17th, 1980.

The Post-Economic Miracle Era: Geopolitical Transformations: 1980–2000

During this period, Japan experienced the post-economic miracle era, which was characterized by significant internal and international changes. Global politics underwent significant change, with Japan adjusting to the end of the Cold War and the expansion of economic and cultural globalization.

The 1980s (1980–1989) represent a first stage in which Japan experienced a period of remarkable economic consolidation. Accordingly, "there was scarcely an area of consumer products that was not either dominated by Japanese companies or being challenged by them"⁶⁸. Japanese brands dominated various industries, including automobiles and electronics. Additionally, the international stage was

⁶⁴ *Diplomatic Bluebook for 1977: Review of Recent Developments in Japan's Foreign Relations*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/1977/1977-contents.htm>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁵ Akimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

⁶⁶ Kitaoka, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

⁶⁷ Stockwin, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁶⁸ Andressen, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

just as dynamic, as Japan handled the end of the Cold War. But 1989 represented a significant year, both globally and in Japan. In addition to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the passing of Emperor Hirohito, 1989 was a turbulent year in Japanese politics, marked by scandals involving corruption and the prefacing of the collapse of an economic bubble. Economic stagnation characterized the 'lost decade', in contrast to the growth seen in the preceding decades. Accordingly, these significant shifts changed both Japan's identity and its place in the world.

Time frame	Prime Minister	Party
● 1980–82	Suzuki	Liberal Democratic Party
● 1982–87	Nakasone	Liberal Democratic Party
● 1987–89	Takeshita	Liberal Democratic Party
● 1989	Uno	Liberal Democratic Party
● 1989–91	Kaifu	Liberal Democratic Party
● 1991–93	Miyazawa	Liberal Democratic Party
● 1993–94	Hosokawa	Japan New Party
● 1994	Hata	Renewal Party
● 1994–96	Murayama	Japan Socialist Party
● 1996–98	Hashimoto	Liberal Democratic Party
● 1998–2000	Obuchi	Liberal Democratic Party

Figure 3: Japanese Prime Ministers during the Post-Economic Miracle Era

The End of the Cold War and the Bubble Economy: 1980–1989

In internal matters, Suzuki adopted “politics of peace”⁶⁹ (*wa no seiji*), focusing on administrative reforms, aiming to increase the efficiency of the government.

⁶⁹ Akimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

His approach represented a more balanced and consensus-based governance style, departing from political struggles. Internationally, Suzuki's relative inexperience in diplomacy became evident. His tour of five ASEAN states in 1981 represented a fruitful attempt at strengthening Japan's ties in Southeast Asia. However, the aftermath of the Reagan-Suzuki Summit of 1981 brought forth diplomatic challenges. Suzuki's declaration, that the US–Japan alliance did not entail a heightened military component, strained relations with Tōkyō's most important ally, showcasing “Japan's continuing ambiguity about the purpose and requirements of its alliance with the United States”⁷⁰.

On November 27th, 1982, after a short period as prime minister, Suzuki chose to step down, being replaced by Yasuhiro Nakasone, one of Tanaka's favorites. Nakasone displayed a more assertive leadership, which departed from the consensus-building driven style of his predecessors (Miki, Fukuda, Ōhira and Suzuki). His administration (November 27th, 1982 – November 6th, 1987) sought to advance both internal reforms and changes in international strategies. During this period, Japan experienced a surge in neo-nationalism, especially in the form of *Nihonjinron*⁷¹. This cultural and ideological movement that emphasized the uniqueness of the Japanese people was mostly centered around Japan's post-war economic success. However, the burst of the bubble economy towards the end of the decade exposed underlying weaknesses in the Japanese economic structure. This nationalist wave was further fueled by Nakasone's support and desire to reforge Tōkyō's identity⁷². In administrative matters, Nakasone's government undertook significant efforts to streamline the bureaucracy. One of the most important reforms of the era was the privatization of state-run enterprises. The most prominent example was the case of the Japanese National Railways (JNR) in 1987, part of a broader effort (even in international economics) of reducing government involvement in the economy. Another significant aspect of Nakasone's tenure was the breaking of the symbolic 1% GNP cap on defense spending in 1987. This decision was paired with the brief removal of “the ban on overseas sales of military equipment, albeit only to the extent of permitting export of military-related technology

⁷⁰ Taketsugu Tsurutani, “Old Habits, New Times: Challenges to Japanese-American Security Relations” in *International Security* 7, no. 2, 1982, p. 175, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538437>.

⁷¹ Papers on Japanese uniqueness.

⁷² Tsuzuki, *op. cit.*, pp. 439–440.

of the US”⁷³. This shift was driven by the geopolitical tensions of the Cold War and by the pressures coming from the US to more actively assume the burden for regional defense.

One of the key aspects of Nakasone's international strategy involved reinforcing the Japan–US alliance, “on the basis of the bilateral security treaty”⁷⁴. He adopted a close relation with US President Ronald Reagan, often termed as the ‘Ron-Yasu’ relationship, highlighting a shift from Suzuki's controversial approach. This allowed more effective and coordinated strategies in the context of the Cold War. Accordingly, during the G7 summit of 1983, “Nakasone took the initiative to rally the participants on the issue of Soviet's Intermediate Nuclear Force by explaining that it concerned not only the nations of Europe but also of Asia”⁷⁵. Nakasone's diplomatic efforts were further characterized by his regional initiatives. He focused on strengthening relations with South Korea, visiting the country in 1983 and committing approximately 4 billion US\$ in economic aid⁷⁶. Similarly, his visits to five ASEAN states in 1983 and the visit to China in 1984 were representative of Japan's expanding regional diplomatic horizons. These efforts were aimed at deepening relations with regional actors (especially those impacted by a collective memory towards Japan's colonial past), within the framework established by the US alliance. However, these cooperative actions contrasted with the visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, which commemorates Japan's World War II victims, including convicted war criminals. These visits sparked severe international criticism, especially from South Korea and China, illustrating the complexities of Japan's diplomatic landscape.

On November 6th, 1987, Nakasone stepped down, passing the leadership of the LDP and of the government to Noboru Takeshita (November 6th, 1987 – June 3rd, 1989). Internationally, the main focus of the Takeshita cabinet revolved around the issue of active contribution to international peace. Such an approach “reflected a move on Japan's own part to fulfill the responsibilities of its international status”⁷⁷. Accordingly, this shift represented one of the first times when the issue

⁷³ Stockwin, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁷⁴ Akimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

⁷⁵ Kitaoka, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

⁷⁶ Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

⁷⁷ Toshiya Hoshino, “Japan's Policies on Conflict Prevention and International Peace Cooperation Activities” in *JIIA Japan and the World, Japan Digital Library*, March 2017, p. 2.

of active contribution to international peace came to the forefront, highlighting Japan's changing role in the world. Internally, the Takeshita administration focused on implementing economic reforms, such as the unpopular consumer tax introduced in 1989. This period represented a rather tumultuous situation in the Japanese economy. Takeshita managed Japan during the peak of this period, termed as 'the bubble economy', however his tenure was marked by the Recruit scandal⁷⁸. Plainly put, shares of the Recruit Corporation were distributed within the LDP for the adoption of favorable legislation. Allegedly, this scandal indicated "the beginning of the end of the LDP hegemony"⁷⁹. Being involved in the Recruit scandal, Takeshita resigned. Sōsuke Uno's tenure (June 3rd, 1989 – August 10th, 1989), although brief, was marked by the LDP's most significant electoral defeat, losing the majority in the House of Councillors (*Sangiin*) – the Upper House. Moreover, his short premiership was overshadowed by a personal sexual scandal. Consequently, Uno resigned in a context not at all favorable for Japan. The term 'bubble economy' is a concept that defines Japanese economic dynamics during the 1980s. At that time, "the real estate-oriented economy, which was promoted by the construction state* amid high postwar growth, caused excessive land speculation unlike any before"⁸⁰. Moreover, it was also influenced by expansive fiscal policies aimed at promoting economic growth. In this way, asset and real estate prices increased to artificially high numbers, far exceeding their actual values. Most importantly, on the long-term, the burst of the bubble economy ushered a prolonged period of economic stagnation, often referred to as 'the lost decade'.

Political Turbulence and Japan's Lost Decade: 1989–2000

An important turning point in the political and social landscapes of Japan occurred in 1989. The passing of Emperor Hirohito marked the transition from the Shōwa to the Heisei era, symbolizing a vision of 'peace throughout the world'. A change in political leadership was marked by Toshiki Kaifu taking office from

⁷⁸ For an in-depth analysis, see also William Nester, "Japan's Recruit Scandal: Government and Business for Sale" in *Third World Quarterly* 12, no. 2, 1990, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436599008420236>.

⁷⁹ Tsuzuki, *op. cit.*, p. 442.

⁸⁰ Hiromi Tsuruta and Jackie Miyasaka, "The Bubble Economy and Financial Crisis in Japan: Financial Deregulation, Globalization, and Financial Administration" in *International Journal of Political Economy* 29, no. 1, 1999, pp. 32–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08911916.1999.11643984>.

August 10th, 1989 until November 5th, 1991. In contrast to his predecessors, Kaifu did not hold a significant position within the LDP. Accordingly, his administration prioritized clean politics and political change.

However, in spite of certain positive results, “the LDP found itself confronting new scandals and problems with which it could not cope”⁸¹. At the domestic level, Japan's lost decade began with the collapse of the bubble economy. Throughout the entire 1990s, the economic slowdown was highlighted by growth rates that were continuously low and occasionally negative. On the global stage, Kaifu managed Japan's reaction to the Gulf War, striking a balance between the country's pacifist state status and its increasing obligation to take on international responsibilities. In the end, Japan provided significant financial aid to the anti-Iraq coalition, however without any military support. Additionally, the Kaifu administration sought to pass the UN Peace Cooperation Bill which would have enabled the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) to participate in UN-coordinated activities. However, similar to other reform initiatives, the UN Bill had not been approved. With a declining power base, a loss in support, and inefficient political reform⁸², Kaifu resigned on November 5th, 1991, being replaced by Kiichi Miyazawa.

A key achievement under prime minister Miyazawa's leadership (November 5th, 1991 – August 9th, 1993) was the successful adoption of the UN Peace Cooperation Bill in 1992. It marked a step in Japan's evolving role and responsibility in regional and global peace. Nonetheless, the bill was passed in a more moderate form, stipulating that “the SDF should not participate in peacekeeping force (PKF) activities”⁸³. Notably, for the first time, Japanese peacekeepers were deployed in Cambodia in September 1992. However, Miyazawa's tenure was overshadowed by the Sagawa Express Scandal. Similar to Recruit, it exposed the corruption within LDP's structure, especially related to Shin Kanemaru, LDP's Vice-President at the time⁸⁴. This scandal actually weakened the LDP, leading to a notable split, as Ichirō Ozawa, an influential member of the LDP, and a significant faction broke away from the party. Following a motion of no confidence in 1993, the Miyazawa cabinet dissolved the Diet. This was paired with the creation of new political parties,

⁸¹ Richard Sims, *Japanese Political History since the Meiji Renovation: 1868–2000*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, p. 331.

⁸² Tsuzuki, *op. cit.*, pp. 452–453.

⁸³ Akimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

⁸⁴ Sims, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

such as the Japan Renewal Party (JNR) – *Shinseitō* (formed by the LDP defectors), which further complicated the political landscape. For the first time since 1955, the LDP failed to achieve a majority in the House of Representatives (*Shūgiin*) – the lower house – in the 1993 elections. This moment led to Miyazawa's resignation but, most importantly, indicated a shift in LDP's hegemonic rule in political dynamics.

The task of leading the government was passed to Morihiro Hosokawa, the leader of the Japan New Party (JNP) – *Nihonshintō*. The cabinet backed by an eight-party coalition represented the first non-LDP government since 1955. The Hosokawa administration (August 9th, 1993 – April 28th, 1994) projected at its center the image “of a politician leading a new party formed from outside the political establishment”⁸⁵. The new administration brought forward a reformist agenda, focused on anti-corruption measures and successfully enacted changes in the electoral system. However, the administration faced significant challenges, the most important one being the entrenched bureaucracy deeply interwoven with LDP politicians⁸⁶. Additionally, Hosokawa's decision to raise the consumer tax led to breaches within the coalition and a subsequent decline in popularity. Ultimately, amid allegations of corruption, Hosokawa resigned. In spite of its short duration, the Hosokawa cabinet had a significant normative impact, highlighting the possibility of coalition governments independent of LDP's dominance. Tsutomu Hata (April 28th, 1994 – June 30th, 1994) continued the LDP-alternative rule, but his administration was widely perceived as an ineffective government. The JSP's withdrawal of support ultimately crumbled both the coalition and the Hata cabinet. The LDP returned to power, but under different circumstances: it formed a coalition with the JSP and the New Party Sakigake or the New Harbinger Party (*Shintō sakigake*), indicating a new phase of Japanese politics where coalition governments became a norm.

Although the LDP represented the largest party in the new formed coalition, Tomiichi Murayama (June 30th, 1994 – January 11th, 1996) of the JSP had been appointed prime minister. The compatibility between the LDP and JSP was generated through the changes in JSP policies, especially related to the JSDF and the Japan–US Security Treaty⁸⁷. Domestically, this period was marked by profound moments

⁸⁵ Stockwin, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

⁸⁶ Sims, *op. cit.*, pp. 344–345.

⁸⁷ Stockwin, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

of crisis. The Kōbe Earthquake manifested a significant political impact. Deficiencies in crisis management eroded the cabinet's popularity. Internationally, a notable achievement was the Murayama Statement. On the 50th anniversary of World War II's end (August 15th, 1995), Murayama issued an official apology statement, which played a significant role in Japan's conciliatory efforts⁸⁸. However, overall, "the lingering economic depression brought about political apathy which characterized the era of transition"⁸⁹. In early 1996, the JSP rebranded as the Social Democratic Party (SDP) – *Shakai minshutō*. The period was characterized by high political fluidity and party-switching. In such tumultuous times, the main focus of the cabinets remained largely domestic. Murayama's resignation in January 1996 led to Ryutaro Hashimoto of the LDP assuming leadership.

In opposition, the Hashimoto Cabinet (January 11th, 1996 – July 30th, 1998) primarily focused on diplomatic initiatives. The priority was to rebuild the relations with the US following the Okinawa scandals and the international apathy of previous cabinets. The efforts materialized in the development of new guidelines for defense cooperation⁹⁰ that emphasized mutual cooperation for regional security and a shared understanding of security challenges. This prioritization strengthened Japan's position as a reliable partner in the Asia-Pacific area. Moreover, the Hashimoto administration attempted to formally sign a peace treaty with Russia in 1997. Accordingly, the Krasnoyarsk Summit offered a plan of action, which also marked a turning point in Japan's efforts to resolve protracted territorial issues. In terms of domestic politics, the government attempted to address the dire economic situation by offering aid to house loaning companies. Moreover, it attempted to pursue fiscal reform, by increasing the consumer tax. However, "the slump in economic growth made the government appear incompetent as well as unsure of itself"⁹¹. These inefficiencies impacted the popularity of the cabinet. Given the poor results of the LDP in the July 1998 elections, Hashimoto could not avoid his resignation. Keizō Obuchi's tenure as prime minister (July 30th, 1998 – April 5th,

⁸⁸ *Statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama – 'On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the war's end'*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 15, 1995, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/press/pm/murayama/9508.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁸⁹ Tsuzuki, *op. cit.*, pp. 458.

⁹⁰ *The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation*, Ministry of Defense of Japan, September 23, 1997, https://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11591426/www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/us/anpo/pdf/19970923.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁹¹ Sims, *op. cit.*, pp. 356.

2000) was a period marked by economic challenges and political shifts. Initially being a single-party cabinet, Obuchi found himself compelled to form a coalition with the Liberal Party (led by Ozawa) and the Kōmeitō (Clean Government Party) to navigate a precarious political landscape. The most significant domestic challenge of Obuchi was combating the severe economic situation. Despite taking bold initiatives to revitalize the economy, these efforts were met with limited success, especially due to the coalition's unstable political majority in the Diet⁹². Obuchi's conciliatory approach to regional politics was reinforced through his administration's efforts at strengthening ties with South Korea amidst North Korea's missile tests. Moreover, Obuchi worked on improving relations with Russia, aiming to sign a formal peace treaty and to resolve the issue of the Northern Territories. These efforts materialized in the signing of the Moscow Declaration in 1998⁹³. Obuchi's tenure was cut short by a sudden stroke in April 2000. Similar to the transition after Ohira's tenure, the LDP unified to address the political crisis, leading to the proposal of Yoshirō Mori as his successor. The 1990s were marked by two defining elements: economically, the period is known as Japan's 'lost decade', a time of prolonged stagnation and financial slowdown, while politically, it saw the end of LDP hegemony. Moreover, this period was characterized politically by three trends: the demise of the traditional left (JSP), "the public's impatience (the so-called 'new-party fatigue') with the kaleidoscopic way in which the opposition parties [...] changed their names and images"⁹⁴ and the consolidation of a new opposition in the form of *Minshutō* – Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). As the decade drew to a close with Obuchi's health issues, these elements set the stage for significant shifts as Japan moved into the 2000s.

Japan in the Globalized World: 2000–2012

With the exception of Junichiro Koizumi's administration, the period was characterized by a rapid succession of prime ministers, each serving brief terms, underscoring the political volatility of the time. Moreover, during this period, the

⁹² Stockwin, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

⁹³ *Moscow Declaration on Establishing a Creative Partnership between Japan and the Russian Federation*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 13, 1998, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/russia/territory/edition01/moscow.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁹⁴ Sims, *op. cit.*, pp. 363.

phenomenon of *Nejire kokkai* or Twisted Diet (meaning that no party or coalition controls both the House of Councillors and the House of Representatives) further complicated policy implementation. Moreover, this stance was further reflected in Japan’s focus on the regional context, emphasizing peace and cooperation in Asia. The internal situation was complemented by the global economic turmoil brought by the Global Financial Crisis and by the significant effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Navigating through a Changing World: 2000–2009

Yoshiro Mori’s brief tenure as prime minister (April 5th, 2000 – April 21st, 2001) was marked by notable aspects. Primarily, it was affected by a series of controversial statements, which significantly affected his public approval.

Timeframe	Prime Minister	Party
● 2000–01	Mori	Liberal Democratic Party
● 2001–06	Koizumi	Liberal Democratic Party
● 2006–07	Abe	Liberal Democratic Party
● 2007–08	Fukuda	Liberal Democratic Party
● 2008–09	Asō	Liberal Democratic Party
● 2009–10	Hatoyama	Democratic Party of Japan
● 2010–11	Kan	Democratic Party of Japan
● 2011–12	Noda	Democratic Party of Japan

Figure 4: *Japanese Prime Ministers during the 2000–2012 timeframe*

Domestically, the policies initiated by the administration were part of a broader strategy to restore economic growth and consumer confidence in the aftermath of the ‘lost decade’. On the international front, he adhered to established foreign policy trajectories, maintaining strong partnership with key partners. However,

with declining popular support, subjected to political criticism (both internally and internationally), and perceived as rather an inadequate leader, Mori was ultimately replaced by Junichiro Koizumi in an intense internal electoral process.

In stark contrast to his predecessor, Koizumi's tenure as prime minister (April 26th, 2001 –September 26th, 2006) stands out as a defining period characterized by bold reforms and a charismatic, sometimes even populist, leadership style. As the LDP was becoming unpopular throughout the electorate, Koizumi had to provide something different: he was a rather unconventional leader with an ambitious agenda of reform. The Koizumi Revolution, as it has been termed, refers to the structural political and economic reforms aimed at revitalizing Japan's stagnant landscape⁹⁵. In economic terms, Koizumi focused on deregulation in order to support the stagnant economy⁹⁶. Two of his key initiatives were the privatization of Japan Post and the restructuring of the banking sector, which were intended to revitalize the financial system. In the political realm, Koizumi "broke with the principle of Cabinet construction in proportion to factional strength"⁹⁷. Moreover, he also focused on strengthening the prime minister position "to centralize policy-making processes, especially its foreign and security policy"⁹⁸. In spite of his critics, Koizumi succeeded in regaining and even maintaining a stronger position for the LDP on the political stage. In regional politics, he sought to maintain a strong alliance with Washington, particularly through Tōkyō's support for the War on Terror and Iraq. In the case of North Korea, Koizumi attempted a different approach, focusing on restoring relations amid domestic unrest over North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens. These efforts even lead to the signing of the Pyongyang Declaration⁹⁹ in 2002, which briefly touched historical issues and security concern, but with little to no success at reconciliation. Moreover, Koizumi's frequent visits to the Yasukuni Shrine sparked diplomatic problems, especially with China and South Korea. However, sixty years after the end of World War II, on August 15th, 2005, Koizumi issued a formal apology for Japan's colonial

⁹⁵ Ko Mishima, "Grading Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi's Revolution: How Far Has the LDP's Policymaking Changed?" in *Asian Survey* 47, no. 5, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2007.47.5.727>.

⁹⁶ Stockwin, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

⁹⁸ Akimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

⁹⁹ *Japan–DPRK Pyongyang Declaration*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 17, 2002. https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/pmv0209/pyongyang.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

reign, which reiterated Tōkyō's commitment to peace and mirrored the 1995 Murayama statement.

In September 2006, Shinzō Abe (September 26th, 2006 – September 26th, 2007) assumed the role of prime minister, marking a transition from Koizumi's era, with a blend of pragmatism. Domestically, he focused on revising Japan's pacifist stance towards a more active defense policy. However, his more controversial statements on historical issues sparked significant domestic and international concern. In terms of foreign policy, Abe took a firm stance on North Korea, particularly following nuclear and standard military tests in 2006, leading Tōkyō to adopt trade restrictions and sanctions against Pyongyang¹⁰⁰. Abe also sought to strengthen relations with its allies, especially the US, proposing the idea of the Quad in 2007. However, “[w]hereas Abe's pragmatism has worked on the foreign front, [...] it has had a much less positive impact domestically”¹⁰¹. Abe's initial tenure was impacted by political scandals, involving cabinet members. As a result, the LDP was defeated in the 2007 House of Councillors elections. Abe resigned leaving behind a mixed legacy which “represented the combination of high expectations and deep disillusionment by the public”¹⁰², laying the groundwork for his influential return to leadership. The son of former prime minister Takeo Fukuda, Yasuo Fukuda replaced in a political environment marked by a Twisted Diet, where the opposition controlled the House of Councillors. The choice of Fukuda as prime minister (September 26th, 2007 – September 24th, 2008) came largely due to “his reputation as a moderate, his collaborative style and the personal and political distance between him and Abe”¹⁰³. Regarding foreign policy, he adhered to his father's doctrine, focusing on fostering cooperative relations with Japan's Indo-Pacific partners. Moreover, he also acknowledged that the US was Tōkyō's most important ally. Despite domestic challenges, Fukuda advocated for the continuation of Japan's refueling mission in the Indian Ocean, albeit under a different legislation. With decreasing support, Fukuda was replaced by Tarō Asō (September 28th,

¹⁰⁰ Ewen MacAskill and Jonathan Watts, “Japan Bans All Trade with North Korea” in *The Guardian*, October 11, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/oct/12/japan.northkorea1>. Accessed January 24, 2024.

¹⁰¹ Richard Katz and Peter Ennis, “How Able Is Abe?” in *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 2, 2007, p. 77.

¹⁰² Akimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

¹⁰³ Hitoshi Tanaka, “Japanese Foreign Policy under Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda” in *East Asian Insights – Japan Center for International Exchange* 2, no. 6, October 2007, p. 1.

2008 – September 16th, 2009), who took office as Japan was experiencing significant economic difficulties. In order to limit the impact of the global recession, the government proposed a significant stimulus plan that would support the country's most vulnerable industries¹⁰⁴. In terms of foreign policy, Asō achieved several milestones, but mostly in normative terms. Concretely, the period saw the development of two key interconnected diplomatic strategies: *value-oriented diplomacy* (the promotion of universal values) and *The Arc of Freedom and Prosperity* (a network of nations from East Asia to Europe that share the common value of freedom)¹⁰⁵. Moreover, Asō focused on strengthening relations with Asian states, marked by the signing of the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between Japan and India and the set-up and host of the first China–Japan–South Korea Trilateral Summit in 2008. Despite these efforts, the administration struggled with low public support especially due to economic difficulties and policy missteps. LDP's historic defeat in the August 2009 general elections altered the political landscape of Japan. It also marked the beginning of a new political era, with the coming to power of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).

Japan under the Democratic Party: 2009–2012

Under the DPJ, the stage of Japanese politics was marked by an air of change that promised reform and a break from bureaucratic dominance¹⁰⁶. As initial steps, The Hatoyama cabinet (September 16th, 2009 – June 8th, 2010) focused on enhancing welfare and reducing income disparities in a move towards a more citizen-centered governance process. As an electoral promise, Hatoyama attempted to relocate the Futenma US Air Base from Okinawa, a move that gained internal traction but faced challenges in implementation. On the international front, Hatoyama attempted to “re-visit some of what he called ‘asymmetries’ of the US–Japan security alliance”¹⁰⁷. The Japan–US alliance remained, however, fundamental in Tōkyō's diplomatic horizon for regional stability. The administration also promoted the concept of

¹⁰⁴ *Press Conference by Prime Minister Taro Aso*, Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, March 31, 2009. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/asospeech/2009/03/31kaiken_e.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

¹⁰⁵ Akimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

¹⁰⁶ Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012, p. 42.

¹⁰⁷ Axel Berkofsky, “Japanese Foreign and Security Policies under Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama – Some Changes, A Lot of Continuity” in *Il Politico* 76, no. 2, 2011, p. 183.

an 'East Asian Community'¹⁰⁸, envisioning greater regional integration and co-operation. Hatoyama's decline in popularity was mostly caused by two factors: his involvement in a corruption scandal alongside Ozawa¹⁰⁹ and the failure to relocate the US Marine Air Base to Futenma. Hatoyama announced his resignation, ending a tenure that, despite high expectations, encountered significant challenges.

On June 8th, 2010, Naoto Kan replaced Hatoyama as prime minister in a time when the DPJ was losing popularity. His administration brought forth a changed perspective on the bureaucracy. Kan attempted to incorporate the bureaucrats into the political process, rather than limiting their involvement¹¹⁰. His term was most prominently characterized by the way he handled the 2011 Fukushima Nuclear Incident and the Great East Japan Earthquake Crisis. Both positive and negative feedback was given to the government's response. Nonetheless, Kan also focused on Japan's reconstruction and a non-nuclear future, advocating for a shift in energy policy. The collision of two Japanese vessels with a Chinese one near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands highlighted the period's major international dispute with China. During this incident, the "relations between the two countries hit a new low following Japan's decision to arrest and detain the Chinese boat's captain"¹¹¹. The last DPJ prime minister, Yoshihiko Noda, replaced Kan in September 2011. Under Noda's leadership (September 2nd, 2011 – December 26th, 2012), recovery was balanced with more extensive initiatives for social and economic reconstruction. Additionally, compared to his predecessors, he possessed a more pragmatic leadership style, recognizing the importance of the bureaucracy within the political process. He used the bureaucracy so much so that he was criticized even by members of the DPJ for "becoming a puppet of the bureaucracy, as with many LDP prime ministers"¹¹². With the help of the LDP and of the Komeito, he raised the consumer tax¹¹³ to address debt and fiscal sustainability, a decision that led to a decrease in

¹⁰⁸ Akimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

¹⁰⁹ Hiroaki Richard Watanabe, "Japanese Politics under the Hatoyama Administration" in *II Politico* 76, no. 2, 2011, p. 182.

¹¹⁰ Tomohito Shinoda, "Japan's Failed Experiment: The DPJ and Institutional Change for Political Leadership" in *Asian Survey* 52, no. 5, September 2012, p. 813, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2012.52.5.799>.

¹¹¹ Paul J. Smith, "The Senkaku/Diaoyu Island Controversy: A Crisis Postponed" in *Naval War College Review* 66, no. 2, 2013, p. 28

¹¹² Shinoda, *op. cit.*, p. 822.

¹¹³ Akimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

popularity, both in public opinion and within the DPJ. On the international stage, Noda's term was impacted by increasing strenuous relations with Beijing. The controversial choice to buy three of the eight Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands also proved unproductive for the development of relations, damaging the already strained ties with China. The DPJ's defeat in the December 2012 elections indicated the public's overall dissatisfaction towards the DPJ administration. This loss marked the end of DPJ leadership and a return to LDP politics, reflecting a shift in public sentiment and a return to more traditional political dynamics in Japan.

Japan in Recent Times: 2012–2024

Abe's second term as prime minister (December 26th, 2012 – September 16th, 2020) marked a significant political change. Through his more assertive leadership, Abe put forth a bold political agenda both on the national and on the international levels. The second Abe cabinet was defined as a “crisis breakthrough Cabinet”¹¹⁴, in a context in which Japan's “two-decade-long recession, aggravated by the great earthquake of March 11th, 2011, lingered tenaciously”¹¹⁵. The revitalization was planned through a combination of monetary easing, fiscal stimulus and structural reforms, more commonly known as ‘Abenomics’. The changes on the regional stage were more evident in China's strategic rise. The enhancement of the security system in Japan also meant a “dilution of the country's postwar pacifist norms that had constrained the exercise of military power and Japan's role as a more reliable US ally”¹¹⁶. In terms of international relations, Abe focused on Proactive Contribution to Peace. These moves were part of the wider reinterpretation of the Article 9 in the constitution. The main priority of the government remained strengthening the US–Japan Alliance, deemed pivotal in the context of the emerging regional security challenges. Abe also sought to expand the geopolitical focus, fostering closer ties with India and Australia alongside the US, alignment encapsulated in

¹¹⁴ *Press Conference by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe*, Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, December 26, 2012, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201212/26kaiken_e.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

¹¹⁵ Takashi Inoguchi, “Japan in 2013: Abenomics and Abegeopolitics” in *Asian Survey* 54, no. 1, 2014, p. 102.

¹¹⁶ Sebastian Maslow, “A Blueprint for a Strong Japan? Abe Shinzō and Japan's Evolving Security System” in *Asian Survey* 55, no. 4, 2015, p. 740.

the Democratic Security Diamond (DSD), which would later materialize in the Quad.

Time frame	Prime Minister	Party
● 2012–20	Abe II–IV	Liberal Democratic Party
● 2020–21	Suga	Liberal Democratic Party
● 2021–24	Kishida	Liberal Democratic Party
● 2024–Present	Ishiba	Liberal Democratic Party

Figure 5: Japanese Prime Ministers during between 2012 and 2024

The mandate of the government was reaffirmed by LDP's victory in the December 2014 elections, offering Abe a new opportunity to push his policy agenda. During this time, Abenomics were recalibrated into what was dubbed Abenomics 2.0., with a focus on social security. Accordingly, the foundational elements of Abenomics transitioned into the first arrow of Abenomics 2.0¹¹⁷. This strategic shift reflected a response towards concerns about income disparities and the dire demographic situation of Japan. The reinterpretation of the constitution materialized in the enactment of the JSDF legislation of 2015. Encouraged by LDP's victory, the legislative package generated significant public debate and opposition. Additionally, on the international front, ties with South Korea went through a phase of relative calm aided by US assistance.

However, the changes in leadership of the US in 2016 and of South Korea in 2017 indicated changes in the relations Japan has been fostering with these partners. In the case of the US, an air of uncertainty dominated the partnership, following the more transactional strategy adopted by Trump. Moreover, Moon Jae-in's new policy of engagement with North Korea complicated Tōkyō's regional position, alongside the resurfacing of history-related controversies. These leadership changes in key nations represented a shift in the geopolitical landscape, prompting strategic adjustments in Japan's diplomatic engagement. Moreover, given the uncertainty

¹¹⁷ Tobias Harris, *The Iconoclast. Shinzō Abe and the New Japan*, London: C. Hurst & Company, 2020, p. 248.

and “multilateralist phobia”¹¹⁸ spurred by Trump’s election, Japan developed the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, which emerged as a new pillar of its foreign policy. Under Abe’s leadership, Japan also played a key role in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations. Recognizing the importance of multilateral trade agreements in an interconnected global economy, Japan took initiative to rebrand and reshape the former TPP into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), signed in 2018. The pivot towards the FOIP and the CPTPP reinforced Japan’s role in shaping regional economic and security frameworks in the face of shifting geopolitical dynamics.

Abe’s response to the escalating dynamics, especially North Korea’s missile tests during the 2017–2018 Missile Crisis, cemented his reputation as a leader capable of defending Japan¹¹⁹, in spite of political scandals and degrading public opinion. His tenure, however, was also subjected to significant challenges. The deterioration of relations with South Korea continued especially due the lack of resolutions on historical issues. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic overshadowed the 2020 Tōkyō Olympics, prompting the authorities to enact emergency measures and adopt economic stimulus programs. With Abe’s resignation in September 2020, a significant era in Japanese politics came to an end. His tenure, however, also saw unfulfilled ambitions, such as constitutional revision, leaving behind a mixed legacy¹²⁰.

The main focus of Yoshihide Suga’s tenure (September 16th, 2020 – October 4th, 2021) centered around addressing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The administration focused on public health measures aimed at controlling the spread of the virus. The decision to host the Olympics during the pandemic¹²¹, however, resulted in decreasing approval rates, particularly in regards to the handling of the health crisis. In terms of foreign policy, Suga’s efforts were notable,

¹¹⁸ Șerban Filip Cioculescu, “Understanding the Foreign Policy of the People’s Republic of China: Historical Facts, Main trends, Actors and Decision-Making Bodies” in Valentin Naumescu (ed.), *Great Powers’ Foreign Policy: Approaching the Global Competition and the Russian War against the West*, Leiden: Brill, 2023, p. 118.

¹¹⁹ Tobias Harris, *The Iconoclast*, p. 289.

¹²⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 312.

¹²¹ “Survey: Olympic Support up, but Cabinet Approval Rate Drops to 28%” in *The Asahi Shimbun*, August 9, 2021, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14414274>. Accessed April 7, 2024.

particularly towards the regional context. Naturally, the “Quad momentum has accelerated further under the administration of United States President Joe Biden”¹²². In this context, Suga committed stronger relations with the US after a relative rebalancing of relations. The administration also made a significant policy-shift regarding climate change, pledging in October 2020 that Japan would aim to become carbon-neutral by 2050¹²³. In September 2021, Suga announced that he would not run for re-election as the leader of the LDP, being replaced by Fumio Kishida.

Assuming office towards the end of 2021, Kishida faced a complex situation characterized by the ongoing pandemic and by the rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape. Accordingly, the deterioration of the security situation, especially through the onset of the War in Ukraine, heightened regional and global political anxieties for Japan. In terms of budgetary changes, the Kishida administration even laid out the plan to significantly strengthen Japan's defense capabilities, aiming to increase defense spending to 2% of GDP by 2027¹²⁴. Moreover, this was paired by a normative commitment and alignment with the Western allies, particularly through active participation in the NATO Summits in 2022 in Spain and in 2023 in Lithuania. Additionally, as a substantial change from Abe's period, relations with South Korea witnessed a notable improvement. In this sense, probably the most important challenge impacting the Kishida administration was the erosion of public support. Following a series of public scandals¹²⁵ (involving misuse of campaign funds and corruption), concerning senior LDP party leaders, the credibility and approval rating of the Kishida cabinet have been adversely impacted. The approval rate of the Kishida cabinet (e.g., according to a Mainichi Shinbun survey, the approval rate fell to 14% in February 2024¹²⁶;) had a profound implication for the continuity of the

¹²² Robert Ward, “Suga's Premiership: A Short-Lived but Packed Administration” in *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, September 3, 2021, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/09/suga-yoshihide-short-lived-premiership>. Accessed April 7, 2024.

¹²³ Justin McCurry, “Japan Will Become Carbon Neutral by 2050, PM Pledges” in *The Guardian*, October 26, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/26/japan-will-become-carbon-neutral-by-2050-pm-pledges>. Accessed April 7, 2024.

¹²⁴ Takahashi Kosuke, “Japan Approves 16.5% Increase in Defense Spending for FY2024” in *The Diplomat*, December 22, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/japan-approves-16-5-increase-in-defense-spending-for-fy2024/>. Accessed April 7, 2024.

¹²⁵ Yann Messager, “Japan's Crisis of Confidence” in *The Diplomat*, January 16, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/japans-crisis-of-confidence/>. Accessed April 7, 2024.

¹²⁶ “自民支持率 16%、自公政権下最低に 裏金問題など直撃 世論調査 [Liberal Democratic Party support rate at 16%, lowest under the LDP-Kōmeitō government due to

administration. In spite of its perceived stability and continuity, Kishida announced that he will not consider re-election as the leader of the LDP. Following his decision, Shigeru Ishiba became Japan's prime minister since October 1st, 2024.

issues such as slush funds, according to public opinion poll]" in 毎日新聞 [*Mainichi Shinbun*], February 18, 2024, <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20240218/k00/00m/010/111000c>. Accessed April 7, 2024.

2.

How States See the World: Three Theories of International Relations

Generally speaking, International Relations Theory (IRT) seeks to explain how states behave and interact in the international system. As such, it tries to provide answers to various questions, such as why conflicts occur, how cooperation occurs between states and what is the role of international institutions in world politics.

The realm of IRT has traditionally been characterized by a substantial emphasis on tangible, material factors and forces. As consecrated theories, Realism and Liberalism have been central to this discourse. By focusing on tangible elements, “states have enduring interests such as power and wealth, and are constrained in their ability to further those interests because of material forces such as geography, technology and the distribution of power”¹²⁷. In spite of having different guiding principles and ideas, these theories are classified as *materialistic*, based on the importance they place on material elements. In recent decades, another perspective, known as Social-Constructivism, has gained prominence, which emphasized the role of ideas and identities in explaining state behavior. This chapter introduces a short overview of these three theoretical lenses in an accessible manner, offering a toolkit to understand international politics. Additionally, it also serves as the backbone for the analytical part.

Realism and the Quest for Power: State Behavior in International Politics

Through its various viewpoints, Realism has significantly influenced both theoretical debates and the practical conduct of foreign policy. However, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to conceptualizing Realism. Rather, it developed to

¹²⁷ Michael Barnett, “Social Constructivism,” in John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 8th edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 193.

encapsulate various principles of IRT. Nonetheless, the Realist line of thought is centered around a series of common values: international relations are fundamentally a field of power struggles among sovereign states. From this concise definition, three elements stand out: power struggles, sovereign states and their competition for survival. These elements define the factors and actors relevant in international politics, being more commonly known as survival, statism and self-help¹²⁸. Foremost, Realists perceive the international system as devoid of a central authority to enforce order. Hence, states are compelled to focus on security and self-help. In other words, states are inherently driven by the need to increase their material power to secure their survival. Additionally, for Realism, states are the primary, if not the sole legitimate actors in the international system. Non-state actors (such as international institutions, NGOs, sub-state entities) are perceived as secondary or peripheral in influencing politics. Therefore, these actors operate under the influence of states, with marginal impact on the global stage.

E.H. Carr – The Idealist Mirage

Modern Realism was structured as a significant international relations theory as a response to the idealist movements that predominated following World War I¹²⁹. The return of power politics and the harsh realities of World War II shattered the idealist aspirations for peace. In this logic, the context created an opportunity for the emergence of a more pragmatic approach. Edward Hallett Carr directly criticized the utopian aspirations of the interwar period, emphasizing the fact that the behavior of states in international politics is primarily motivated by power and self-interest¹³⁰.

Being a more direct reaction to the interwar status quo, Carr also analyzes the failure of the League of Nations as an idealist project. One of the major issues of the League was the attempt to replicate a domestic democratic system upon the international order. For him, “[a]ny social order implies a large measure of standardisation, and therefore of abstraction; there cannot be a different rule for

¹²⁸ Tim Dunne and Brian C. Schmidt, “Realism,” in John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 8th edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 138.

¹²⁹ Laura Maria Herța, *De la relațiile româno-sârbe la relațiile româno-iugoslave. Interpretări constructiviste*, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Fundației pentru Studii Europene (EFES), 2012, p. 7.

¹³⁰ E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: 1919–1939*, 2nd ed., London: The MacMillan Press Ltd, 1946.

every member of the community”¹³¹. While such standardization is successfully performed in a domestic setting, it becomes almost impossible to replicate with a multitude of states with significant differences (in terms of size and power). Additionally, Carr divides the concept of power into three major categories: military power, economic power and power over opinion. Nonetheless, military power is the most important for states, as it decisively influences foreign policy. Basically, a state’s foreign policy is not only determined by its objectives, but it is also constrained by its military capabilities, especially in relation to those of others¹³². In his work, Carr also showcases the limits of Realist thought, which, “in denying any *a priori* quality to political theories [...] falls easily into a determinism”¹³³ deeming theories as simple observations of natural events. Altogether, Carr considers that international politics mean both utopia and reality, showcasing a more balanced approach between pragmatic Realism and idealist Liberalism¹³⁴.

Hans Morgenthau – The Desire for Power

Hans Morgenthau, a foundational figure in the Realist school of thought, emphasized that the dominant feature of the international system is power struggles among states, while this pursuit of power, characteristic of the human nature, influenced state behavior. In his seminal work, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*¹³⁵, Morgenthau lays out his theory of international politics. For him, “[b]oth domestic and international politics are a struggle for power, modified only by the different conditions under which this struggle takes place in the domestic and in the international spheres”¹³⁶. While domestic politics are *hierarchical*, and the struggle for power can be limited due to the organization of the system, international politics are *anarchic*, as states consider themselves the highest form of power and authority. In this logic, the human desire for power

¹³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

¹³² *Ibidem*, p. 110.

¹³³ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹³⁴ See also, Christian Reus-Smit, “The Strange Death of Liberal International Theory” in *European Journal of International Law* 12, no. 3, June 1, 2001, pp. 573–93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/12.3.573>. For Reus-Smit, a narrow interpretation of Carr solely in the Realist line of thought does not do justice to the complexity of his ideas.

¹³⁵ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948.

¹³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

becomes universal and, if it “cannot be abolished everywhere in the world, those who might be cured would simply fall victims to the power of others”¹³⁷. States must therefore rely on their own power to secure their survival and interests. Subsequently, the stage of international politics is in a state of perpetual conflict (albeit, not always manifesting overtly), where states seek to balance the power of others. Furthermore, states act rationally, seeking to further their interests in terms of power. This contrasts with the liberal approaches that tend to emphasize other elements (such as economic interdependence and international institutions) in mitigating conflict. Fundamentally, for Morgenthau, “the struggle for power is universal in time and space and is an undeniable fact of experience”¹³⁸ and of the human nature.

Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer – The Structural Imperatives of Anarchy

In 1979, Structural Realism (Neorealism) came to the forefront with Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*¹³⁹. Waltz introduced a more structured analysis of the international stage, by focusing on the anarchic nature of the system (rather than human nature) and on the distribution of capabilities (especially in terms of military assets). Similarly to Morgenthau, for Waltz, the system is inherently anarchic, without a supreme authority to enforce order. Thus, for Neorealists, “[a]lthough states are like units functionally, they differ vastly in their capabilities”¹⁴⁰. In other words, the distribution of capabilities across states, which defines the structure of the system, fundamentally influences how states act. Additionally, for Waltz, “[s]tructures encourage certain behaviors and penalize those who do not respond to the encouragement”¹⁴¹. Structural pressures determine states to prioritize their security and military capabilities due to the potential threat posed by other states. In this logic, in a “self-help system, considerations of security subordinate economic gain to political interest”¹⁴². State behavior is not, thus, a choice, but rather a necessity shaped by systemic imperatives: the anarchic

¹³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

¹³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

¹³⁹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

¹⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 107.

order compels states to prioritize their security above everything else. Moreover, in the case of Waltz as a proponent of Defensive Realism, power maximization is not the absolute goal of states, as it “often proves to be counter-productive because it triggers a counterbalancing coalition of states”¹⁴³. On the contrary, John Mearsheimer as a supporter of Offensive Realism, considers that states are inherently aggressive and not merely driven by security concerns¹⁴⁴, due to an incessant quest for power. Mearsheimer posits that great powers are always searching for opportunities to achieve a hegemonic position over their rivals, strive driven by the fear that, if they do not take the initiative, others surely will¹⁴⁵.

Realism and its Critics

Throughout time, various points of criticism have been directed towards the fundamental Realist principles. Foremost, Realism is sometimes viewed as inflexible to adapting to changing dynamics. In this logic, Waltz’s statement about structures could be well applied to the Realist thought: “Structures never tell us all that we want to know. Instead they tell us a small number of big and important things”¹⁴⁶. As a result, Realism was criticized for not being fully capable of capturing the changing nature of international relations. This is especially important as the strict Realist framework might not capture the nuances of the rapidly evolving world. Additionally, its emphasis on state-centric power struggles might simply overlook the subtle shifts in how power is projected and disseminated in the contemporary era. This preference for constancy (rather than diversity) in international relations is a deliberate, theoretical decision within the Realist thought¹⁴⁷. In an extremely comprehensive manner, Ashley captured the inflexibility of Realism as a theory that:

treats the given order as the natural order, limits rather than expands political discourse, negates or trivializes the significance of variety across time and place, subordinates all practice to an interest in control, bows to the ideal of social power beyond responsibility, and thereby deprives political interaction

¹⁴³ Dunne and Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

¹⁴⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, pp. 2–3.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 3–4.

¹⁴⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, “Reflections on Theory of International Politics. A Response to My Critics” in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 329.

¹⁴⁷ Donnelly, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

of those practical capacities which make social learning and creative change possible¹⁴⁸.

Moving forward, as international politics expanded beyond a state-centric perspective (to include non-statal and sub-statal actors), the Realist assumption of the state being the only legitimate political actor seems no longer fully adequate. On the one hand, through such a perspective, the Realist logic fails to adequately account for the roles of non-state actors in influencing international politics. On the other hand, for Realists, the “proposition that the state might be *essentially* problematic or contested is excluded”¹⁴⁹. Inherently, states are perceived as monolithic entities that act according to their national interests, determined by the anarchic structure of the system. This perspective, however, neglects the possibility of states having significant political, social or ethnic divisions, which could impact the foreign policy directions adopted by those specific states. The state is not an arbitrator of national interests, but a contested entity whose policies are shaped by domestic power struggles. Lastly, another disputed point of Realist thought is the apparent neglect of ethical and normative considerations in the state's pursuit of foreign policy. Moral considerations and norms can often be considered secondary, since states prioritize survival and power over all other concerns. Or norms could be seen as tools used by states to achieve their goals, potentially being “treated as largely reducible to the material interests of the powerful”¹⁵⁰. States do, however, respect international norms and standards, not only because doing so serves their strategic interests, but also because of the legitimacy costs generated by norm infringement.

Liberalism and the Vision of Cooperation: Interdependence in Global Affairs

Liberalist ideas in IRT have their roots in the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and progress. Liberalism does not solely define one single linear line of thought, but the theory shares a number of broader principles that contrast the Realist

¹⁴⁸ Richard K. Ashley, “The Poverty of Neorealism” in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 258.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 269.

¹⁵⁰ Donnelly, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

perspective. Generally, it posits that interdependence and the pressure of international organizations reduce the likelihood of conflict. Unlike Realism, which mostly centers on power struggles among actors, Liberalism considers that the international system, though anarchic in nature, allows for cooperation and even mutually beneficial interactions among actors. In this sense, Liberalism is based on certain recurring themes, such as the possibility of cooperation through institutions, democratic values and the interdependence of actors. As such, even though states are the primary actors, Liberalism acknowledges that non-statal actors (including society, NGOs, institutions) can also influence the international system. Institutional frameworks prove essential in facilitating cooperation and creating predictable patterns of behavior.

In terms of IRT, Liberalism emerged towards the end of World War I. Woodrow Wilson's perspective of collective security mechanisms influenced the development of international relations. Through the lens of Wilson's liberalism, "peace could only be secured with the creation of an international organization to regulate international anarchy"¹⁵¹. This idea that international collaboration may avert the possibility of war crystalized in the formation of the League of Nations. However, the Liberal hope was dissipated by the League's failure to prevent World War II.

David Mitrany and Ernst B. Haas – Functionalism and Neo-functionalism

Following the disillusionment with the League of Nations, Liberalism in International Relations underwent a period of relative dormancy. It was overshadowed during the Cold War due to the predominance of Realist strategies that were better suited to address the power arrangements. Still, during this period, Neo-functionalism emerged as a subset of Liberalism with a specific emphasis on European integration. The underlying principle was that greater cooperation in specific areas may result in greater political integration. Neo-functionalist theory was deeply influenced by Mitrany's work and his perspective of Functionalism. Accordingly, for Functionalists, peace could be achieved through distinct international agencies, each managing specific functions. Additionally, Mitrany portrayed

¹⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 107.

a “state system increasingly overlaid by dense webs of international activities”¹⁵². In such a system, the state delegates some of its control over specific instances of domestic affairs to international organizations with clearly-set functions¹⁵³. Moreover, the functional approach could achieve a working peace by making “changes of frontiers unnecessary by making frontiers meaningless through the continuous development of common activities”¹⁵⁴. Neo-functionalism, under the guide of Ernst Bernard Haas in the 1960s, highlights how economic integration could organically lead to increased political cooperation. As a departure point from Functionalism, Haas emphasized regional integration (not global interactions), particularly in the context of Europe¹⁵⁵. For him, integration within a defined geographical area could create a dynamic where economic interactions would lead to political integration, primarily through mechanisms like *spillover*. Plainly put, cooperation in one area would lead to further integration in other sectors, strengthening the institution and mitigating potential conflicts¹⁵⁶. Additionally, states play a significant role in initiating the process of integration, but “they do not exclusively determine the direction, extent, and pace of change”¹⁵⁷. For Functionalists and Neo-functionalists, a change in the role of the state becomes evident: it moved away from its sole historical duty of protecting individual rights towards a more contemporary role of efficiently providing a wide range of social services¹⁵⁸.

Robert Keohane and Josephy Nye – The Complex Interdependence of Neoliberal Institutionalism

Nonetheless, towards the 1980s, Neoliberalism emerged as a more adequate reconceptualization of Liberal principles. With significant historical changes, it

¹⁵² Per A. Hammarlund, *Liberal Internationalism and the Decline of the State: The Thought of Richard Cobden, David Mitrany, and Kenichi Ohmae*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 36.

¹⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

¹⁵⁴ David Mitrany, *A Working Peace System*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1943, p. 26.

¹⁵⁵ Ernst B. Haas, *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces 1950–1957*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 292, 293.

¹⁵⁷ John Gerard Ruggie et al., “Transformations in World Politics: The Intellectual Contributions of Ernst B. Haas” in *Annual Review of Political Science* 8, no. 1, June 15, 2005, p. 279, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.8.082103.104843>.

¹⁵⁸ David Long and Lucian M. Ashworth, “Working for Peace: The Functional Approach, Functionalism and Beyond” in David Long and Lucian M. Ashworth (eds), *New Perspectives on International Functionalism*, Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999, p. 4.

became clearer that the “power of nations [...] has become more elusive”¹⁵⁹. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye introduced a more nuanced understanding of power dynamics through their conceptualization of complex interdependency. However, Keohane and Nye do not negate the importance of military force, but state that, under complex interdependence, the use of military power becomes less effective or even counterproductive in achieving national goals¹⁶⁰. This is due to the fact that there is no consistent hierarchy among national goals or issues. While for Realism, military security as part of survival dominates, for Liberal Institutionalism, the importance of issues and goals varies, with no single one dominating international politics¹⁶¹. Accordingly, states are not the only legitimate actors, as [m]ultiple channels connect societies”¹⁶². Therefore, international institutions play a crucial role in managing complex interdependence, by helping set international agendas and by facilitating cooperation. Moreover, the international regime is essential in influencing the interests and behaviors of actors. In a different understanding compared to Realism, international regimes are made-up both of power configurations within the system (distribution of capabilities) and the sets of norms and rules around which the actors’ expectations converge¹⁶³. These international regimes serve to guide and constrain the actions of states, facilitating cooperation and creating predictability in international relations. As the Cold War ended, Francis Fukuyama’s bold declaration that the world might be witnessing *the end of history*¹⁶⁴ marked a significant moment for Liberalism, mainly for Internationalism. For him, the liberal democracy emerged as the most adequate form of government. Since no other ideological options were feasible¹⁶⁵, Fukuyama considered that the spread of democratic values and free market economic principles may result in a lasting peace. However, the validity of this argument has been put to the test by subsequent developments in world politics.

¹⁵⁹ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 4th ed., New York: Longman, 2012, p. 3.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

¹⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

¹⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 20.

¹⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

¹⁶⁴ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” in *The National Interest*, no. 16, Summer 1989.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

Liberalism and its Critics

With its focus on a wider array of relevant actors and its emphasis on the role of international institutions, Liberalism was often perceived as overlooking the bare realities of power politics. Regarding institutions, in general, they are perceived as critical in mitigating the effects of anarchy and in promoting cooperation (by reducing uncertainties). Critics argue, however, that institutions cannot operate independently of the will of the states. This is due to the fact that they “are based on the self-interested calculations of the great powers, and they have no independent effect on state behavior”¹⁶⁶. Rather than serving as neutral facilitators of international cooperation, institutions reflect the interests of the states. In this sense, the role of organizations can be perceived as limited, as the competitive nature of the anarchic system cannot be fully overcome with any degree of institutional cooperation¹⁶⁷. More powerful states frequently influence the objectives and agendas of institutions, despite the fact that they are meant to harmonize power imbalances. Historically speaking, states also acted independently, disregarding the debates and decisions of such international organizations.

Moreover, the Liberalist frameworks tend to downplay or even disregard the importance of power politics and *realpolitik* (the pursuit of practical considerations rather than ethical ones). Its focus on how institutions, legal frameworks and complex interdependency mitigate conflict and promote cooperation often overlooks the states' pursuit of strategic, security interests. Even in the case of institutions and international regimes, which outline patterns of acceptable behavior on the international stage, these very rules “are negotiated by states, which agree to abide by the rules they created because it is in their interest to do so”¹⁶⁸. For instance, despite economic interdependency and institutional communality, states like the US and China continue to engage in strategic rivalries that encompass military build-up and economic and technical competition. In spite of a certain degree of interdependence, the strategic use of non-standard power means, such as economic sanctions and political pressure tends to be marginalized by Liberal thought.

¹⁶⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions” in *International Security* 19, no. 3, 1994, p. 7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539078>.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

¹⁶⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 17.

Lastly, the post-9/11 international changes are a reflection of the increasing complexities that influence the global order. In spite of Fukuyama's bold statement, "confidence in the liberal international order has ebbed and liberalism is now in question both in international theory and in practice"¹⁶⁹. The Liberal Internationalist approach was shaped by the normative assumptions regarding the widespread applicability of Western political ideals. However, imposing democratic standards has often been accused as a form of cultural imperialism, especially in those cases in which these standards were used to justify military interventions¹⁷⁰.

Social-Constructivism and the Fabric of International Politics: Why Non-Material Factors Matter

The main difference brought-up by Social-Constructivism is that it goes beyond a solely materialistic point of view, highlighting the fact that international relations are shaped by a variety of social, non-material forces. In this way, ideas, norms and identities play an active role in guiding state behavior. Historically, Social-Constructivism emerged during two significant debates that marked the end of the Cold War.

First of all, the 1980s witnessed the onset of the Neo-Neo debate, reflecting the theoretical exchanges between Neorealism (Waltz and Mearsheimer) and Neoliberalism (Keohane and Nye). The main argument was centered around the dynamics of the anarchic international system. In this sense, both theories converged on several aspects (such as, the presence of anarchy and state-centrism). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, both theories emphasized structural factors, but differed in their perspectives on the role of institutions and on the potential and aim of cooperation. Accordingly, Neorealists "conceptualize institutions as *constraints* on state behavior; neoliberals see them as *enabling* states to reach mutually beneficial, cooperative outcomes"¹⁷¹. However, the end of the Cold War had a double effect on the realm of IRT. Foremost, the traditional theories failed to predict the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and the systemic changes that came with

¹⁶⁹ Dunne, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

¹⁷⁰ Scott Burchill, "Liberalism" in Scott Burchill et al. (eds), *Theories of International Relations*, 3rd ed., Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 48–49.

¹⁷¹ Randall L. Schweller, "A Tale of Two Realisms: Expanding the Institutions Debate" in *Mershon International Studies Review* 41, 1997, p. 3.

it. Secondly, it “gave constructivists the opportunity to speed up past critique to offer genuinely novel, compelling understandings of the world in areas that neo-realists considered their bread-and-butter”¹⁷², such as power politics. Consequently, Social-Constructivism emerged as a critique to materialistic and deterministic views of the consecrated theories.

Second of all, Social-Constructivism also emerged amidst the Rationalist (Neorealism and Neoliberalism) – Critical Theorist debate¹⁷³. Rationalists draw upon the rational choice theory, which showcases “how actors operate as they attempt to maximize fixed preferences under a set of constraints”¹⁷⁴. In this logic, Rationalism considers that states seek to maximize their advantages through strategic interactions within the anarchic system (despite diverging views related to anarchy mitigation between Neorealism and Neoliberalism). Critical Theorists, in contrast, question the fundamental belief of power politics and anarchy, challenging the views promoted by traditional theories. Fundamentally, they support “interpretative modes of understanding, attuned to the unquantifiable nature of many social phenomena and the inherent subjectivity of all observation”¹⁷⁵. Critical Theorists, thus posit that the international system is heavily social, and interactions are influenced by cultural identities, historical narratives and collective memories. Moreover, they question the objective reality of international relations, focusing on how discourse and language construct social realities and enforce power structures. Being overly abstract and philosophical in nature, Critical Theory, as its name suggest, was mostly aimed at opposing “prevailing assumptions about legitimate knowledge, about the nature of the social world and about the purpose of theory”¹⁷⁶.

Social-Constructivism challenges the diverging viewpoints of this dichotomy held by Rationalists and Critical Theorists. The former consider that ideas only have an impact if it can be quantified in how it changes the material world, while the latter believe that discourse practices that define material conditions are more important than the condition themselves. Social-Constructivism offers an alternative: the international system is influenced both by material elements and by ideational

¹⁷² Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

¹⁷³ Christian Reus-Smit, “Constructivism” in Scott Burchill et al. (eds), *Theories of International Relations*, 3rd ed., Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p 188.

¹⁷⁴ Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

¹⁷⁵ Christian Reus-Smit, “Constructivism”, p. 189.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 189.

ones. Ideas matter more than just their immediate, practical outcomes, but the nature of international politics is not entirely reducible to ideas¹⁷⁷. In essence, the key theoretical pillars of Social-Constructivism were influenced by social theories which particularly emphasized the constructed nature of reality. Prominent thinkers such as Anthony Giddens, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann extensively focused on social processes and interactions. In this sense, their seminal works provide the fundamental conceptual frameworks for the core ideas of Social-Constructivism. According to their theories, the reality is inherently social, being (re)constructed through interactions and linguistic exchanges, which offer coherence to human existence¹⁷⁸. Basically, all knowledge, including everyone's perception of reality is produced through such social interactions.

Furthermore, language serves as an enabling factor, which allows the individual experience to be transformed into broader categories of meaning as collective consciousness (they are objectified)¹⁷⁹. Giddens's *The Constitution of Society* also focuses on the agent-structure dependency. The key concept is the 'duality of structure', which states that human behavior both shapes and is conditioned by the social structures in which it is embedded¹⁸⁰. In other words, every action contributes to the existing system and is (re)shaped by it. In this logic, agency and structure are fundamentally linked in a dynamic process of social construction. The philosophical contributions of Berger, Luckmann and Giddens help frame Social-Constructivism's core premises in international relations: the identities, interests and behaviors of states are not inherent, but are constructed through social interactions that are embedded in historical contexts (with specific cultural and social values). Additionally, states do not simply respond to an anarchic system, but rather construct their behavior through social and discursive practices that define and sustain the international order. As theoretical anchors, the study adopts the Social-Constructivist principles developed through the works of Alexander Wendt, Peter Joachim Katzenstein and Martha Finnemore.

¹⁷⁷ Emanuel Adler, "Constructivism in International Relations: Sources, Contributions, and Debates" in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons (eds.), *Handbook of International Relations*, 2nd ed., London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2013, p. 113.

¹⁷⁸ Herța, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁷⁹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 53.

¹⁸⁰ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985, p. 19.

Scientific Realism

To provide a structured framework of analysis, Wendt considers that scientific realism serves as a foundational philosophy of constructivist thought. For him, “the state and states system are real structures whose nature can be approximated through science”¹⁸¹. This approach contrasts with the ideas of Critical Theorists and of Empiricists, suggesting a middle ground where material elements and ideational forces influence each other. Fundamentally, through scientific realism, the focus is shifted on *ontology*¹⁸². In doing so, Social-Constructivism brings to the forefront fundamental aspects of reality, asking questions about the nature and structure of the world. Wendt admits that ideas emerge from and are shaped by the material context. Yet, the actual force and meaning of material capabilities are determined through their interactions with ideas¹⁸³. However, Japan has adhered to a policy of pacifism, impacted by three significant criteria, two of which have ideational underpinnings. Aside from legal constraints enshrined in the Constitution, public perceptions and international expectations (a mark of historical experiences and normative frameworks) have shaped strategic considerations.

Social Construction of Reality

Accordingly, for Wendt's constructivist thought, the system also manifests social relations. These “social structures are defined, in part, by shared understandings, expectations, or knowledge”¹⁸⁴. In a contrastive perspective to Waltz's Neorealism, the structure of the system is not only characterized by the distribution of capabilities (in material terms), but also by the distribution of ideas¹⁸⁵. A fundamental characteristic of the distribution of ideas is the concept of *culture*, briefly defined as “[s]ocially shared knowledge”¹⁸⁶. These instances of shared knowledge highlight the social construction of the stage of international politics.

¹⁸¹ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 47.

¹⁸² *Ibidem*, p. 91.

¹⁸³ *Ibidem*, pp. 110–112.

¹⁸⁴ Alexander Wendt, “Constructing International Politics” in Michael E. Brown *et al.* (eds), *Theories of War and Peace: An International Security Reader*, London: The MIT Press, 1998, p. 418.

¹⁸⁵ Herța, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹⁸⁶ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 141.

Accordingly, “the character of international life is determined by the beliefs and expectations that states have about each other, and these are constituted largely by social rather than material structures”¹⁸⁷. In this sense, Social-Constructivism asserts that foundational elements of international politics (such as, power, interests and even the very nature of the international system) are products of social interactions and intersubjective understanding. Even in the case of states, they (re)form through interactions and shared understandings, rather than being actors with pre-defined interests. Material elements obviously exist, but their meaning depends on the culture that predominates in the international system.

“Anarchy is what states make of it”¹⁸⁸

Through this quote, Wendt directly challenges one of the core assumptions of Neorealism, specifically the anarchic nature of the international stage. Plainly put, Neorealists consider that “self-help and competitive power politics are simply given exogenously by the structure of the state system”¹⁸⁹. However, the nature of anarchy is determined by the perceptions and interactions of states. The collective knowledge described earlier and the mutual interactions between actors reinforce the social structure of the system, around which these very actors reshape their identities¹⁹⁰. Put in simple terms, the knowledge held by states and their interactions actually reinforce the anarchic system.

Hence, “[i]f states find themselves in a self-help system, this is because their practices made it that way”¹⁹¹. In turn, anarchy is not a given, a natural element, but a socially-constructed condition, which can foster different environments (from more hostile to more cooperative), based on how states shape their identities and interests. Fundamentally, for Social-Constructivism, states act differently towards other actors, based on the meanings they hold for them. In addition to meanings and ideational factors, Social-Constructivism also places an emphasis on “the role of practices in maintaining and transforming”¹⁹² the stage of international

¹⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

¹⁸⁸ Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics” in *International Organization* 46, no. 2, 1992, p. 395, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818300027764>.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 396.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 406.

¹⁹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 407.

¹⁹² Christian Reus-Smit, “Constructivism”, p. 192.

politics. As highlighted through the ideas of Berger and Luckmann, routinized practice represents a central element of social interactions.

Structure and Agency

In this logic, agents and structures are mutually constituted. Basically, “by engaging in certain practices agents produce and reproduce the social structures that constitute and regulate those practices and their associated identities”¹⁹³. For Social-Constructivism, the structures of international politics are themselves shaped by historical processes, as states interacted over time. This interaction leads to the (re)establishment of norms and practices that subsequently influence how states understand their and other's roles, interests and expectations. In such a view, states (as agents) do not merely operate within a given system (as structures). Through their actions and beliefs, states shape the system which, in turn, through its norms and rules, changes the identity and behavior of states. However, this does not mean that Social-Constructivism portrays “an unstable society or one that is malleable *ad infinitum*”¹⁹⁴. These interactions between agents and structures are mediated through shared knowledge and culture. In other words, while states and the system evolve, they do so within a context of established practices and expectations (and not spontaneously).

Identities and Norms

These gradual shifts are fundamental in understanding how states form and change their identities, on the one hand, and their interests on the other hand. In this logic, it is essential to understand that “non-material structures condition actors' identities [...] because identities inform interests and, in turn, actions”¹⁹⁵. Identities, thus, become primordial in understanding the interests of actors. What exactly is an identity? As Wendt put it, an “identity is an inherently social definition of the actor grounded in the theories which actors collectively hold about themselves and one another and which constitute the structure of the social world”¹⁹⁶. As states engage in social interactions, they develop a sense of self and, implicitly, of other.

¹⁹³ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 342.

¹⁹⁴ Herța, *op. cit.*, p. 24 (translation ours).

¹⁹⁵ Christian Reus-Smit, “Constructivism”, p. 191.

¹⁹⁶ Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It”, p. 193.

Consequently, identities are (re)shaped through a relational process. This means that identities do not naturally form, but are shaped by structural forces, while they also “reside in relations with others: you-me and us-them”¹⁹⁷. These identities shape the interests state pursue, aligning their behavior with the rules and norms of the international system.

With these in mind, norms and rules become significant elements of international politics. Accordingly, “norms and ideas thus condition what actors consider necessary and possible, in both practical and ethical terms”¹⁹⁸. As a concept of analysis for Social-Constructivism, norms define the “collective expectations for the proper behaviour of actors with a given identity”¹⁹⁹. As states act in accordance to international norms, they also evaluate and interpret them, leading to potential shifts in how these norms are understood. Moreover, Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein posit that norms have two types of effects²⁰⁰. First of all, as mentioned above, norms can be *regulative*, meaning they regulate behavior. States are guided in their behavior by regulative norms, which set standards for what is acceptable for and expected from them in various situations. Second of all, norms are also *constitutive*, meaning they constitute the actors or the processes. In this sense, they “define [...] identities in the first place (generating expectations about the proper portfolio of identities for a given context)”²⁰¹. Additionally, norms are constitutive because they also shape the existence of the system. For example, the “rules of sovereignty not only regulate state practices but also make possible the very idea of a sovereign state”²⁰². In simpler terms, constitutive norms set the rules of the game: they create the framework within which actors operate and interact. While Realism and Liberalism focus on the functional nature of norms, which translates in benefits to certain interests, Social-Constructivism puts an emphasis on the interpretative and constitutive dimensions of norms (which manifest social power).

¹⁹⁷ Charles Tilly, *Identities, Boundaries, and Social Ties*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005, p. 8.

¹⁹⁸ Christian Reus-Smit, “Constructivism”, p. 193.

¹⁹⁹ Peter J. Katzenstein, “Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security” in Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 5.

²⁰⁰ Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt and Peter J. Katzenstein, “Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security” in Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 54.

²⁰¹ *Ibidem*, p. 54.

²⁰² Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

Moving forward, internal norms and identities also influence state behavior. In comparison to Wendt's approach, Katzenstein places higher emphasis on "the importance of institutionalized regulatory and constitutive national social and legal norms"²⁰³ in shaping foreign policy directions. In this sense, the domestic political, social and cultural factors impact the conduct of states in international politics. Through this perspective, however, Katzenstein does not discard the importance of international social structures²⁰⁴, but he considers them insufficient in explaining certain phenomena. Japan represents such a case for which analyzing the "domestic cultural-institutional context in which defense policy is made"²⁰⁵ is fundamental in understanding the formulation of its foreign policy strategies. In addition, the collective identities of the communities are also shaped by these social and legal norms (and by the historical experiences associated with them). Basically, they "embody the qualities that define actor identities and the standards of conduct"²⁰⁶. Aside from the social and cultural factors (norms, identities, historical experiences and even public opinion), institutional frameworks also impact how policies are formulated. In the case of Japan, the institutional framework discourages a strong emphasis on military security goals, as security policies are developed through the cooperation of multiple institutions, which also include a variety of stakeholders throughout the process²⁰⁷.

Interests, Power and Security

Moving forward, such social structures "provide states, individuals, and other actors with understandings of what is important or valuable and what are effective and/or legitimate means of obtaining those valued goods"²⁰⁸. For materialists, the nature of the international system represents a factor which dictates and limits

²⁰³ Christian Reus-Smit, "Constructivism", p. 194.

²⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 195.

²⁰⁵ Thomas U. Berger, "Norms, Identity, and National Security in Germany and Japan" in Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 318.

²⁰⁶ Peter J. Katzenstein, *Cultural Norms and National Security. Police and Military in Postwar Japan*, London: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 18.

²⁰⁷ Peter J. Katzenstein and Nobuo Okawara, "Japan's Security Policy: Political, Economic and Military Dimensions" in *The International Spectator* 26, no. 3, July 1991, pp. 104–105., <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729108457947>.

²⁰⁸ Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society*, London: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 15.

the behavior of states to various rational choices adopted to navigate challenges. While still contrasting with the more pronounced material focus of traditional theories, Social-Constructivism does not discard key concepts, such as interests, power and security. These variables are not exclusively materialistic²⁰⁹, but are influenced by intersubjective understanding. For Social-Constructivism, the social system expands the range of preferences of actors, changing the interests states take into consideration. In this sense, Social-Constructivism offers a different perspective on how states shape their interests, contrary to the more deterministic views of Neorealism and Neoliberalism. What a state perceives as its interest is deeply influenced by its identity and by the norms, rules and values of the international system. Accordingly, for states, the “values and the rules and roles they define channel behavior”²¹⁰. It is undeniable that all states are concerned with power and security, but what exactly do these concepts mean?

Based on the theoretical predominance of materialist theories (especially Realism), power was widely translated as military might. In a self-help system in which conflict is endemic, power becomes the fundamental goal of the state. In such a context, Morgenthau defined power as “man’s control over the minds and actions of other men”²¹¹. Moreover, for Waltz, power also “provides the means of maintaining one’s autonomy in the face of force that other wield”²¹². In this sense, power is associated with *control* and *coercion*, being a prerequisite for *survival*. States that hold more power outlive those with less power. For Social-Constructivism, power as a concept is multifaceted, extending beyond solely material capabilities. Accordingly, ideational factors have a defining role in exercising power. This became more evident as “the changing nature of international politics has also made intangible forms of power more important”²¹³. This broader perspective is generally conceptualized as co-optive or soft power²¹⁴. Soft power and the ability of attraction are opposed to hard power (espoused by the Realist tradition) and its ability of coercion. On the international stage, actors “frequently

²⁰⁹ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 94.

²¹⁰ Martha Finnemore, *National Interests*, p. 29.

²¹¹ Morgenthau, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

²¹² Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 194.

²¹³ Joseph S. Nye, “Soft Power” in *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990), p. 164. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>.

²¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 166.

look for solutions to their problems in the solutions tried by other, apparently successful actors”²¹⁵. Therefore, soft power is exerted through two means: morally good or legitimate practices and cultural influence or attractive values. Social-Constructivism, however, does not disregard the importance of military capabilities. Consequently, it does not operate with a soft power – hard power dichotomy. Instead, “an actor’s power is [...] determined [...] by the degree to which other actors perceive its identity, interests and actions as legitimate, as rightful in relation to prevailing social norms and expectations”²¹⁶. Material forces must be complemented through coherent normative frameworks that validate the power of the actors. A key concept for exercising power is *legitimacy*, which is the actor’s assumption that their behavior is aligned with the values and norms of the international system²¹⁷. Without the legitimacy conferred by this alignment, the power of the actors can face significant resistance. Additionally, legitimacy also serves as an enabling factor: “the greater the legitimacy, the easier is to convince others to cooperate with their policies; the less the legitimacy, the more costly the action”²¹⁸.

Subsequently, in the materialist tradition, power was equated with survival and security. Such traditional perspectives offer a narrow definition of security, which focuses on military (material) forces and state-centric approaches to defense²¹⁹. The main focus was on the state, as its security policies were aimed at persevering territorial integrity and sovereignty through material means. The Social-Constructivist framework expands the concept of security beyond these traditional limits. Moreover, this conceptual expansion of security is based on two elements²²⁰. First of all, the object of security (the target of threats) goes beyond the state, incorporating non-state actors, communities and individuals. In this logic, the nature of security is multifaceted: the military element is complemented by political, economic, environmental and social threats. Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde categorize these dimensions as sectors of security, which “simply grew up [...] during the later decades of the Cold War as new issues were added to the

²¹⁵ Martha Finnemore, *National Interests*, p. 11.

²¹⁶ Christian Reus-Smit, “Constructivism”, p. 201.

²¹⁷ Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

²¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 198.

²¹⁹ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security. A New Framework for Analysis*, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998, p. 3.

²²⁰ Peter J. Katzenstein, “Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security”, pp. 9–11.

military-political agenda”²²¹. This classification is performed to offer more clarity in analysis, but the sectors are, after all, inseparable for a comprehensive understanding of security²²². Second of all, security is fundamentally linked to inter-subjective understanding. Thus, security is “a self-referential practice, because it is in this practice that the issue becomes a security issue – not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat”²²³. This process, more commonly defined as *securitization*, is contingent on the social context (the culture) and the ability of actors to frame issues in ways that resonate with other actors. Securitization and security are social elements and, therefore, “it *does* matter how others judge the reasonableness of a securitization, because this influences how other actors in the system will respond to a security claim”²²⁴. For example, Japan has framed North Korea’s missile program as a significant security threat to regional stability. This framing has resonated with other actors in the region, such as South Korea, which led to increased security cooperation (GSOMIA).

Limitations of Social-Constructivist Thought

As a social theory, Social-Constructivism “makes claims about the nature of social life and social change and suggests ways of doing research to uncover the links between structural and agentic forces”²²⁵. Accordingly, one of the most poignant limitations of Social-Constructivism is its lack of predictive power. Social-Constructivism’s emphasis on ideational factors makes it challenging to create forecasts. In this sense, the theory’s focus on the social construction of the international system means that outcomes are, by definition, context-dependent. Paired with this point of view, Social-Constructivism was also criticized for its limited methodological apparatus, especially in relation to traditional theories²²⁶. As it more often relies on qualitative methods and interpretation, its findings could be less replicable than standard theories. Even among Social-Constructivist

²²¹ Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

²²² *Ibidem*, p. 8.

²²³ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

²²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

²²⁵ Martha Finnemore, *National Interests*, p. 27.

²²⁶ Robert O. Keohane, “International Institutions: Two Approaches” in *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 4, December 1988, p. 392. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600589>.

theorists, it is acknowledged that the theory's "distinctiveness lies in its theoretical arguments, not in its empirical research strategies"²²⁷. In this sense, this restricted ability to outline specific outcomes can also limit the practical applicability of Social-Constructivism.

Additionally, operationalizing central concepts might also prove difficult, without clear empiric counterparts. For example, identity, as a concept for analysis, can be imbued with different values (e.g., Katzenstein's perspective and Wendt's perspective). As identity remains a rather elusive concept, "it will produce very particularistic explanations for state action and provide little hope of contingent generalizations"²²⁸. This ambiguity, fundamentally, makes conducting systemic and comparative research rather difficult. Consequently, measuring the impact of norms and identities in a quantifiable manner can also prove difficult with conceptual vagueness.

More generally speaking, Social-Constructivism was also criticized for its disproportionate emphasis placed on ideational elements. In this logic, it might sometimes downplay the relevance and influence of material elements, or even the importance of realpolitik. Waltz considers that "[s]tate behavior varies more with differences of power than with differences in ideology, in internal structure of property relations, or in governmental form"²²⁹. In various cases, power distribution (and material factors overall) may influence state behavior more than non-material factors. The War in Ukraine has brought hard power back to the forefront, showcasing the continued importance of realpolitik. Additionally, for materialists, the continued relevance of hard power is of no surprise, as they consider that, in spite of "all the changes of boundaries, of social, economic, and political form, of economic and military activity, the substance and style of international politics remain strikingly constant"²³⁰.

Nonetheless, the impact of the war cannot be limited to the material dimension. The ensuing debates and points of contention surrounding sovereignty and territorial integrity play a defining role in how various states perceive and react to the conflict.

²²⁷ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics" in *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, no. 1, June 2001, p. 392. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.4.1.391>.

²²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 399.

²²⁹ Kenneth Waltz, "Reflections on Theory of International Politics", p. 329.

²³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 329.

Subsequently, to attempt to mitigate the other limitations of Social-Constructivism, the study offers comprehensive clarifications of key concepts, and also consistency in their application. This also allows the research to avoid a conceptual dilution that would render these theoretical categories empirically unapplicable. Moreover, the study also employs a mixed research methodology, combining qualitative strategies with quantitative approaches. Through such a perspective, the study offers a wider, more nuanced understanding of the topics at hand. Consequently, such a methodological choice creates a structured way of thinking about future configurations of social and of material factors and forces.

3.

Japan Post-2012

A Turning Point in Japanese Politics

For a wider period of time, Japanese policy directions were rather consistent but limited. On the regional stage, its economic-oriented approach served as the primary political tool for enhancing its influence²³¹. Complementing its regional posture, Japan's relations with the US continued to represent one of its core foreign policy pillars. Historically, the partnership with the US allowed Tōkyō to pursue economic growth and consolidation (especially through the Yoshida Doctrine). The partnership, however, also had a significant impact on the domestic stage of politics, as it nurtured “internal consensus on economic growth by not getting involved in international political and strategic affairs which were domestically divisive”²³². However, the 2000s showcased a series of transformations which impacted Japan's strategies. These transformations gradually influenced how perceptions and expectations evolved in relation to Japan's role on the global stage.

Why is 2012 considered pivotal in Japan's modern history and why is it the starting point of the research at hand? First and foremost, the importance of 2012 should be divided into two interconnected perspectives: on the one hand, it witnessed a series of transformative events on the internal political scene; on the other hand, it was marked by profound transformations on the international stage. To begin with, pre-2012 Japan was characterized by pronounced political instability and fragmentation. With the exception of Koizumi's tenure, political discontinuity (especially in the form of single-term cabinets) impacted the articulation of coherent Japanese strategies. This meant that, on the international front, Japan was rather

²³¹ Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, “Identity, Policy Ideas, and Asian Diplomacy: Japan's Response to the Rise of China” in *International Area Studies Review* 15, no. 4, 2012, p. 359, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2233865912467181>.

²³² Michael K. Connors, “Between a Doctrine and Hard Place: Japan's Emerging Role” in Michael K. Connors, Rémy Davison and Jörn Dosch, *The New Global Politics of the Asia-Pacific. Conflict and Co-Operation in the Asian Century*, 3rd ed., New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 86.

reactive, and not proactive in the face of challenges. Additionally, economic stagnation and social challenges eroded public confidence in the government, leading to inefficient measures at addressing these various challenges.

Internally, the political transition from the DPJ leadership to the 2nd Abe Government instilled a period of relative stability and coherence in Japanese politics. Moreover, it has successfully “created a solid domestic political base by lasting for more than seven years and because this longevity has been sustained partially by the people’s satisfaction with outcomes”²³³. Abenomics offered a different take on economic revitalization, a prerequisite for strengthening Tōkyō’s global influence. In addition, Abe introduced a foreign policy direction centered around three key elements: “a promoter of international rules and norms, a guardian of the global commons, and an effective US ally”²³⁴. In this sense, the Abe government actively focused on traditional security measures, aimed at legitimizing and formalizing a coherent framework of addressing regional and global challenges.

Moving forward, in the case of international transformations, the Asia-Pacific’s growing geo-strategic importance was paired with a series of changes that also impacted regional dynamics. Kim Jong-un’s rise to power emboldened North Korea’s missile tests. The continuous missile launches and nuclear tests heightened the regional security dynamics. Starting with 2012, “North Korea has conducted more than 220 missile tests and debuted a variety of missiles with increasing ranges”²³⁵. Furthermore, Xi Jinping’s ascendancy in 2012 also transformed the Chinese regional policies into more assertive and active ones. Particularly, the maritime tensions in South-China Sea and East-China Sea²³⁶ showcased the intensification of the regional security framework. These territories, aside from their symbolic value related to sovereignty, also hold significant importance due

²³³ Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, *Japan’s Asian Diplomacy. Power Transition, Domestic Politics, and Diffusion of Ideas*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 1.

²³⁴ James Przysup, “The Foreign Policy of Abe Shinzo: Strategic Vision and Policy Implementation” in *The Asan Forum*, February 5, 2015, <https://theasanforum.org/the-foreign-policy-of-abe-shinzo-strategic-vision-and-policy-implementation/>. Accessed July 4, 2024.

²³⁵ *Fact Sheet: North Korea Missile Test Activity*, Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, November 14, 2023, <https://armscontrolcenter.org/fact-sheet-north-korea-missile-test-activity/>. Accessed July 5, 2024.

²³⁶ *Diplomatic Bluebook 2013*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 11, 2013, p. 2, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page22e_000013.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

to their economic potential in the form of oil resources. Additionally, the Chinese authorities successfully implemented the arguments of multilateralism and of cooperation in their strategies. This led to the development of a network of (inter)dependency on the regional stage, as China manifested the discourse and behavior of an active promoter of cooperation, while being engaged in various disputes with regional partners²³⁷.

The territorial disputes in which Japan was trapped, paired with their lack of resolution (Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands with China, Takeshima/Dokdo Islands with South Korea and the Northern Territories with Russia) further complicated the international scenery. Additionally, the rapid shifts in Pyongyang's and Beijing's strategies produced significant debates in Japan's policy circles, including a "rise of outer space as a factor influencing Japan's national security"²³⁸. Consequently, these developments initiated the ensuing debates around Japan's security and the reinterpretation of Article 9 in the Constitution. However, as discussed, security manifests multiple facets, with various objects and threats. The state remains the central element throughout these discussions, but traditional military threats became intertwined with various other factors, such as domestic and international norms, public opinion, regional factors and non-conventional security challenges (cyber threats and environmental issues).

Obama's re-election provided a significant platform for the consolidation of the alliance with the US. Consequently, the American pivot to Asia allowed greater cooperation between the two nations²³⁹. Moreover, the ongoing partnership also proved essential for the Japanese strategies of bolstering its security posture and of expanding its global influence. The American authorities were calling for a more active Japanese role in regional security matters, encouraging Japan to shoulder greater responsibilities for the stability of Asia-Pacific²⁴⁰. This aligned with Japan's new regional and global perspectives and with the establishment of

²³⁷ Claudiu-Bogdan Aldea, "Japonia în Era Globalizării: Navigând prin Provocările unui Sistem Internațional în Criză" in Melania-Gabriela Ciot (ed.), *Criza Globalizării sau Criza Sistemului Internațional?*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2023, p. 265.

²³⁸ Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, *Japan's Asian Diplomacy*, p. 160.

²³⁹ *Diplomatic Bluebook 2013*, p. 6.

²⁴⁰ *Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee. Toward a More Robust Alliance and Greater Shared Responsibilities*, Ministry of Defense of Japan, October 3, 2013, p. 1, https://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11591426/www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/us/anpo/pdf/js20131003_e.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025.

a more coherent policy platform with the 2nd Abe Government. As a consequence, the Guidelines for Japan–US Cooperation were revised in 2015, to reflect these transformations, marking a significant step towards a more integrated alliance.

All things considered, 2012 represented a pivotal year for both regional dynamics and Japanese politics. With the return of Abe at the head of the LDP, Japan focused on redefining its role on the international stage, while also attempting to legitimize these changes domestically. These developments reflected a profound shift in both domestic politics and regional strategies. The ensuing administrations (with particular emphasis on the Abe period) also sought to reshape Japan's identity and the norms it adheres to (both nationally and internationally). Thus, the strategic initiatives developed during this time attempted to establish Japan as a significant player in global affairs.

The Land of the Rising Power

In this dynamic context, the Japanese authorities sought to enhance Tōkyō's security posture, as well as its global influence. The impact of the economic miracle has started to wane, indicating a shift in Japan's power projection strategies. Due to the legal (Constitution) and normative constraints (expectations of the general public), Japan made use of mostly co-optive forces throughout its international relations and policies. Additionally, based on historical experiences, it had to adopt a softer approach by emphasizing the importance of norms and values for cooperation. This perspective was “especially true in Southeast Asia, where the legacies of war have often bred distrust among regional countries towards Japan”²⁴¹. In turn, Japanese authorities employed cultural diplomacy and international cooperation as softer forms of power. However, in the face of a degrading regional security environment, the need for a more comprehensive security strategy to focus on harder aspects of power became evident. Solely relying on soft power forces was no longer feasible or efficient in addressing emerging regional and global threats. Moreover, on its own, soft power exhibits a limited potential of political leverage and of power of decision. Accordingly, since 2012, proactive diplomacy

²⁴¹ Indira Zahra Aridati, “The Courteous Charmer: A Hard Look at Japan's Soft Power in Southeast Asia” in *FULCRUM*, October 18, 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/aseanfocus/the-courteous-charmer-a-hard-look-at-japan-soft-power-in-southeast-asia/>. Accessed July 7, 2024.

and the development and enhancement of harder aspects of power became significant features of Japanese policies. Japan came to be perceived as an anchor of regional stability, but these expected responsibilities do not always match its policy inclinations.

Japan's Cultural Reach and Global Norm Leadership

As discussed, non-material forms of power also play a fundamental role on today's stage of international politics. For Nye, this type of power is influenced by three factors of a specific actor: "its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)"²⁴². In certain cases, these elements are interconnected (or at least two of them, in most situations political values and foreign policy). For example, Japan's ODA assistance as a tool of foreign policy showcases its commitment to sustainable development.

Going beyond this, soft power is usually disseminated through two means. First of all, cultural values play a crucial role in shaping a country's attractiveness for other actors. However, culture as an element of soft power can be split in two fundamental constitutive elements. Cultural diplomacy, which emphasizes traditional or popular cultural values, promotes understanding and cooperation. Moreover, political culture also serves as a foundational element of soft power. An actor's political values, such as the commitment to human rights, are linked to its foreign policy initiatives. A successful model of governance exemplifies the state's commitment to these principles globally. Moving forward, the second channel of exerting soft power is the legitimate practices performed by that actor, which are indicative of norm compliance and/or enforcement. As discussed in the theoretical part, a key concept for this is *legitimacy*, which can have a significant impact upon the power of actors. Legitimate practices include actions and policies that align with international norms, thereby contributing to the influence of that particular state. If political culture highlights that the values of an actor are projected to a regional or global audience, legitimate practices enact these political values, showcasing commitment.

²⁴² Joseph S. Nye, "Think Again: Soft Power" in *Foreign Policy*, February 23, 2006, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2006/02/23/think-again-soft-power/>. Accessed July 7, 2024.

Japan's pronounced cultural potential (as a form of attraction) remained unharnessed for a longer period of time. In 1983, with the rise of Japanese neo-nationalism in the form of *Nihonjinron*, then prime minister Nakasone admitted in an interview for *Time Magazine* that the Japanese "have done quite well in exporting products. But from now on, we must make greater efforts in exporting cultural information"²⁴³. During the 1980s and 1990s, Japan's primary focus was on economic development, as it emerged as one of the world's leading economies. In this logic, Japan's influence was largely driven by its economic prowess and technological exports, being portrayed as an economic giant, but a political dwarf²⁴⁴, due to its significant focus on the economic dimension in the detriment of political leverage. Consequently, the expectations adopted by the global community were in line with Japan's posture. However, as Japan experienced its lost decade(s), it fundamentally recognized the need of diversifying and consolidating its strategies for exerting power. In line with the "growing interest in more contemporary forms of Japanese popular culture such as manga and video games, the Japanese state has also moved to leverage Japanese pop culture as a new source of cultural soft power"²⁴⁵. Consequently, the power of cultural diplomatic initiatives is directly tied to the shift in "political paradigm from the modern world of geopolitics and power to the postmodern world of image"²⁴⁶. Complementing harder aspects of influence (such as military developments and economic prowess), the image and reputation of a state became essential in its competitiveness²⁴⁷. This was primarily relevant for Japan during the 2000s, when economic slowdown and political fragmentation prevented coherent policy-making.

This shift was standardized with the introduction of a more coherent soft power strategy in the form of 'Cool Japan' and the Creative Industries Policy in 2010, by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI)²⁴⁸. Japan has

²⁴³ "An Interview with Yasuhiro Nakasone" in *Time Magazine*, August 1, 1983.

²⁴⁴ Yee-Kuang Heng, "Shaping the Indo-Pacific? Japan and Europeanisation" in *LSE Ideas* 2021, p. 9.

²⁴⁵ Yee-Kuang Heng, "Three Faces of Japan's Soft Power" in *Asian International Studies Review* 18, no. 1, 2017, p. 173, <https://doi.org/10.16934/isr.18.1.201706.171>.

²⁴⁶ Peter van Ham, "The Rise of the Brand State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation" in *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 80, no. 5, 2001, p. 4.

²⁴⁷ Takeshi Matsui, "Nation Branding Through Stigmatized Popular Culture: The 'Cool Japan' Craze Among Central Ministries in Japan" in *Hitotsubashi Journal of Commerce and Management* 48, no. 1, 2014, p. 88.

²⁴⁸ *Cool Japan Strategy*, Cabinet Secretariat, https://www.cao.go.jp/cool_japan/english/index-e.html. Accessed July 12, 2024.

acquired significant soft power assets, being identified as a cultural superpower (or rather soft-power superpower). These developments are mostly related to the Japanese considerable establishment of soft power institutions throughout the world. 'Cool Japan' brings forward the cultural tools and apparatus of attraction that define Tōkyō. Moreover, this initiative draws attention on the one hand towards tradition (such as, crafts, cuisine and art) and, on the other hand, on the constantly evolving popular culture (*anime*, *manga*, fashion style, the music industry)²⁴⁹. This capacity of influencing the perceptions and preferences of other actors through cultural diplomacy plays an important role in Tōkyō's strategies. Such a "discourse portrays an attractive, yet evasive, ahistorical Japanese national character that is radically different from anything else and is expressed in a diversified range of symbolic forms, old and new"²⁵⁰. The 'Cool Japan' initiative was aimed at harnessing and promoting Japan's cultural appeal, while also boosting the export of Japanese commercial products. As part of the initiative, various programs have been launched to assist the promotion of Japanese cultural exports. The program gained coherence with the establishment of the Cool Japan Fund in 2013²⁵¹ and the Public-Private Partnership in 2015²⁵², with a focus on expanding the demand for Japanese cultural products and engaging multiple stakeholders in the process. These elements transformed 'Cool Japan' from a simple initiative, developed around popular forms of culture, to a strategy promoted at the governmental level. However, its economic goal remained out of reach, as overall revenue generated by cultural exports remained rather limited²⁵³. As indicated by the chart below, Japan's exports of cultural goods did not witness any unusual increase in the

²⁴⁹ *Cool Japan Strategy Public-Private Partnership Initiative*, Cool Japan Strategy Promotion Council, Cabinet Secretariat, 2015, p. 1, https://www.cao.go.jp/cool_japan/english/pdf/published_document1.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025.

²⁵⁰ Michal Daliot-Bul, "Japan Brand Strategy: The Taming of 'Cool Japan' and the Challenges of Cultural Planning in a Postmodern Age" in *Social Science Japan Journal* 12, no. 2, 2009, p. 253.

²⁵¹ *What Is Cool Japan Fund?*, Cool Japan Fund Inc., <https://www.cj-fund.co.jp/en/about/cjfund.html>. Accessed July 13, 2024.

²⁵² *The Cool Japan Public-Private Partnership Platform*, Cabinet Secretariat, https://www.cao.go.jp/cool_japan/english/platform_en/platform_en.html. Accessed July 13, 2024.

²⁵³ Jacques Quass de Vos, "Cool Japan, Soft Power, and the Commodification of a National Identity" in *Stellenbosch University Japan Centre*, November 14, 2023, <https://www0.sun.ac.za/japancentre/2023/11/14/cool-japan-soft-power-and-the-commodification-of-a-national-identity/#ref>. Accessed July 13, 2024.

period 2004–2019. Moreover, they consistently made-up between 0.7% and 1% of Japan’s total goods exports²⁵⁴.

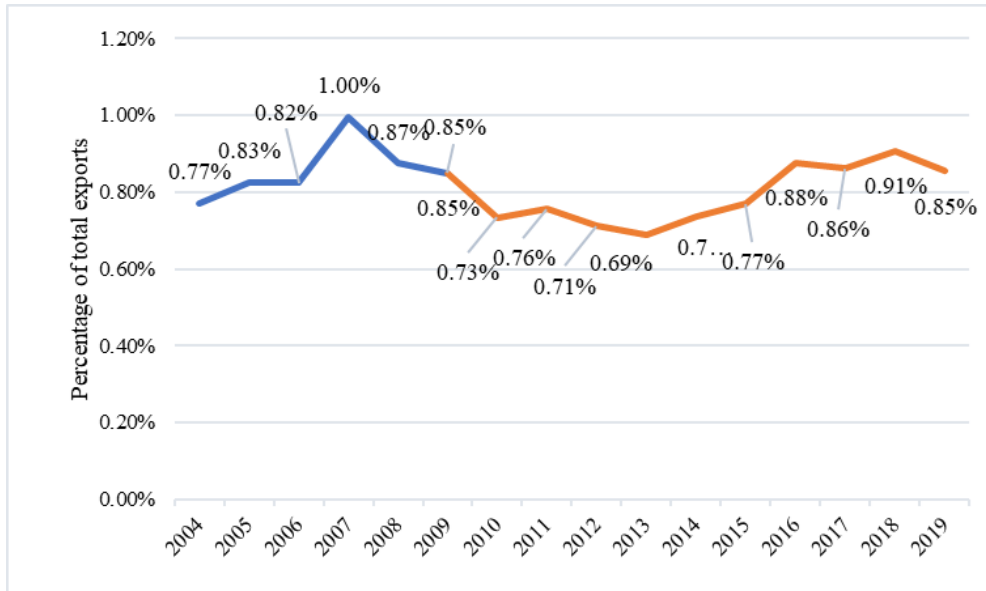


Figure 6: Graph showcasing the percentage of cultural exports out of all exports (2004–2019)

Despite the fact that it relatively failed to surpass its economic targets, ‘Cool Japan’ played a significant role in enhancing Japan’s cultural influence worldwide, solidifying its status of cultural superpower. Numerous voices draw attention to Tōkyō’s cultural and soft power standing nowadays (as, most often, cultural values are perceived as the primary form of soft power)²⁵⁵, considering it one of the most influential nations. Although such generalizations can be expressed based on the clear spread of Japanese cultural values, it is equally important to

²⁵⁴ Data has been adapted from *International Trade in Cultural Goods*, The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), <https://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=3630>. Accessed July 13, 2024. *Cultural goods*, as a statistical concept, refer to consumer goods that convey ideas, symbols and ways of life.

²⁵⁵ For example, see David McElhinney, “Is Japan’s Soft Power at an All-time High?” in *Tokyo Weekender*, December 28, 2023, <https://www.tokyoweekender.com/japan-life/news-and-opinion/japan-soft-power-at-an-all-time-high/>. Accessed July 15, 2024 and Joshua W. Walker, “Soft power and Japan’s role in a complex world” in *The Japan Times*, October 24, 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2023/10/24/japan/japan-soft-power/>. Accessed July 15, 2024.

take into consideration that quantifying such cultural influence proves inherently challenging. While economic and social metrics (such as cultural data exports and learners of Japanese) provide tangible data, cultural diplomacy “depends on its impact on attitudes, and attitudes are extremely difficult to gauge”²⁵⁶. Basically, the influence of ‘Cool Japan’ is visible in the increased global interest in Japanese cultural products. Accordingly, it contributed to a positive international image, but the actual political benefits (in terms of legitimacy and influence) are difficult to quantify. Moreover, for prime minister Abe, the initiative represented a key strategy of the government, becoming “a useful hanger for his political and economic revitalizations programme and a means for enhancing national dignity”²⁵⁷. This is a similar approach to the rise of *Nihonjinron* in the 1980s, being perceived as a form of nationalism. This is further reinforced through the vague definition of what actually makes up Japanese coolness, as it serves as “a convenient catchphrase to denote Japanese uniqueness, however construed”²⁵⁸. This might prove damaging on the long-term, as the initiative might be perceived of espousing cultural imposition. Nonetheless, Japan’s cultural diplomacy, including the ‘Cool Japan’ initiative, capitalizes on the widespread appeal of cultural products. Fundamentally, the strategic value of cultural diplomacy initiatives lies in their subtlety and ability to influence perceptions without coercion or imposition, even though their effects might not be directly measurable. Paired with the spread of communication platforms, various facets of Japanese popular culture (such as *manga* and *anime*) are deeply integrated into the preferences and daily lives of people worldwide.

However, the success of such strategies is highly dependent on the audience as, “in consumer capitalism, cool is ephemeral by definition, always to be replaced by something newer and more exciting”²⁵⁹. Therefore, the sustainability and relevance of ‘Cool Japan’ have come under criticism, and the shift towards the “country’s stable democracy and vibrant civil society”²⁶⁰ as elements of soft

²⁵⁶ Thomas U. Berger, “Japan in Asia: A Hard Case for Soft Power” in *Orbis* 54, no. 4, 2010, p. 567, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2010.07.005>.

²⁵⁷ Taku Tamaki, “Repackaging National Identity: Cool Japan and the Resilience of Japanese Identity Narratives” in *Asian Journal of Political Science* 27, no. 1, 2019, p. 117, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2019.1594323>.

²⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 109.

²⁵⁹ Daliot-Bul, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

²⁶⁰ Hanscom Smith, “Toward a Universal Japan: Taking a Harder Look at Japanese Soft Power” in *National Bureau of Asian Research – Asia Policy*, no. 15, 2013, p. 116.

power should take precedence. Japan represents a success story in terms of democracy, and its latest focus on transnational issues (such as climate change combating efforts, sustainable development, disaster prevention and preparedness) show its position as a global actor. Rather than various strings related to popular culture, Japan should rather (re)direct its resources to emphasize its success and stability as a democracy for over seven decades. This perspective pertains to the political culture, on the one hand, and to the legitimate practices, on the other hand.

Japan's extensive focus on addressing transnational issues is reflected in the steps taken for the implementation of 'The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'. In 2017, Japan shifted its focus, aiming to become "a leader toward a future where economic, social and environmental improvements are attained in an integrated, sustainable and resilient manner while leaving no one behind"²⁶¹. Aside from domestic politics, Tōkyō also highlighted the need to export good practices worldwide, supporting the global implementation of the agenda items in various fields. This commitment came as an extension of the establishment of the Development Cooperation Charter in 2015²⁶², revising the 1992 ODA Charter. Fundamentally, the Japanese strategic priorities changed, encompassing human security and peace as strategic factors of developmental cooperation. In this sense, the charter drew attention to the need of mobilizing diverse resources to address developmental challenges. ODA assistance should be complemented by private investments and NGO involvement. Fundamentally, the charter basically highlighted the fact that softer aspects of power would have to be complemented by a more comprehensive approach that includes harder aspects (such as, a more proactive role on the regional stage to promote a free and open order)²⁶³. The deterioration of the regional security environment and the increasing complexity of challenges (transcending one-dimensional challenges) led to the Revision of the Development Cooperation Charter in 2023²⁶⁴. In this sense, the protection of democratic institutions and the fostering of quality, sustainable growth were directly linked to security

²⁶¹ *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Japan's Implementation*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, March 2017, p. 2, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000252817.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

²⁶² *Development Cooperation Charter*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, February 2015, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000067701.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

²⁶³ *Ibidem*, pp. 3–4.

²⁶⁴ *Development Cooperation Charter*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, June 2023, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100514705.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

and stability²⁶⁵. Various transnational issues, such as climate change and economic disparities are not isolated, but part of a complex web impacting peace and stability. Hence, the 2023 revision points towards the fact that such legitimate practices and norm promotion efforts contribute not only to addressing immediate developmental needs, but also to the long-term security and stability of the regional and international frameworks.

Japan's engagement with ASEAN exemplifies its strategic approach to addressing these multifaceted issues. The 2022 White Paper on Development Cooperation confirmed that the "region's stability and development are directly linked to the security and economic prosperity of Japan"²⁶⁶. By this regional focus, Tōkyō attempts to improve overall cooperation efforts, while still emphasizing the need for norms-based cooperation. In terms of its focus on sustainable developmental practices and its regional identity, Japan has been "offering its help as an attractive solutions-provider through capacity-building and aligning itself diplomatically with shared values and norms"²⁶⁷.

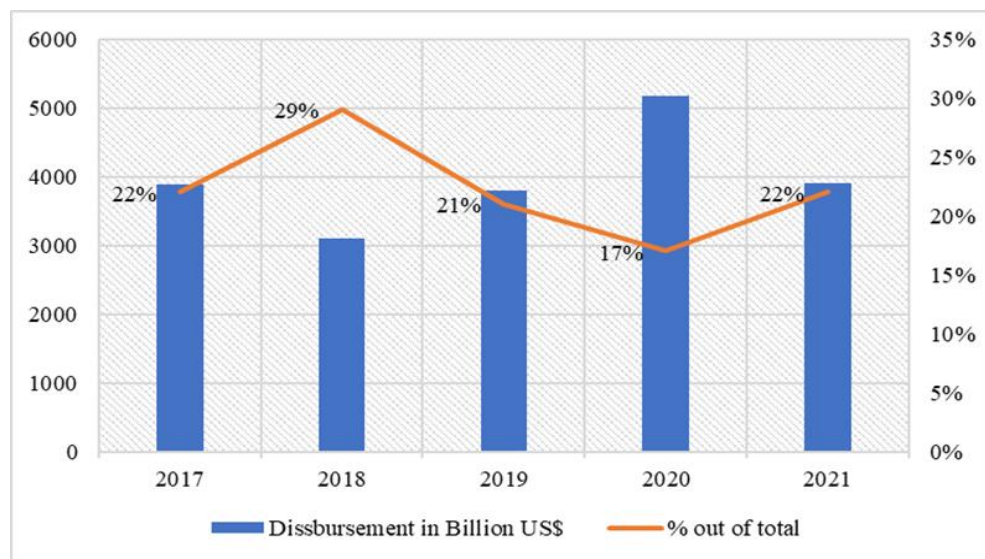


Figure 7: Graph showcasing the ODA gross disbursements to East Asia (2017–2021)

²⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 8–9.

²⁶⁶ *White Paper on Development Cooperation 2022*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, December 2023, p. 92, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/pagewe_000001_00014.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

²⁶⁷ Yee-Kuang Heng, "Three Faces of Japan's Soft Power" p. 176.

As depicted in the graph above²⁶⁸, ODA gross disbursements to East Asia from 2017 to 2021 highlight a consistent support within Asia. Meanwhile, disbursements to Asia remained very stable as well, accounting for 56% to 61% of Japan's total ODA support from 2017 to 2021²⁶⁹. This clearly points towards Japan's strategic focus on enhancing stability and development in East Asia as a broader commitment to security. Additionally, with its identity of solutions-provider and norms-enforcer and supporter, Japan tied these legitimate development practices with wider, security-oriented initiatives, such as the FOIP. Moreover, the regional alignment of these initiatives further adds to their legitimacy. ASEAN's own Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which advocates for "the rule of law, openness, freedom"²⁷⁰ underscores a shared commitment to a secure regional environment.

Moving forward, another key pillar of Japan's political culture that enhances its soft power is democracy promotion. Democracy came to be central to Japanese rhetoric starting with the second Abe government. In a policy speech from 2013, prime minister Abe highlighted the need to "develop a strategic diplomacy based on the fundamental values of freedom, democracy, basic human rights, and the rule of law"²⁷¹. Since then, the promotion of democratic values came to permeate the majority of Japanese policy papers and statements. Ranging from enhancing the judicial system, to supporting free and fair electoral processes, democracy support came to encapsulate various measures surrounding the overall promotion of democratic practices. As a notable example, Japan has provided continuous assistance to Laos, manifesting a pivotal role in the development of its legal system. Moreover, since 2012, Japan's overall assistance materialized in the drafting of the nation's first civil code in 2020²⁷².

²⁶⁸ Data has been centralized from the 2017–2022 White Papers on Development Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, January 23, 2025, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/page_000017.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

²⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁷⁰ *White Paper on Development Cooperation 2022*, p. 92.

²⁷¹ *Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 183rd Session of the Diet*, Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, January 28, 2013, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201301/28syosin_e.html. Accessed July 20, 2024.

²⁷² *The First Civil Code in Laos Entered into Force*, Ministry of Justice of Japan, May 27, 2020, https://www.moj.go.jp/EN/kokusai/m_kokusai08_00001.html. Accessed July 22, 2024.

These efforts are also outlined in wider cooperation partnerships that focus, among other aspects, on democracy support²⁷³. Additionally, democracy support and the commitment to promoting shared values is also connected to wider, traditional-security related initiatives, such as the FOIP. Fundamentally, “Japan seems to be utilizing the term ‘democracy’ to emphasize commonalities with other democratic countries as a means of encouraging defense cooperation with democratic security partners”²⁷⁴. In this sense, Japan’s normative commitments to universal values have, at times, faced pragmatic challenges. Moreover, in relation to democracy promotion, although it is substantive, there are voices even within Japan who consider that “[d]emocracy is not necessarily commonly accepted as a guiding norm for foreign policy even among Japanese media; at least some of the media view democracy more as an umbrella term useful for strategic diplomacy”²⁷⁵. In such cases, Japan’s normative commitments play against more pragmatic diplomatic and political considerations. Another point of criticism relates to the fact that Japan’s support was not entirely tailored for the societies, as it was mostly directed towards official institutions. However, the *Kusanone*²⁷⁶ initiative (which is actually most commonly known as Grant Assistance for Grass-Roots Human Security Projects) stands out as a counterexample to this. Unlike the broader approach exemplified and discussed earlier, Kusanone specifically targets grass-root level projects. Launched in 2019, it is mostly aimed at providing financial assistance to smaller entities, directly connected to the community (such as NGOs and local governments) to address specific social needs²⁷⁷. All in all, Japan’s strategic deployment and dissemination of various soft power resources has maintained its high global standing.

²⁷³ For example, for an analysis of US–Korea–Japan tripartite cooperation for democracy support in the Indo-Pacific, see also Nicholas Szechenyi, Jada Fraser and Hannah Fodale, “The Case for U.S.–Japan–ROK Cooperation on Democracy Support in the Indo-Pacific Region” in *Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)*, November 3, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/case-us-japan-rok-cooperation-democracy-support-indo-pacific-region>. Accessed July 22, 2024.

²⁷⁴ Maiko Ichihara, “The Role of Democracy Promotion in Japanese Foreign Policy” in Nicholas Szechenyi (ed.), *Asianism and Universalism: The Evolution of Norms and Power in Modern Asia*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2019, p. 14.

²⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 11–12.

²⁷⁶ Literally translated as grass roots.

²⁷⁷ *White Paper on Development Cooperation 2018*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, January 15, 2020, p. 121, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/page24e_000261.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

This global recognition showcases Tōkyō's cultural attraction and impact on international audiences, facilitated by efforts such as 'Cool Japan' and its comprehensive cultural diplomacy. In addition, its focus on development cooperation and on tackling transnational issues point towards a multifaceted role on the international stage. However, in the contemporary world, soft power, on its own, proves to be limited. Accordingly, soft power initiatives must be coupled with a more active and pronounced engagement on the regional and international stages. Ultimately, Japanese foreign policies must attain a balance between soft power elements and a heightened, more active international profile (which may be perceived as a harder element in manifesting power). This is perfectly highlighted through the connection between national security and developmental policies, including norm enforcement and democracy promotion.

Japan's Strategic Engagement in Security and Defense Policies

As mentioned earlier, while Japan attempted to expand its soft power avenues, by enhancing cultural diplomacy and development cooperation initiatives, these facets of influence are not efficient on their own in addressing evolving challenges both on the regional and on the global frameworks. With the re-election of Shinzō Abe, the period was marked by a palpable shift in Japan's strategic posture, fundamentally driven both by the evolving regional dynamics and by the change in political values and momentum brought about by the prime minister. The major changes indicated by the new LDP government in 2012 revolved around new foreign policy directions and around political and institutional reforms aimed at bolstering the country's defensive posture. Changes in political and institutional directions were also visible during the post-9/11 period, when non-military support was provided during the Iraq War. However, the "pace of Japanese adaptation to the post-Cold War conditions might have continued at a slow, incremental pace had not the emergence of a newly assertive China and a belligerent North Korea created a more threatening regional environment"²⁷⁸. The intensification of security dynamics in the regional context provided Japan both with the opportunity and the need to adapt to the evolving conditions of the contemporary world. These changes are encapsulated in Japan's *proactive*

²⁷⁸ Pyle, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

*contribution to peace*²⁷⁹, which highlighted the need of international cooperation and increased involvement in international affairs to guarantee the security of the system.

The changes on the regional stage were more evident in China's strategic rise. Since assuming office, Xi Jinping consolidated his position within the CCP, showcasing that "China might finally become the aspiring regional if not global hegemon that many in the US and Japan had warned about for years"²⁸⁰. Accordingly, in November 2013, the Chinese authorities formally announced an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over East China Sea, action that sparked various reactions among regional actors. For Japanese authorities, the most pressing vocal concerns revolved around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands²⁸¹, however it also showcased the inherent gaps in the national defense posture. The Abe cabinet developed a series of institutions and strategies aimed at enhancing Tōkyō's defense policies (following the efforts undertaken by the DPJ administrations). The National Security Council (NSC) was established in December 2013 to provide a coherent decision-making process in terms of national security. Accordingly, under the guidance of the NSC, the Japanese authorities published a series of policy guidelines that outlined the most important challenges to national security and also the strategic priorities and defense policies to shift towards a more involved foreign policy. Moreover, the first National Security Strategy (NSS)²⁸² was published in December 2013, whose primary aim was to identify the long-term priorities for Japan's security. The NSS highlighted a series of key challenges, directly impacting the security environment: shifting power dynamics in the regional context (evident through North Korea's prolonged military exercises and the military and strategic rise of China), which were coupled by a series of novel global risks and gray-zone challenges, that move beyond traditional state security, including maritime freedom, outer space and issues related to cyberspace

²⁷⁹ *Japan's Security Policy*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 05, 2023, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1we_000079.html. Accessed July 27, 2024.

²⁸⁰ Tobias Harris, *The Iconoclast*, p. 248.

²⁸¹ *Statement by the Minister for Foreign Affairs on the announcement on the 'East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone' by the Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 24, 2013, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_000098.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

²⁸² *National Security Strategy*, Cabinet Secretariat, December 17, 2013, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

and cybersecurity²⁸³. Overall, the NSS concluded with the necessity of enhancing national defense capabilities, but, most importantly, it emphasized the need to build-up a comprehensive defense architecture. This framework would coordinate national defense resources and initiatives with extensive international partnerships with like-minded partners. Complementing the fresh NSS, the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) were upgraded in December 2013 to also align the nation's defense policies with the wider strategic direction²⁸⁴. The NDPG provided similar details and conclusions as the NSS, pointing towards the need for new structural defense guidelines, necessity precipitated by the changes in the security dynamics. Additionally, the NDPG highlighted a series of practical enhancements for the JSDF, such as improved personnel training and equipment modernization²⁸⁵. Furthermore, it focused on strengthening regional and global security cooperation (including disaster relief and defense capacity building), both through multilateral platforms (such as ASEAN, the EU and NATO) and at the bilateral level.

Fundamentally, the institutionalization of such security guidelines and frameworks created a policy environment which led towards a reconceptualization of collective self-defense. Accordingly, in this logic, the emphasis on proactive contribution to peace opened the path towards analyzing the scope and limitations of Japan's defense capabilities under Article 9 of the Constitution²⁸⁶. As these policy papers highlighted the need for a more active involvement in addressing various challenges and for more coherent defense measures, they were naturally constrained by a strict, traditional interpretation of Article 9. In simple terms, Article 9 prohibits the right of belligerency and the maintenance of war potential. However, it cannot constrain the government to protect Japan in case of national threats to its security. Traditionally, this interpretation meant that the JSDF could only use force if Japan was directly attacked. Through the Cabinet Decision on Development of Seamless Security Legislation to Ensure Japan's Survival and

²⁸³ *Ibidem*, pp. 8–12.

²⁸⁴ *National Defense Program Guidelines*, Ministry of Defense of Japan, December 17, 2013, https://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11591426/www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2014/pdf/20131217_e2.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025.

²⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

²⁸⁶ Michael Auslin, "Japan's New Realism. Abe Gets Tough" in *Foreign Affairs*, February 16, 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/japan/2016-02-16/japans-new-realism>. Accessed July 27, 2024.

Protect its People²⁸⁷ adopted in July 2014, the government recognized the fact that Japan's security is (inter)dependent on that of its allies and partners. Hence, through the 2014 Cabinet Decision, the Abe administration highlighted the need of enhancing national defense capabilities and put forth the prospect of reinterpreting Article 9 and expanding the strict interpretation of the use of force. In this logic, this decision of reinterpreting Article 9 to allow for limited collective self-defense (CSD) if national security is at stake laid the groundwork for the 2015 security legislation (formally known as 'Japan's Legislation for Peace and Security', enacted in 2016). This represented a remarkable achievement for Abe, hinted at during his first tenure with the intention of revising the Constitution. Although this reinterpretation fell short of a structural constitutional revision, it succeeded in creating a new core framework for Japan's security.

The policy reforms enacted in 2016 were centered around two fundamental elements of Tōkyō's security assets: exercising CSD and an expansion of peace cooperation initiatives. Naturally, as part of its proactive contribution to peace, the legislation was aimed at four major policy areas: defense preparedness, diplomatic initiatives, Japan–US cooperation and norms-guided partnerships²⁸⁸. In terms of reinterpretation, the legislation set forth three fundamental criteria for exercising the use of force for CSD: first, Japan or a close ally is subjected to an armed attack directly threatening their survival; second, there are no other appropriate means for addressing the threat; third, the use of force must be kept to a minimum and consistent with international law²⁸⁹. As part of Japan–US cooperation, Washington has been a fervent advocate for an extended and more active Japanese role in the alliance, particularly during the consolidation of regional threats. Accordingly, this decision of reinterpretation “has set in motion the most profound change in

²⁸⁷ *Cabinet Decision on Development of Seamless Security Legislation to Ensure Japan's Survival and Protect its People*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, July 1, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page23e_000273.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

²⁸⁸ Atsuhiko Fujishige, “New Japan Self-Defense Force Missions under the ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’ Policy: Significance of the 2015 Legislation for Peace and Security” in *Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)*, July 21, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-japan-self-defense-force-missions-under-proactive-contribution-peace-policy>. Accessed August 04, 2024.

²⁸⁹ *Japan's Legislation for Peace and Security. Seamless Responses for Peace and Security of Japan and the International Community*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, March 2016, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000143304.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

the U.S.–Japan alliance since the end of the occupation”²⁹⁰. The ability to participate in CSD highlighted a more typical alliance pattern, with a more balanced burden-sharing (in terms of potential escalations) in the regional security framework. However, as indicated above, the reinterpretation of Article 9 was still limited in permitting the use of force for CSD. In this sense, the immediate effects it had on the alliance should not be exaggerated or overstated, but rather interpreted through its impact in “political symbolism and the implications of new operational freedom”²⁹¹. The reinterpretation has opened the way for a more active foreign policy posture (in line with its proactive contribution to peace) and for increased strategic flexibility within its alliance with the US. Moreover, it is also fundamental to recognize that the actual unfolding and practical implementation of these changes has been rather incremental, as Japan had to balance its evolving and dynamic security posture with domestic sensitivities, on the one hand, and with regional perceptions on the other hand. Regionally, the most vocal responses came from China, who especially condemned the manner through which the Abe government sidestepped a full revision of the Constitution²⁹². South Korea experienced mixed reactions related to the reinterpretation. On the one hand, it was perceived as beneficial in fostering closer collaboration with the US (a fundamental South Korean ally in the region as well) and in proving a stronger deterrent for North Korea. On the other hand, such changes were perceived as threatening Seoul’s security, especially due to lingering mistrust spurred from unaddressed historical tensions²⁹³.

The legislative package also introduced significant changes for Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs). Essentially, it brought forward changes related to Japan’s engagement in PKOs and also to the JSDF’s role in such missions²⁹⁴. Japan was

²⁹⁰ Pyle, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

²⁹¹ Ian E. Rinehart, “Collective Self-Defense and US–Japan Security Cooperation” in *East-West Center*, October 1, 2013, p. 10.

²⁹² Amy King, “China’s Response to Japan’s Constitutional Reinterpretation” in *East Asia Forum*, July 27, 2014, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2014/07/27/china-responds-to-japans-constitutional-reinterpretation/>. Accessed August 5, 2024.

²⁹³ For a comprehensive analysis of South Korea’s reactions on Japan’s reinterpretation of the Constitution and enhanced military dimensions, see also E. J. Cho and Ki-young Shin, “South Korean Views on Japan’s Constitutional Reform under the Abe Government” in *The Pacific Review* 31, no. 2, November 14, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2017.1397731>.

²⁹⁴ *Japan’s Legislation for Peace and Security. Seamless Responses for Peace and Security of Japan and the International Community.*

authorized to participate in PKOs following a resolution of the UN, or of any other regional organization. Moreover, the new policy expanded the scope activities and roles that the JSDF could undertake during such missions. By widening the spectrum of operational tasks which can be performed by the JSDF (including securing areas and rescuing personnel), the legislative package formally allowed the use of weapons in performing such tasks²⁹⁵. In 2015, the Ministry of Defense (MOD) also underwent structural restructuring as part of the defense reforms spearheaded by the Abe government. The Acquisition, Technology & Logistics Agency (ATLA) was directly established under the leadership of the MOD to further streamline various processes related to the JSDF. The most important aims of ATLA revolve around 3 fundamental missions²⁹⁶: the development of advanced defense technologies (as part of Research and Development – R&D – trends), the standardization of equipment acquisition processes (under the guide of efficient project management) and the improvement of equipment development and technology cooperation with partners (in line with the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology). Throughout the years, several policy papers have been published highlighting the main priorities of ATLA in terms of defense capabilities. The 2016 Medium-to Long-term Technology Outlook²⁹⁷ and the 2023 Defense Technology Guideline²⁹⁸ represent significant advancements in the strategic direction of the agency, connecting technological developments with the other policy institutions and papers initiated starting with 2013 (the NSS, and the National Defense Strategy – NDS, established later in 2022). Through its wider focus on R&D, defense technologies and international cooperation, ATLA primarily focuses on bolstering Japan's defense capabilities (in terms of emerging technologies and digital infrastructure), while also contributing to wider, regional and global security. As highlighted above in relation to development cooperation, Japan's new defense strategy integrates both military-inclined and non-military tools in addressing more complex security challenges. In strengthening this point

²⁹⁵ Fujishige, *op. cit.*

²⁹⁶ *Missions of ATLA*, Acquisition, Technology & Logistics Agency (ATLA), https://www.mod.go.jp/atla/en/soubichou_gaiyou.html. Accessed August 5, 2024.

²⁹⁷ *Medium-to Long-Term Technology Outlook*, Acquisition, Technology & Logistics Agency (ATLA), August 2016, <https://www.mod.go.jp/atla/en/policy/pdf/outlook.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

²⁹⁸ *Defense Technology Guideline 2023. To Defend Our Nation at All Times with Technologies*, Ministry of Defense of Japan, June 2023, <https://www.mod.go.jp/atla/guideline2023/en/>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

of view, the new defense measures “transcend hard security areas in order to encompass a stronger role for the SDF in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts”²⁹⁹. Aside from PKOs, the JSDF has been actively involved in Humanitarian Assistance / Disaster Response missions (HA/DR), focusing on crisis aid. This was particularly evident in November 2013, when Japan deployed one of its most extensive humanitarian missions to Philippines, in response to the Haiyan Typhoon. Overall, the MOD and the JSDF deployed over 1100 personnel, three vessels and 16 aircraft, alongside medical assistance and sustained financial aid. In a more symbolic way, headlines stated that Japanese troops were returning to previously occupied regions³⁰⁰, highlighting the profound transformation of Japan’s identity. A military presence once associated with conflict has transformed into a force of humanitarian aid. Such sustained efforts (including PKOs, HA/DR missions and more specific knowledge-sharing exercises) have contributed to the “growing list of lessons learned by the SDF as they have accumulated significant experience in working alongside other nation’s militaries”³⁰¹. The collaboration involving JSDF personnel primarily enhances its logistical and operational capabilities, fostering deeper connections with Japan’s partners. This wider framework, in which traditional security aspects (such as military capabilities) is directly connected to human security and development showcases the vision of proactive contribution to peace. By integrating (even in discourse and in policy papers) the various facets of military strength with softer security aspects (such as HA/DR), Tōkyō is capable of projecting capabilities of addressing a broader spectrum of security challenges.

Aside from these legislative and policy transformations, transformations could be perceived in more practical areas as well. Japan’s defense budget has been marked by gradual increases throughout the last decade. Since the adoption

²⁹⁹ J. Berkshire Miller, “Battle-Ready Japan? The Real Story Behind Tokyo’s First National Security Strategy” in *Foreign Affairs*, January 10, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2014-01-10/battle-ready-japan>. Accessed August 5, 2024.

³⁰⁰ J. T. Quigley, “68 Years After WWII, Japanese Troops Return to the Philippines” in *The Diplomat*, November 28, 2013, <https://thediplomat.com/2013/11/68-years-after-wwii-japanese-troops-return-to-the-philippines/>. Accessed August 5, 2024.

³⁰¹ Sheila A. Smith, “Reinterpreting Japan’s Constitution” in *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 2, 2014, https://www.cfr.org/blog/reinterpreting-japans-constitution?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAAR3D8yh2kIw07I5Qvy9BNtN75CC7jR67IRxeF5bVFcfk6f9NZJHLfsP-r3k_aem_mx3wCRrZcNA93Cea3XHiOw. Accessed August 5, 2024.

of the NSS and the updated NDPG in 2013, the budget has witnessed a steady increase almost every year. Moreover, with 2020, the defense budget even broke the traditional cap of 1% of the GDP (as it can be seen in the graph below³⁰²). Additionally, for the 2024 fiscal year, the amount expanded to 1.6% of the GDP, totaling a record 56.7 billion US\$ through March 2025³⁰³. The expanded defense budgets were used for the modernization of existing platforms, for technological development (e.g., ATLA's role) and for the acquisition of advanced equipment. Thanks to these, Japan maintains one of the most capable militaries in the world in spite of rather restrictive post-World War II normative and legal frameworks. For example, Japan ranked 6th in the Military Capability ranking of the 2023 Lowy Institute Asia Power Index³⁰⁴ and 7th in the 2024 Global Fire Power Index³⁰⁵.

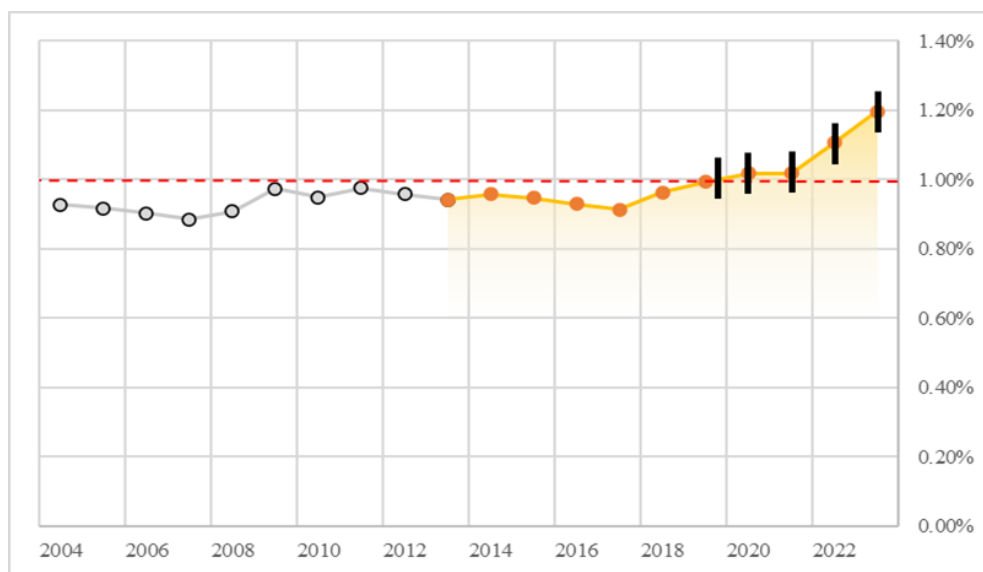


Figure 8: Graph showcasing the evolution of Japan's defense spending in relation to its GDP (constant \$ value, 2004–2023)

³⁰² Data adapted from *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*, <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>. Accessed August 9, 2024.

³⁰³ Shinnosuke Nagatomi, "Japan's Defense Spending Climbs to 1.6% of GDP" in *Nikkei Asia*, April 27, 2024. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/Japan-s-defense-spending-climbs-to-1.6-of-GDP>. Accessed August 9, 2024.

³⁰⁴ *Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2023 Edition*, Lowy Institute, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/data/military-capability/>. Accessed August 9, 2024.

³⁰⁵ *GFP 2024 Military Strength Ranking*, Global Fire Power, <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php>. Accessed August 9, 2024.

For these rankings, conventional military capabilities (excluding nuclear arsenal) were taken into consideration. The consistent investments witnessed throughout the last years have enabled Japan to remain a key player both in regional and in global security dynamics. Moreover, these rankings highlight Japan's ability to project its harder aspects of power, maintaining a more integrated and comprehensive defense posture in an increasingly competitive environment. Fundamentally, Japan's defense capabilities saw notable enhancements in the last years. These transformations were aimed at creating a more versatile, better prepared and technologically advanced defense force. While the differences in JSDF equipment between 2010 and 2019 are not drastic, they represent tangible and meaningful developments that reflect Japan's efforts of gradually enhancing its defense capabilities. To visually showcase these developments, the table below contains a comparison of existing major JSDF equipment in 2010, 2013 and 2019 (the years when revised NDPGs were published)³⁰⁶.

Division	Type of equipment	2010	2013	2019
JGSDF (Japan Ground Self-Defense Force)	Tanks	*400	*700	*600
JMSDF (Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force)	Destroyers	48	47	54
	Submarines	22	16	22
	Combat aircraft	*150	*170	*190
	Aegis-equipped destroyers	6	6	8
JASDF (Japan Air Self-Defense Force)	Combat aircraft	*340	*340	*370
	Fighters	*260	*260	*290

Figure 9: The table details the distribution of military equipment alongside the three branches of the JSDF (based on the 2010, 2013 and 2019 numbers reported in the NDPGs)

Japan's air defense capabilities saw increased modernization efforts, as the JASDF benefited from the acquisition of advanced fighter jets. The actual upgrade process was initiated in 2011, when the MOD decided to adopt the Lockheed

³⁰⁶ Information is centralized from NDPGs.

Martin F-35 Lightning II jet as the JASDF fighter aircraft³⁰⁷. Accordingly, in 2018, the MOD formally announced the acquisition of 105 additional F-35 jet fighters to replace the aging F-15 aircraft. In spite of its advanced technological capabilities and surveillance potential, the decision was perceived as controversial and realistically counterproductive. As a multirole aircraft, the F-35 excels in air-to-ground attacks and naval support, however it displays severe limitations in air-to-air combat abilities³⁰⁸. This is particularly important as scramble missions³⁰⁹ to intercept potential airspace violations represent one of the JASDF's most frequent and important missions. In recent years, the majority of these scrambling activities were performed in response to incursions by Chinese and Russian aircraft. To put things into perspective, the chart below showcases the dynamics of scramble missions with Chinese aircraft³¹⁰.

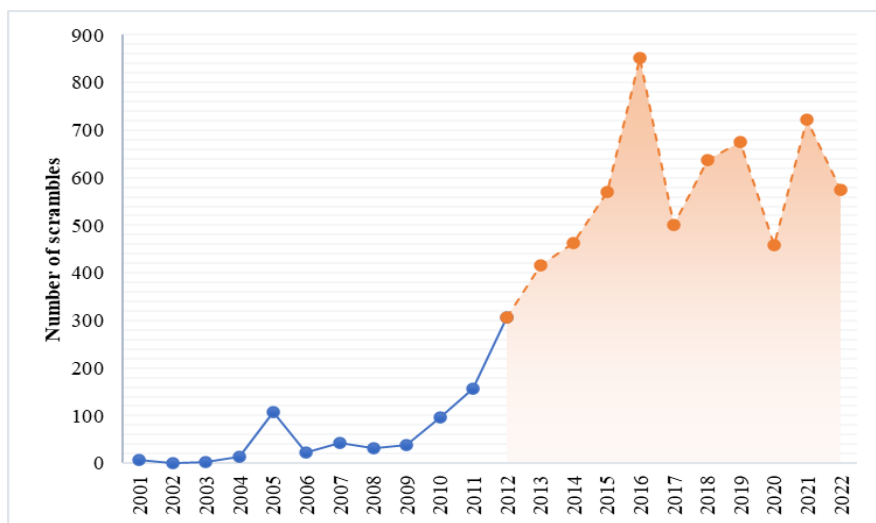


Figure 10: Graph showcasing the number of scramble missions in between 2001 and 2022. Notice the spike starting with 2010

³⁰⁷ “Japan Selects Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II” in *Lockheed Martin*, December 19, 2011, <https://news.lockheedmartin.com/2011-12-19-Japan-Selects-Lockheed-Martin-F-35-Lightning-II>. Accessed August 11, 2024.

³⁰⁸ Franz-Stefan Gady, “Are 105 Extra F-35s the Best Option for Japan’s Military?” in *The Diplomat*, December 19, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/are-105-extra-f-35s-the-best-option-for-japans-military/>. Accessed August 11, 2024.

³⁰⁹ ‘Scramble’ refers to the rapid deployment of military aircraft in response to an immediate threat, representing an air-to-air interception mission.

³¹⁰ *Defense of Japan 2023*, Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2023, p. 74, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2023/DOJ2023_EN_Full.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025.

In the early 2000s, such incidents were rather rare (with an exception in 2005). Starting with 2010 and with a steady increase with 2012, the number of scramble missions surged, peaking at 851 such encounters in 2016. This coincided with the consolidation of Xi Jinping's tenure, indicating the heightened territorial disputes and more frequent incursions near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Since 2016, in spite of various fluctuations, the overall level of activity remained elevated especially in comparison to the pre-2012 era. Moreover, in relation to encounters with Russian aircraft, the number of scramble missions in the 2013–2022 period has ranged between 150 and 473 annually³¹¹. To illustrate the geographical context of these encounters, the map below showcases the areas where the 2022 scramble missions have occurred³¹².

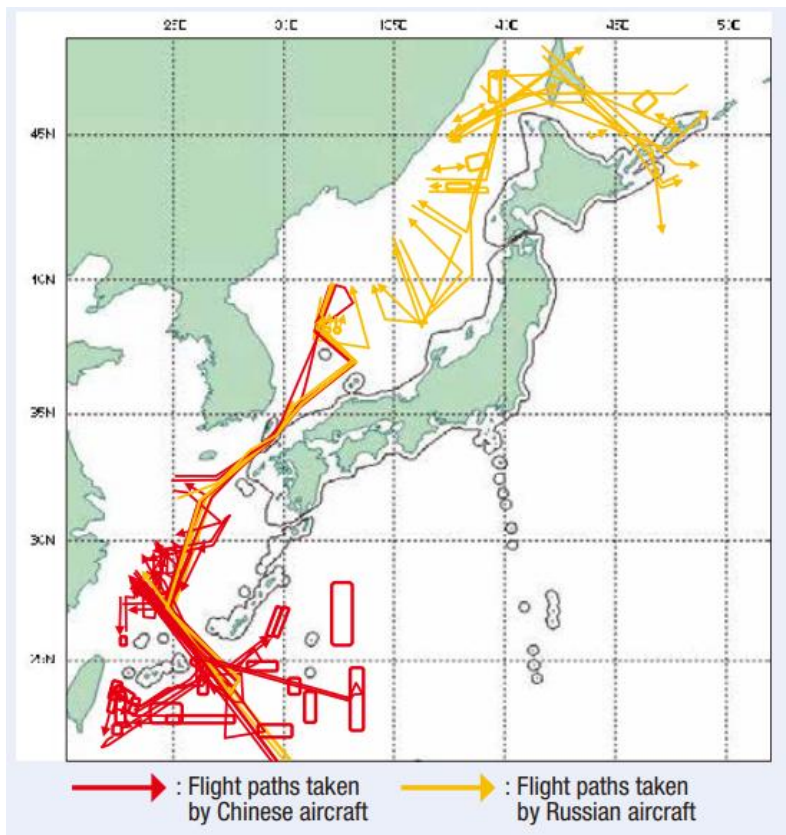


Figure 11: Map showcasing where most scramble mission took place in 2022

³¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 136.

³¹² *Ibidem*, p. 306.

As it can be seen, in the case of Chinese aircraft, the majority of the scramble missions took place around the regions near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, while for Russian incursions, they were mostly centered around the northern airspace, near the Northern Territories/Kuril Islands. In this logic, these air-to-air encounters raise various questions about the effectiveness of F-35 deployment in defense capabilities. Accordingly, the selection of F-35 aircraft could only represent “a stopgap measure by Japan’s Ministry of Defense (MOD) to bridge a shortage of fighter aircraft, as older JASDF airframes [...] will slowly be phased out”³¹³. Furthermore, Japan also invested in complementary equipment (aside from fighters) to detect various threats to its security. One of the prime examples is the acquisition of 4 E-2D Advanced Hawkeye Airborne Early Warning and Control Aircraft and its associated equipment in 2015³¹⁴ and 5 additional units in 2024³¹⁵, which provide enhanced surveillance capabilities and “situational awareness of air and naval activity in the Pacific region”³¹⁶. The JMSDF also witnessed modernization efforts. The development of the new *Taigei* submarine class represented a symbolic and technological milestone in Japan’s maritime capabilities, complementing the renowned *Sōryū* class. As a new class of attack submarines, the *Taigei* particularly excel in terms of stealthiness. Additionally, they incorporate improved sonar systems and lithium-ion batteries (instead of lead-acid ones), meaning that the *Taigei* submarines display one “of the most advanced underwater performance of any submarine force in the world”³¹⁷. Aside from the new submarines, the JMSDF also benefitted from the development of the Aegis-equipped *Maya* class destroyers, mentioned in the 2013 NDPG³¹⁸. These destroyers are designed to enhance Tōkyō’s ballistic missile defense (BMD) capabilities within a dynamic regional framework.

³¹³ Gady, *op. cit.*

³¹⁴ Japan – E2D Advanced Hawkeye Airborne Early Warning and Control Aircraft, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, June 1, 2015. <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/japan-e-2d-advanced-hawkeye-airborne-early-warning-and-control>. Accessed August 14, 2024.

³¹⁵ John Hill, “US and Japan Procure Nine E-2D Advanced Hawkeye in \$1.5bn Deal” in *Airforce Technology*, July 22, 2024, <https://www.airforce-technology.com/news/us-and-japan-procure-nine-e-2d-advanced-hawkeye-in-1-5bn-deal/>. Accessed August 14, 2024.

³¹⁶ Japan – E2D Advanced Hawkeye Airborne Early Warning and Control Aircraft, 2015.

³¹⁷ Eric Wertheim, “Japan’s Advanced Lithium-Ion Submarines” in *U.S. Naval Institute*, December 2022, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2022/december/japans-advanced-lithium-ion-submarines>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

³¹⁸ *National Defense Program Guidelines*, 2013, pp. 22–23.

Moreover, the *Maya* class destroyers are also equipped with Cooperative Engagement Capability (CEC), allowing real-time information-sharing with other vessels or aircraft (such as the E-2D aircraft mentioned above) or with allies' vessels³¹⁹.

Japan's defense strategies over the past decade reflect a gradual approach to transforming its defense posture, while still navigating the normative constraints of the post-World War II period. The establishment of a consolidated and coherent strategy with the adoption of the NSS and the revision of the NDPG in 2013 showcase Japan's immediate reactions to the emergence of various security challenges, both in the regional and in the global frameworks. Over time, these immediate reactions consolidated into medium-term approaches to establish a coherent process in relation to national security, by focusing on a more active and engaged foreign policy stance. Throughout this, the Abe administration played a significant role, as it "wrested power from the bureaucrats and consolidated it in the prime minister's office, where he had the counsel and intelligence needed to determine strategy and manage crises"³²⁰. Abe succeeded in breaking the post-war taboos on various military-related topics, such as CSD, overseas deployment of the JSDF and cooperation in the development of military equipment. Furthermore, the increasingly larger MOD budgets assisted in the modernization of Japanese defense capabilities. In this logic, Japan came to resemble a *great power*, reflecting a visible willingness to actively participate in international defense matters. However, can Japan be considered a great power in the increasingly complex and overtly competitive security environment of the 21st century?

Great Powers: Where Does Japan Stand?

What exactly is a great power? It is only natural that the meanings associated with this concept vary depending on the theoretical framework used in analysis. Traditionally, the concept of great power has been most widely associated with materialist theories, especially Realism for which, in an anarchic system, power (in material terms) is the central currency for a state's influence. Accordingly, great powers are primarily defined by their military capabilities, as they all "are

³¹⁹ Yoshihiro Inaba, "JMSDF to Put its Latest Aegis Destroyer JS Maya through its Paces" in *Naval News*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/05/jmsdf-to-put-its-latest-aegis-destroyer-js-maya-through-its-paces/>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

³²⁰ Pyle, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

inclined to look for opportunities to alter the distribution of world power in their favor”³²¹. Moreover, drawing from these, they seek to enhance their military potential to garner influence over regional and global affairs, seeking to change the international order to reflect their interests. Moving forward, Walt considers that a great power is also shaped by the major wars it took part in³²². For the contemporary actors that fit in this category, World War II and the Cold War represent the staple conflicts which define them. Moving forward, if adherence to international structures represents a defining feature of a great power, then it outputs a narrow definition in which only the five permanent members of the UNSC are to be considered true great powers. This would also explain why changing this list is an extremely difficult process (e.g., on Japan and Germany). This argument also comes in line with the one above – that great powers are also defined by their major wars. In the case of Japan, however, this could prove rather problematic in defining its status of great power. As a defeated power in World War II and a rather subtle actor, with a low-profile policy during the Cold War, Japan did not emerge entirely victorious from these military and ideological confrontations. As mentioned earlier, social memories of such conflicts have long-lasting effects on state behavior on the one hand, and on public perception on the other³²³. In this logic, although Japan has enhanced its military capabilities overall, it is still influenced by significant pacifist norms and constraints.

But how would the Social-Constructivist perspective handle the discussion around Japan's positioning as a great power? Social-Constructivism does not reject the concept of great power, but it rather seeks to understand how the social category and identity of great power is constructed and changed overtime. In this logic, as a theoretical lens, Social-Constructivism is more focused on answering the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ of great power status assigned to various actors, rather than accepting it as an objective reality. The great power identity came to encapsulate a variety of dimensions, ranging from material to ideational factors, and while a “great power’s capabilities must outweigh those of ordinary states, it is not

³²¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 3.

³²² Stephen M. Walt, “Great Powers Are Defined by Their Great Wars” in *Foreign Policy*, September 21, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/21/great-powers-are-defined-by-their-great-wars/>. Accessed August 20, 2024.

³²³ *Ibidem*.

necessary for it to perform equally well in all categories”³²⁴. In this logic, at first glance, two major aspects related to Social-Constructivist thought stand out. First, the norms Japan adheres to influence its power projection capabilities. Moreover, this is particularly relevant with those norms and behaviors that were consolidated through historical experiences. The major characteristics of the Yoshida Doctrine, specifically Japan’s minimal development of defense capabilities and most importantly the dependence on the US in terms of security, defined Japan’s identity and power status on the stage of world politics. Secondly, Japan’s identity and status are largely dependent on its legitimacy and on the recognition such legitimacy shapes for other international actors. This becomes particularly important in the “postmodern world of image”³²⁵ – if a state is not recognized as a great power, it might encounter substantial resistance/opposition, regardless of its material capabilities. Fundamentally, these two elements are interconnected. Japan’s limited military capabilities (in line with its historical pacifism) and its reliance on the US (which might be recognized as a weakness, as Japan was widely perceived as the junior partner) are significant factors that constrain its status as great power. In the last 20 years, Tōkyō has been gradually expanding its military role both within the alliance, and within the wider, regional framework. Furthermore, it also sought to reshape its national norms (highlighted through the constitutional reinterpretation), however such efforts are still largely constrained by national and international expectations. Accordingly, Japan still experiences limitations in its power capabilities, mostly as normative expectations shaped through historical experiences³²⁶.

So, then the question still stands: is Japan a great power? While Japan’s prowess is hard to contest in certain spheres, it is nonetheless ambiguous in others. Japan’s legitimacy and recognition are particularly more prominent in areas where it has defined its role and focused on developing its influence. Hence, Japan holds great power capabilities in terms of economic prowess (4th largest economy in

³²⁴ Jonathan M. DiCicco and Tudor A. Onea, “Great-Power Competition” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, January 31, 2023, p. 10, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.756>.

³²⁵ Matsui, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

³²⁶ These historical experiences are conceptualized by Andrew L. Oros as Japan’s three unresolved historical legacies – Andrew L. Oros, *Japan’s Security Renaissance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, pp. 48–65.

2023 and 2024³²⁷) and soft power assets (according to the 2024 Brand Finance Soft Power Index, Japan ranks 2nd in Business & Trade, and in Education & Science, while ranking first in Sustainable Future³²⁸), while it is questioned in terms of other categories, such as military power and regional leadership. This shows that Japan's positioning as a great power is more complex, but it does not imply that Japan is not an important actor in global politics. Japan's regional influence as a leader is also overshadowed by various dynamics, such as the rise of China or of other regional players (e.g., India and South Korea). Fundamentally, as Japan seeks regional stability, it can be stated that Tōkyō's focus is on collective efforts (especially through multilateral and bilateral efforts), rather than on a dominant approach.

By these rules, Japan is not a great power in its fullest sense. Hence, it was more often categorized as a middle power. Conceptually, there are various meanings attached to this status, however for this research, middle powers represent those actors that manifest significant influence on the stage of international relations, but they fall short of the comprehensive power capabilities that characterize great powers³²⁹. Additionally, "middle powers tend to rely on the use of normative capacities by taking diplomatic initiatives or being entrepreneurial in institutional development or rule-building"³³⁰. Accordingly, as a middle power, Japan exerts influence through diplomatic, economic and normative means, rather than through military influence.

Nonetheless, in spite of its middle power status, Japan is still an important player in the great power competition. This competition primarily manifests through the strategic rivalry between the US and China, widely perceived as the two authentic great powers or super powers, with various actors aligning themselves in relation to these forces³³¹. In the context of such great power competition, China and the

³²⁷ Data collected from *GDP, current prices*, International Monetary Fund, <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPD@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD>. Accessed August 27, 2024.

³²⁸ *Global Soft Power Index 2024*, Brand Finance, <https://brandirectory.com/softpower/map?region=1&metric=1&statement=0&fromRegion=1>. Accessed August 27, 2024.

³²⁹ Bruce Gilley and Andrew O'Neil, "China's Rise through the Prism of Middle Powers" in Bruce Gilley and Andrew O'Neil (eds.), *Middle Powers and the Rise of China*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014, p. 2.

³³⁰ Kyoko Hatakeyama, "A Middle Power's Roles in Shaping East Asian Security Order: Analysis of Japan's Engagement from a Normative Perspective" in *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 65, no. 3, September 2019, p. 469, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12592>.

³³¹ Claudiu-Bogdan Aldea, "Japonia în Era Globalizării", p. 264.

US embody distinct systems of values and strategic priorities, to which other relevant actors respond.

For the regional context, presumably “no middle power in Asia is as important as Japan”³³². Japan’s role as a pivotal player has become increasingly prominent in line with its continuous transformations in its foreign and domestic security politics. These shifts also encourage wider cooperation with regional actors, particularly ASEAN, who acknowledged Japan’s commitment to development cooperation and regional stability³³³. Moreover, this more active foreign policy has complemented its longstanding and sustained ODA cooperation efforts. Additionally, Japan also fostered cooperation in emerging fields, such as R&D and technology infrastructure development. Lastly, Japan sought to deepen its defense cooperation within a broader multilateral framework and through various bilateral agreements. Overall, all these initiatives were aimed to strengthen Japan’s regional position as the most comprehensive middle power. However, it is crucial to understand that these changes are not confined within the US–China competition. Fundamentally, this often represents the tragedy of middle powers, having their behavior and actions perceived solely or at least primarily through their impact in great power competition. Consequently, while mediating or balancing within this competition represents an element of their strategic engagement, it does not make up their entire strategic horizon. This is also applicable to Japan. The nuanced role that Japan plays in the regional context reflects its broader strategic vision, where its increasing leadership is not a simple reaction to great power competition, but rather consistent efforts undertaken to shape the future of the Indo-Pacific in such a way that aligns with Tōkyō’s values on the one hand, and its medium-to-long-term interests on the other hand. Japan is a strategic US ally in the regional framework, but its strategies and policies are not simple reactions or adjustments to the dynamics of the great power competition. Moreover, as the name suggests, Japan’s proactive approach established a more engaged stance in shaping and implementing regional norms. Subsequently, Tōkyō focused on establishing wider partnerships, ranging from security cooperation to knowledge-sharing exercises in terms of environmental practices.

³³² Richard Javad Heydarian, “Japan Leads the ‘Middle Powers’ in Shaping Asia’s Future” in *The Japan Times*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/05/17/commentary/japan-commentary/japan-a-leader-in-shaping-asias-future/>. Accessed August 27, 2024.

³³³ *Ibidem*.

To conclude, Japan's status as comprehensive middle power was influenced historically by two types of deficits: capacity and legitimacy³³⁴. To begin with, the capacity deficit stemmed primarily from the Peace Constitution, which significantly limited Japan's military capabilities and constrained its ability to shape regional and global matters. This capacity deficit was also complemented by significant legitimacy deficits. As legitimacy rests primarily in the realm of ideas, it requires a more interpretative analysis. Thus, legitimacy deficits can be divided into two distinct yet interconnected categories. First of all, internally, Japan established a coherent identity and normative framework under the guide of the Yoshida Doctrine, which prioritized economic consolidation and minimal involvement in security matters. This approach was also consistent with national norms and domestic expectations of a peace-oriented state. Consequently, such a normative framework led to a low-profile posture that made Japan the junior partner in its alliance with the US. It also created a certain domestic sensitivity towards radical change, particularly on the security and defense fronts. In general, this sensitivity did not foster the need for change. All these factors shaped Japan's more reactive role. Second, internationally, Japan's legitimacy as a proactive actor was challenged through collective historical experiences. In this sense, there are two perspectives at hand. On the one hand, Japan's atrocities during its colonial rule fueled mistrust, particularly in China and South Korea. These experiences led to more prudent (in the case of Seoul) or more critical (in the case of China) reactions towards Japanese intentions. On the other hand, the country's passivity during the Cold War, influenced by its reliance on the US for security, shaped international perceptions and expectations around Japan. Thus, these legitimacy deficits have modeled Japan's role in the regional and global arenas, being identified as an 'abnormal' country³³⁵.

However, both 'normal' and 'abnormal' represent socially-constructed concepts, defined by various factors such as historical experiences and political and cultural values. In essence, 'normality' in defense and security matters is defined both by objective facts (such as military capabilities), but also by how the domestic and the international audiences perceive the country's role in the

³³⁴ Inoguchi and Bacon, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

³³⁵ For a comprehensive analysis of what normalcy is expected from Japan, see also Yoshihide Soeya, Masayuki Tadokoro and David A. Welch (eds.), *Japan as a 'Normal Country'? A Nation in Search of Its Place in the World*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011.

international system. As Japan is self-defined as a peace-loving nation³³⁶, this ‘abnormality’ stems from the historical narratives and cultural and political values that emerged post-World War II. However, despite the lack of offensive potential, “Japan is not ‘abnormal’ in its retention of art 9”³³⁷. Additionally, in line with these deficits and abnormality, the country was bound by a series of self-limiting measures that Pyle defines as the no’s³³⁸: no participation in CSD, no arms exports, no sharing of defense technology, no more than 1% of GDP for defense spending, no military use of space and no nuclear potential. This chapter highlighted how Japan has been subtly evolving its security and defense policies and how domestic perceptions and normative frameworks gradually expanded in line with international and internal changes. These gradual policy shifts and normative changes underline Japan’s efforts to redefine its role in regional and global security architectures. However, this does not mean that Tōkyō embarked on a journey of normalization – the exclusive categorization of ‘normal’ versus ‘abnormal’ oversimplifies the complexities of Japan’s security evolution. Particularly for this reason, this chapter aimed to examine the specific conditions that have driven these changes and also the nature of these changes. Fundamentally, Article 9 remains a foundational element of Japan’s identity and normative configuration (both internally and internationally) and it is highly unlikely to be revised in the short-term³³⁹.

³³⁶ *Japan’s Security Policy*, 2023.

³³⁷ Simon Miller, “Japan’s Pacificism as National Identity and a ‘Normal’ Security Option” in *The University of Queensland Law Journal* 42, no. 3, November 29, 2023, p. 481, <https://doi.org/10.38127/uqlj.v42i3.8551>.

³³⁸ Pyle, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

³³⁹ Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 481.

4.

Japan's Role in the Indo-Pacific: Regional Diplomacy and Influence

The stage of Asian international politics is of critical importance to Japan. As a nation located in East Asia, Japan's security objectives, its economic growth and overall political partnerships depend heavily on the region's power configuration and degree of stability. As a comprehensive middle power with an impressive development policy, Tōkyō played a significant role in fostering growth across Asia, but its economic policies have been complicated both due to prolonged economic stagnation (impacting the scope and depth of measures) and due to the emergence of new regional players³⁴⁰.

The region's geostrategic significance has continued to expand, turning it into a focal point for power competition, where the diverse interests of various powers interact. In terms of economic parameters, the Asia-Pacific is among the top regions in terms of real GDP growth. In 2024, South Asia reached an annual growth rate of 6.3% (second worldwide), while Southeast Asia managed a 4.6% annual growth rate (third worldwide)³⁴¹. In addition, China, Japan and India make up three out of the five largest economies in the world (in terms of GDP)³⁴². The development of various bilateral and multilateral platforms (such as ASEAN) had a significant role in bringing to the forefront the multitude of security threats affecting the contemporary world. They also encouraged to some extent rules-based and norms-guided cooperation.

In spite of all these, the Asian security framework is still heavily fragmented, being widely characterized by often competing interests and territorial disputes. According to the 2022 National Security Strategy, "Japan's security environment

³⁴⁰ Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, *Japan's Asian Diplomacy*, p. 1.

³⁴¹ Numbers were adapted from *Real GDP growth*, International Monetary Fund, https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/SAQ/SEQ. Accessed September 7, 2024.

³⁴² *GDP, current prices*, International Monetary Fund, <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPD@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD>. Accessed September 7, 2024.

is as severe and complex as it has ever been since the end of World War II”³⁴³. In terms of traditional security, the region is the most nuclearized one in the world, being the home of some of the biggest armies in terms of active personnel³⁴⁴. Despite multilateral efforts (such as those conducted by ASEAN) which achieved significant progress in fostering dialogue, the overall security cooperation remains limited. Great power rivalries also shape the way in which small and middle powers establish their security priorities. Alongside these conventional facets of security, non-traditional challenges are also more visible within the region, ranging from environmental degradation to piracy and terrorism.

Over the last two decades, Japan's diplomatic strategy in Asia has been characterized by a commitment to regional cooperation, alongside development assistance and more pragmatic concerns. In line with the Yoshida Doctrine, the major type of engagement was part of wider ODA policies. Starting with 2006, ODA development was complemented with a more comprehensive outlook, in the form of *value-oriented diplomacy* and the ‘Arc of Freedom and Prosperity’ (as mentioned in Chapter 1), which was aimed at promoting democracy and economic development³⁴⁵. With the accentuation of regional dynamics in 2012, the need for a coherent regional policy became evident. Japan's policy horizons were structured around a security framework to counter China's increased assertiveness and North Korea's continued military program. Following a series of repeated incursions by Chinese vessels around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Abe even stated that “the South China Sea seems set to become a ‘Lake Beijing’”³⁴⁶. North Korea's revitalized offensive programs (both nuclear and conventional missile tests) have created serious anxieties for Japan. Japan's approach was primarily aimed at enhancing its security partnership with the US, whose role in the regional framework was deemed fundamental. Moreover, Tōkyō's foreign policy was

³⁴³ *National Security Strategy of Japan*, Cabinet Secretariat, December 2022, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryō/221216anzenhoshō/nss-e.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁴⁴ Rémy Davison, “Asia's ‘Great Game’?” in Michael K. Connors, Rémy Davison and Jörn Dosch (eds.), *The New Global Politics of the Asia-Pacific. Conflict and Co-Operation in the Asian Century*, 3rd edition, New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 3.

³⁴⁵ Tarō Asō, *On the ‘Arc of Freedom and Prosperity’*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, March 12, 2007, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/pillar/address0703.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁴⁶ Shinzō Abe, “Asia's Democratic Security Diamond” in *Project Syndicate*, December 27, 2012, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/magazine/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe>. Accessed September 7, 2024.

also focused on establishing broader cooperation with like-minded countries (such as Australia, India, Philippines and Vietnam), who found themselves in a similar situation regarding the China factor. Naturally, these efforts came to encapsulate a broader strategy that aimed to shape Japan's identity as a proactive and stability-instilling power in the region. Japan's strategy was also based on supporting multilateral initiatives for conflict resolution or even cooperation as, due to globalization, divergent actors came to hold overlapping national interests³⁴⁷. In this logic, Japanese initiatives were focused on a series of interconnected objectives. Foremost, security cooperation became omnipresent in Japanese initiatives, policy papers and official discourse. Through the promotion of a *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (FOIP), it drew attention to the need of upholding free trade and intra-regional cooperation. Second, development cooperation remained a crucial component of Japanese engagement. Third, economic multilateral platforms and cooperation were aimed at promoting regional integration. Finally, an expanding component of Japan's regional strategy is the 'human-to-human' element, aimed at fostering deeper level of relations.

Japan's Decade of Transformation – Regional Policies after 2012

In 2013, Japan's foreign policy strategies were focused on three key priorities: strengthening the alliance with the US, engaging with neighboring states and pursuing wider economic revitalization. The strength of the alliance and the norm-guided behaviors with neighboring actors were explicitly correlated with the stability and long-term peace of the region. These strategies encompassed multiple facets of security, ranging from the traditional military concerns, to economic and human factors.

Up until 2016, there was no centralized and fully coherent Japanese strategy to tackle issues related to the various facets of security. In relation to maritime security, prior to 2016, Japan has indeed developed institutional mechanisms to comprehensively address ocean management (such as the Basic Act on Ocean

³⁴⁷ Hideshi Tokuchi, "The Role of Japan in Sustaining Regional Order in East Asia" in *Asia Policy* 13, no. 2, April 2018, p. 33, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2018.0020>.

Policy in 2007). However, these efforts largely focused on environmental concerns, rather than on the evolving security issues in the regional maritime domain³⁴⁸. Subsequently, 'security' was very present in policy papers and discourses, but not in a comprehensive classification. In terms of maritime security, the 2013 Diplomatic Bluebook directly connected the necessity of a stable maritime order with Japan's core national interests³⁴⁹. Accordingly, ensuring this safe maritime order was highlighted as a significant strategic priority not only for Japan's security, but also for its relations with the US and with its Asian partners. In this logic, maritime security represents one of the key principles of Japan's ASEAN diplomacy enunciated by Abe on January 18, 2013³⁵⁰:

- (1) Protect and promote together with ASEAN member states universal values, such as freedom, democracy and basic human rights;
- (2) Ensure in cooperation with ASEAN member states that the free and open seas, which are the most vital common asset, are governed by laws and rules and not by force, and to welcome the United States' rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region;
- (3) Further promote trade and investment, including flows of goods, money, people and services, through various economic partnership networks, for Japan's economic revitalization and prosperity of both Japan and ASEAN member states;
- (4) Protect and nurture Asia's diverse cultural heritages and traditions;
- (5) Promote exchanges among the young generations to further foster mutual understanding.

Japan focused on two interconnected objectives: it adopted a more pronounced regional role (and an expanded conceptualization of security) and it focused on collective capacities to address security challenges. This perspective was further reinforced during the 8th East Asia Summit held in Bandar Seri Begawan, the capital of Brunei, where Abe emphasized the need for upholding maritime freedom and enhancing norms-governed behavior, rather than power plays³⁵¹. Additionally,

³⁴⁸ Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, *Japan's Asian Diplomacy*, pp. 119–120.

³⁴⁹ *Diplomatic Bluebook 2013*, pp. 6–7.

³⁵⁰ *Factsheet on Japan–ASEAN Relations*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, February 2013, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/asean/factsheet.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁵¹ *The Eighth East Asia Summit 2013*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 10, 2013, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page3e_000110.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

on the practical side, he highlighted the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) as a potentially beneficial platform for enhancing practical cooperation (including knowledge-sharing and collective exercises). Such an approach was also visible in relation to the US. In 2013, the Japan–US–ROK Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Meeting³⁵² (July 1, 2013) and the Fifth Meeting of the India–Japan–US Trilateral Dialogue³⁵³ (November 15, 2013) underscored the common goal of maintaining freedom of navigation and ensuring maritime stability in the Indo-Pacific by promoting rules-based cooperation. Starting with 2014, Tōkyō's Proactive Contribution to Peace came to the forefront. Primarily, it called for increased cooperation and a more engaged approach in maintaining regional stability. This broader strategy engaged wider efforts towards strengthening bilateral and multi-lateral ties with key partners. For regional actors, a more proactive stance translated into an expansion of Japan's "contribution for enhancing maritime law enforcement capacity of ASEAN countries, including through the provision of patrol vessels and equipment, human resource development of maritime law enforcement agencies, and cooperation in the field of international maritime law"³⁵⁴. From these various discussions and conferences, cooperation materialized in a series of practical exercises and seminar. A key example of this is the Seminar on Capacity Building in Maritime Security and Disaster Relief, organized from September 24th to 26th, 2014³⁵⁵, following Abe's keynote address at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue earlier that year³⁵⁶. During the seminar, the Japanese side provided more comprehensive explanations of its security policies based on the Proactive Contribution to Peace to key ASEAN participants (officials from Indonesia, Cambodia, Singapore, Thailand, The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Myanmar and Laos). Such practical knowledge-sharing exercises served as a platform for Japan to outline its strategic

³⁵² *Japan–U.S.–ROK Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, July 1, 2013, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page6e_000098.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁵³ *The 5th Meeting of the Trilateral Dialogue*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 15, 2013, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_000083.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁵⁴ *Japan–ASEAN Ministerial Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 9, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page3e_000222.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁵⁵ *Seminar on Capacity Building in Maritime Security and Disaster Relief*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 26, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page23e_000328.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁵⁶ *Keynote Address by H.E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the 13th IISS Asian Security Summit 'Shangri-La Dialogue'*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, May 30, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page18e_000087.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

vision and offer concrete examples of its capacity-building efforts in maritime security and disaster relief. In 2014, Abe also highlighted the Three Principles of the Rule of Law at Sea³⁵⁷, which emphasize that states should raise their maritime claims based on international law, they should avoid coercion in advancing those claims and that should prioritize peaceful resolution of any disputes.

In terms of the US alliance, the 2014 Japan–US Summit Meeting in Brisbane, Australia, raised the prospect of reviewing the Guidelines for Japan–US Defense Cooperation to enhance wider security cooperation in the context of intensifying regional security dynamics. This prospect came to fruition in April 2015, when the previous guidelines drafted in 1997 were replaced by a more coherent and context-adapted set of security cooperation protocols³⁵⁸. In line with the expansion of security challenges and dynamics, the partnership included a wider “spectrum of contingencies to address the so-called grey-zone challenges that fall between peacetime and armed conflict”³⁵⁹. The issue of such gray-zone challenges was particularly covered by introducing more complex and targeted measures for cooperation in times of peace³⁶⁰. In this logic, the new guidelines placed a significant emphasis on maritime security and overall maritime cooperation, which were identified as essential for regional stability. On the practical side, they outlined several directions for enhanced coordination to boost the interoperability and readiness of Japanese and American forces, including joint intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) activities. Beyond the more traditional security areas, including ballistic missile defense cooperation, the new guidelines also focused on newer security domains, such as cybersecurity, space security and human security, especially in the form of HA/DR operations. The revision was also performed to reflect Japan's new heightened security posture, reflected in the legislative changes, the acceptance of CSD and the new direction of its Proactive Contribution to Peace. These alliance changes were also complemented through high-level meetings with regional partners, which consistently emphasized consolidating maritime capabilities and promoting the Three Principles of the Rule of Law at Sea.

³⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁵⁸ *The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation*,” 2015.

³⁵⁹ Robin “Sak” Sakoda, “The 2015 U.S.–Japan Defense Guidelines: End of a New Beginning” in *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative – Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)*, April 30, 2015, <https://amti.csis.org/the-2015-u-s-japan-defense-guidelines-end-of-a-new-beginning/>. Accessed September 13, 2024.

³⁶⁰ *The Guidelines for Japan–U.S. Defense Cooperation*,” 2015.

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific

From 2016 onwards, Japan adopted a more structured approach to various security issues in the form of the *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* Strategy. Fundamentally, it represents a broader approach, with three core strategic pillars: the promotion of a norms-governed behavior, the pursuit of economic development and the commitment to regional peace³⁶¹. The FOIP aims to maintain the regional order by promoting freedom of navigation, respect for international law and developmental policies (that also emphasize human-to-human interactions). With its core principles announced during the Sixth Tōkyō International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI) in August 2016, the FOIP ultimately extended Japan's diplomatic reach from a restricted East Asia to the broader Indo-Pacific region. Accordingly, Abe considered that “Japan bears the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making it prosperous”³⁶². Based on the three key pillars mentioned above, Japan's approach involved both diplomatic initiatives, including the promotion of FOIP values in bilateral and multilateral platforms, and practical measures, such as extensive capacity-building initiatives and technical support (including sharing equipment) for maritime law enforcement. Additionally, the FOIP also underlined the need of enhancing cooperation with like-minded countries, being portrayed in policy papers as a shared vision³⁶³. Aside from traditional and geographically-close partners and forums like the US, ASEAN, India and Australia, where regional security challenges were prominent discussion points, the strategy also extended to geographically-distant actors, particularly EU member states and G7 as a broader multilateral platform. Throughout the practical application of FOIP, Japan pursued a multilayered approach, balancing harder aspects of power with softer initiatives. This approach came mostly as “a natural outcome that not only clearly reflects the strategic relevance of Asia, but also echoes the critical importance Indo-Pacific sea

³⁶¹ *Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 28, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e_000278.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁶² *Diplomatic Bluebook 2017*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 15, 2017, p. 26, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/pp/page22e_000817.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁶³ *Japan's Effort for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, March 2021, p. 2, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100056243.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

lanes bear in global trade and energy security in the 21st century”³⁶⁴. Particularly, FOIP is not strictly limited to security cooperation, as it encapsulates various measures, from development cooperation to economic practices aimed at creating a stable regional environment. On the harder side, Japan took a series of steps to enhance its defense capabilities (as detailed in Chapter 3). Through the reformatting of its defense posture, Tōkyō consistently reinterpreted a series of security taboos (stemming primarily from its post-World War II identity). Additionally, it also focused on strengthening its regional partnerships to further augment its defense capabilities.

Traditional Security – The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad)

In terms of traditional security, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad, comprising Japan, the US, Australia and India) is probably the most relevant example of this defense cooperation. Despite a formal establishment in 2007, the platform was effectively inoperative until 2017, especially due to Australia's more prudent approach in its regional stance³⁶⁵. Formally, the Quad is a fundamental security forum for the implementation of a free and open regional context, showcasing the members' "cooperation on maritime security, quality infrastructure, and connectivity in support of preserving and promoting a rules-based order in the region"³⁶⁶. On a more concrete note, the Quad platform is credited for establishing formal high-level dialogues between the four members, in the form of foreign ministers' and leaders' meetings, to coordinate both strategic directions and policy implementations. Fundamentally, these dialogues represented opportunities for Japan to advance initiatives that align with its wider FOIP strategy, such as ASEAN centrality, promotion of maritime stability and human security cooperation (including counter-terrorism and HA/DR operations)³⁶⁷. On the military aspect, Quad's cooperation

³⁶⁴ Jon Elizagaray Iglesias, *Japan's Values-Based Diplomacy & The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision*, Dissertation, University of the Basque Country, 2020, p. 18.

³⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

³⁶⁶ *Japan–Australia–India–U.S. Ministerial*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 26, 2019, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page3e_001112.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁶⁷ *Japan–Australia–India–U.S. (Quad) Foreign Ministers' Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, July 29, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/pageite_000001_00770.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

has been aligned with the Malabar exercises, which unites the four members (Japan joined in 2015, while Australia joined in 2020³⁶⁸). This expansion has transformed Malabar into a platform that mirrors the strategic objectives of the Quad (and the broader FOIP strategy). Since 2020, when the Quad format was replicated in the Malabar format, five annual exercises were conducted in key maritime regions, such as the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, the Philippine Sea, East China Sea and the South Pacific Ocean. Based on the JMSDF press release leading up to the 2023 exercise, Japan's main objectives were to achieve better interoperability with its allies and to enhance the JMSDF's tactical capacities³⁶⁹. This is also complemented at the symbolic level, as it projects a united front that upholds the rules-guided regional order. Additionally, with such operational practices and naval exercises, the Quad members highlight their preference for collective security mechanisms against various threats, such as maritime challenges, piracy and trafficking. Aside from the more practical goals mentioned above, the more strategic target for the Malabar exercise is to enhance the overall deterrence that the four members project on the regional framework³⁷⁰.

However, despite the Quad's announced broader agenda (also encompassing economic cooperation and infrastructure development), it is generally perceived primarily through its military component. This was also accentuated through Malabar's focus on maritime security and joint exercises. The Quad was not received positively by all regional actors. Notably, China perceives these activities as a direct challenge for its growing influence. Although the Quad and the Malabar exercises were not pointed towards any specific actors, it is quite clear that the platform has gained strategic substance (including Australia's return to the Malabar exercise in 2020) as a response to China's increasingly assertive actions in the South China Sea and East China Sea. Consistent with policy papers, the general cooperation highlighted by the Quad and the more specific cooperation indicated through

³⁶⁸ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "Malabar Exercise Brings Quad Navies Together in Australia" in *The Diplomat*, August 22, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/malabar-exercise-brings-quad-navies-together-in-australia/>. Accessed September 13, 2024.

³⁶⁹ *Japan–U.S.–India–Australia Multilateral Exercise (MALABAR 2023)*, Ministry of Defense of Japan, August 8, 2023, <https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/en/release/202308/20230808en.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁷⁰ Kirsty Needham, "India, Japan, US, Australia Hold First Malabar Naval Exercise off Australia" in *Reuters*, August 10, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india-japan-us-australia-hold-first-malabar-naval-exercise-off-australia-2023-08-10/>. Accessed September 13, 2023.

Malabar are aimed at reinforcing a security architecture that deters and discourages changes to the status-quo. In this logic, Japan's foreign policy strategies have focused on maintaining the existing regional order and promoting norms-guided behaviors to foster stability³⁷¹. While Japan has underscored that the activities undertaken within these platforms are aimed at promoting regional stability, based on rule of law and freedom of navigation, it became clearer that these efforts intensified and were performed consistently due to China's aggressiveness which precipitated the regional security dynamics. As a result, Beijing defined the Quad as an Asian NATO "being formed [...] with the four as a geopolitical tool of Washington, a means-to-end for Japan, hedging-its-bets for a speculative India and an OK-I-am-in Australia"³⁷². Fundamentally, China has characterized this multilateral platform as a counterbalancing alliance to its rising influence. In this logic, the Quad has been mostly perceived based on its strategic, security-related dimension, rather than its outlined broader focus on regional stability and connectivity.

Traditional Security – Vientiane Vision and Vientiane 2.0.

Another significant security-oriented platform within Japan's FOIP strategy is the Vientiane Vision. Originally launched in 2016 at the 2nd ASEAN–Japan Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting organized in Vientiane, Laos³⁷³, the new vision targeted five areas of cooperation that combined the organizational-level focus, with individual member states engagement: rule of law, capacity building, defense equipment cooperation, joint exercises and academic knowledge-sharing³⁷⁴. Additionally, from ASEAN's side, this initiative was paired with the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), which reunites members with additional

³⁷¹ Ryo Sahashi, "Japan's Search for Order and Stability: Navigating Chinese-Japanese-US Triangular Relations" in *International Centre for Defence and Security*, May 15, 2020, <https://icds.ee/en/japans-search-for-order-and-stability-navigating-chinese-japanese-us-triangular-relations/>. Accessed September 13, 2024.

³⁷² "Quad Setting Itself up as Core of Divisive, Disruptive 'Asian NATO'" in *China Daily*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202303/06/WS6405d400a31057c47ebb2941.html>. Accessed September 13, 2024.

³⁷³ *Overview of ASEAN–Japan Dialogue Relations*, ASEAN Secretariat, August 16, 2018, p. 2, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Overview-ASEAN-Japan-Relations-As-of-16-August-2018-rev.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁷⁴ *Vientiane Vision: Japan's Defense Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN*, Ministry of Defense of Japan, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/exc/vientianevision/index.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

eight regional partners for addressing security issues: Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia and the US (which form the Plus)³⁷⁵. In 2019, Tōkyō redefined the first initiative into Vientiane Vision 2.0, in line with the FOIP and with ASEAN's own 'Outlook on the Indo-Pacific'³⁷⁶. This was built upon the experience gained through the first initiative, but it was also driven by various changes in international politics, including increased Chinese aggressiveness and the uncertainties spurred by the Trump administration. In line with its more engaged posture, Japan adopted a dual-track approach which meant a consolidation of its alliance with the US, and a diversification and expansion of its security partnerships (beyond the US) with regional actors³⁷⁷. Given the increased tensions in South China Sea, much of this security and defense cooperation revolved around "actively boosting the capacity of countries like the Philippines and Vietnam to enforce the law of the sea"³⁷⁸. Consequently, through such efforts, Japan positioned itself as a reliable security partner, keen on maintaining the stability of the Indo-Pacific. The integration of the FOIP vision alongside ASEAN's own Outlook on the Indo-Pacific was also based on several ASEAN anxieties, stemming from the fear of marginalization³⁷⁹. Specifically, in the context of increased great power competition, such strategic horizons could expose ASEAN members to a vulnerable position of choosing one of the two mutually exclusive standpoints: either US or China. However, Tōkyō's emphasis on ASEAN centrality and unity (both within FOIP and Vientiane policy papers³⁸⁰) showcases a more balanced approach, which brings to the forefront ASEAN's central role in the regional security architecture. As mentioned earlier, Japan supports a collective framework, guided by international

³⁷⁵ *About the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus*, Asean Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), January 11, 2024, <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/about-admm/about-admm-plus.html>. Accessed September 14, 2024.

³⁷⁶ *Updating the 'Vientiane Vision: Japan's Defense Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN'*, Ministry of Defense of Japan, November 2019, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/exc/admm/06/vv2_en.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁷⁷ Sebastian Maslow, "Japan's 'Pivot to Asia': Tokyo Discovers the Indo-Pacific" in *Policy Forum*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.policyforum.net/japans-pivot-asia/>. Accessed September 14, 2024.

³⁷⁸ Ōba Mie, "Japan and ASEAN: Partners for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific in an Era of Uncertainty" in *Nippon Communications Foundation*, December 3, 2023, <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/a09401/>. Accessed September 14, 2024.

³⁷⁹ Tomohiko Satake, "Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy' and Its Implication for ASEAN" in *Southeast Asian Affairs*, December 31, 2019, p. 77, <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814843164-007>.

³⁸⁰ Centrality and unity are key points for smoother cooperation among and with ASEAN members in the *Updating the 'Vientiane Vision: Japan's Defense Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN'*.

law and norms. Like the Quad, the Vientiane 2.0 does not explicitly point towards any regional actor, but it is widely perceived as a strategic vision to counter Chinese expanding influence. Japan's efforts to, on the one hand, enhance ASEAN's maritime security capabilities and, on the other hand, to promote rules-based cooperation, are influenced by Chinese maritime claims and aggressive behaviors in East and South China Seas.

The Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI) and The Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (EPQI)

As mentioned earlier, the FOIP is a broader strategy that stresses the importance of improving overall physical connectivity to pursue sustainable economic development³⁸¹. Central to this perspective are the PQI, launched in 2015, and its subsequent version, the EPQI, redefined in 2016. Such an approach has historical roots, as “Japan was the main Asian country that provided developing countries in the region with capital, foreign aid, and advanced technologies [...] for developing physical infrastructure”³⁸². The PQI, announced during the 21st International Conference on the Future of Asia³⁸³, focused on developing quality infrastructure that respect local needs, quality standards and international norms and good practices. The PQI introduced four core pillars for the development of quality infrastructure: acceleration of ODA and assistance packages through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), collaboration with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), support for public-private partnerships on overseas infrastructure projects and the development of quality international standards³⁸⁴. To respond to the increasing regional infrastructure demand and to fulfill the PQI, Japan announced an investment budget of US\$ 110 billion over five years. During the May 2016 G7 Ise-Shima Summit, Japan announced the EPQI, and, as the name suggests, expanding the

³⁸¹ *Japan's Effort for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, 2021, p. 2.

³⁸² Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, *Japan's Asian Diplomacy*, p. 87.

³⁸³ 'The Future of Asia: Be Innovative' – Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Banquet of the 21st International Conference on the Future of Asia, Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, May 21, 2015, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201505/0521foaspeech.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁸⁴ *Partnership for Quality Infrastructure. Investment for Asia's Future*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, May 21, 2015. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000081298.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

scope and depth of the initial project³⁸⁵. The investment budget almost doubled, reaching US\$ 200 billion over five years, while also extending its geographical reach to the whole world³⁸⁶. Fundamentally, the expansion of the initial partnership was aimed to serve as a catalyst for quality growth, both regionally and globally. The 2016 Summit also issued the G7 Ise-Shima Principles for Promoting Quality Infrastructure Investment providing a wider degree of legitimacy for the EPQI, by endorsing a comprehensive set of principles throughout a multilateral platform³⁸⁷. These principles primarily emphasize the importance of developing quality infrastructure to support sustainable growth. This approach for promoting quality infrastructure was further consolidated with the establishment of the Global Facility to Promote Quality Infrastructure Investment for Environmental Preservation and Sustainable Growth (QI-ESG) by the Japan Bank for International Cooperation in 2018³⁸⁸. These efforts are in-line with the FOIP objectives, aiming to facilitate and support infrastructure projects that meet high environmental, social and governance criteria.

Aside from the focus on creating regional wellbeing, it is quite clear that such “[i]nfrastructure export and investment has become a prominent feature of geoeconomic competition between Japan and China, particularly since 2013”³⁸⁹. China's BRI, launched in 2013, quickly consolidated as a significant development strategy focused on enhancing global trade connectivity through extensive regional and international infrastructure networks. The BRI garnered recognition as a strategy of economic growth, but also raised concerns in relations to transparency and its veiled accentuated political nature. A report conducted in 2019 by the Center for Global Development pointed towards the issue that, at the time, at least 23 countries

³⁸⁵ *White Paper on Development Cooperation 2016*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, March 2017, p. 7, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/page22e_000815.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

³⁸⁷ *G7 Ise-Shima Principles for Promoting Quality Infrastructure Investment*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, May 2016, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000160272.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁸⁸ *JBIC Launches Global Facility to Promote Quality Infrastructure Investment for Environmental Preservation and Sustainable Growth*, Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), June 28, 2018, <https://www.jbic.go.jp/en/information/news/news-2018/0628-011154.html>. Accessed September 14, 2024.

³⁸⁹ Saori N. Katada, “Partnership for Quality Infrastructure: Developmentalism or New Liberal Order” in *Revised Paper – University of Southern California*, February 16, 2020.

involved in the project were subject to “debt distress”³⁹⁰. Accordingly, the EPQI also stands as Japan’s response to the growing attractiveness of the BRI, being portrayed as an alternative that promotes quality over quantity, with high standards of transparency. Consequently, within the wider FOIP spectrum, EPQI and overall quality infrastructure debates (such as the G7 principles) represent instances of norm setting and enforcement. In doing so, “the Japanese strategy hopes to tip China’s domestic political scale in support of a more cautious and quality-pursuing approach”³⁹¹. Through these efforts, Japan adopted a more proactive approach to strengthen its leadership role and promote a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, while supporting the broader objectives of its FOIP strategy. This competition is also highly driven by a shared recognition that infrastructure investments go beyond economic development, serving as a critical element of soft power. Especially in the case of Japan, portraying an alternative to China’s BRI includes a heightened economic side, but it is not limited to it, as the EPQI “was never intended to match the investment volume of China’s BRI, let alone its financial prowess”³⁹². Particularly, the EPQI, in line with the FOIP, showcases a vision of regional integration based on mutual benefit, but conditioned by international norms and multilateral platforms.

Regional Resiliency, Development Cooperation and Human Security – Japan–Mekong Cooperation

The FOIP also incorporates a strong focus on human security and development cooperation. As this was broadly addressed in Chapter 3, it is clear that Japan’s participation in regional frameworks plays a crucial role in advancing these objectives. This dimension that incorporates development cooperation and human security is commonly defined in terms of non-traditional security challenges, being identified as threats that go beyond the realm of conventional military concerns, but addressing them is essential for the stability of the Indo-Pacific. In the FOIP,

³⁹⁰ John Hurley, Scott Morris, and Gailyn Portelance, “Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective” in *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development* 3, no. 1, 2019: pp. 143–144, <https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd.v3i1.1123>.

³⁹¹ Katada, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

³⁹² Jagannath Panda, “Shinzo Abe’s Infrastructure Diplomacy” in *Asia Times*, July 31, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/07/shinzo-abes-infrastructure-diplomacy/>. Accessed September 15, 2024.

these priorities were encapsulated in the third pillar, highlighting Japan's commitment for stability and peace through capacity-building and cooperation in terms of human and social security. Historically, Japan has promoted wider cooperation through its ODA programs, focused on building local capacities (e.g., in terms of healthcare, judicial system and also enhancing disaster-response capabilities). These were also covered consistently through various policy papers. For example, the 2015 Diplomatic Bluebook highlighted Japan's priorities in the regional context, ranging from addressing poverty to human resource and institutional development³⁹³.

In this logic, another key example of Japan's commitment to promoting human and social security is the Japan–Mekong Cooperation framework. The platform brings to the forefront various challenges to human security and overall regional development through a series of annual summit meetings and ministerial meetings³⁹⁴. However, it is not a novelty initiative, created in accordance with the FOIP, as it actually predates the wider initiative, becoming an annual platform for discussion since 2009³⁹⁵. It is quite clear that the Japan–Mekong Cooperation platform became a channel for raising and addressing shared vulnerabilities. Nonetheless, The New Tōkyō Strategy 2015 for Mekong–Japan Cooperation (MJC2015)³⁹⁶ marked a significant point of evolution for the platform, reflecting Japan's shift towards a more comprehensive regional approach under its Proactive Contribution to Peace. Additionally, the new strategy correlated the consolidation of the rule of law and respect for human rights with the overall stability and wellbeing of the region. Fundamentally, the new strategy iterated four pillars of cooperation³⁹⁷: 'hard' infrastructure development (improving physical connectivity in the region), 'soft' infrastructure consolidation (at the level of ideational connectivity through human resource development and fostering people-to-people exchanges), sustainable management of natural resources (including a more addressed focus on disaster risk reduction) and coordination with relevant stakeholders (including regional frameworks, other countries and the private sector). For this

³⁹³ *Diplomatic Bluebook 2015*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 27, 2015, p. 249, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/pp/page24e_000100.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁹⁴ *Japan–Mekong Cooperation*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, July 26, 2024, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/mekong/cooperation.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁹⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁹⁶ *New Tōkyō Strategy 2015 for Mekong–Japan Cooperation (MJC2015)*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, July 4, 2015, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000088538.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

³⁹⁷ *Ibidem*.

platform, the scope of cooperation expanded beyond economic development, focusing on building relations with regional actors. The 2015 strategy aimed to attain “greater complementarity between various economic initiatives in the Asia-Pacific given the region’s massive infrastructure needs, rather than adopting a more zero-sum approach”³⁹⁸. On a similar note, the Tōkyō Strategy 2018 for Mekong–Japan Cooperation³⁹⁹ legitimized two significant objectives: first, it elevated the relationship to the level of a *strategic partnership*⁴⁰⁰ and secondly, it formally aligned the previous strategic horizon with the broader FOIP strategy. Moreover, it introduced three new pillars of cooperation, which focus on intertwined security aspects (ranging from development cooperation and environmental factors to human and social security): vibrant and effective connectivity, people-centered society and the Green Mekong. During the 15th Mekong–Japan Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, the new Mekong–Japan Cooperation Strategy 2024⁴⁰¹ was announced, representing the latest phase in Japan’s commitment to the region. Primarily building on the perceived achievements of the 2018 strategy and based on the new episodes of crises post-2020 (such as the coronavirus pandemic and the War in Ukraine), the policy paper identified three new key areas of cooperation⁴⁰²: social security in a post-COVID-19 world, the importance of cybersecurity and digitization and proactive responses to non-conventional security issues. Overall, in relation to the Mekong area, Japan has focused on addressing development gaps and various social challenges. The evolution of the Mekong–Japan Cooperation framework, however, demonstrates Japan’s commitment to deepening the scope and depth of its engagement with Mekong countries across a wider spectrum of sectors. Tōkyō has “carved out a role for itself as a prominent actor in development aid and foreign investment”⁴⁰³, however its presence is complicated by competing influences,

³⁹⁸ Prashanth Parameswaran, “The Real Importance of Japan’s New Strategy for the Mekong” in *The Diplomat*, July 7, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/07/the-real-importance-of-japans-new-strategy-for-the-mekong/>. Accessed September 15, 2024.

³⁹⁹ *Tōkyō Strategy 2018 for Mekong–Japan Cooperation*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 9, 2018, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000406731.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰¹ *Mekong–Japan Cooperation Strategy 2024*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, July 26, 2024, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100703926.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴⁰² *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰³ Carl Lentz, “Japan’s Foreign Policy in the Mekong Region” in *The Diplomat*, November 21, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/japans-foreign-policy-in-the-mekong-region/>. Accessed September 15, 2024.

especially related to the China factor. The Mekong can also be perceived as a geostrategic region, where both powers struggle for influence throughout different platforms (e.g., China's Lancang–Mekong Cooperation strategy⁴⁰⁴). Throughout the deepening of Japan's engagement, it sought to address emerging challenges, being intent on maintaining the regional balance.

To conclude, Japan's FOIP represents a comprehensive and multilayered approach to promote regional stability. Anchored in its three pillars, the FOIP emerged alongside Japan's more proactive role in shaping the Indo-Pacific order. This part focused on understanding the practical implementation of the FOIP through diverse engagements and across various sectors. Additionally, developed as a regional strategy, it was soon expanded to other geographical areas and correlated with other similar initiatives. In the case of European states, these efforts were aimed at raising “the perception of severe maritime security conditions in Asia among European leaders who did not necessarily pay due attention to them”⁴⁰⁵. However, maritime security is not the sole focus of the FOIP. Throughout policy papers, Tōkyō promotes a vision of regional integration that emphasizes mutual benefit and adherence to international norms. In this sense, these papers also portray the FOIP as an inclusive platform for political, cultural and economic cooperation. This contrasts with a strict military-oriented perspective “aimed at countering Chinese power and influence by creating a maritime coalition with regional democracies”⁴⁰⁶. While Japan's policy does address various security concerns related to Chinese actions in the region, it is not strictly confined to this dimension. The FOIP seeks to foster and maintain a more balanced and rules-based order to discourage and deter forceful changes of the status-quo.

⁴⁰⁴ *Lancang–Mekong Cooperation*, Lancang–Mekong Cooperation China Secretariat, <http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/>. Accessed September 15, 2024.

⁴⁰⁵ Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, *Japan's Asian Diplomacy*, p. 138.

⁴⁰⁶ Tomohiko Satake, “Japan's ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy’”, p. 69.

5.

China: Between Cooperation and Competition

Before the Storm: Japan–China Relations pre-2012

Up until 2012, Japan–China relations were characterized by a relatively stable balance, in spite of their complexity. Incorporating historical grievances, the relationship was characterized by a mix of development assistance, economic cooperation, diplomatic dialogues and strategic engagement. Although the relations did not reach the same height achieved during the 1980s, considered almost the golden age of post-World War II relations when Japan provided significant ODA to support China’s modernization⁴⁰⁷, they were rather stable, with occasional strenuous episodes. Additionally, in the post-Cold War era, the bilateral trade relations expanded rapidly also paired with Japan’s considerable support in terms of development assistance and investment. During the 1990s, the two sides displayed different stances in terms of historical experiences – while Japan considered that this point of view was largely addressed (especially through the 1995 Murayama statement and with Japan’s continued commitment to promoting development and economic cooperation), China continued to emphasize and criticize it⁴⁰⁸.

The post-2000 relationship, primarily perceived through the very engaged economic dimension, was relatively cooperative (in the sense that higher level meetings and dialogues were organized regularly), build upon a mix of strategic thinking, economic exchanges and pragmatic diplomatic stances. This pragmatism meant that, despite ideological differences and historical issues, the two countries focused on cooperation in areas of shared interests (such as investment and trade), where they could achieve a mutually-beneficial partnership. Although they maintained a rather stable level of engagement, which contributed to regional stability, various political topics remained unaddressed and would resurface as significant points

⁴⁰⁷ Ryosei Kokubun, “From the ‘1972 System’ to ‘Strategic Mutual Benefits’ – Japan’s Foreign Policy toward China” in *Japan and the World*, *Japan Digital Library*, March 2017, pp. 4–7.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

of interest. The tenure of prime minister Koizumi (2001–2006) hinted towards the existence of some sensitive topics within the partnership, in a period in which China was expanding economically. If “Koizumi acknowledged the economic development of China as an opportunity, his visits to Yasukuni created political problems for the Chinese leadership, denying opportunities for bilateral dialogue”⁴⁰⁹. These controversial visits were mostly perceived as a minimization of wartime aggression, sparking significant diplomatic friction between the countries and protests from the general public. Fundamentally, the visits affected the political framework of cooperation constructed by the two partners⁴¹⁰, denying potential opportunities for deeper bilateral dialogue, while also reinforcing the importance of historical memory in shaping their diplomatic relations. Furthermore, during this period, Japan also began to align more closely with the US in its strategic outlook. Koizumi's support for the US in the War on Terror was paired by the absence of a coherent China-policy, meaning that “Japan's China strategy merely became an extension of the USA's strategy of deterrence towards China”⁴¹¹. In terms of security, the early 2000s were also marked by Chinese modernization of military capabilities. The NDPG for FY2005 issued in December 2004 focused on China as a point of interest, in light of its military modernization and extensive actions in the maritime domain⁴¹². However, the NDPG did not attach any deeper strategic meanings to this, being identified as a simple point of interest, which showcases Tōkyō's focus on building constructive relations.

Following Koizumi's departure, Abe sought to address these topics and visited China in October 2006. Based on this visit, the Japan–China Joint Press Statement was issued, reaffirming the importance of bilateral relations and peaceful development⁴¹³. The statement also focused on both countries' commitment in

⁴⁰⁹ Madoka Fukuda, “The Koizumi Years, A Time of Lost Opportunities” in *East Asia Forum Quarterly* vol. 7, no. 3, July–September 2015, p. 12.

⁴¹⁰ Justin McCurry, “Koizumi Ignores Protests in Final Shrine Visit” in *The Guardian*, August 16, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/aug/16/secondworldwar.japan>. Accessed September 17, 2024.

⁴¹¹ Haikuan Gao, “The China–Japan Mutually Beneficial Relationship Based on Common Strategic Interests and East Asian Peace and Stability” in *Asia-Pacific Review* 15, no. 2, November 2008, p. 37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13439000802571483>.

⁴¹² *National Defense Program Guideline, FY 2005*, Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, December 10, 2004, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/policy/2004/1210taikou_e.html. Accessed September 19, 2024.

⁴¹³ *Japan–China Joint Press Statement*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 8, 2006, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/joint0610.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

addressing historical issues and promoting wider cooperation (such as youth exchange, collaboration on regional issues and also economic exchanges). However, most importantly, it introduced the idea of developing “a mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests”⁴¹⁴. In 2008, during Fukuda’s term, this commitment was taken to the next level through the Joint Statement between the Government of Japan and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Comprehensive Promotion of a ‘Mutually Beneficial Relationship Based on Common Strategic Interests’⁴¹⁵, following Hu Jintao’s visit to Japan. The statement was perceived as a commitment to formalize and institutionalize cooperation across a wide range of areas, including security, energy and the environment. Aside from tackling global concerns (such as environmental topics and human security), it also focused on more specific aspects of the partnership, including resource development in East China Sea and promotion of human-to-human exchanges⁴¹⁶. However, despite this high level of engagement in contrast with the Koizumi era, political and public tensions continued to influence the relations. Based on the Genron Japan–China Public Opinion Survey 2023⁴¹⁷, 15% of Japanese respondents had a favorable view of China in 2005, while 38% had a poor impression. The proportion of respondents with negative views increased to 72% in 2010, while only 27% had positive perceptions. This tendency was also evident in Chinese public opinion, but in a more gradual manner. 63% of Chinese respondents thought poorly about Japan, in 2005, while 12% thought positively of it. This tendency continued to be predominantly negative in 2010, with 56% of respondents having unfavorable attitudes, while 38% had positive ones. In the case of the Japanese public opinion, this declining trend remained remarkably consistent, reaching 7.8% in 2013.

After 2008, it became rather clear that, if China was rising on the regional framework, Japan was losing ground. Moreover, China’s rise was not only limited to the economic domain, but it also seeped through other strategic fronts (such

⁴¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹⁵ *Joint Statement between the Government of Japan and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Comprehensive Promotion of a ‘Mutually Beneficial Relationship Based on Common Strategic Interests’*, The World and Japan Database, May 10, 2008, <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/JPOCH/20080510.D1E.html>. Accessed September 19, 2024.

⁴¹⁶ Kokubun, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁴¹⁷ *Japan–China Joint Public Opinion Survey 2023*, The Genron NPO, October 2023, https://www.genron-npo.net/en/opinion_polls/docs/Japan-China%20Joint%20Public%20Opinion%20Survey%202023.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025.

as military capabilities and its status in international politics). In the midst of the global financial crisis, China's growing influence and rising relevance in world politics⁴¹⁸ contrasted Japan's stagnation and prolonged economic slowdown. Adding to this, Japan's fragmented stage of internal politics was made even more complex through the rise of DPJ leadership. The Hatoyama administration called for closer engagement with China, under the idea of an economic 'East Asian Community'⁴¹⁹. This momentum, however, dissipated under Kan's leadership, when the 2010 collision incident occurred near Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands involving a Japanese Coast Guard ship and a Chinese fishing vessel. The incident led to a significant diplomatic crisis, with China warning about "strong countermeasures"⁴²⁰ for Japan's detention of the fishing boat's captain. The early phase of Noda's tenure was marked by a rather optimistic perspective, with the two nations holding a series of high-level dialogues⁴²¹. However, the situation soon took another more dramatic turn with the government's decision to nationalize three of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, on the basis of preventing Shintarō Ishihara, a hardline, radical-right leader, of acquiring them. Despite its intended moderation, the move actually generated the opposite reactions, leading to widespread protests across China and a palpable degradation of diplomatic relations. From Beijing's perspective, the move represented Japan's attempt at solidifying its claims for the islands.

Post-2012: Rougher Seas

Politically, however, 2010 and 2012 represented a turning point in bilateral relations, by solidifying the underlying view that the territorial dispute was hard

⁴¹⁸ Jing Men, "Will the Financial Crisis Make China a Superpower?" in *NATO Review*, July 02, 2009, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2009/07/02/will-the-financial-crisis-make-china-a-superpower/index.html>. Accessed September 19, 2024.

⁴¹⁹ Akimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

⁴²⁰ For reference, see also Tania Branigan, "China Cuts Japan Contacts Over Detained Trawler Captain" in *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/19/china-japan-contacts-detained-trawler-captain>. Accessed September 19, 2024.

Different sources claim that China even imposed an embargo on the export of rare materials, however this point is contested. For an analysis based on economic indicators related to Chinese rare material exports, see also Simon Evenett and Johannes Fritz, "Revisiting the China–Japan Rare Earths dispute of 2010" in *Centre for Economic Policy Research*, July 19, 2023, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/revisiting-china-japan-rare-earths-dispute-2010>. Accessed September 19, 2024.

⁴²¹ Kokubun, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

to address and its complexity even overshadowed, at times, the more cooperative elements of the relationship. Xi Jinping's consolidation of power and the declaration of an ADIZ over East China Sea contributed to a growing perception within Japanese policymakers of the rise of China as a strategic competitor. With 2012, Japan–China relations were marked by a blend of collaboration and competition⁴²², as both partners cooperate on a spectrum of shared goals, while still being influenced by increased political and public tensions. Abe's second administration, as highlighted, emphasized Japan's need to strengthen its security framework, particularly in response to the degradation of the regional environment. The 2013 NDPG identified Chinese military activities (including its aggressive behaviors in maritime affairs and the continuous strengthening of military capabilities) as secondary concern, being trumped in importance only by North Korea's sustained military efforts⁴²³. Japan also adopted a more extensive and untraditional defense policy, including the reinterpretation of Article 9 allowing for CSD. China perceived these changes primarily in a negative light as a potential departure from its pacifist path, however it did not manage to expose any weaknesses within Japanese public opinion. This was due to the fact that China was mostly perceived as “a self-serving actor on this issue”⁴²⁴, based on its assertiveness in East and South China Seas. These topics were also covered within policy statements and platforms. For example, based on the announcement of the ADIZ over East China Sea, a statement was issued by Japan's Minister for Foreign Affairs on November 24, 2013⁴²⁵, expressing concern over the unilateral action that went against the principles of international law and the regional normative framework. Nonetheless, under the guidance of Abe, Tōkyō pursued extensive diplomatic engagements to manage the increasingly tense relation.

The 2014 Japan–China Foreign Ministers' Meeting brought to the front the potential cooperation in various domains based on the principle of a mutually

⁴²² For reference, Aoyama defines this perception as a relation of “cooperative rivalry”. See Rumi Aoyama, “Stability and Fragility in Japan–China Relations: China's Pivotal Power and Japan's Strategic Leverage” in *China Review* vol. 23, no. 1, February 2023, p. 188.

⁴²³ *National Security Strategy*, 2013, pp. 3–4.

⁴²⁴ King, *op. cit.*

⁴²⁵ *Statement by the Minister for Foreign Affairs on the announcement on the 'East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone' by the Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China.*

beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests⁴²⁶. This was in line with a list of four priorities needed to enhance bilateral relations (most commonly known as ‘The Four Point Consensus’⁴²⁷), which highlighted the fact that the partners hold divergent views on the regional context, but would work bilaterally and multilaterally to ease the tensions. Additionally, it stressed the fact that, from the Chinese perspective, the evolution on the partnership was contingent on three expectations: Japan’s vision on historical issues, its acknowledgement of China’s development and its evolution as a peace-oriented nation. This potential for cooperation was reinforced at the 2014 Summit Meeting, held on the sidelines of the APEC Summit in Beijing⁴²⁸. Being the first meeting in two years, as no summit was held in 2013 in the context of extremely heightened tensions, it was characterized by a palpable cold atmosphere, but it also stood as a strong willingness on both sides to re-engage diplomatically and practically through expanded and multilayered cooperation. The major relevance of these platforms was perceived through two aspects. First, they reinforced the strategic horizon of a mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests. Through this framework, both countries sought to manage their disputes peacefully and through dialogue, while maintaining and expanding cooperation in areas of mutual benefit. Second, they set the stage for Japan’s Proactive Contribution to Peace. It allowed Tōkyō to project its security strategy within a broader regional and global context, aligning its defensive policies with the wider goal of maintaining a rules-based order, paramount in deterring unilateral changes to the status-quo. Furthermore, 2015 witnessed the re-ignition of the 13th Japan–China Security Dialogue after a break of four years, where Japan introduced its new heightened strategic outlook in the form of its Proactive Contribution to Peace⁴²⁹. The dialogue also called for increased transparency from China on its military activities, re-introducing the

⁴²⁶ *Japan–China Foreign Ministers’ Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 8, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page3e_000262.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴²⁷ *Regarding Discussions toward Improving Japan–China Relations*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 7, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page4e_000150.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴²⁸ *Japan–China Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 10, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page4e_000151.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴²⁹ *13th Japan–China Security Dialogue*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, March 20, 2015, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/page3e_000315.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

need for a maritime and aerial communication mechanism. Most notably, the creation of the FOIP strategy was a key regional initiative aimed at promoting rules-based behaviors. Its strong emphasis on maritime security and the freedom of navigation was impacted by China's expansive maritime claims in the South and East China Seas. For wider legitimacy, the FOIP also focused on deepening ties with other regional powers, most of which found themselves in contradiction to China. In line with the expanded engagement, the 2016 Japan–China Summit organized on the occasion of the G20 Hangzhou Summit, introduced five areas of cooperation: economic relations, environmental concerns, social problems caused by aging populations, tourism and disaster response and prevention⁴³⁰. However, the Japanese side also focused on the tense situation in the East China Sea, mainly generated by the Chinese maritime claims, alongside the extraction of natural resources.

The 2017–2020 period can be defined as a positive development in terms of diplomatic engagements, with numerous platforms for dialogue that stressed the fact that the two countries are “partners who cooperate together and are not threats to each other”⁴³¹. The underlying motif of these meetings was centered around Tōkyō's and Beijing's commitments to improving bilateral ties, especially due to the heightened tensions in terms of maritime security. Abe's 2018 visit to China marked a symbolic turning point, being the first such high-level visit in seven years and calling for a new direction of their strategic relations⁴³². This diplomatic outreach was part of a broader strategy to stabilize relations, while strengthening Japan's security partnerships with other regional actors. By the time of Abe's resignation in 2020, the bilateral relations have improved diplomatically, but the broader security dynamics remained tense, as the relation was underlined with strategic caution. This duality continued to manifest throughout discourses and meetings, as the two sides acknowledged positive progress in terms of enhancing diplomatic bilateral cooperation, while security issues were briefly touched upon,

⁴³⁰ *Japan–China Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 5, 2016, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page3e_000558.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴³¹ *Japan–China Foreign Ministers' Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, January 28, 2018, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page3e_000817.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴³² Daniel Hurst, “Abe Wants ‘New Era’ in China-Japan Relations” in *The Diplomat*, October 26, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/abe-wants-new-era-in-china-japan-relations/>. Accessed September 23, 2024.

but not really comprehensively engaged and addressed⁴³³. The general situation was complicated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the wider changes it had in terms of international relations (including economic disruptions and the decline of international engagement). The pandemic has also “disrupted the prolonged period of political stability in Japan that started with the second administration of prime minister Shinzo Abe at the end of 2012”⁴³⁴. Diplomatically, however, the onset of the pandemic offered opportunities for cooperation. In February 2020, The Japan Youth Development Association offered material aid (mask and thermometers) to pandemic-struck China, in a symbol of cooperation and friendship, with an ancient poem written on the side of the boxes: ‘different land, same sky’⁴³⁵. This was highly praised both from the Chinese side, as well as from the Japanese part (including former DPJ prime minister, Yukio Hatoyama). In the face of a changing world and the relative disconnect from cooperation in the international field (including the internationalization of the vulnerabilities generated by the pandemic, such as vaccine geopolitics), “China and Japan have embarked on an unexpected path of reciprocal generosity”⁴³⁶.

With Yoshihide Suga's ascendancy to the prime minister position in 2020, the relations largely followed the previous trajectory. This was highlighted during Suga's meeting with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi in November 2020⁴³⁷, where he raised key issues such as maritime security (with a focus on East China Sea) and the coronavirus situation. Moreover, during this period, the relation was

⁴³³ This was also the case during Abe's last Japan–China Summit organized in December 2019, where he explicitly connected stability and prosperity of Japan–China relations to stability in the East China Sea. See *Japan–China Summit Meeting and Working Lunch*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, December 25, 2019, https://www.mofa.go.jp/page6e_000242.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴³⁴ Robert Ward, “Japan's Long-Term Foreign Policy: Building Resilience” in *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2020/06/japan-long-term-foreign-policy>. Accessed September 28, 2024.

⁴³⁵ Emiko Jozuka and Serenitie Wang, “China and Japan's Relationship Is Thawing in the Time of Coronavirus” in *CNN World*, February 25, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/25/asia/japan-china-coronavirus-enemies-to-friends-hnk-intl/index.html>. Accessed September 28, 2024.

⁴³⁶ Cheng Li and Ryan McElveen, “Mask Diplomacy: Coronavirus Upended Generations of China–Japan Antagonism” in *China–US Focus*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/mask-diplomacy-how-coronavirus-upended-generations-of-china-japan-antagonism>. Accessed September 28, 2024.

⁴³⁷ *Prime Minister Suga Receives a Courtesy Call from State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 25, 2020, https://www.mofa.go.jp/page3e_001083.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

impacted by a heightened human-security oriented approach. Japan expressed concern related to human rights abuses, particularly related to the treatment of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang and the crackdowns on pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong⁴³⁸. However, the tone was rather mild, as Japan balanced its criticism and call for rules-based behaviors with an eye set towards preserving the diplomatic momentum and enhancing economic relations during the pandemic. However, tensions between Japan and China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands persisted, with increased Chinese incursions into the waters surrounding the islands. Accordingly, the administration aimed “to achieve and maintain stability through order building and multi-layered cooperation”⁴³⁹. As a point of continuity, the new administration remained committed to the Quad, hosting the Second Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in October 2020, where the need for promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific was reiterated based on the situations in East and South China Seas⁴⁴⁰. These actions naturally drew criticism from the Chinese side, which viewed the efforts as a containment strategy. In spite of these rising tensions, economic cooperation still remained important both for Tōkyō and for Beijing, something that Suga sought to enhance. However, the uncertainties brought about by the coronavirus pandemic and by the transactional approach of the Trump administration also highlighted the importance of diversifying supply chains and/or shifting manufacturing hubs back to Japan and Southeast Asia⁴⁴¹. This was also the trend experienced during Kishida’s tenure. A former foreign minister with vast diplomatic experience, Kishida attracted high hopes throughout a complex Japan–China landscape. Consistent with the previous policies, the Kishida administration has placed strong emphasis on bolstering Japan’s defense capabilities. This was also influenced by the Chinese

⁴³⁸ *Japan–China Foreign Ministers’ Meeting and Working Dinner*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 24, 2020, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_ml/cn/page3e_001084.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴³⁹ Ryo Sahashi, “Japan: Strengthening Order and Stability in a Free and Open Indo-Pacific” in Ron Huiskens and Kathryn Brett (eds.), *CSCAP Regional Security Outlook 2021*, Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific, 2020, p. 18.

⁴⁴⁰ *The Second Japan–Australia–India–U.S. Foreign Ministers’ Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 6, 2020, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press6e_000244.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴⁴¹ Naomi Tajitsu, Makiko Yamazaki and Ristuko Shimizu, “Japan Wants Manufacturing Back from China, but Breaking Up Supply Chains Is Hard To Do” in *Reuters*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-japan-production-a-idUSKBN23F2ZO/>. Accessed September 28, 2024.

show of force around Taiwan, starting with the August 2022 exercises⁴⁴² and heightened in April 2023⁴⁴³. These actions also led to uncomfortable situations in South China Sea, particularly in October 2023 and August 2024, when Chinese vessels collided with Philippine ones, leading to both nations blaming each other for the incidents. In recent years, these encounters greatly increased in occurrence rate, but, most importantly, they became physical (including collisions and use of water cannons against ships)⁴⁴⁴.

Although Japan connected its increased defense-oriented focus to the degradation of the security environment, primarily through China's assertive actions, these transformations drew sustained criticism from the authorities in Beijing, who considered that, through these escalations in dynamics (both through increased military capabilities and with the expansion of its security partnership), Japan itself was becoming a threat to regional stability and security⁴⁴⁵. In spite of these, diplomatic engagement with China continued at an increased level. 2022 marked the 50th anniversary since the normalization of diplomatic relations. During the 2022 Summit, Kishida and Xi promoted a reformulated vision of “‘constructive and stable Japan–China relationship’ [...] that commensurate with the demands of a new era”⁴⁴⁶. Throughout 2023 and 2024, the platforms for dialogue underscored the fact that both partners seek to maintain a cooperative balance in their relations amidst growing regional tensions. The 2023 and 2024 Japan–China Summit Meetings⁴⁴⁷ focused on promoting a ‘mutually beneficial relationship based on

⁴⁴² Helen Davidson and Julian Borger, “China Resumes Military Drills Off Taiwan after Shelving US Talks” in *The Guardian*, August 8, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/08/entirely-provoked-china-defends-calling-off-us-military-talks-after-nancy-pelosis-taiwan-visit>. Accessed September 28, 2024.

⁴⁴³ Anand Katakam and Jitesh Chowdhury, “Crowded Skies and Seas. China's Storm of Military Drills Around Taiwan” in *Reuters*, April 14, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/CHINA-TAIWAN/egvbylbywpq/>. Accessed September 28, 2024.

⁴⁴⁴ *Tracking Tensions at Second Thomas Shoal*, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, January 30, 2024, <https://amti.csis.org/tracking-tensions-at-second-thomas-shoal/>. Accessed September 28, 2024.

⁴⁴⁵ Li Wei (ed), *Japan Should Learn Lessons from History and Avoid Beggar-Thy-Neighbor Path: Defense Spokesperson*, Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, December 29, 2022, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/NewsRelease/4929444.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴⁴⁶ *Japan–China Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 17, 2022, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page1e_000550.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴⁴⁷ The Summit in 2023 was held on the sidelines of the APEC Summit in San Francisco, while the one in 2024 was organized during the Ninth Japan–China–ROK Trilateral Summit in Seoul.

common strategic interests’ and a ‘constructive and stable Japan–China relationship’. These two perspectives underline the fact that diplomatic engagements serve as a necessary means of managing the complex partnership. The Japanese side, however, experiences severe security concerns ranging from maritime military activities to human rights issues and the nature of the situation in Taiwan. The trajectory of post-2012 Japan–China relations reflects a duality between economic interdependence and political-security competition. Looking ahead, the ties between Tōkyō and Beijing will remain shaped by this duality. The key challenge for Japan will be managing the relations in an extremely complicated international and domestic scenario. Ishiba will most likely maintain Japan’s heightened focus on national security, but he supports a more nuanced approach towards Beijing. However, his more controversial vision for the need of a regional collective defense mechanism, similar to an Asian NATO, might prove to be a policy deadlock.

The Developed Economic Component

Historically speaking, economic relations represented one of the strongest pillars (if not the strongest) of Japan–China engagement. Since 1979, Japanese ODA, trade and investment represented key contributors to China’s modernization and development. From 1979 to 2022 (when ODA to China has formally ceased), Tōkyō provided approximately 3.3 trillion yen in loan aid, 157.6 billion yen in grant aid and 185.8 billion yen in technical cooperation⁴⁴⁸. The Japanese ODA programs that focused on infrastructure development (national integration through railway systems, highways and other means of transportation) have proven to be a significant element that shaped the Chinese economic philosophy. This infrastructure-perpetuated economic development stands at the core of numerous Chinese initiatives in the regional context and the international framework (e.g., Africa, where China is an ardent promoter of infrastructure-induced economic growth). These shared economic experiences played a fundamental role in the evolution of their trade and investment relations. Such large-scale projects have the aim of enhancing integration, by promoting better resource extraction, transportation

⁴⁴⁸ *History of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to China*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, July 6, 2022, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/region/e_asia/china/index.html. Accessed on September 29, 2024.

and overall economic development, goals that both China and Japan endorse. Post-2010, as China's economic rise accelerated, the relationship took a more competitive note. During his visit to China in 2018, Abe formally announced that Japan will stop its ODA program proposals for China, stressing the fact that the cooperation between the two nations has entered a new phase as "equal partners"⁴⁴⁹. However, by the time this equality came to be acknowledged in official discourses, China's rise as an economic powerhouse outweighed Japan's economic influence in the region.

Japan's foreign direct investment (FDI) outflows to China represent a key element of their economic relationship. Facilitated by institutionalized cooperation in the form of the Japan–China Economic Association⁴⁵⁰, established in 1972, "Japan was once the most important foreign investor in China, accounting for 8% of China's total FDI in 1995"⁴⁵¹. Pre-2012, Japanese companies invested in the Chinese market due to low production costs⁴⁵². Post-2012, Japanese FDI outflows to China, although slowed, remained rather consistent until 2022. The decrease was impacted by various factors, including political tensions (centered around territorial disputes and security challenges) and an increasingly hard to predict domestic business environment⁴⁵³. As highlighted in Figure 12⁴⁵⁴, between 2005 and 2012, Japanese FDI consistently grew, reflecting the strong economic ties between the two countries. 2013 stands out with a significant decline, given the heightened political tensions that plagued the relationship.

However, despite gaining back economic momentum between 2013 and 2021, by 2023 Japanese FDI had dropped to 3.8 billion US\$, a reduction driven in-part

⁴⁴⁹ *Prime Minister Abe Visits China*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 26, 2018, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page3e_000958.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴⁵⁰ *About JCEA*, Japan–China Economic Association, <https://www.jc-web.or.jp/pages/673/>. Accessed September 29, 2024.

⁴⁵¹ Min-Hua Chiang, "Contemporary China–Japan Relations: The Politically Driven Economic Linkage" in *East Asia* 36, no. 4, November 16, 2019, p. 272, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-019-09321-x>.

⁴⁵² Katsuji Nakagane, "Japanese Direct Investment in China: Its Effects on China's Economic Development" in Hanns Günther Hilpert and René Haak (eds.), *Japan and China. Cooperation, Competition and Conflict*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 62–64.

⁴⁵³ Ajay Shamdasani, "China: Foreign Direct Investment Hits 30-Year Low" in *Global Finance*, April 2, 2024, <https://gfmag.com/economics-policy-regulation/china-foreign-direct-investment-hits-30-year-low/>. Accessed September 29, 2024.

⁴⁵⁴ Data centralized from *Japanese Trade and Investment Statistics*, Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), <https://www.jetro.go.jp/en/reports/statistics/>. Accessed September 29, 2024.

by the heightened security framework around Taiwan (including the 2022 and 2023 extensive military exercises conducted by Beijing) and also by the wider changes in investment strategies influenced by geopolitical tensions in the region.

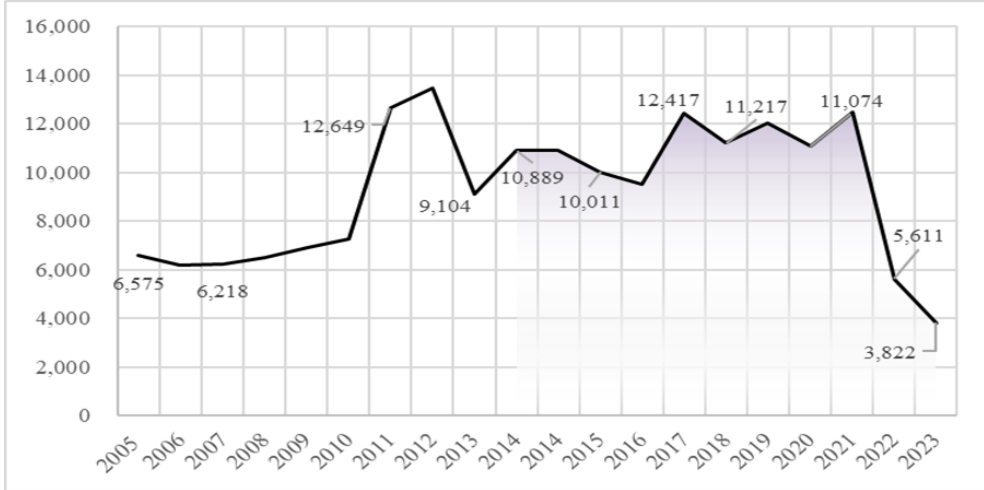


Figure 12: Japanese FDI outward flows to China in between 2005–2023 (in US\$ million)

Accordingly, “the push by Washington and its allies to lessen their reliance on Chinese manufactured goods and raw materials has prompted some producers to relocate to Southeast Asia and Latin America”⁴⁵⁵. Hence, the decline in FDI also reflects Japan’s strategy of reducing economic risks and ensuring stable supply chains. This was also visible with the enactment of the Economic Security Promotion Act in May 2022, aimed at bolstering Japan’s economic security by reducing dependency on other actors. Japan’s approach to FDI outflows to China has shifted from a solely benefit-oriented approach to a more complex perspective that incorporates risk mitigation strategies and strategic competition in the regional context. Overall, while Japan’s FDI outflows to China have declined, it still remains an important destination for Japanese investment. In 2023, China ranked 9th amongst Tōkyō’s outflow destinations. This underlines the enduring economic significance of China for Japan’s businesses. In terms of trade relations, Japan and China display long-standing commercial ties.

⁴⁵⁵ Shamdasani, *op. cit.*

Given that they are two of the world's largest economies, trade has been a central pillar of their bilateral relations. By observing the evolution of their trade relations, it is rather clear that political coldness did not really impact commercial exchanges. This can be observed in Figure 13⁴⁵⁶. Over the past ten years, China has emerged as Japan's most significant trade partner. In 2022, exports to China amounted to approximately 135 billion US\$ (18.6% of Japan's total exports), while imports from China amounted to roughly 178 billion US\$ (21.7% of Japan's total imports).

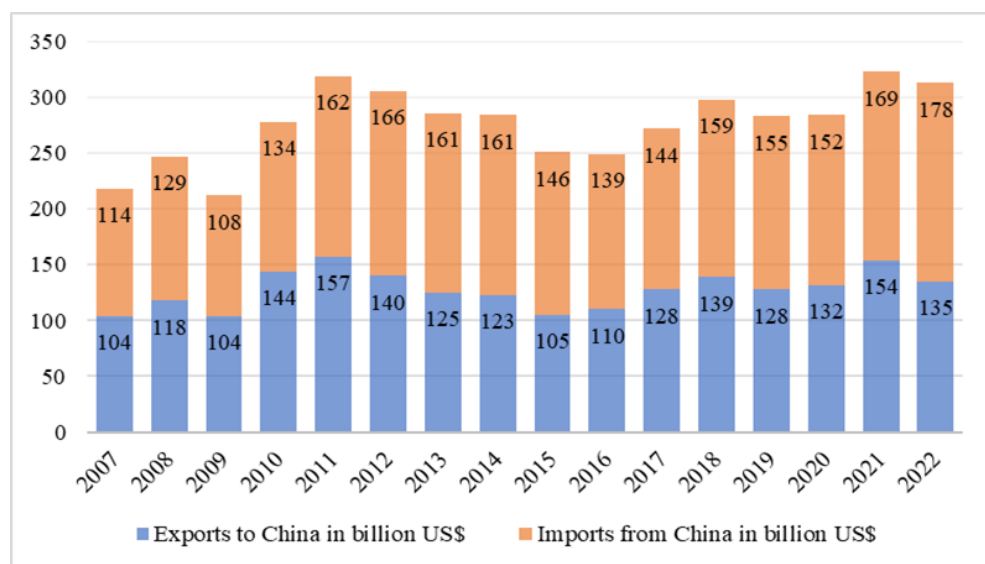


Figure 13: Graph detailing the depth of trade relations between China and Japan (2007–2022)

When it comes to top exports, machinery (43.77%), chemical products (12.69%), metals (10.31%) and automotive products (9.34%) accounted for 76.1% of Japan's total exports to China in 2022. In terms of imports, machinery (43.41%), textiles (11.03%) and chemical products (7.44%) made up 61.88% of Japan's imports from China in 2022. Since Japan's tech industry depends on such products, it is not surprising that China, the "world's sole manufacturing superpower"⁴⁵⁷, dominates

⁴⁵⁶ The graph centralizes data from *Japan–Yearly Trade*, Observer of Economic Complexity (OEC), <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/jpn>. Accessed September 29, 2024.

⁴⁵⁷ Richard Baldwin, "China Is the World's Sole Manufacturing Superpower: A Line Sketch of the Rise" in *Centre for Economic Policy Research*, January 17, 2024, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/china-worlds-sole-manufacturing-superpower-line-sketch-rise>. Accessed September 29, 2024.

in supplying these necessities to Japan. These economic relations were further developed through holding of high-level summits and the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2020, after eight years of negotiation. The 2018 currency swap agreement stands as a significant development in recent years. Halted since 2013 (based on the maritime tensions), the agreement was presented as a significant economic achievement during Abe's visit to China. The currency swap, performed to mitigate the impact of external factors (such as dynamic exchange rates), facilitated smoother trade and investment cooperation between the partners⁴⁵⁸. The Japan–China High Level Economic Dialogue was established in 2006 to develop economic cooperation under the guidance of a 'mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests'⁴⁵⁹. After eight years of pause, the platform was reinitiated in 2018, focusing on various economic topics (ranging from investment to technological development). However, in spite of its 'revival, the meeting was organized only on two occurrences and, since 2019, no new rounds have taken place in spite of extensive focus on resuming the dialogue. Quite differently from the previous platform, coming into force in 2022, the RCEP was signed by the ASEAN states, the Plus Three Countries (Japan, China and South Korea), Australia and New Zealand as a broad free trade agreement. As the world largest trading bloc, the RCEP was intended to deepen regional economic integration, by standardizing trade rules, simplifying custom procedures and overall fostering wider cooperation⁴⁶⁰. From the Japanese point of view, the RCEP is particularly important in its more subtle political undertone: by integrating the regional economies (through supply chains and partnerships), the RCEP could actually limit the impact of geopolitical shocks on the regional relations. Nonetheless, "the degree of liberalization within RCEP is not as deep as in the CPTPP, and the coverage is less comprehensive"⁴⁶¹. RCEP does not have extremely strict environmental standards and labor rules (which underscore the wider, security-

⁴⁵⁸ "Japan, China to Resume Currency Swap Agreement" in *The Mainichi*, October 20, 2018, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20181020/p2a/00m/0na/007000c>. Accessed September 29, 2024.

⁴⁵⁹ *Fifth Japan–China High-Level Economic Dialogue*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 14, 2019, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m2/ch/page4e_001005.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴⁶⁰ Jang Woo Kang et al., "Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership: Overview and Economic Impact" in *ADB Briefs No. 164*, December 2020, p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.22617/brf200422-2>.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

oriented approach undertaken by Japan in the CPTPP), but it still serves as fundamental pillar of regional economic cooperation, facilitating trade relations between Japan and China, among other different regional partnerships. However, even within the framework of a free trade agreement (FTA), China still banned Japanese seafood products in August 2023, based on Tōkyō's decision to release treated wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear plant in the ocean⁴⁶². Although the economic impact of such a decision was limited (as detailed above, seafood exports are not among the top 76% of Japanese exports to China), its symbolic and normative impact is relatively strong. Most importantly, the ban coincided with the 2023 Camp David Japan–ROK–US statement⁴⁶³, which served as a transformative call for a new era of trilateral cooperation. Fundamentally, during this meeting, the partners directly expressed their concerns about Chinese maritime actions in East and South China Seas, focusing on the importance of maintaining regional security in the Indo-Pacific⁴⁶⁴. In this sense, political tensions remain visible, at times manifesting in economic relations (including China's ban on seafood imports). Nonetheless, economic exchanges are still a primordial element of Japan–China cooperation, underscoring the mutually beneficial trade ties.

China's expanding global influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also fueled dilemmas for Japanese policymakers. In this sense, Tōkyō adopted a nuanced stance towards the BRI. Based on a series of problems identified in BRI's functioning principles (including concerns over transparency and over political influence), Japan's approach was a mix of pragmatism and values-oriented approach, shifting from non-engagement in the early phases to conditional engagement starting with 2017⁴⁶⁵. Japan's participation in the BRI should be underscored by its efforts at making it “a more accommodating initiative for all, and that the funding and implementation of BRI projects is based on international standards

⁴⁶² Walter Brenno Colnaghi, “Japanese Seafood Ban Signals China's Shady Virtues” in *East Asia Forum*, October 23, 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/10/23/japanese-seafood-ban-signals-chinas-shady-virtues/>. Accessed October 1, 2024.

⁴⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶⁴ *The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 18, 2023, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100541826.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴⁶⁵ Asei Ito, “China's Belt and Road Initiative and Japan's Response: From Non-Participation to Conditional Engagement” in *East Asia* 36, no. 2, June 2019, pp. 122–124, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-019-09311-z>.

and rules, including fair and open competition and cooperation”⁴⁶⁶. This norm-upholding perspective is paired with more pragmatic views which showcase the economic potential that BRI’s initiatives hold for Japan. Fundamentally, Japan’s “strategy is one of engagement in the BRI that will contribute to Japan–China cooperation on the plus-sum economic projects in particular, while at the same time striving to broaden rule-based order throughout Asia and Africa through maritime security under the Indo-Pacific Strategy”⁴⁶⁷. In other words, Japan seeks to maintain high economic relations with China, while also promoting stability and regional development within the broader FOIP framework (and specific initiatives like EPQI). This perspective could become more efficient as Japan transitioned from using a more overt democracy-promotion language, to more ideologically-pale concepts around good governance and sustainable development.

The Human Connection: Limits of Soft Power

Moving forward, the depth of engagement not only encouraged extensive economic relations, but also deepened human ties between the two nations. Human-to-human interactions (through cultural diplomacy, soft power and education exchanges) are a significant element of Japan–China relations. As an economic component, China was one of Japan’s largest sources of inbound tourists in the pre-pandemic era⁴⁶⁸. This interest peaked in 2019, when approximately 9.6 million Chinese tourists visited Japan, making-up around 30.1% of Japan’s total visitors⁴⁶⁹. On the Japanese side, the increase mobility was supported by the relaxation of visa requirements for Chinese travelers in 2015⁴⁷⁰. In contrast, Japan tourists to China remained rather consistent but on a smaller scale, with approximately 2.6

⁴⁶⁶ Shutaro Sano, “Japan’s Engagement in China’s Belt and Road Initiative” in *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australian-outlook/japan-one-belt-one-road/>. Accessed October 1, 2024.

⁴⁶⁷ Ito, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

⁴⁶⁸ Here, tourism refers to all forms of visiting activities, ranging from business trips, transit, cultural tourism, etc.

⁴⁶⁹ *Visitor Arrivals*, Japan National Tourism Organization, <https://statistics.jnto.go.jp/en/graph/#graph--inbound--travelers--transition>. Accessed October 1, 2024.

⁴⁷⁰ *Relaxation of Visa Requirements for Chinese Citizens*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, January 6, 2015, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_000576.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

million visitors in 2019⁴⁷¹. Formally speaking, promotion of the human component was consistently present in high-form dialogues, including summit meetings and ministers' meetings. With "Abe's visit to Beijing in 2018, the need for expanding two-way cooperation in human relations was emphasized, as the two nations designated 2019 as the "Youth Exchange Promotion Year"⁴⁷². This emphasis showcases the fact that human connections are perceived as vital for shaping the future of Japan–China relations.

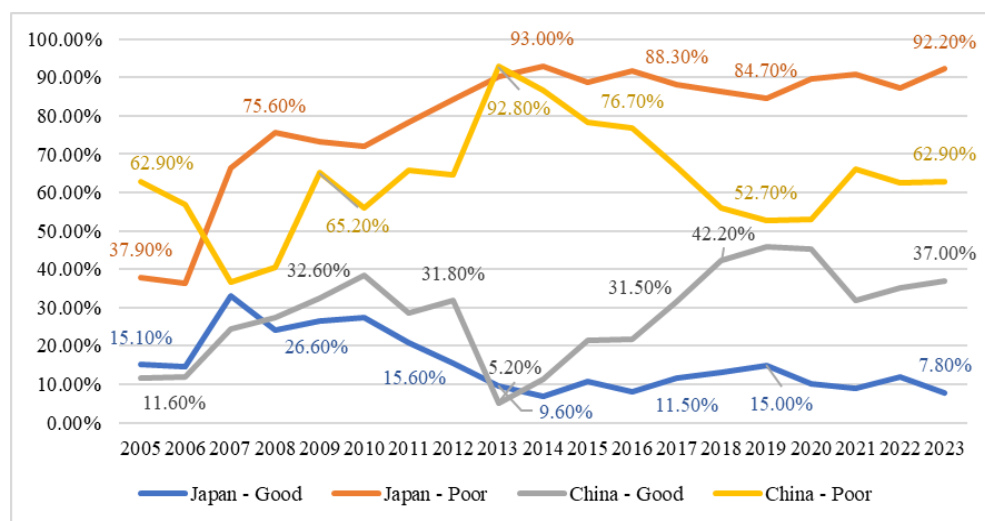


Figure 14: Graph detailing the evolution of public perceptions (2005–2023); 2013 witnessed a spike for both partners

When it comes to educational exchanges, Chinese students frequently choose Japan as their destination. The number of Chinese students in Japan has increased accounting for 41.35% of all exchange students in Japan in 2023⁴⁷³. In contrast to this large number of Chinese students in Japan, a relatively small proportion of Japanese students actually choose China as a foreign destination. This reluctance also came as wider pandemic-induced trend throughout Japanese

⁴⁷¹ *Japanese Visitors*, Japan National Tourism Organization, <https://statistics.jnto.go.jp/en/graph/#graph--Japanese--Trends>. Accessed October 3, 2024.

⁴⁷² *Prime Minister Abe Visits China*, 2018.

⁴⁷³ *Result of International Student Survey in Japan, 2023*, Japan Student Services Organization, May 2024, p. 4, <https://www.studyinJapan.go.jp/en/statistics/enrollment/data/2405241100.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

students, who primarily chose to avoid such overseas endeavors. In 2023, 703 Japanese were studying in China, representing 1.07% of Japanese students abroad⁴⁷⁴. This becomes more explicit when analyzing the top destinations for Japanese students: approximately 76% chose to study in the US, Australia, Canada, the UK and the Philippines⁴⁷⁵. On a more political note, it is clear that the preference of Japanese students is impacted by the historical alliance with the Western states (which included stronger academic ties due to the global dominance of English in academia). However, this can also be linked to historical experiences, which fundamentally shaped public opinion. Although the countries display an ancient-old history of cultural exchanges, consistent and lingering political tensions (in the case of Japan, stemming from tensions generated by territorial disputes and assertive behaviors, while in the case of China, generated by historical grievances and contemporary Japanese political choices) may impact such educational exchanges⁴⁷⁶. Based on the 2023 Genron Survey⁴⁷⁷, 92.2% of Japanese respondents viewed China negatively, while only 7.8% held positive opinions. The predominant negative perceptions stemmed largely from anti-Japanese narratives in Chinese media, which framed Japan either as a historical aggressor or as a nation subordinated to US regional influence. Fundamentally, “the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Chinese state, and its increasing assertiveness in international relations are affecting its cultural relations with other countries”⁴⁷⁸. This also becomes clear for the argument above, which underlined the fact that Japanese students preferred destinations which politically resembled Japan. In spite of these challenges, Japan remained committed to enhancing overall human connections. One good example is the Sasakawa Japan–China Friendship Program, initiated in 1989 and aimed at “promoting understanding, nurturing talent, and furthering cooperation to shape

⁴⁷⁴ JAOS 2023 Statistical Report on Japanese Studying Abroad, Japan Association of Overseas Studies, May 22, 2024, https://www.jaos.or.jp/newsrelease_eng. Accessed October 03, 2024.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷⁶ To get a perspective of such cases, see also, Laura Zhou and Yijing Shen, “Can China–Japan Youth Exchanges and Goodwill Overcome Their Deep Political Chill?” in *South China Morning Post*, September 8, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3277600/can-china-japan-youth-exchanges-and-goodwill-overcome-their-deep-political-chill>. Accessed October 3, 2024.

⁴⁷⁷ *Japan–China Joint Public Opinion Survey 2023*, 2023.

⁴⁷⁸ Utpal Vyas, “Cool, Warm, Soft and Sharp: Paradigms of Cultural Exchange in Japan–China Relations” in *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 26, no. 7, April 16, 2020, p. 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2020.1752683>.

the future”⁴⁷⁹. The program enhanced cultural dialogue between the two nations, emphasizing the need for a more open relation and structured cooperation. On the similar note, Japan Foundation's Japan–China 21st Century Friendship Program⁴⁸⁰ also played a significant role in fostering people-to-people connections. By focusing on academic exchanges, cultural activities and language learning programs, the main goal of the projects was to promote “interactivity and collaboration”⁴⁸¹. The implementation of similar projects was facilitated by the Japan–China High-Level People-to-People and Cultural Exchange Dialogue in 2019⁴⁸², which introduced a structured way for both governments to promote human-to-human exchanges (covering a wide range of areas, including culture, education, tourism and even sports). However, as with other similar mechanisms that were politically forgotten, the platform for dialogue did not fully materialize in a sustained initiative, as political tensions overshadowed the softer diplomatic effort. Human-to-human interactions transformed into a vital tool of modern diplomacy, promoting mutual understanding between the nations. However, China's more assertive behaviors on the political stage created tensions in its softer initiatives, making countries more cautious in engaging culturally with China⁴⁸³. For the Japanese side, the more controversial political actions (including the nationalization and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the political visits to Yasukuni) also degraded its cultural cooperative potential. Without efficiently addressing the complex political issues that continue to shape public perceptions, the human element in Japan–China cooperation will likely remain underdeveloped⁴⁸⁴, further influenced by sustained economic cooperation and strategic rivalry.

⁴⁷⁹ *Sasakawa Japan–China Friendship Program*, The Sasakawa Peace Foundation, <https://www.spf.org/en/programs/china/>. Accessed October 4, 2024.

⁴⁸⁰ *Japan–China 21st Century Friendship Program*, The Japan Foundation, <https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/project/intel/exchange/chinacenter/index.html>. Accessed October 4, 2024.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸² *First Japan–China High-Level People-to-People and Cultural Exchange Dialogue*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 25, 2019, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_ml/cn/page3e_001135.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴⁸³ Vyas, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁴⁸⁴ Jin Qiu, “The Politics of History and Historical Memory in China–Japan Relations” in *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 11, no. 1, March 2006, pp. 27–28, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02877032>.

Strategic S(l)ide: Intense Competition, Limited Cooperation

As discussed previously, the evolving Japan–China relationship was widely shaped by security topics, with both nations part of a complex environment of cooperation and competition. Since 2012, the strategic dimension of their relationship has intensified, heightened by China’s expanding military capacities and assertiveness in the regional context and by Japan’s new domestic political environment. A significant development occurred in the new emerging-security areas, including information, outer space and cybersecurity. These new domains are often presented as areas of gray-zone security challenges, where China employed a distinct strategy “to promote the military use of civilian resources and the civilian use of military technology”⁴⁸⁵. This strategy was also used in more traditional facets of security, such as the maritime domain. China’s use of its coast guard (a non-military actor) to advance its claims in the East China Sea represents a persistent challenge for Japan, who has to cautiously address it (as to avoid a further escalation). However, this cycle of escalations makes long-term stability harder to achieve. Fundamentally, information became an extremely important asset in the realm of security. With today’s expansion of communication platforms, “authoritarian states have managed to reassert control over the realm of ideas”⁴⁸⁶. Control over information and the ability to shape narratives represent significant tools of influence. This more assertive use of non-material forces is conceptualized as ‘sharp power’, whose effects “are increasingly apparent in the spheres of culture, academia, media, and publishing”⁴⁸⁷. Beijing utilizes such tools to advance its political objectives especially with its state media and extended digital infrastructure. This has a clear effect on public opinion, as highlighted above with the 2023 Genron Survey.

Moving forward, information can also serve as a crucial asset in terms of cybersecurity and open space policies. Japan’s focus on bolstering its own cybersecurity defense and integrating it with the broader regional and international frameworks was heavily influenced by the increased cyber threats China could potentially generate. The 2015 China Military Strategy paper explicitly details

⁴⁸⁵ *Defense of Japan 2021*, Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2021, p. 58. https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2021/DOJ2021_EN_Full.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴⁸⁶ Christopher Walker, “What Is ‘Sharp Power’?” in *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3, 2018, p. 11, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0041>.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

the importance of the cyber dimension both in its strategic value (as new security domains) and its economic and social component⁴⁸⁸. To account for this extensive role of the cyber dimensions, Japan has been accelerating its cybersecurity efforts (including the creation of the JSDF Cyber Defense Command and the JGSDF Electronic Warfare Operations Unit in 2022) and strengthening its information-sharing mechanisms with allies⁴⁸⁹. In July 2024 Japan, South Korea, Germany, the UK, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand issued a joint statement warning about a Chinese, presumably state-sponsored, hacking group called Advanced Persistent Threat 40 (APT40), claiming that it represents a severe threat to national cyber networks⁴⁹⁰. Linked to China's Ministry of State Security, APT40 was accused of stealing valuable data and exploiting wider software vulnerabilities⁴⁹¹. A similar cybersecurity incident also occurred in 2020, when Chinese hackers actually targeted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, leading to a leak of sensitive diplomatic information⁴⁹². These incidents pointed towards gaps in national cybersecurity capacities. The 2022 National Security Strategy introduced the principle of "active cyber defense for eliminating in advance the possibility of serious cyberattacks that may cause national security concerns"⁴⁹³. This active attitude (in contrast to a reactive one) aligns with Japan's broader security objectives underlined in the FOIP, especially in the context of China's focus on cyber capabilities and the increased tensions as part of gray-zone operations.

⁴⁸⁸ *China's Military Strategy*, The State Council of The People's Republic of China, May 27, 2015, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm. Accessed October 5, 2024.

⁴⁸⁹ See also, *National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and Beyond*, Ministry of Defense of Japan, December 18, 2018, https://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11591426/www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/2018121_e.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025; and *Defense of Japan 2024*, Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2024, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2024/DOJ2024_EN_Full.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴⁹⁰ Mike Cherney, "U.S., Allies Issue Rare Warning on Chinese Hacking Group" in *The Wall Street Journal*, July 9, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/u-s-allies-issue-rare-warning-on-chinese-hacking-group-9eebb0ce>. Accessed October 5, 2024.

⁴⁹¹ "Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures of Indicted APT40 Actors Associated with China's MSS Hainan State Security Department" in *Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency*, July 19, 2021.

⁴⁹² "U.S. Warned Japan of China's Hacking of Official Diplomatic Telegram System; Reinforcing Cybersecurity Key Concern" in *The Japan News – Yomiuri Shimbun*, February 5, 2024, <https://japan.news.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/defense-security/20240205-166966/>. Accessed October 5, 2024.

⁴⁹³ *National Security Strategy of Japan*, Cabinet Secretariat, December 2022, p. 23, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

The 2022 NSS called for enhanced international cooperation and for the establishment of coherent mechanisms to prevent or to counter such incidents⁴⁹⁴. Throughout the Japan–China relations, the cyber domain remains a dynamic and evolving area. China’s increased capabilities and strategies influenced Japan to promote a wider cooperative regional cybersecurity framework, aligned with its FOIP strategy. Initiatives like the ASEAN–Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Centre (AJCCBC) highlight Japan’s commitment and focus on addressing such challenges at the regional level. This approach calls for ensuring a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, especially in relation to emerging security domains.

It is quite clear that strategic competition represents a defining feature of the relations between the two nations. However, a notable platform for cooperation emerged in the form of the Maritime and Aerial Communication Mechanism (MACM), officially launched in June 2018⁴⁹⁵. The cooperation mechanism was developed to prevent unintended events between the military forces which interest in contested territories. Overall, the platform garnered high expectations in confidence-building and in ensuring smoother communication between the defense forces to minimize the risk of misunderstandings (preventing overt conflict). In 2023, the mechanism was further augmented with the establishment of the Hotline between Japanese and Chinese Defense Authorities⁴⁹⁶. The hotline enables direct communication between the defense ministries about encounters or incidents. The hotline has a significant potential at de-escalating tensions surrounding more contentious activities around disputed territories. Since its establishment, the hotline was impacted by a significant challenge: it connects a political figure (Japan’s defense minister) with a Chinese military official⁴⁹⁷. For urgent military situations, this configuration could delay critical communication. Subsequently, to augment this communication the two countries resumed the Sasakawa Foundation

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 18–22.

⁴⁹⁵ “Japan, China Launch Maritime-Aerial Communication Mechanism” in *The Mainichi*, June 8, 2018, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20180608/p2a/00m/0na/002000c>. Accessed October 5, 2024.

⁴⁹⁶ *Establishment of the Hotline Between Japan–China Defense Authorities*, Ministry of Defense of Japan, March 31, 2023, <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2023/03/dd1ddd1e633fe6b16f982cf5fd6762ec152934e7.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁴⁹⁷ Yasuhiro Kawakami, “Japan–China Crisis Communications Are Improving but Face Challenges” in *United States Institute of Peace*, October 4, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/10/japan-china-crisis-communications-are-improving-face-challenges>. Accessed October 5, 2024.

Japan–China Field Officer Exchange Program in 2019 and then in 2023⁴⁹⁸. In 2023, JSDF officers met with their Chinese counterparts in Beijing, resuming a series of exchanges aimed at increasing cooperation to avoid accidental clashes⁴⁹⁹. Moreover, the Japanese delegation also visited a series of Chinese military facilities, underscoring the importance of cooperation in an extremely tense security framework. Overall, the security component of Japan–China relations involves both competition and limited cooperation. With tensions still overtly manifesting in traditional security areas (such as maritime security), emerging domains are slowly mirroring these areas. In this logic, it is clear that the competitive side dominates the strategy-cooperation nexus. However, the establishment and resumption of various cooperative mechanisms are promising steps. The key is the extent to which these collaborative frameworks can be strengthened or, on the contrary, they will be politically forgotten in the shifting geopolitical landscape (as it was the case with the Japan–China High-Level People-to-People and Cultural Exchange Dialogue and The Japan–China High Level Economic Dialogue).

Takeaways – What endures? What shifts?

This part analyzed the evolution of the bilateral relations into a complex blend of cooperation and competition, reflecting the entrenched economic interdependence and the sustained strategic tensions. The very engaged economic relations (which, at times, seem to be relatively resilient in face of political shocks) are paired by limited people-to-people exchanges and severe security issues. The two partners focused on a certain degree of integration, ranging from the economic dimension (such as the RCEP), to more politically and socially-inclined cooperation (including their common membership in the ASEAN+3 framework). Moreover, Tōkyō places significant emphasis on norm-setting, especially based on multilateral frameworks. The FOIP is more than a simple mechanism to counter Chinese influence in the region. By being portrayed as an inclusive and open platform for cooperation, Japan stressed the importance of the FOIP as a *vision* of regional connectivity

⁴⁹⁸ *Japan–China Field Officer Exchange Program*, The Sasakawa Peace Foundation, <https://www.spf.org/en/china/programs/V20180142.html>. Accessed October 5, 2024.

⁴⁹⁹ Yukio Tajima, “Japanese, Chinese Defense Officers Revive Exchanges after 4 Years” in *Nikkei Asia*, July 18, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/Japanese-Chinese-defense-officers-revive-exchanges-after-4-years>. Accessed October 5, 2024.

and mutual wellbeing. This comes in line with Japan's shift from an extensive focus on values, to a more ideologically-easy language related to development cooperation and good governance. Hence, through its FOIP vision, Japan "stresses rules, norms and principles that can be agreed by all regional countries, rather than values themselves"⁵⁰⁰. This allows for wider engagement (including even cooperation) with countries that share different ideological values. Fundamentally, Japan's strategic objective throughout this relation was "to induce better behavior from China and to encourage China to pursue a role as a constructive stakeholder in the region"⁵⁰¹. For both countries, the other represents a crucial partner, as they avoid direct confrontations and seek to manage disputes rather quietly (to avoid severe negative consequences, including economic disengagement and wider military confrontations). However, the increasing asymmetrical character of the relations (in which Japan, as a middle power, occupies the junior position) presents a significant challenge. This differences also manifest in terms of threat perceptions, which means that Japan and China pursue different security strategies to counter different security challenges⁵⁰². Naturally, this has also influenced Japanese policy-makers to substantially enhance the strategic alliance with the US (overtly detailed both in the 2022 NSS, and in the yearly defense white papers), which sparked consistent tensions in its relations with Beijing. Moreover, Japan has expanded its defense capabilities and pursued new security partnerships (especially in the regional context within rules-governed partnerships), which added to the fragility of its relations with China. On the sidelines of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting in July 2024, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that the bilateral relations are at a "critical stage"⁵⁰³. On the one hand, in August 2024, Japan's Ministry of Defense reported its first airspace violation committed by a Chinese military aircraft⁵⁰⁴, a reconnaissance plane that crossed the territorial airspace of

⁵⁰⁰ Tomohiko Satake, "Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy'", p. 76.

⁵⁰¹ Kawakatsu Ueki, "Japan's China Strategy: The End of Liberal Deterrence" in *Security Challenges* vol 16, no. 3, 2020, p. 59.

⁵⁰² Aoyama, *op. cit.*, pp. 206–207.

⁵⁰³ Apama Divya, "China–Japan Relations at a Crossroads Amid Strategic Challenges" in *The Diplomat*, August 17, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/08/china-japan-relations-at-a-crossroads-amid-strategic-challenges/>. Accessed October 5, 2024.

⁵⁰⁴ *Press Conference by Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 27, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaikenwe_000001_00089.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

the Danjo islands. This represented the first such occurrence involving a military plane. On the other hand, in September 2024, the Japanese destroyer JS Sazanami sailed for the first time through the Taiwan Strait towards a military exercise⁵⁰⁵, prompting a swift reaction from the Chinese government. In terms of traditional security, these actions mark historical firsts. Coming into contrast with the 2012–2023 period (which was diplomatically packed with various platforms and frameworks for dialogue), the evolution of the partnership hangs on how these countries will manage their divergent security perspectives.

⁵⁰⁵ Rieko Miki, “Japan SDF Destroyer Sails through Taiwan Strait for 1st Time” in *NikkeiAsia*, September 26, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Taiwan-tensions/Japan-SDF-destroyer-sails-through-Taiwan-Strait-for-1st-time>. Accessed October 5, 2024.

6.

South Korea: Rivals, Friends, Both?

History Problems – The Power of Ideas

Throughout their evolution, Japan–South Korea relations make up a complex blend of historical experiences, divergent public opinions, economic cooperation and a wider strategic alignment through the support of the US. This part underlines the importance of understanding the evolution of this relationship, especially by taking into consideration the relevance of non-material factors. Although nowadays, the Japan–South Korea relations appear to be at a relatively stable point, they “have experienced diplomatic conflicts caused by emotional identity clashes rather than material interests”⁵⁰⁶. What is more, these ideas-driven clashes have also, at times, eclipsed more strategically-oriented aspects of cooperation (e.g., the General Security of Military Information Agreement signed in 2016 – GSOMIA, which was at the center of a wider dispute in 2019). ‘History problems’ were consistently present in Japan–South Korea dialogues, revolving around a series of specific issues identified during Japan’s colonization of South Korea, defined by cultural suppression, economic exploitation and the dehumanization of Korean individuals⁵⁰⁷: forced labor, sexual slavery (topic most commonly known as the issue of ‘comfort women’) and territorial frictions related to sovereignty over the Takeshima/Dokdo Islands. In spite of the formal settling of these disputes through the signing of the Treaty on Basic Relations in 1965, these unresolved grievances fueled harsher sentiments through South Korea’s public opinion, also influenced by a series of controversial decisions coming from the Japanese side (including history textbook revisions and official statements from high-ranking officials that downplay the gravity of the occupation⁵⁰⁸). The 1965 Treaty led to political and economic normalization

⁵⁰⁶ Ji Young Kim, “Escaping the Vicious Cycle: Symbolic Politics and History Disputes between South Korea and Japan” in *Asian Perspective* 38, no. 1, 2014, p. 34, <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2014.0001>.

⁵⁰⁷ Stephen Gowans, *Patriots, Traitors and Empires: The Story of Korea’s Struggle for Freedom*, Quebec: Baraka Books of Montreal, 2018, p. 24.

⁵⁰⁸ Gi-Wook Shin, “Historical Disputes and Reconciliation in Northeast Asia: Can the United States Play a Role?” in *EAI Fellows Program Working Paper Series* No. 16, 2009, pp. 6–11.

of relations between the two states, ending a period of political instability and economic distress. Following its signing, the Japanese government provided financial support to Korea totaling 300 million US\$ of grant aid, 200 million US\$ of loan aid and 300 million US\$ in terms of commercial loans⁵⁰⁹. However, the Treaty failed to address the deep historical issues that dominated throughout South Korean public opinion. At the diplomatic level, both countries sought to move forward in terms of their partnership, but the disconnect between governmental agreements and public opinion dominated. For South Korea, more pragmatic needs (in the form of stability) overshadowed these symbolic considerations. While Park Chung-hee's (1961–1979) administration focused on the *pragmatic* side of relations, the wider public was slowly experiencing feelings of *humiliation* and *antagonism* towards Japan⁵¹⁰. This general trend continued to manifest even during South Korea's democratic transition, when such “narratives of humiliation found increasing resonance [...] and began to overwhelm those of pragmatism that had dominated earlier”⁵¹¹. However, they did not entirely resonate with governmental policies. During this period, Japan issued two significant statements addressing the imperial past. In 1993, the Kōno Statement⁵¹² formally acknowledged the fact that, during World War II, the Japanese authorities established ‘comfort stations’ where women were forced into sexual slavery. Additionally, in 1995, the Murayama Statement acknowledged Japan's colonial aggressions upon Asian nations. Following these two statements, in 1998, the two nations issued a joint declaration also known as the Kim-Obuchi Declaration⁵¹³ which called for a new era of bilateral relations. Accordingly, the statement focused on reconciliation with the past and on the adoption of a future-oriented cooperative vision. Fundamentally, the statement linked the evolving partnership (included in its political and economic sides) with regional stability and peace.

⁵⁰⁹ Kim Gyu-Pan, “Korea's Economic Relations with Japan” in Troy Stangorone (ed.), *Korea's Economy Volume 31*, The Korea Economic Institute of America, August 3, 2017, p. 24.

⁵¹⁰ Eun A. Jo, “Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean–Japanese Relations” in *International Organization* 76, no. 4, 2022, pp. 781–782, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818322000194>.

⁵¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 784.

⁵¹² *Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 4, 1993, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page25e_000343.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵¹³ *Japan–Republic of Korea Joint Declaration. A New Japan–Republic of Korea Partnership towards the Twenty-first Century*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 8, 1998, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/korea/joint9810.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

In other words, cooperation was necessary on both sides to address the new, emerging threats of the 2000s. Based on this partnership, South Korea started to sequentially relax its restrictions on Japanese cultural imports (which were in place since the end of Japan's colonial rule)⁵¹⁴. Initially, partial restrictions were still maintained but by 2004, Japanese cultural imports were allowed unrestricted for domestic consumption. Moreover, the total volume of trade between Japan and South Korea was significant. By mid-2000s, both countries were important trade partners. In 2005, Japan was South Korea's second largest trading partner (with a total of 18.5% in terms of import share and 8.4% in terms of export share), below China and marginally above the US (while Japan made-up 26.9% of South Korea's trade relations, the US sat closely at around 26.4%)⁵¹⁵. However, a major issue throughout this trade relation is South Korea's consistent deficit with Japan, which became almost a structural problem. Since the early 1970s, "Korean companies imported intermediate goods from Japan, processed these imports, then exported these final products to third countries"⁵¹⁶. On this economic note, the early 2000s also witnessed the initiation of a potential FTA which, gradually, expanded into a trilateral forum alongside China.

However, these changes indicated only "a certain degree of quantitative development but very little qualitative progress during the post-Cold War period"⁵¹⁷. This trend was expanded in diplomatic relations through the presidencies of Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) and Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013), who adopted harder stances on such historical topics. This was also paired by a heightened degree of activism in South Korean society, as various groups amplified their efforts in demanding an official apology from Japan for historical problems, primarily the issue of comfort women⁵¹⁸.

⁵¹⁴ Gillianne Lux, "Cool Japan and the Hallyu Wave: The Effect of Popular Culture Exports on National Image and Soft Power" in *East Asian Studies Honors Papers* 3, May 14, 2021, pp. 82–84.

⁵¹⁵ Based on the data centralized from *Korea, Rep. trade balance, exports and imports*, World Integrated Trade Solution, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/KOR/Year/2005/TradeFlow/EXPIMP#>. Accessed October 6, 2024.

⁵¹⁶ Gyu-Pan, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁵¹⁷ Ji Young Kim, "Rethinking the Role of Identity Factors: The History Problem and the Japan–South Korea Security Relationship in the Post-Cold War Period" in *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 15, no. 3, April 21, 2015, p. 3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcv007>.

⁵¹⁸ Jo, *op. cit.*, p. 789.

2012 and Beyond – Volatile Bilateral Relations

In an initial phase spanning from 2012 to 2014, the relations were steadily deteriorating, largely due to the issues mentioned above. Nonetheless, this period was characterized by fewer and inconsistent episodes of engagement, also displaying a rather shallow depth. The major high-level dialogues fostered throughout 2012 and 2014 overtly acknowledged the existence of certain uncomfortable topics of discussion in their bilateral relations. However, the dominant concern and the recurrent theme was the extended focus on the military threats stemming from North Korea⁵¹⁹. This was also the major focus point of trilateral Japan–US–South Korea forums, which fundamentally highlighted the need for closer cooperations to provide stability and predictability in the regional context⁵²⁰. Starting with 2015, the relations were marked by a more positive note, showcasing an extended engagement. The moment also holds a symbolic importance, marking 50 years since the normalization of relations. Moreover, 2015 was also the year when announced its peace legislation. This focus on security topics was also visible in its dialogues with South Korea, as the March 2015 Foreign Ministers' Meetings presented the prospect of a coordinated bilateral security dialogue, with a 2+2 component (foreign affairs and defense ministries)⁵²¹. Nonetheless, given that 2015 was a symbolic year, security topics were complemented by human-to-human and cultural elements, including the successful unfolding of the Korea–Japan Festival. Towards the end of the year, however, the two partners took a significant step towards addressing one of the most pressing historical issues: the issue of comfort women. In December 2015, Tōkyō and Seoul reached an agreement aimed at settling the dispute. The announcement focused on three topics: first, it acknowledged the involvement of the Japanese military in the comfort camps; second, it committed approximately 1 billion yen to a new foundation to be established by South Korea to support the surviving victims (the future Reconciliation and Healing Foundation); three, it settled the issue as final and irreversible, and both nations agreed to stop

⁵¹⁹ This represented a consistent line of dialogue throughout multiple Foreign Ministers Meetings and the May 2012 Summit Meeting.

⁵²⁰ *Japan–U.S.–ROK Trilateral Summit Meeting (Outline)*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, March 25, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/page3e_000171.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵²¹ *Japan–ROK Foreign Ministers' Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, March 23, 2015, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page22e_000664.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

criticizing each other on this topic⁵²². The agreement was perceived as the height of diplomatic progress between the two nations, emphasizing the need to move forward. However, the apparent reconciliatory motif for reaching the agreement was underlined by other national factors, including the domestic political stage and the evolving regional security issues⁵²³. The agreement also faced significant backlash and opposition from South Korean civil society groups, who perceived the financial aid not as a compensation for the atrocities committed, but rather as a compromise to re-ignite the bilateral cooperative relations. In terms of the other shortcomings, Japan's approach did not focus on properly providing aid and closure to the victims (especially highlighted through its third point, which called for avoiding mutual criticism on this topic), while its vague language severely discredited the conciliatory power of the apology⁵²⁴.

In this context, the regional security environment became increasingly tense. North Korea's extensive military tests served as direct threats to both Japan and South Korea. Additionally, China's increased assertiveness in the maritime domain created regional anxieties, but prompted different reactions among Tōkyō and Seoul, based on their threat perceptions. Japan's more vocal criticism of Chinese incursions contrasted with South Korea's more cooperative interpretation of Chinese actions⁵²⁵, prompting a rather muted stance. Additionally, trilateral meetings between Japan–China–South Korea largely focused on broader regional economic and non-traditional security concerns (such as, development cooperation and disaster relief), avoiding harder stances on maritime issues⁵²⁶. The election of President Moon Jae-in in 2017, alongside the coming to power of Donald Trump introduced a new phase in Japan–US–South Korea relations. North Korea's escalating tests in 2017, including the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile

⁵²² *Announcement by Foreign Ministers of Japan and the Republic of Korea at the Joint Press Occasion*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, December 28, 2015, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page4e_000364.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵²³ Klea Ramaj, "The 2015 South Korean–Japanese Agreement on 'Comfort Women': A Critical Analysis" in *International Criminal Law Review* 22, no. 3, February 4, 2022, p. 495, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718123-bja10127>.

⁵²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 508.

⁵²⁵ Cheol Hee Park, "Strategic Estrangement Between South Korea and Japan as a Barrier to Trilateral Cooperation" in *Atlantic Council*, November 1, 2019, p. 6.

⁵²⁶ *The Eighth Japan–China–ROK Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 24, 2016, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page3e_000539.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

(ICBM) dominated the agenda of trilateral⁵²⁷ and bilateral meetings⁵²⁸ between the partners. Even though these high-level platforms emphasized the need for a coordinated response to North Korea's actions, they did not provide any practical or institutionalized mechanisms to enforce this defense cooperation. In this complex security web, the pragmatic focus on North Korea's actions was paired by Seoul's decision of reviewing the 2015 agreement. The governmental task force which reviewed the agreement concluded that it fell short of addressing the concerns of the victims, while its signing process was not entirely democratic as it included a restricted decision-making polity, without consultations with the wider public and the victims⁵²⁹. Japan's official reaction came in the form of a statement issued by then-foreign minister Tarō Kōno, who drew attention to the fact that, if the South Korean government attempts to "change an agreement which has already been implemented, the Japan–ROK relationship will become unmanageable"⁵³⁰. From the Japanese perspective, any attempts to revise or even abandon the 'final and irreversible' agreement would strain the bilateral diplomatic relations. This was also influenced by the fact that, from Tōkyō's perspective, its commitments have been fulfilled through the 1 billion yen financial contribution to the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation. Despite the harder diplomatic stance, public pressure and the new perspective adopted on Japanese topics indicated a distancing from the agreement coming from the South Korean side. From their point of view, simple financial compensation would not entirely heal the wounds of the victims, as they also require and value more symbolic needs, "primarily [...] acknowledgement, recognition and memorialization"⁵³¹. The topic of memorialization was a recurrent

⁵²⁷ *Japan–U.S.–ROK Trilateral Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, July 6, 2017, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/page3e_000703.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵²⁸ *Japan–ROK Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 7, 2017, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page3e_000760.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵²⁹ "'Comfort Women' Deal Inked with Secret Agreements: Foreign Ministry" in *The Korea Times*, December 27, 2017, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/10/113_241540.html. Accessed October 12, 2024.

⁵³⁰ *The Announcement of the Results of the Assessment by the Taskforce to Review the Agreement on Comfort Women Issue reached between the Governments of Japan and the ROK*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, December 27, 2017, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001857.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵³¹ Roland Moerland, "The 2015 South Korea–Japan 'Comfort Women' Agreement: Acknowledging Wartime Sexual Slavery or Denying It?" in *SSRN*, April 15, 2024, p. 22, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4767732>.

one throughout these disputes, given the installation of comfort women statues (young girl statues) outside Japan's embassy in Seoul in 2011 and outside Japan's consulate in Busan in 2017. The second statue in Busan was subject to sustained criticism coming from Japan's side, as it was widely perceived as a symbolic breach of the 2015 agreement, which called for a low-profile approach on the topic. Accordingly, the Japanese side "halted talks on a planned currency swap and delayed high-level economic dialogue"⁵³². These contrasting perspectives showcased the fact that the agreement was slowly falling apart. In 2018, Seoul decided to dissolve the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, which provided financial assistance to a number of victims, essentially 'killing' the agreement.

In spite of increasing tensions concerning historical topics in 2018, the level of diplomatic engagement remained surprisingly high. Two summit meetings were organized during that year: the first in February, when Abe visited South Korea attending the opening ceremony of the PyeongChang Winter Olympics; the second in May, when Moon visited Japan. The summits were also complemented by Foreign Ministers' Meetings, both in a bilateral format and in a trilateral one (alongside the US). This higher level of dialogue was augmented by the fact that 2018 represented the 20th anniversary of the Kim–Obuchi Declaration. Hence, the various frameworks facilitated the cooperation of the two states and allowed them to raise their contentious issues, specifically the changes in the 2015 agreement and the situation of the statue raised in Busan, topics controversially defined from the Japanese side as "the 'requisitioned workers' issue"⁵³³. Nonetheless, the summit and ministers' meetings, while showcasing the need for sustained dialogue, focused on broader security concerns involving North Korea's military provocations. In this sense, the discussions actually did not project a practical trajectory for resolving the rising tensions surrounding the historical topics, in spite of the closer connectivity displayed throughout 2018.

Dramatically and ironically, in October, exactly 20 years since the joint statement, South Korea's Supreme Court ruled that Japanese company Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corporation must pay compensation for the victims of

⁵³² Sol Han and James Griffiths, "Why this Statue of a Young Girl Caused a Diplomatic Incident" in *CNN*, February 10, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/05/asia/south-korea-comfort-women-statue/index.html>. Accessed October 13, 2024.

⁵³³ *Japan–ROK Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, February 9, 2018, https://www.mofa.go.jp/page4e_000829.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

forced labor in World War II. Diplomatically, Tōkyō swiftly reacted, opposing the decision and stating that the 1965 treaty had resolved all claims related to wartime forced labor, and that this decision “overthrows the legal foundation of the friendly and cooperative relationship that Japan and the Republic of Korea have developed”⁵³⁴. In the ensuing period of time, relations between Japan and South Korea consistently deteriorated, reaching a historic low, with subsequent rulings that demanded various Japanese companies pay compensation for forced labor victims⁵³⁵. In 2019, the tensions further escalated into the diplomatic and mostly economic domains. On the basis of lenient export controls on the Korean side impacting Japanese security concerns, Abe's administration introduced extensive controls on export tech materials, fundamental for South Korea's tech industry. As, at the time, Japan controlled over 90% of the global fluorinated polyimide and photoresist supplies and South Korea's Samsung and SK Hynix controlled a large share of the global semiconductor production industries⁵³⁶, the move was perceived as a significant blow to South Korea's economy. In spite of official security reasons, South Korea viewed these actions as retaliation for the Supreme Court rulings, as the dispute spiraled into an economic war⁵³⁷. The two states soon removed each other from their own lists of trusted trade partners, displaying the rift in political relations. In August 2019, the tensions reached their boiling point, when South Korea announced its intention of terminating the GSOMIA, a pale sign of security cooperation. Although the termination of the agreement was temporarily postponed after US pressure and intervention⁵³⁸, the dispute showcased the fact that

⁵³⁴ *Regarding the Decision by the Supreme Court of the Republic of Korea, Confirming the Existing Judgments on the Japanese Company*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 30, 2018, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_002204.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵³⁵ Jack Kim, “South Korea Forced Labour Victims Gets ‘Compensation’ from Japan Firm, Lawyer Says” in *Reuters*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/skorea-forced-labour-victim-receives-compensation-japanese-firm-family-lawyer-2024-02-20/>. Accessed October 14, 2024.

⁵³⁶ Mitsuru Obe, “Japan's Export Curbs on South Korea: 5 Things to Know” in *NikkeiAsia*, July 9, 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-s-export-curbs-on-South-Korea-5-things-to-know>. Accessed October 14, 2024.

⁵³⁷ Sherisse Pham, “South Korea Accuses Japan of Waging ‘Economic War’” in *CNN*, August 2, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/08/02/business/japan-south-korea-trade-war/index.html>. Accessed October 14, 2024.

⁵³⁸ Songok Han Thornton and William H. Thornton, “South Korea's Trilateral Imperative: Facing Up to the New Cold War in Northeast Asia” in *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 24, no. 3, 2020, p. 81.

both partners would use non-conventional means (such as economic restrictions and diplomatic pressure) to advance their views and interests. Diplomatic mistrust between the two partners deepened, with South Korea taking Japan's restrictions to the World Trade Organization (WTO), claiming they violate the free trade rules that Japan itself promotes through its FOIP. Fundamentally, in spite of the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, relations remained rather sour, as both Seoul and Tōkyō avoided making any political concessions on more sensitive topics. The period between the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022 marked a palpable shift in relations, with the political changes both in Japan and South Korea. Kishida's a premiership was paired with the election of Yoon Suk-yeol in South Korea (in March 2022), with an explicit desire to improve bilateral relations. This was further facilitated by US consistent engagement, for whom trilateral cooperation was perceived as critical for the regional security framework. Renewed diplomatic dialogues defined 2022, with the major bilateral and trilateral platforms widely accepting the need for a free and open Indo-Pacific, supported through consistent collaboration. The deepening of engagement was also visible in the Japan–US–South Korea Summit Meeting statement issued in November⁵³⁹. Fundamentally, it focused on three key cooperation areas. First, it stressed the need for stability based on the degrading security framework (including challengers as North Korea, China and Russia). Second, it focused on regional centrality, stressing the importance of ASEAN and its AOIP vision in fostering wider cooperation. Third, norms-guided economic and tech cooperation were defined as essential elements for sustained climate action. The US played a pivotal role in managing the relation, emphasizing the strategic value of Japan–South Korea bilateral cooperation within the regional framework. This was complemented by the first Summit Meeting between prime minister Kishida and President Yoon, where South Korea presented its Indo-Pacific Strategy of Freedom, Peace, and Prosperity, sharing an aligned vision for the regional framework⁵⁴⁰.

The cooperative focus was maintained in 2023, following President Yoon's visit to Tōkyō. The March 2023 Summit was one of the most practically-inclined

⁵³⁹ *Japan–U.S.–ROK Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 15, 2022, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/pageite_000001_00646.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵⁴⁰ *Japan–ROK Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 13, 2022, Japan–ROK Summit Meeting. Accessed February 15, 2025.

ones through its multifaceted nature⁵⁴¹. On the economic front, the discussions revolved around addressing the trade disputes, which were major points of contention since 2019. Strategically, the partners highlighted the need for reigniting various frameworks (especially the security dialogue) to address increased regional tensions, stemming both from North Korea's extensive missile launches (including the launch of the Hwasong-12 ballistic missile that flew over Japan⁵⁴²) and by the situation in Ukraine (identified as a unilateral change of the status-quo). Aside from the strategic and economic aspects, the summit also covered the desire to heal gaps in public relations, supporting people-to-people and youth exchanges. In May 2023, Kishida visited Seoul for another summit meeting. Facilitated by the US, the depth of bilateral relations greatly expanded in comparison to previous years. Even quantitatively, 2023 witnessed six summit meetings which prioritized pragmatic cooperation. The Kishida–Yoon period laid the groundwork for increased engagement and practical cooperation, while historical sensitivities remained largely unaddressed.

Security Dimension: Overcoming Consistent Challenges

Presently, Japan and South Korea are bound in a pragmatic trilateral alliance, promoting security interests that are perceived as widely common along the allies: the regional threats (both in terms of traditional security and in gray-zone aspects) posed by North Korea and China's military escalations, and the global threat to the liberal world posed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Being nations which benefited greatly from the stable development of the status-quo (as entrenchment in the global liberal order yielded significant economic development for both South Korea and Japan), unilateral attempts to shift this order created political anxieties for them. However, as underlined throughout this part, colder political relations have had a significant impact both in terms of economic cooperation and in more sensitive security and strategic dialogues. Apart from the 'history problems' mentioned above, which have impacted a greater depth of cooperation

⁵⁴¹ *Japan–ROK Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, March 16, 2023, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page1e_000593.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵⁴² Victor Cha, Ellen Kim and Andy Lim, "North Korea Tests Missile over Japan" in *Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)*, October 5, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/north-korea-tests-missile-over-japan-0>. Accessed October 17, 2024.

historically, the post-2014 security-oriented collaboration between Seoul and Tōkyō was further complicated by a series of challenges, including the Takeshima/Dokdo Islands dispute and Japan's more proactive approach in international politics. In this logic, the strategic cooperation has faced challenges, primarily due to divergent threat perceptions and Japan's more assertive and engaged defense posture.

For the first point, both South Korea and Japan identified the nuclear threat posed by North Korea as the crucial strategic concern. However, during Moon's tenure, Seoul prioritized reducing tensions to seek cooperative dialogue with North Korea, actions facilitated by the American intentions (including Trump's more personal rapprochement with Kim Jong-un) and by China's calls for cooperation in the regional framework⁵⁴³. This approach contrasted with Japan's official stance, which remained largely skeptical and less inclined to engage with North Korea. These contrastive approaches coincided with the signing of the Panmunjom Declaration⁵⁴⁴, which announced a new era for the Korean Peninsula based on national reconciliation and denuclearization. The rapprochement initiated by South Korea and the US towards North Korea also led to Japan's relative estrangement in the process. During 2018 and 2019, diplomatic initiatives involving North Korea, South Korea and the US usually sidelined Japan's own concerns. Plainly put, the American and Korean focus on reducing military tensions overshadowed Japan's own security agenda, which was particularly concerned with North Korea's missile capabilities. At that time, Japan became one of the most important regional players which were left out of the North Korea equation, as Kim participated in meetings alongside Trump, Moon, Xi and Putin. This was also palpable in the Japanese public opinion, with fears stemming from the fact that Japan was being isolated in a shifting regional context, where one of Tōkyō's most poignant security challengers engaged in extended political dialogue with virtually everyone but Japan⁵⁴⁵. Abe remained consistent and called for maximum pressure on North Korea through sanctions,

⁵⁴³ Park, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁵⁴⁴ *Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula*, Republic of Korea – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 17, 2018, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5478/view.do?seq=319130&srchFr=&%3BsrchTo=&%3BsrchWord=&%3BsrchTp=&%3Bmulti_itm_seq=0&%3Bitm_seq_1=0&%3Bitm_seq_2=0&%3Bcompany_cd=&%3Bcompany_nm=&page=1&titleNm. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵⁴⁵ James Griffiths, "Japan Seeking Own North Korea Summit as Abe Risks Being Left Out" in *CNN*, March 29, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/29/asia/japan-north-korea-summit-intl/index.html>. Accessed October 19, 2024.

but, as his country lacked a role throughout the extended diplomatic process, he accepted the idea of holding a direct bilateral summit with Kim to address its own historical issues (the abductions) and security concerns. The divergence in Japanese and South Korean strategies, backed by the US, showcased a series of practical challenges towards bilateral security cooperation in the post-2012 era.

For the second point, divergent approaches held towards historical disputes have exacerbated the security-related disconnect. This is the case with the Takeshima/Dokdo Islands dispute, perceived by many as another facet of 'history problems', which resurfaced during periods of increased diplomatic frictions. As a historical territorial conflict over a group of islands in the Sea of Japan⁵⁴⁶, the dispute has been a persistent point of contention in bilateral relations. These political tensions were further fueled by actions on both sides, including a series of visits on the island performed by South Korean Presidents (particularly in 2012 and 2014), and Japan's set-up of a local celebration in the form of 'Takeshima Day' and its inclusion of the islands in national tsunami alerts. Despite the fact that South Korea administrates the islands (a mark of *de facto* control), Japan often protests the situation, promoting its sovereignty and stating that, based on various historical documents, the land was acquired as *terra nullius*, basically land belonging to no one (a mark of *de jure* control), in 1905⁵⁴⁷. At the level of public opinion, in 2014, the Takeshima/Dokdo dispute was the 2nd most used argument for the mutual negative perceptions⁵⁴⁸. Even though, through their bilateral and multilateral platforms, both partners acknowledge the need to find a resolution to this topic and strategically address shared security challenges, the practical efforts were rather limited. Moreover, starting with 2014, Japan's more assertive defense posture further added complexity to these relations. These changes revolved around the increase in military spending, the expansion of the constitutional interpretation and an overall more heightened

⁵⁴⁶ The naming of the sea between Japan, the Korean Peninsula and Russia is itself an intense subject of debate. For South Korea, the sea is known as the East Sea, while the dominant international name is the Sea of Japan. The main point of contention is related to when the dominant name became used as the standard – from the Korean point of view, the dominant name became more widely used during Japan's colonial rule. Hence, the issue holds a deep symbolic value, while attempts to reach mutual consent made little progress.

⁵⁴⁷ Tsukamoto Takashi, "The Meaning of the Territorial Incorporation of Takeshima (1905)" in *Review of Island Studies – The Sasakawa Peace Foundation*, December 25, 2014, p. 1.

⁵⁴⁸ Elena Atanassova-Cornelis, Ramon Pacheco Pardo and Eva Pejsova, "Pride and Prejudice: Maritime Disputes in Northeast Asia" in *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)*, March 1, 2015, p. 32.

role. For South Korea, these transformations raised concerns about Japan's strategic ambitions. Naturally, existing sensitivities were exacerbated by the increase in military capabilities of a neighbor with whom Seoul has a territorial dispute, although these changes were framed within a defensive-oriented approach. Moreover, based on existing historical grievances, Japan's actions for countering evolving regional challenges and for managing uncertainties were also perceived in South Korea as a departure from Japan's post-war pacifism. In this logic, "[t]o the extent that Korea has a maritime dimension to its strategic culture, [...] Japan looms as the more revisionist power rather than China, even though Japan is far less likely to resort to actual force"⁵⁴⁹. In other words, after the expansion of its defense policies and during times of fractured relations, the colonial rule and its territorial claims made South Korea more suspicious about Japan's intentions, in spite of its general alignment with democratic norms. Accordingly, for security and strategic cooperation, the relation is widely shaped both by geopolitical realities and historical memory. From the Japanese side, South Korea's extensive focus on the bilateral symbolic rift (with the history problems) impacted Tōkyō's abilities and strategic efforts in maintaining the regional power dynamics. Accordingly, Seoul's reluctance to adopt a harder stance on China, strategy portrayed as a collective effort in providing regional stability, also limited the potential for a stronger trilateral alliance alongside the US. In this sense, Japan was more skeptical about South Korea's potential and reliability as a regional security partner. Based on these uncertainties, Japan did not include South Korea as a partner for its Quad vision, despite the fact that both manifest serious challenges in terms of maritime security. Consequently, the Japanese leaders "may find the absence of South Korea an additional advantage to the quadrilateral grouping"⁵⁵⁰. As mentioned before, South Korea adopted more muted stances against Chinese actions, which could represent significant legitimacy and credibility gaps throughout the Quad. Without the inclusion in such formal platforms of cooperation, the security cooperation between the two partners lacked a high-level framework. This was also palpable in more practical instances, where various disputes impacted the security dimensions. The 2018 radar dispute and the Seoul's decision in 2019 to not renew the GSOMIA are such examples. In the case of the

⁵⁴⁹ Michael J. Green, *Line of Advantage. Japan's Grand Strategy in the Era of Abe Shinzō*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2022, p. 166.

⁵⁵⁰ Emma Chanlett-Avery, "Japan, the Indo-Pacific, and the 'Quad'" in *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, February 2018.

radar dispute, a South Korean vessel allegedly directed its Fire-Control (FC) radar at a Japanese surveillance plane in the Sea of Japan.

Such instances of heightened tensions were ultimately resolved with Washington's help. In the case of the radar dispute, it was shifted in 2024 into a practical opportunity for capacity-building⁵⁵¹, while the GSOMIA cooperation was preserved. Throughout consistent trilateral frameworks (ranging from summit meetings to ministers' meetings and more practical instances of cooperation), the US attempted to harness closer cooperation between the allies, focusing on addressing shared security concerns, particularly those related to North Korea's military programs. In 2012, with Obama's pivot to Asia, trilateral cooperation was emphasized as primordial to regional stability. In spite of various controversies, the pivot yielded a series of positive results in security cooperation. First of all, it succeeded in transitioning from the *hub-spokes* partnerships developed during the Cold War, where the US engaged separately with each partner, while Japan and South Korea did not develop their bilateral military relations, into a more integrated trilateral alliance⁵⁵². Second of all, the engaged US pressure led to the signing of the GSOMIA in 2016, despite initial attempts to draft such an agreement in 2012. In spite of the fact that the GSOMIA is not as comprehensive as a military cooperation treaty, it represented a first step towards deeper security engagement in a period mired with controversies and tensions. From the strategic point of view, the GSOMIA facilitated more practical security engagement between the two states, as the information-sharing process was made more efficient and more adaptable. Plainly put, Seoul and Tōkyō could directly exchange North Korea-related information with each other⁵⁵³, allowing the US to share information with both countries. Third of all, US efforts included practical military exercises which were aimed to improve the overall interoperability of the allies. Although these exercises were not strictly trilateral alongside South Korea and Japan, participation in such US-led exercises emphasized military cooperation. Red Flag-Alaska, a multinational,

⁵⁵¹ *Joint Press Statement by Minister of Defense of Japan and Minister of National Defense of the Republic of Korea*, Ministry of Defense of Japan, June 1, 2024, <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2024/06/379fa1b91bffc2aee8a35e60413b555b96bbe6b.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵⁵² Chien Liu, "Obama's Pivot to Asia and Its Failed Japan–South Korea Historical Reconciliation" in *East Asia* 35, 2018, p. 303, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-018-9304-7>.

⁵⁵³ Sangbo Park, "Implications of the General Security of Military Information Agreement for South Korea" in *Stimson*, December 16, 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2016/implications-general-security-military-information-agreement-south-korea/>. Accessed October 20, 2024.

US-led air force exercise that focuses on combat-simulated military training, serves as a platform for increased cooperation, with both partners actively participating between 2015 to 2018⁵⁵⁴. Based on the recurring sensitive topics, South Korea stopped participating between 2018 and 2021. Since then, both nations resumed their active participation in the program. Moving forward, between 2017 and 2020, a series of political changes generated a transformation in dynamics both in bilateral and trilateral cooperation. At the peak of South Korea–Japan disputes, the efforts to get over the stalemate required “a degree of serious personal involvement in diplomacy for which [Trump] has shown little inclination”⁵⁵⁵. President Trump’s more transactional approach to security issues (including calls for increased military spending) were paired by the prominence of history problems, showcasing the lowest point of modern bilateral relations between Japan and South Korea. Moreover, Trump’s more cooperative approach to North Korea gained resonance with South Korea, but not with Japan. Abe managed to avoid any fundamental changes in the US–Japan relations with his personal approach, but security collaboration with its neighbor remained extremely limited. Despite Trump’s approach, the pressure put forth by his administration were instrumental in persuading South Korea to not terminate the GSOMIA agreement, but the political and cultural rift between the two Asian partners remained significant. The FOIP and Quad focus brought about by the Biden administration aligned with the political changes in Japan and South Korea. This also meant augmented practical military cooperation, such as the Sea Dragon Exercise, a multilateral maritime exercise especially focused on Indo-Pacific maritime challenges⁵⁵⁶. This exercise slowly transformed into a sort of Quad + South Korea military platform, including Seoul in wider, multilateral maritime cooperation. Furthermore, based on the increased geopolitical tensions, the three partners laid out their vision for security cooperation in August 2023, during their Camp David Summit⁵⁵⁷. The partners formally institutionalized their

⁵⁵⁴ The information was centralized from multiple news articles from the US Indo-Pacific Command, <https://www.pacom.mil/>. Accessed October 20, 2024.

⁵⁵⁵ Marcus Noland, “Alliances under Stress: South Korea, Japan, and the United States” in *East-West Center*, November 19, 2019, p. 2.

⁵⁵⁶ *Australia, India, Japan, Korea, and the U.S. Complete Multilateral Exercise Sea Dragon 2024*, United States Navy, January 31, 2024, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/3662123/australia-india-japan-korea-and-the-us-complete-multilateral-exercise-sea-drago/>. Accessed October 20, 2024.

⁵⁵⁷ *The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States*, 2023.

cooperation by highlighting a shared view of regional challenges, including North Korea's and China's challenges to stability. Moreover, based on US support, the statement called for diplomatic efforts in addressing disputes between Japan and South Korea. In terms of practical cooperation, the summit focused on the need for military exercises and the expansion of additional frameworks for intelligence-sharing to complement the GSOMIA. The extended principles espoused through the joint statement were not left stagnant. In June 2024, the new trilateral military exercise, called 'Freedom Edge', was conducted with a focus on multi-domain interoperability⁵⁵⁸. Additionally, the consistent efforts were also visible at a higher level. In July 2024, the two partners held the first meeting of defense officials since 2015⁵⁵⁹, followed by the signing of the Memorandum of Cooperation on the Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework (TSCF) alongside the US⁵⁶⁰. For the first time in years, the memorandum laid the foundation for more structured and frequent security dialogues, paired by practical exercises and knowledge-sharing mechanisms. All in all, the American efforts were essential in transforming South Korea–US–Japan cooperation into a more integrated regional alliance, capable of addressing Asian security-related complexities.

Economies and People: Opportunities and Changes

Just as in the case of the security dimension, the economic relationship developed into a complex element of cooperation and competition. Overall, trade relations remained rather consistent even in the context of heightened political tensions. As mentioned before, Japan has been a key supplier of high-tech raw materials, crucial to South Korea's semiconductor industry. This stability is visible

⁵⁵⁸ *First Execution of Multi-Domain Japan–ROK–U.S. Exercise FREEDOM EDGE*, US Indo-Pacific Command, June 27, 2024, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3819042/trilateral-statement-first-execution-of-multi-domain-japan-rok-us-exercise-free/>. Accessed October 20, 2024.

⁵⁵⁹ "S. Korea, Japan Hold 1st Meeting of Senior Defense Officials in 9 Years" in *The Korea Times*, July 10, 2024, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/10/113_378425.html. Accessed October 20, 2024.

⁵⁶⁰ *Joint Statement of the 15th Republic of Korea–United States–Japan Defense Trilateral Talks*, U.S. Department of Defense, September 9, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3900255/joint-statement-of-the-15th-republic-of-korea-united-states-japan-defense-trila/>. Accessed October 20, 2024.

in the graph below⁵⁶¹. Even in 2019, during the Japan–South Korea trade war, the Japanese trade indicators remained virtually the same, with exports to South Korea making-up 6.47% – in comparison to an average of 7.14% in between 2012 and 2022 – (44.7 billion US\$) of Japan’s total exports, while imports from South Korea consisted of 4.3% – compared to a 4.4% average in between 2012 and 2022 – (28.3 billion US\$) of Japan’s total imports. However, the trade conflict had a negative impact on Japan’s hydrogen fluoride exports, as South Korea, its most important and largest buyer, has turned towards domestic production, with its semiconductor industry largely unaffected⁵⁶².

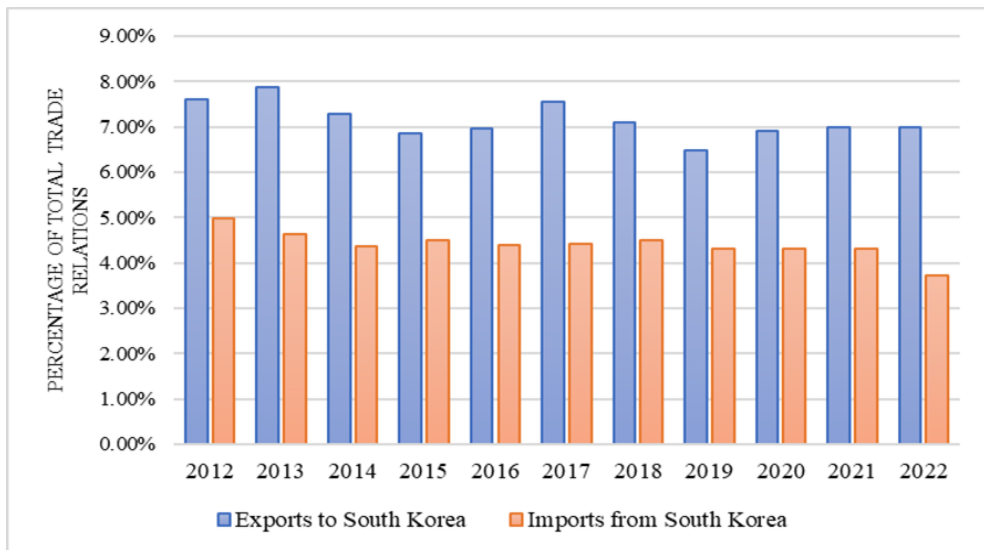


Figure 15: Graph detailing the total trade relations (imports and exports) between Japan and South Korea (2012–2022)

In terms of wider partnerships, Japan and South Korea did not establish an FTA, despite launching trilateral negotiations alongside China in the early 2010s. Nonetheless, both nations are signatories of the RCEP, which focused on tariff reductions on major products, providing better market access and reducing the

⁵⁶¹ The graph centralizes data from *Japan–Yearly Trade, Observer of Economic Complexity (OEC)*, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/jpn>. Accessed October 20, 2024.

⁵⁶² Young June Hong, “What Are the Effects of the Korea–Japan Trade Dispute on Korean and Japanese Hydrogen-Fluoride and Semiconductor Industries?” in *University College London*, 2022.

overall cost of trade⁵⁶³. The RCEP framework also promotes stabilization of supply chains in case of serious global events (such as the Coronavirus pandemic). As both Seoul and Tōkyō are crucial players on the stage of global high-tech industry, disruptions for them could cause international issues. The geographic proximity and the formalized platform provided by the RCEP could allow for better responses in case of such global events. Nonetheless, trilateral trade relations can also prove to be a hot topic, especially in cases in which political issues trump practical economic cooperation. This was visible in Japan–South Korea relations (in the case of 2019 trade conflict), but most importantly in the trilateral cooperation alongside China. Beijing has exerted influence in the economic domain in its relations with both South Korea and Japan to send a series of political messages. In the case of South Korea, China launched a sort of economic retaliation in response to Seoul's agreement to implement the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system. Given South Korea's increase trade connectivity (and implicitly dependence) with China, it made the country more inclined to various concessions⁵⁶⁴. For this reason, enhancing bilateral economic relations is perceived by both nations as a mechanism of reducing dependency on China, especially in terms of supply chains and economic initiatives. However, Japan and South Korea's "export-oriented structures become more competitive than complementary, especially when overcapacity and cheap exports from China emerge as major risks"⁵⁶⁵. This is visible especially in the tech and the automotive industries. For instance, in December 2023, the European car market was bound by close competition between Japan, China and South Korea (as Japan held 13% of the market share, versus South Korea's 9% and China's 3%⁵⁶⁶). In the case of hybrid and electric vehicles (EVs),

⁵⁶³ Chenyun Wang, "Study on the Prospects for the Development of China, Japan and Korea Economic and Trade Cooperation under RCEP" in *SHS Web of Conferences* 163, 2023, p. 5, <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202316303035>.

⁵⁶⁴ Florence Wen-Ting Yang, "Asymmetrical Interdependence and Sanction: China's Economic Retaliation over South Korea's THAAD Deployment" in *Issues & Studies: A Social Science Quarterly on China, Taiwan, and East Asian Affairs* 55, no. 04, December 2019, p. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1142/s1013251119400083>.

⁵⁶⁵ Yeo Han-koo, "Economic Cooperation by Korea–Japan–China Trilateral Could Ease Tensions" in *Peterson Institute for International Economics*, June 13, 2014, <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economics/2024/economic-cooperation-korea-japan-china-trilateral-could-ease-tensions>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

⁵⁶⁶ Juan Felipe Muñoz-Vieira, "Asian Car Brands Continue to Grow in the European Car Market" in *JATO*, April 26, 2024, <https://www.jato.com/resources/news-and-insights/asian-car-brands-continue-to-grow-in-the-european-car-market>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

in 2023 South Korea sold over 1.5 million EVs and hybrid vehicles, while Japan exported about 1.6 million⁵⁶⁷. However, South Korea clearly leads in terms of pure battery EVs, with 1.1 million units in comparison to Japan's 0.2 million units. This is visible due to South Korea's predominance in the semiconductor and EV battery industries, with significant support from the governmental level. Based on these factors, South Korea harnessed a significant reputation as a technology leader, enhancing its identity and soft power capabilities, in spite of Japan's strong foothold in such technological domains.

In spite of more competitive trends, both partners emphasized the value of cooperation, especially in areas pertaining to emerging challenges. In November 2023, Kishida and Yoon visited the Stanford University in the US, focusing on the need for extended cooperation in the technological fields⁵⁶⁸. This cooperation framework extended beyond the military domain, being a recurrent topic of discussion throughout high-level dialogues. Moreover, it was formally established through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), a 2022 US-initiated framework. Alongside Australia, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, the three partners committed to strengthening economic and technological cooperation, based on four major pillars: expansions of trade connections, especially in terms of e-commerce; supply chain resilience; environmental-friendly economic relations; transparency in information-sharing practices⁵⁶⁹. In spite of competitive dynamics, through the IPEF and consistent dialogue, both Seoul and Tōkyō can mutually benefit from collaboration on relevant global topics, such as AI and renewable energy.

The human element of Japan–South Korea relations has proven to be the most complex and the most important at the same time in shaping their bilateral dynamics. Historical controversies, widely spread among public perceptions, have

⁵⁶⁷ Eric Ng Shing and Roy Santana, "Trade Data Reveal Changing Patterns in Electric Vehicles Market" in *World Trade Organization*, May 14, 2024, https://www.wto.org/english/blogs_e/data_blog_e/blog_dta_14may24_e.htm. Accessed October 26, 2024.

⁵⁶⁸ *Strengthening Collaboration Between Japan and the Republic of Korea in Advanced Science and Technology*, The Government of Japan, February 2, 2024, https://www.japan.go.jp/kizuna/2024/02/collaboration_between_japan_and_the_rok.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵⁶⁹ *Fact Sheet: In Asia, President Biden and a Dozen Indo-Pacific Partners Launch the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity*, The White House, May 23, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-in-asia-president-biden-and-a-dozen-indo-pacific-partners-launch-the-indo-pacific-economic-framework-for-prosperity/>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

basically dictated the way in which political relations evolved. The multitude of issues detailed in the pages above remain deeply embedded in the public consciousness, impacting both how the two populations perceive each other, and how diplomatic engagement progresses. Between 2013 and 2023, the dynamics in public perceptions changed significantly. The graph below showcases how public perceptions evolved⁵⁷⁰. From the Japanese point of view, up until 2022, the number of respondents who held favorable views failed to reach 30%. From the Korean point of view, perceptions remained dynamic until 2023, with a sharp drop in 2020, impacted by the resurfacing of history problems and the 2019 trade conflict. Based on the 2024 EAI Survey⁵⁷¹, the number of Korean respondents who hold positive views towards Japan increased to 41.7%, while the ones with negative views decreased to 42.7%.

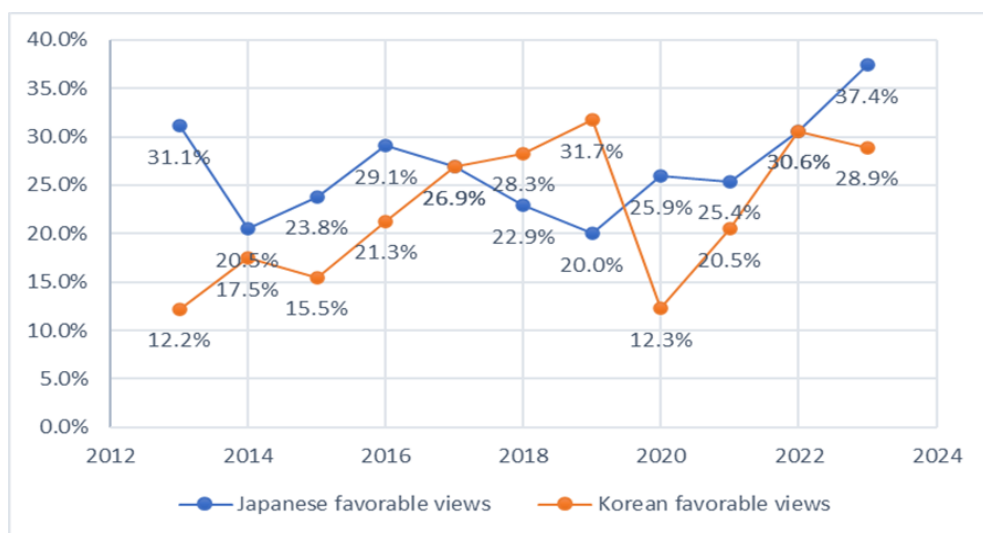


Figure 16: Graph showcasing the dynamics of public opinion between Japanese and South Korean audiences (2013–2023)

Another joint survey conducted by The Yomiuri Shimbun in Japan and by the newspaper Hankook Ilbo in South Korea yielded similar results⁵⁷². The Japanese

⁵⁷⁰ 2023 EAI-Genron NPO Korea-Japan Joint Public Opinion Poll: Japan and the ROK-Japan Relations, East Asia Institute and the Genron NPO, 2023.

⁵⁷¹ 2024 EAI Public Opinion Poll on International Affairs: Japan and the ROK-Japan Relations, East Asia Institute, 2024.

⁵⁷² “Japan–S. Korea Public Opinion Survey: Understanding of Security Cooperation Deepens, But Problems Remain” in *The Japan News – The Yomiuri Shinbun*, June 11, 2024, <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/editorial/yomiuri-editorial/20240611-191291/>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

respondents who had favorable views reached 50% (first time since 2011), while the percentage of Korean respondents with similar positive perceptions stood at 42%. Moreover, the same survey revealed that 86% of Japanese participants and 79% of Korean respondents were in favor of enhancing security cooperation between the two partners alongside the US. While it is rather clear that public relations should be still perceived with caution, as positive perceptions are still mirrored by negative ones, there are also significant improvements in how public sentiment evolved in the last four years. This highlights the fact that the heightened engagement in terms of traditional diplomacy has also impacted the human-centered instances of public diplomacy. Additionally, these public changes are also a sign of shifting regional dynamics, with both partners understanding the need for cooperation alongside the US. The evolution of public relations hinges on the political stability displayed by the two partners.

In terms of cultural relations, both countries augmented their soft power assets, with specific cultural export initiatives. South Korea's *Hallyu*⁵⁷³ and Japan's *Cool Japan* were focused on expanding soft influence overseas through various cultural elements. South Korea's cultural liberalization in the late 1990s and early 2000s was paired by its extensive focus on cultural exports. In this logic, the Korean public was accustomed to Japanese cultural influence (especially in the form of pop-culture), while the Japanese public was 'hit' by the Korean wave of cultural exports. By the 2020s, the Hallyu has both "culturalized and anesthetized South Korea's international image in Japan, especially among the younger generations"⁵⁷⁴. Hallyu embedded these cultural products into Japanese daily lives through their appeal. At the same time, the popularity of such products has 'numbed' to a certain extent political issues, especially among younger people. This was also the case with Japanese cultural influence, where its extended appeal increased the consumption of such pop culture assets. By the early 2010s, approximately 80% of comic books in South Korea were of Japanese origin⁵⁷⁵. However, in face of controversial

⁵⁷³ The export of native pop culture products, including K-Pop music and K-Dramas. See also, Seungyun Oh, "Hallyu (Korean Wave) as Korea's Cultural Public Diplomacy in China and Japan" in Kadir Ayhan (ed.), *Korea's Public Diplomacy*, Hangang Network: Seoul, 2016, pp. 167–196.

⁵⁷⁴ Wang Linbin, "How Has the 'Korean Wave' Impacted Japan–South Korea Relations?" in *The Diplomat*, January 6, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/how-has-the-korean-wave-impacted-japan-south-korea-relations/>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

⁵⁷⁵ Yamanaka Chie, "Manga Hyōgen Keishiki no Ekkyō: Kankoku ni okeru Mohō Kaizokuban Manga wo Jirei toshite" in Shōji Yamada (ed.), *Komonzu to Bunka: Bunka ha Dare no Monoka*, Tōkyō:

historical problems and accentuated political issues, the impact of soft power initiatives remained limited. Plainly put, they did strengthen cultural appreciation between the two nations (especially in the case of younger generations), but they were not sufficient to address such political issues. The disconnect in public opinions is evident: South Koreans maintain high expectations of Japan to reconcile with the past, while for the Japanese such topics were addressed throughout continuous diplomatic dialogue. Moreover, while “pop culture creates bridges, the deep scars of the past and differing perspectives on historical accountability continue to hinder the development of interpersonal connections”⁵⁷⁶. For this reason, recent high-level dialogues extensively focused on human-to-human exchanges. During the May 2024 Summit Meeting⁵⁷⁷, both partners focused on the need of improving youth exchanges, especially through various programs (including Japan's JENESYS). Additionally, the meeting highlighted the practical development of the Future Partnership Fund, established “for collaborative projects to promote a forward-looking relationship between the two countries, particularly in fields such as youth exchanges [...] with the aim of building a friendly relationship”⁵⁷⁸. For the practical implementation of the Future Partnership Fund, public-private partnerships are fundamental, as various corporations donated funds to the initiative. Additionally, these efforts to build mutual trust also materialized in various civil platforms for dialogue. The Korea–Japan Future Dialogue organized by the EAI and Genron NPO reached its 10th edition in 2022⁵⁷⁹, bringing together individuals from both countries and engaging in extensive debates on series of topics, ranging from security topics, to human-to-human relations and public opinion surveys. All in all, such initiatives go beyond cultural awareness, directly engaging the two populations

Tokyo dō, 2010, p. 50, quoted in Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, *Regionalizing Culture. The Political Economy of Japanese Popular Culture in Asia*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014, p. 50.

⁵⁷⁶ Ryan Ashley and Joseph Su, “Mending Historical Memory: Improving People-to-People Ties Between Japan and South Korea” in *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 1, 2024, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/05/mending-historical-memory-improving-people-to-people-ties-between-japan-and-south-korea/>. Accessed October 27, 2024.

⁵⁷⁷ *Japan–ROK Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, May 26, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/pageite_000001_00372.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵⁷⁸ *Japan–Korea and Korea–Japan Future Partnership Funds*, Keizai Koho Center, <https://en.kkc.or.jp/programs/ktpl/>. Accessed October 27, 2024.

⁵⁷⁹ [The Tenth Korea–Japan Future Dialogue] ‘The Future of South Korea–Japan Relations in the Context of the U.S.–China Conflicts’, East Asia Institute, September 3, 2022, https://www.eai.or.kr/new/en/project/view.asp?code=104&intSeq=21429&board=eng_event&keyword_option=&keyword=&more=. Accessed October 27, 2024.

on a range of issues, including the history topics. Given that the human element is the most complex part of Tōkyō's relationship with Seoul, such civil initiatives will prove essential in addressing the complexities of their relations.

Takeaways – Fragile Progress

This section has focused on how Japan–South Korea relations evolved, emphasizing the complex interplay of historical grievances, pragmatic needs and more recent forms of cooperation. In terms of security, the US became an essential factor for the stability of the partnership. However, despite initial hiccups in cooperation, Japan's commitments to the FOIP have coincided with South Korea's recent strategic realignment. This change was impacted by the severe degradation of the security environment, but, most importantly, by the transformations in political positions both in Tōkyō and in Seoul. Japan and South Korea aligned their security horizons within a framework established alongside the US. Moreover, this political and strategic engagement was also mirrored in practical instances of cooperation, with the launch of the first trilateral military exercise among Seoul, Washington and Tōkyō. Pairing this strategic closeness, the economic relations also changed. The RCEP has provided a limited framework of cooperation, in the absence of a bilateral or trilateral (alongside China) FTA. Moreover, this economic cooperative relation was also complemented by tech competition. Japan's strength in high-tech raw materials (and its identity of a tech innovator) was contrasted by South Korea's dominance in semiconductor and high-tech electronics industries. However, as both nations seek to reduce their dependency on China, strategic collaboration came to sideline the more competitive side of their relations, especially focusing the 2019 trade conflict. Through the IPEF and the various summit level meetings held throughout the last two years, economic security (including partnerships for ethic development of technology and supply chain resilience) came to the forefront of Japan–South Korea economic cooperation. Fundamentally, the human side remains one of the most intricate and important elements of these relations, as historical grievances continue to shape public sentiments. Recent high-level dialogues were focused on educational and people-to-people interactions for building understanding.

Overall, the post-2012 Japan–South Korea partnership proved to be extremely delicate, integrating strategic cooperation, historical grievances and economic

interactions. The key factor in ensuring continued improvement of their relations is political stability to maintain the trajectory of positive developments. Ishiba is widely expected to keep the momentum going. This was reiterated during Ishiba's and Yoon's first official meeting in October 2024⁵⁸⁰, where the two partners focused on the 2025 60th anniversary of the normalization of relations. As of December 2024, however, Yoon's decision to establish Martial Law and Ishiba's minority government do not exactly bear positive trends. Moreover, the return of Trump could add fuel to the fire and further complicate Tōkyō-Seoul dynamics. In this logic, "China's influence in Asia will inevitably grow if the United States becomes just another transactional player in the region"⁵⁸¹. Given the previous evolution of their security and economic relations, it is clear that continued US support is of crucial importance for sustained security collaboration to address both traditional issues and gray-zone challenges. Finally, despite sustained cooperation on various topics, the historical issues plaguing the relations remain largely unaddressed. Comfort women and Takeshima/Dokdo topics still rank high among the reasons used by South Koreans to justify negative perceptions of Japan. This showcases the fragility of current improvements, without concrete progress on addressing historical issues. In this logic, Tōkyō and Seoul may struggle to formalize and institutionalize this cooperation on the long-term.

⁵⁸⁰ *Japan-ROK Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 10, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na1/pageite_000001_00001.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵⁸¹ Victor Cha, "America's Asian Partners Are Not Worried Enough About Trump" in *Foreign Affairs*, June 26, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-asian-partners-are-not-worried-enough-about-trump>. Accessed October 27, 2024.

7.

ASEAN: Building Bridges in Southeast Asia

From Early Economic Engagement to Partnership Expansion

Japan's relationship with ASEAN has become a cornerstone of its regional diplomatic initiative, evolving from a solely economic-oriented approach to a multilayered partnership. Presently, the relations with ASEAN, "if properly developed, can and should serve as one of Japan's most important diplomatic pillars to promote liberal, open and rule-based regional integration in Asia"⁵⁸². However, throughout its evolution, Japan's engagement with ASEAN states was also impacted by the historical mark which affected its relations with other Asian partners, such as China and South Korea. The progressive change in approach underscored both Japan's increased role in international relations as well as its focus on fostering regional stability and economic development. For these foreign policy goals, ASEAN became strategically essential. Japan's initial engagement with ASEAN occurred during the 1970s, as part of its postwar economic expansion. The 1970s and 1980s also brought about a series of transformations on the regional framework, which highlighted the need for multilateral cooperation in the face of emerging threats. The normalization of US–China relations, with a focus on more cooperative relations, and the geopolitical shifts (including the Cambodian Civil War) underscored this point of view. These changes impacted Japan's strategies, for whom a secure regional framework proved essential for its own interests. However, the early phases of their relationship were marked by frictions, particularly spurred by widespread anti-American feelings, which extended to Japan (perceived as a critical American partner). Moreover, these feelings were further exacerbated by a certain level of skepticism towards Tōkyō's cooperative intentions, as many

⁵⁸² Ken Jimbo, "Japan–Southeast Asia Relations: Implication of US Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific Region" in Yuki Tatsumi (ed.), *Japan's Foreign Policy Challenges in East Asia: Views from the Next Generation*, Washington DC: Stimson, 2014, p. 53

feared that economic help would actually lead to Japanese economic dominance⁵⁸³. A significant reference point was established with the Fukuda Doctrine in 1977, which highlighted Japan's expanding intentions, with its commitment to peace and focus on more constructive cooperation. Additionally, "Southeast Asian states [...] welcomed this diplomatic approach because they were able to benefit from Japan's increasing economic assistance and diplomatic respect"⁵⁸⁴. Hence, the relationship between Japan and ASEAN also held a more pragmatic nuance, on both sides. For ASEAN, ODA programs and the Japanese focus on FDI made Tōkyō one of its most important development partners, with a heightened role in various economy-related projects (such as infrastructure). Moreover, for the Japanese side, a turn to ASEAN meant an expansion of its diplomatic horizon, initially visible through its ODA policies. Moreover, the trading routes through ASEAN became essential for Japanese economic relations⁵⁸⁵. Through the Fukuda Doctrine, Japan emphasized an equal relationship with ASEAN, focusing on enhanced cooperation for mutual understanding. In 1996, Japanese FDI to ASEAN was significant, totaling 6.21 billion US\$⁵⁸⁶, making it one of the region's most important economic partners, cooperation which was also aimed at tempering anti-Japanese feelings. In this sense, the mid and later 1990s were marked by a period of deeper engagement, with a subtle shift which paired economic ties with wider political engagement. Japan expressed sustained support for ASEAN-centered frameworks. The first ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) held in 1994 represented a key achievement which "enabled the countries in the Asia-Pacific region to foster the habit of constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concerns"⁵⁸⁷. Additionally, with the 1997 informal meeting between ASEAN and the Plus Three states (Japan, South Korea and China),

⁵⁸³ Narongchai Akrasanee and Apichart Prasert, "The Evolution of ASEAN–Japan Economic Cooperation" in *ASEAN–Japan Cooperation: A Foundation for East Asian Community*, Tōkyō: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2003, p. 66.

⁵⁸⁴ Kei Koga, "Japan–ASEAN Study. Alternative Strategic Partner in Southeast Asia? The Role of Japan in the US–China Rivalry" in Koki Shigenoi (ed.), *Japan's Role for Southeast Asia Amidst the Great Power Competition and its Implications for the EU–Japan Partnership*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, April 2022, p. 8.

⁵⁸⁵ Akrasanee and Prasert, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

⁵⁸⁷ *The First ASEAN Regional Forum*, ASEAN Regional Forum, July 25, 1994, p. 3., <https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/First-ARF-Bangkok-25-July-1994.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

the road was paved for the formal institutionalization of the ASEAN+3 Summit meetings in 1999 in Manila. Moreover, 1997 was a significant year for enhanced cooperation, based on the Japan–ASEAN Summit, with an extensive focus on regional stability (including Japan’s endorsement of ASEAN-led platforms, such as the ARF), people-to-people exchanges and the need for mutual cooperation in addressing global issues⁵⁸⁸.

By the 2000s, the relations expanded beyond a single-dimensioned perspective of economic cooperation, encapsulating political initiatives, cultural exchanges and a focus on developmental cooperation. Japan manifested an interest for deeper engagement with ASEAN, in spite of political controversies particularly related to Koizumi’s visits to Yasukuni, which held a sensitive importance for Asian states. In 2005, Koizumi attended the first East Asia Summit (EAS), alongside ASEAN, Australia, New Zealand, China, South Korea and India⁵⁸⁹. Following the summit, the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the East Asia Summit was issued, outlining key principles for regional stability: openness and inclusivity, with a heightened focus on equal relations. In complementing wider regional frameworks of cooperation, 2005 was also instrumental with the bilateral joint statement focused on Deepening and Broadening of ASEAN–Japan Strategic Partnership⁵⁹⁰. Formally, the relations were upgraded to a strategic partnership, focused on commitment to international norms and mutual support. This platform also focused on accelerating negotiations for the signing of the ASEAN–Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (AJCEP), finalized in 2007 and operative since 2008. Additionally, based on this consistent Japanese support, the Japan–ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) was established in 2006, aimed at facilitating developmental goals by easing the transfer of financial resources to ASEAN-led initiatives. Aside from the economic focus, the partners addressed the need for multifaceted cooperation to support ASEAN community-

⁵⁸⁸ *Joint Statement of the Meeting of Heads of State/Government of the Member States of ASEAN and the Prime Minister of Japan*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, December 16, 1997, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/asean/pmv9712/statement_1.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵⁸⁹ *Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi Attends the EAS, ASEAN+3, and Japan–ASEAN Summit Meetings*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, December 2005, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/eas/summary0512.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵⁹⁰ *Joint Statement of the Ninth ASEAN–Japan Summit. Deepening and Broadening of ASEAN–Japan Strategic Partnership*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, December 13, 2005, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/asean/conference/joint0512.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

building on the one hand, and to address global and transnational issues on the other hand. In 2010, multilateral security dialogues also became institutionalized through the establishment of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meetings Plus (ADMM-Plus), which brought together the ASEAN states alongside Japan, China, South Korea, India, Russia, the US, Australia and New Zealand. The format allowed these partners "to engage with ASEAN collectively on transnational security challenges and capacity building such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and maritime security",⁵⁹¹. This accessibility became extremely relevant, especially due to the prominence of sensitive topics (among the platform's members) in recent years. Moving forward, another key achievement was reached in 2011, with the Bali Declaration (formally, The Joint Declaration for Enhancing ASEAN–Japan Strategic Partnership for Prospering Together⁵⁹²). Fundamentally, it highlighted key areas of cooperation, ranging from political-security topics (especially maritime security, in light of the degradation of the security environment) to socio-cultural exchanges and Tōkyō's institutional support (including collaboration through EAS, ASEAN+3 and ADMM-Plus).

Post-2012: Deepening Cooperation in a Complicated Landscape

Post-2012, the relations continued to expand, reaching substantial levels of engagement. Amidst rising regional tensions, however, ASEAN states found themselves in a rather strenuous situation, almost forced to choose between two mutually-exclusive positions throughout great power competition. In this sense, they adopted a more balanced and cautious approach in their reaction to the Chinese incursions in the East and South China Seas. Accordingly, Japan's ability to bridge between the two power centers proved essential for building ASEAN's trust⁵⁹³ in relation to both its self-assumed and externally-showcased centrality for the regional framework. Accordingly, in this context of emerging regional challenges,

⁵⁹¹ Amy Searight, "ADMM-Plus: The Promise and Pitfalls of an ASEAN-led Security Forum" in *Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)*, November 1, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/admm-plus-promise-and-pitfalls-asean-led-security-forum>. Accessed November 2, 2024.

⁵⁹² *Joint Declaration for Enhancing ASEAN–Japan Strategic Partnership for Prospering Together*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 18, 2011, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/asean/conference/pdfs/bali_declaration_en_1111.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵⁹³ Koga, *op. cit.*, p. 9

including China's assertive maritime actions and North Korea's military and nuclear activities, Japan recognized the central role of ASEAN in its regional strategies. In 2013, celebrating 40 years of diplomatic engagement, they issued their Vision Statement on ASEAN–Japan Friendship and Cooperation⁵⁹⁴. This common vision prioritized four major areas of cooperation: ensuring regional security and stability (in terms of traditional and non-traditional facets of security); economic prosperity, with a heightened focus on improving Japan–ASEAN connectivity; quality of life improvements, including mutual cooperation for disaster relief and human capacity development; and human-to-human partnership, with a focus on tourism and cultural exchanges. This was further developed with the 2014 ASEAN–Japan Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat Terrorism and Transnational Crime⁵⁹⁵. The focus on non-conventional transnational challenges highlighted their mutual commitment in addressing issues for regional stability. Moreover, ASEAN was in support of Japan's more proactive approach in addressing regional challenges, in a period mired by various tensions. This heightened role in regional affairs also came as a consequence of Tōkyō's relations and engagement with ASEAN, as "Southeast Asians' trust in Japan has been conducive for Tokyo to play a bigger security role in the region"⁵⁹⁶. As maritime tensions significantly increased, Japan also upped its support for such security initiatives. In 2014, Abe announced Japan's comprehensive maritime security support for human development and preparedness, by supporting capacity building for 700 ASEAN personnel⁵⁹⁷. Aside from more traditional facets of security, the cooperation was also focused on human security (ranging from developmental topics to social ones). By 2015, Japan provided 1 trillion yen ODA assistance for human resource development, through the ASEAN–Japan Health Initiative⁵⁹⁸. Additionally, Tōkyō expressed wider and deeper support

⁵⁹⁴ *Vision Statement on ASEAN–Japan Friendship and Cooperation*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, January 18, 2013, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000022449.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵⁹⁵ *The ASEAN–Japan Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat Terrorism and Transnational Crime*, ASEAN Secretariat, November 2014, <https://asean.org/the-asean-japan-joint-declaration-for-cooperation-to-combat-terrorism-and-transnational-crime/>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵⁹⁶ William Choong and Joanne Lin, "Japan, the Courteous Power, Bares Some Teeth for Regional Stability" in *ISEAS Perspective* 54, July 18, 2024, p. 4.

⁵⁹⁷ *17th Japan–ASEAN Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 12, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page3e_000260.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁵⁹⁸ *The 18th Japan–ASEAN Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 22, 2015, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page3e_000422.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

for ASEAN's establishment of the ASEAN Community, a vision based on three fundamental normative anchors⁵⁹⁹: the political-security nexus, with calls for dialogue in addressing issues, economic integration, with a focus on making Southeast Asia a prosperous region and the socio-cultural elements, focused on addressing issues impacting quality of life in the region (from medical to social issues). Throughout the years, this multifaceted support and cooperation was aligned with Japan's regional initiatives and visions, including the EPQI, the Mekong Initiative and JENESYS. However, complementing this sustained support, Japan continued to voice its own concerns in relation to the South China Sea tensions. This was overtly visible after the 2016 ruling of the Arbitral Tribunal in favor of the Philippines in its case against Chinese incursions. As Japan's FOIP vision was unfolding, ASEAN remained rather moderate in its explicit support for the initiative. Koga identified three reasons for which ASEAN's alignment was rather limited in depth⁶⁰⁰. Foremost, as highlighted through the Quad, Japan's presumed ASEAN-centrality was not fully in-line with the group's own emphasis on its central role in the Indo-Pacific. Tōkyō's high-level politics alongside the US, India and Australia potentially overshadowed ASEAN's central role in terms of regional topics. Second, ASEAN countries differ in their positioning regarding China, who is a key economic partner for several members. Based on this diversity (a key challenge for ASEAN), the members are rather reluctant to openly confront China. Third, ASEAN members were also rather reluctant towards the overall traction and power of the concept of *Indo-Pacific*. Hence, despite the fact that Japan–ASEAN cooperation highlighted key topics mentioned in the FOIP, such as regional stability and maritime freedom, ASEAN's reluctance towards the initiative dominated its early phase.

Japan emphasized the need for increased collaboration centered around ASEAN's importance in the regional framework. The Vientiane Vision introduced in 2016 showcased a more pragmatic side, focused on security assistance for ASEAN's needs. Moreover, in response to the rise of non-traditional security challenges, the ASEAN–Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Centre was established in 2018, expanding cooperation beyond mere (geo)political alignments.

⁵⁹⁹ *Three Pillars of ASEAN Community*, ASEAN Indonesia 2023, April 18, 2023, <https://asean2023.id/en/news/three-pillars-of-asean-community>. Accessed November 3, 2024.

⁶⁰⁰ Koga, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

Through such strategies, Tōkyō focused on common goals, such as regional stability, espoused through the FOIP, allowing ASEAN to engage in such beneficial co-operation without choosing sides. In the context of heightened regional relations, ASEAN's strategies tended to lean towards a rather inclusive approach, keen on maintaining open dialogue with relevant stakeholders, including China. ASEAN's support for multilateralism was also consistent with the divergence in the expectations of its members, as the group identified potential risks in favoring mutually-exclusive divisions. In this context, Japan–ASEAN relations manifested various dimensions under a vision of regional stability. At the level of diplomatic engagement, the leaders engaged regularly in official dialogues to deepen ties and augment collaboration. Alongside the bilateral summit and ministerial meetings, Japan was also consistently engaged in ASEAN-led platforms (such as the ARF or the EAS), showcasing a high degree of institutionalization. Consequently, the multi-level engagement was aimed at addressing a plethora of challenges, ranging from environmental topics (including disaster preparedness and climate change initiatives) to economic and defense cooperation. In 2019, ASEAN formally launched its AOIP and Tōkyō expressed high hopes of synergizing the initiative with its own FOIP. This made sense as both visions emphasized the need and the importance of a rules-based order, encouraging open trade and overall physical connectivity in the region. Additionally, Japan reiterated ASEAN's central role in the region's architecture, including security and economic dialogues. For ASEAN, fears of geopolitical isolation were augmented by the heightened focus on the Quad. However, as mentioned earlier, Japan expanded its approach, portraying itself as a collaborative partner, rather than a divisive factor in the region. This was visible with the establishment of Vientiane 2.0 in 2019, which solidified Japan's commitment to enhancing ASEAN's strategic role within the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, as highlighted in the 2019 Joint Statement of the 22nd ASEAN–Japan Summit on Connectivity⁶⁰¹, their high-level cooperation connected broader objectives with specific initiatives. The 22nd ASEAN–Japan Summit went beyond simple security cooperation, focusing especially on economic development and infrastructure enhancement. As part of this focus, the Japan Association for Smart Cities in ASEAN (JASCA) and the

⁶⁰¹ *Joint Statement of the 22nd ASEAN–Japan Summit on Connectivity*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 4, 2019, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000534745.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

ASEAN–Japan Smart Cities Network High-Level Dialogue were established in 2019 to promote sustainable urban development and digital transformation in ASEAN cities⁶⁰². Moreover, cooperation also included cybersecurity and digital infrastructure development to complement physical connectivity. The extended partnerships led to the signing of the Japan–ASEAN Technical Cooperation Agreement in 2019⁶⁰³, which was aimed at facilitating cooperation through JICA-led initiatives and knowledge-sharing exercises.

During the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, Japan focused its cooperation on areas heavily impacted by it. In this sense, public health and economic collaboration became essential in addressing pandemic-related challenges. Japan played a fundamental role in the creation of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED), both in terms of financing and operational support. In May 2020, Japan committed 49.8 million US\$ for the operationalization of the project, while also promoting capacity-building programs⁶⁰⁴. Additionally, in response to the economic impacts of the pandemic, the partners formulated the ASEAN–Japan Economic Resilience Action Plan, focused on three pillars: to maintain the economic connections between the partners, to reduce the economic impact of the pandemic, to bolster resilience⁶⁰⁵. Through these cooperative initiatives and focus on human security, Japan reinforced its role as a proactive power, focusing on norms-based collaboration and being committed to ASEAN centrality for the stability of the Indo-Pacific⁶⁰⁶. Moreover, 2020 also witnessed the establishment of the Japan–ASEAN Connectivity Initiative, which brought together Japan's active infrastructure projects in ASEAN totaling 2 trillion

⁶⁰² *Overview*, Japan Association for Smart Cities in ASEAN, <https://www.jasca2021.jp/about/>. Accessed November 8, 2024.

⁶⁰³ *The Signing of the Japan–ASEAN Technical Cooperation Agreement*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, May 13, 2019, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_002444.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁰⁴ *Fact Sheet: Major Examples of Japan's COVID-19 related Support towards ASEAN*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 27, 2021, p. 2, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100252718.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁰⁵ Keita Oikawa and Fusanori Iwasaki, "Chapter 5. The Current ASEAN–Japan Economic Partnership" in Keita Oikawa and Fusanori Iwasaki (eds.), *ASEAN–Japan Economic Partnership for a Sustainable Future*, Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2023, p. 175.

⁶⁰⁶ Claudiu-Bogdan Aldea, "From Trump to War: Normative Implications of Japan's Crisis Management" in Delia Pop-Flanjan and Laura-Maria Herța (eds.), *Communication Dynamics in Global Affairs: Navigating Conflict and Diplomacy*, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2023, p.88.

yen worth of investments⁶⁰⁷. The main focus of the initiative was to, on the one hand, enhance land, sea and air connectivity within the region and, on the other hand, to promote capacity-building exercises for ASEAN personnel⁶⁰⁸. With the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, geopolitical uncertainty resurfaced even in the Asian regional framework. This prompted Japan and ASEAN to adopt a shared diplomatic stance keen on maintaining the stability of the international order, denouncing unilateral attempts to change the status quo as unacceptable⁶⁰⁹. This support for the norms-governed order was also influenced by regional factors, mainly the partners' shared concerns regarding China's assertiveness and North Korea's unpredictable military ambitions. Based on these anxieties, Japan continued its focus on the FOIP vision, aligning with the AOIP for the stability of the region. Marking the symbolic milestone of 50 years of diplomatic relations, Japan and ASEAN issued their Joint Vision Statement on Friendship and Cooperation in December 2023⁶¹⁰. Alongside this, they elevated their partnership to the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership⁶¹¹, reinforcing their commitment to deeper engagement. In terms of security concerns, Japan established the Official Security Assistance (OSA) initiative, mirroring the already famous ODA programs. As its name suggests, OSA is designed to better support the security needs of Japan's regional partners⁶¹². In this context, "Japan has emerged as the most trusted and strategically relevant middle power to ASEAN"⁶¹³.

Japan's relationship with ASEAN has slowly developed into a complex partnership, formally acknowledged as a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. This complexity manifests both positive elements, ranging from the extensive areas of cooperation to the consistent high-level dialogues, and negative ones,

⁶⁰⁷ *23rd Japan-ASEAN Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 12, 2020, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page3e_001075.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁰⁸ *Japan-ASEAN Connectivity Initiative*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November, 2020, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100114591.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁰⁹ *ASEAN-Japan Foreign Ministers' Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 4, 2022, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page1e_000432.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶¹⁰ *The Commemorative Summit for the 50th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, December 20, 2023. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/pageite_000001_00029.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶¹¹ *Joint Statement on the Establishment of the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 6, 2023, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100560221.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶¹² *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁶¹³ Choong and Lin, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

especially related to ASEAN's internal divisions and differences in threat perceptions. This expansion came as a consequence of the fact that "Japan has supported the socio-economic and political development of Southeast Asian states without posting a political and military threat"⁶¹⁴. However, ASEAN's approach towards regional challenges did not always align with Japan's assumed security interests, especially related to the China factor. In this sense, such discrepancies could limit the scope of cooperation. Nonetheless, the partnership experienced significant growth in recent years. Despite initial hiccups, Japan and ASEAN aligned their own views of the Indo-Pacific in a more comprehensive manner. Accordingly, these span a wider spectrum of domains. The upgrade of their relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership held significant normative implications, showcasing Japan's favorable reputation in the region and its acknowledged identity of a solutions-provider and a trusted partner.

Security Cooperation: Minilateralism within ASEAN

Security and peace represent core ideas of ASEAN–Japan engagement, being consistently mentioned throughout diplomatic dialogues. The 2013 and 2023 Vision Statements highlighted the need for enhanced security support, based on emerging regional challenges. Additionally, based on its historical development, "the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the initiation of ASEAN+3 (China, Japan and South Korea) have strengthened the voice of ASEAN in peace and security in the area"⁶¹⁵. The increased institutionalization of ASEAN, which also led to the establishment of wider initiatives, have garnered a more significant role for the group, especially concerning security topics. Moreover, the changes in regional power dynamics have prompted Japan to re-evaluate its relationship with Southeast Asia, as the security and prosperity of the partners are dependent on the stability of the region and on ensuring freedom of navigation.

Despite coherent, institution-wide objectives, "Japan's current security strategy is increasingly characterized by a shift towards minilateral arrangements"⁶¹⁶.

⁶¹⁴ Koga, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁶¹⁵ Mohamed Jawhar bin Hassan, "ASEAN's Political and Security Relations with Japan" in *ASEAN–Japan Cooperation: A Foundation for East Asian Community*, Tōkyō: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2003, p. 146.

⁶¹⁶ Hoang Thi Ha, "Japan–ASEAN Cooperation as Security Partners" in *Japan Up Close*, May 10, 2024, https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20240510_1.html. Accessed November 10, 2024.

Accordingly, Tōkyō promoted extensive bilateral relations with ASEAN member states to foster their defensive capabilities. In the case of the Philippines, the relations make up Japan's most extensive bilateral strategic engagement in the region, mainly due to the fact that both partners experience severe episodes of tension with China. Japan's support to enhance the capabilities of the Philippines Coast Guard (PCG) was formally established through the multi-phased Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project (MSCIP)⁶¹⁷. The 1st phase launched in 2013 expressed Japan's support for the PCG to acquire 10 44-meter Multi-Role Response Vessels (MRRVs). The 2nd phase initiated in 2016 was focused on delivering 2 97-meter MRRVs. Lastly, the 3rd phase initiated in 2024 focused on acquiring 5 additional 97-meter MRRVs. The MSCIP also promoted consistent technical support, complementing these transfers to enhance PCG preparedness in terms of maritime security and search and rescue (SAR) missions. In 2016, the two partners established a legal framework for security cooperation through the signing of the Agreement Concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology⁶¹⁸. This agreement formally legitimized their security cooperation and equipment and technology transfers within the broader framework of maintaining international peace. During that year's Summit Meeting, Tōkyō reiterated its commitment to assist Manila in enhancing its security assets, by leasing two TC-90 aircraft and providing training programs for the pilots⁶¹⁹. By 2018, Japan donated five such aircraft (including the two initially leased). Another milestone was reached in 2020, when Japan achieved its "first successful commercial deal [...] in Southeast Asia"⁶²⁰ concerning defensive equipment, with the contract signed between the Department of National Defense of the Republic of Philippines (DND) and Mitsubishi Electric Corporation (MELCO). This deal stipulated the transfer of four air surveillance radar systems

⁶¹⁷ *JICA inks new agreement with the Philippine Government for Maritime Safety Capability Improvement*, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), June 14, 2024, https://www.jica.go.jp/english/overseas/philippine/information/press/2024/1542369_53492.html. Accessed November 10, 2024.

⁶¹⁸ *Agreement Between the Government of Japan and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines Concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 2016, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000152490.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶¹⁹ *Japan–Philippines Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 6, 2016, https://www.mofa.go.jp/sa/sea2/ph/page3e_000568.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶²⁰ Victor Teo, "Japan's Weapons Transfers to Southeast Asia: Opportunities and Challenges" in *ISEAS Perspective 70*, May 2021, p. 5.

to improve Manila's reconnaissance capacities. Based on the extensive security-oriented initiatives, the Philippines and Japan signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA)⁶²¹ in July 2024, a significant milestone for Tōkyō. The agreement allows stationing of forces within each other's territories.

In comparison to the Philippines, Japan's direct support for other ASEAN member states was reduced in scope and depth. Japan's support for Vietnam had a similar objective of bolstering Hanoi's defense capabilities in rather troubled waters. The 2014 Summit Meeting signaled the intent of both partners to expand their relations under an Extensive Strategic Partnership, which would facilitate cooperation across a wider spectrum of domains⁶²². During the summit, Japan announced the prospect of supplying six patrol vessels to Vietnam through its ODA support. Moreover, through consistent diplomatic dialogue (especially in the form of ministerial meetings), Tōkyō and Hanoi institutionalized cooperation with a series of comprehensive documents. First of all, following the Japan–Vietnam Defense Vice-Ministerial Level Meeting in November 2016, the two partners established the Terms of Reference (TOR) in regards to defense cooperation (including equipment-sharing and capacity-building)⁶²³. To complement this, the Memorandum on the Orientation of Promotion of Defense Industry Cooperation was established in 2019 to enhance defense equipment and technology transfers to promote regional stability in a free and open Indo-Pacific⁶²⁴. Building upon these foundational frameworks, in 2020, JICA facilitated an ODA agreement for the delivery of six additional patrol vessels to the Vietnam Coast Guard (VCG)⁶²⁵. Paralleling the MSCIP project with Philippines, the initiative is aimed at bolstering Vietnam's maritime capacity to uphold a free and open maritime region. In 2021, cooperation deepened through the signing of an Agreement Concerning the Transfer

⁶²¹ *Signing of the Japan–Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, July 8, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea2/ph/pageite_000001_00432.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶²² *Japan–Viet Nam Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 11, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea1/vn/pageite_000001_00611.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶²³ *Defense of Japan 2019*, Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2019, p. 442, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2019/pdf/DOJ2019_Full.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 442.

⁶²⁵ *Signing of Japanese ODA Loan Agreement with Viet Nam: Strengthening the maritime security and safety capability of the Vietnam Coast Guard*, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), July 30, 2020, https://www.jica.go.jp/english/information/press/2020/20200730_31_en.html. Accessed November 10, 2024.

of Defense Equipment and Technology⁶²⁶. Japan's support for upgrading regional maritime capabilities was also identified in its relations with Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. In 2016, Japan committed to donating two former Japan Coast Guard (JCG) patrol vessels to the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA)⁶²⁷. In 2018, Tōkyō and Kuala Lumpur signed a Memorandum of Defense Cooperation and an Agreement concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology⁶²⁸, formalizing such collaboration through an official agreement. Subsequently, in 2023, the two partners upgraded their relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, highlighting the need for mutual cooperation to achieve a stable Indo-Pacific⁶²⁹. Japan's relations with Indonesia and Singapore followed a similar turn, as both Jakarta and Singapore signed such Agreements with Tōkyō⁶³⁰. Japan's cooperation with ASEAN also included efforts to integrate these defense and security initiatives within the broader vision of regional framework, including FOIP and AOIP. Additionally, this effort was visible in Japan's focus on multilateral efforts throughout various platforms, such as the ADMM-Plus, the EAS and the ASEAN+3. Fundamentally, it is quite clear that Tōkyō's complex security web with ASEAN has matured into an authentic strategic partnership, which combines minilateral and multilateral efforts towards regional stability. Based on the expanding nature and depth of regional challenges, the partners emphasized the need to also address issues impacting human security, cybersecurity and overall gray-zone topics. A significant strategic component in Japan's defense approach towards the region is its Official Security Assistance (OSA), launched as an extension to its traditional ODA. Additionally, as highlighted above with the instances of defense equipment-sharing, OSA is also "a continuation of a long-standing trend whereby Japan sought

⁶²⁶ *Agreement Between the Government of Japan and the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam Concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 2021, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100232888.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶²⁷ *Exchange of Notes for the grant of patrol vessels and for the Grant Aid to Malaysia*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 16, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001355.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶²⁸ *Agreement Between the Government of Japan and the Government of Malaysia Concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 2018, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000360291.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶²⁹ *Japan–Malaysia Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, December 16, 2023, https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea2/my/pageite_000001_00049.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶³⁰ The agreement with Indonesia was signed in March 2021, while the one with Singapore was signed in June 2023.

to bolster the security capacities of like-minded regional countries”⁶³¹. Highlighted in the 2022 NSS, OSA came to encapsulate a distinct assistance strategy to build-up security capabilities of different partners within a norms-governed framework and to uphold international peace. In this logic, OSA is not solely focused on traditional security challenges, but it also seeks to address the various needs associated with humanitarian assistance (including HA/DR, SAR, goods transportation capabilities)⁶³². For 2023, the OSA budget was approximately 15 million US\$, with four major grant projects in the Philippines (provision of coastal radar systems), Malaysia (provision of rescue boats), Bangladesh (provision of patrol boats) and Fiji (provision of rescue and patrol boats)⁶³³. The focus on ASEAN is clear: two member states were initial partners for Japan's OSA to promote maritime security, in a framework impacted by Chinese assertive actions in South and East China Seas. By addressing multilayered challenges (including traditional security with non-conventional facets), Tōkyō's OSA initiative aligns with FOIP's broader goals of promoting developmental cooperation and regional stability. However, various barriers still persist in their strategic cooperation. Japan's bilateral engagement with ASEAN member states varies significantly (e.g., the Philippines vs Laos), while ASEAN itself holds internal diverse perspective on various topics. Moreover, Japan's recent harder stance on China could mean that its “comparative advantage vis-à-vis ASEAN in strengthening functional cooperation without politicisation could potentially likely diminish over time”⁶³⁴. Accordingly, despite its moderating aims, the FOIP has a security-oriented undertone, focused especially on “preventing a power vacuum and blocking China from changing the status quo by force or coercion”⁶³⁵. In this context, Japan's capacity to act as a stabilizing force in the regional context depends on its adaption of the FOIP vision with ASEAN's priorities and concerns. Naturally, this also means a reduced focus on issues that

⁶³¹ Choong and Lin, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁶³² *Implementation Guidelines for Japan's Official Security Assistance*, National Security Council, April 5, 2023, pp. 1–2, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100487432.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶³³ *Official Security Assistance (OSA). Programme in implementation*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, January 23, 2025, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/ipc/pagewe_001067_00001.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶³⁴ Koga, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁶³⁵ Ryosuke Hanada, “ASEAN's Role in the Indo-Pacific: Rules-Based Order and Regional Integrity” in Sharon Stirling (ed.), *Mind the Gap: National Views of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, Germany Marshall Fund of the United States, 2019, p. 9.

generate polarization (including sensitive topics related to regional hegemony), and an increased focus on developmental cooperation and human security.

Comprehensive Cooperation: Going Beyond Economic and Security-Centered Cooperation

Human security, developmental cooperation and people-to-people connections are fundamental facets of Japan's relationship with ASEAN. As per the 2023 Vision Statement and as highlighted both through the FOIP and the AOIP visions, overall quality of life topics and social and cultural exchanges are core pillars in ensuring regional stability. Formally speaking, there are three defining areas of cooperation⁶³⁶:

- (1) *Partners for Peace and Stability*, for which collaboration ranges from maritime security to combating transnational crime.
- (2) *Partners for Co-creation of Economy and Society for the Future*, which encompasses various topics of discussion, from regional connectivity, to disaster management and environmental protection.
- (3) *Heart-to-Heart Partners across Generations*, which highlights a complex focus on cultural exchanges, business best-practices and language learning.

Fundamentally, these represented key engagement areas that predate security cooperation. JAIF played a key role for this cooperation, serving as a catalyst for deeper engagement on a wide spectrum of topics, ranging from disaster management to cultural exchanges⁶³⁷. In the case of disaster resilience, Japan has channeled significant resources to bolster ASEAN's capacities in dealing with such phenomena. A key element was Japan's support for the establishment of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) in 2011. Additionally, Tōkyō also assisted with the development of the Disaster Emergency Logistics System for ASEAN (DELSA), which became operational since 2012 and focuses on facilitating rapid responses in post-disaster scenarios⁶³⁸.

⁶³⁶ *Areas of ASEAN–Japan Cooperation*, Mission of Japan to ASEAN, October 9, 2024, https://www.asean.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/11_000001_00077.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶³⁷ Naoki Minamiguchi and Zin Aung Swe, "From Response to Resilience: ASEAN–Japan Cooperation in Disaster Management" in *The ASEAN Magazine*, October 8, 2024, <https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/from-response-to-resilience-asean-japan-cooperation-in-disaster-management-2/>. Accessed November 14, 2024.

⁶³⁸ *DELSA-Disaster Emergency Logistics System for ASEAN*, AHA Centre, 2018, <https://ahacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DIGITAL-Version-FACTSHEETS-DELSA.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

Aside from more practical elements of cooperation (including financial assistance and deployment of relief measures), Japan's support was also focused on capacity-building. From 2014 until 2024, more than one thousand people received training through JAIF-sponsored programs, becoming disaster-management specialists⁶³⁹. Additionally, Japan actively participates in the Sentinel Asia Project, "an international cooperative project that aims to contribute to disaster management in the Asia Pacific region by utilizing space technology"⁶⁴⁰. The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) provides free satellite data, helping in monitoring natural disasters, such as floods and volcanic eruptions.

JAIF proved to be an essential initiative in supporting projects that cover other areas of cooperation as well. This became visible especially in environmental cooperation. In 2007, the partners launched the Japan–ASEAN Dialogue on Environmental Cooperation to provide a structured framework for dialogue. A decade later in 2017, Japan and ASEAN expanded their partnership through the establishment of the Japan–ASEAN Environment Cooperation Initiative⁶⁴¹, which focused on a structured way of addressing shared environmental challenges. Building on this initiative, the two partners also launched the ASEAN–Japan Climate Change Action Agenda, focused on "transparency, adaptation and mitigation to enhance co-innovation by using Japanese advanced low/zero carbon and resilient technologies"⁶⁴². The partnership continued to evolve and in 2019, the Japan–ASEAN Dialogue on Environmental Cooperation was upgraded to the ASEAN–Japan Ministerial Dialogue on Environment and Climate Change (AJMDEC). Moreover, in 2021, the ASEAN–Japan Climate Change Action Agenda 2.0 replaced the older iteration stepping up the efforts of the partners in implementing the agreed-upon steps to mitigate the diverse effects of climate change⁶⁴³. Additionally, in 2023, the AJMDEC "proposed the Strategic Program for ASEAN Climate and Environment (SPACE) to address the triple crises of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity

⁶³⁹ Minamiguchi and Swe, *op. cit.*

⁶⁴⁰ *Sentinel Asia*, Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, <https://earth.jaxa.jp/en/application/disaster/sentinel-asia/index.html>. Accessed November 15, 2024.

⁶⁴¹ *Japan–ASEAN Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 13, 2017, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page3e_000791.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁴² *ASEAN–Japan Climate Change Action Agenda*, Japanese Ministry of the Environment, <https://www.env.go.jp/content/900512472.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁴³ *ASEAN–Japan Climate Change Action Agenda 2.0*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2021, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100252719.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

loss”⁶⁴⁴. These efforts (especially related to the increased institutionalization of environmental cooperation) showcase the partner's concern with non-conventional security topics.

Furthermore, through JAIF, Japan has also allocated funds to projects supporting infrastructure and connectivity development within ASEAN. This came as a primordial need for the regional stage, given that the overall “regional infrastructure deficit adversely affects economic competitiveness as inadequate infrastructure raises transportation and trade costs”⁶⁴⁵. The focus on enhancing connectivity in its physical sense aims to reduce overall infrastructure gaps on the regional stage, facilitating both better integration among states and smoother trade flows. ASEAN’s priority for enhancing infrastructure is evident in its Master Plan on Connectivity 2025 (MPAC), issued in 2016, which highlights three core areas pertaining to both harder and softer elements: *physical connectivity* (harder aspects, including energy and transportation system), *institutional connectivity* (softer aspects, especially trade and investment flows and knowledge-sharing) and *human connectivity* (including people-to-people connections, such as educational exchanges and tourism)⁶⁴⁶. Historically speaking, in terms of hard infrastructure development, Japan has been one of ASEAN’s oldest and most consistent partners in terms of such projects. Naturally, “Japanese ODA enabled the construction of bridges and estates along Thailand’s Eastern Seaboard and the Mekong River, extending growth to the whole Mekong Region”⁶⁴⁷. However, this role was complicated by the emergence and consolidation of regional competitors who offer similar infrastructure assistance. In this sense, the higher number of such regional actors have fragmented the cooperation framework for infrastructure building. China became one of the most important contributors in terms of hard infrastructure projects.

⁶⁴⁴ *Launch of the Strategic Program for Japan Climate and Environment (SPACE) and Results of the ASEAN–Japan Environment Week to Commemorate 50th Anniversary*, Japanese Ministry of the Environment, August 31, 2023, https://www.env.go.jp/en/press/press_01857.html. Accessed November 15, 2024.

⁶⁴⁵ Blake H. Berger, “ASEAN Connectivity and China–Japan Infrastructure Export Competition” in Tomoo Kikuchi and Masaya Sakuragawa (eds.), *Financial Cooperation in East Asia*, March 1, 2019, p. 99.

⁶⁴⁶ *Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025*, The ASEAN Secretariat, 2016, p. 8, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/8_compressed.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁴⁷ Souknilanh Keola, “Japan Builds on ASEAN’s Infrastructure Ambitions” in *East Asia Forum*, September 21, 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/09/21/japan-builds-on-aseans-infrastructure-ambitions/>. Accessed November 15, 2024.

Between 2000 and 2018, Tōkyō invested approximately 230 billion US\$ in the region's infrastructure projects, surpassing China's 155 billion US\$ investments during the same period⁶⁴⁸. However, China's strategic rise in this domain became explicitly clear, especially through the institutionalization of this focus in various initiatives such as the BRI and the China–ASEAN Investment Cooperation Fund (CAF). Consequently, the infrastructure domain came to encapsulate a strategic rationale in Japan's competition with other powers, including China. While both Beijing and Tōkyō “are proactive in engaging the region economically and contribute to regional integration through infrastructure exports, the rivalry between them has the potential to constrain the development of a cohesive integrated region”⁶⁴⁹. This is visibly impacting ASEAN, as its member states often balance the economic and social benefits of such large-scale investments from both Japan and China with managing the political implications of such competition. Japan's focus on the hard infrastructure dimensions serves multiple purposes. Foremost, it is aimed at exporting both its high-quality standards and its high-tech systems, promoting norms-based cooperation that emphasize transparency, sustainability and accountability⁶⁵⁰. This showcases the fact that its infrastructure investments are strategically tied to the broader objectives in the Indo-Pacific. In this sense, infrastructure serves as an economic asset (including stimulating trade growth), while also fostering regional integration. Second of all, infrastructure became a geopolitical avenue, through which powers vie for influence. This competitive dynamic is especially visible in the strategies of Japan and China. The alignment of ASEAN countries to various projects in the detriment of others underline the strategic note of infrastructure investment. This is the case with Vietnam's approach on its railway system project, initiating discussions both with Beijing and Tōkyō for the execution of its North-South highspeed railway system⁶⁵¹. For Japan, these strategic choices paired with the depth of its engagement with ASEAN underscore the need for increased adaptability, as it seeks to reinforce its role as a solutions-provider and a reliable partner for regional actors.

⁶⁴⁸ Berger, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 100.

⁶⁵⁰ Keola, *op. cit.*

⁶⁵¹ Dragan Pavlicevic, “China's Railway Diplomacy on High Speed in Vietnam” in *East Asia Forum*, August 14, 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/08/14/chinas-railway-diplomacy-on-high-speed-in-vietnam/>. Accessed November 15, 2024.

The 2023 Japan–ASEAN Comprehensive Connectivity Initiative expanded the focus by identifying two major infrastructure domains for improvement (on a more detailed level split into six): hard and soft infrastructure⁶⁵². Fundamentally, the human level became central, with a need of expanding human connections. This focus is also part of ASEAN’s own MPAC. A notable initiative is the Japan–East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths (JENESYS), which was implemented in multiple iterations. Between 2007 and 2012, the program achieved a total support amounting to 196 million US\$. For the first iteration, between 2013 and 2015, the collaboration received approximately 73 million US\$. For the present collaboration, over 11000 youth were part of JENESYS projects between 2015 and 2022⁶⁵³. JENESYS aims to promote mutual understanding for enhancing cooperation through a future-oriented vision. Additionally, it focuses on cultural exchanges to enhance people-to-people ties through authentic experiences in Japan.

In addition to this, tourism plays a significant role for human exchanges. The ASEAN Promotion Centre on Trade, Investment and Tourism in Japan estimated that in 2022, 31% of Japanese travelers visited ASEAN countries, while 25.4% of the number of foreign visitors to Japan came from ASEAN countries⁶⁵⁴. Aside from the economic role of tourism, such flow of human exchanges showcases that both partners are welcoming destinations for the citizens. To promote such exchanges, several ASEAN member states have signed visa exemption arrangements with Japan: Brunei (14 days), Indonesia (15 days only for diplomatic missions), Malaysia (90 days), Singapore (90 days) and Thailand (90 days)⁶⁵⁵. In the case of the other member states, however, visa requirements still apply (Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines and Vietnam). This perspective showcases an uneven approach towards facilitating tourism, as this disparity limits the flow of people from certain ASEAN nations. Moreover, it might subtly affect the perceptions towards Japan’s presumed openness, possibly creating a sense of exclusion among citizens of

⁶⁵² *Speech by Prime Minister KISHIDA Fumio at the ASEAN-Indo-Pacific Forum*, Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, September 6, 2023, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202309/06speech.html. Accessed November 15, 2024.

⁶⁵³ *JENESYS Programme*, Japan–ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF), <https://jaif.asean.org/jaif-component/jenesys-programme/>. Accessed November 16, 2024.

⁶⁵⁴ *ASEAN–Japan at a Glance*, ASEAN Promotion Centre on Trade, Investment and Tourism, <https://www.asean.or.jp/en/asean-japan-information/>. Accessed November 16, 2024.

⁶⁵⁵ *Exemption of Visa (Short-Term Stay)*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, December 10, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/j_info/visit/visa/short/novisa.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

countries still subject to visa restrictions. This is part of a broader challenge for ASEAN, as, despite high-level dialogues, there is no ASEAN-centralized approach, with each member state addressing its own needs. This has also been the case in bilateral and minilateral security cooperation.

At the level of perceptions, public opinion within ASEAN highlights Japan's role as a relevant partner in the regional context. In line with the results of the State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey Report, Japan is perceived as the most dependable power in the region, receiving a trustworthy rating from 58.9% of respondents⁶⁵⁶. This rise in trust actually reflects Japan's consistent engagement through 2023, as the 50th anniversary of Japan–ASEAN relations. Among the most important reasons for this positive perception, 36.5% cited Tōkyō's commitment to upholding global rules and norms, 27.7% focused on its economic and political avenues as a global leader, while 21.1% were drawn by Japan's cultural assets. Significantly, however, only 5.8% of the respondents trusted Japan's military capabilities in ensuring peace and stability. While Japan is widely regarded as a principled partner and as a cultural source of admiration, there is a limited confidence in its ability to provide security through military means. This perception could also be complicated by the China factor. This comes as a consequence of the fact that ASEAN has to navigate its relationships (both at the level of the institution, and at the level of the member states) with both Japan and China in a region marked by complex security dynamics and under the fragile possibility of increased great power polarization.

Takeaways – Trust over Power

ASEAN has transformed into one of Japan's most important strategic partners. From initial economic engagement, the partnership expanded to address security concerns, regional development topics and overall human-to-human interactions. Throughout Tōkyō's FOIP, ASEAN is a core priority area in fostering both a rules-based and norms-governed order and regional stability and prosperity. This is why Japan's depth of engagement came to address a variety of challenges. Japan's position became complicated through the emergence or consolidation of other significant actors which engaged ASEAN. China's BRI and multilateral and minilateral engagements with ASEAN on infrastructure topics and trade have

⁶⁵⁶ Sharon Seah, *et al.*, "The State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey Report" in *ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute*, 2024, p. 62.

nurtured a significant cooperation between Beijing and Southeast Asia. This could come at the cost of Japanese influence, given ASEAN members' traditional more autonomous position.

At the same time, Japan's efforts that also indicated adaptability in its approach (particularly as regional challenges evolve and ASEAN definitively desire to remain out of great power competition) are paired by an extremely high level of trust within the area. This complements the view that Tōkyō is a significant strategic partner for ASEAN, despite its limited outreach in defense topics. Based on the significant evolution of relations, as ASEAN is also considered one of Japan's most important partners for the future (especially in the case of normative considerations), Tōkyō's relations with the Southeastern partners might be rather resistant to domestic political shocks. However, there are two possible areas that might be impacted by significant policy shifts. First of all, in the face of political fragmentation, ASEAN engagement could be kept at a standard level (which is above-average), but it would not witness significant expansions, especially in case of shifting security dynamics (American uncertainty, Chinese aggressiveness). Second, more unconventional approaches, such as the Asian NATO, could also limit the depth of expansion. This is perfectly visible in the case of ASEAN, where, although the two partners hold region-wide frameworks of cooperation, actual military (conventional) collaboration has been mostly conducted through bilateral engagements. For the moment, however, ASEAN remains a fundamental pillar of Japan's focus, pairing security, human and economic cooperation with Tōkyō's reputation and identity as a solutions-provider.

8.

India: The Strategic Duo

Partnership Foundations

Japan's modern relationship with India has deep historical roots of political interactions. After the Second World War, "India waived war reparations and signed a separate Japan–India Peace Treaty in 1952"⁶⁵⁷. Nonetheless, the polarizing dynamics of the Cold War impeded warm political relations. India's non-aligned political stance contrasted with Japan's alliance and engagement with the US⁶⁵⁸. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Japanese investment in India surged. However, the divergence in foreign policy priorities was further complicated by security-related disparities. Specifically, in 1998, India's nuclear tests temporarily strained relations, due to Tōkyō's strict non-proliferation stance. This meant that Japan reacted heavily with two types of measures. Foremost, economically, new ODA project loans were frozen, protest also marked with Japan's withdrawal from hosting the India Development Forum (IDF) in Tōkyō in 1998⁶⁵⁹. For the Japanese policy-makers, nuclearization went against the fundamental ODA principles. Secondly, on the political level, Tōkyō sought to garner strong institutional support (with appeals to the UNSC and the G8) in support to its pursuit of non-proliferation⁶⁶⁰. Additionally, the establishment of the Tōkyō Forum and its subsequent report on Non-Proliferation and Disarmament directly criticized India and Pakistan for their efforts of developing nuclear weapons⁶⁶¹.

⁶⁵⁷ Takaaki Asano, "Japan–India Relations: Toward a Special Strategic Partnership" in Yuki Tatsumi (ed.), *Japan's Global Diplomacy: Views from the Next Generation*, Stimson Center, March 1, 2015, p. 34.

⁶⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

⁶⁵⁹ *Press Conference by the Press Secretary*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, May 15, 1998, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/press/1998/5/515.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁶⁰ Satu P. Limaye, "Tokyo's Dynamic Diplomacy: Japan and the Subcontinent's Nuclear Tests" in *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 22, no.2, August 2000, p. 325.

⁶⁶¹ *Facing Nuclear Dangers: An Action Plan for the 21st Century*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, July 25, 1999, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/disarmament/forum/tokyo9907/>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

Given all these factors mentioned above, the Japan–India more cooperative partnership began to take shape in the post-Cold War era, when both nations focused on strengthening their ties in a changing global landscape. As mentioned above, the economic component witnessed significant growth during the 1990s, when India experienced its liberalization. In terms of trade flows, from 1991 to 1995, India’s imports from Japan surged by 177%⁶⁶². A similar trend was visible in terms of FDI flows into India as Japan’s FDI increased eightfold during the same period, with Tōkyō becoming the 5th largest investing nation in India in 1994⁶⁶³. The early 2000s marked a significant shift in political relations, as both nations sought to address past tensions and identify areas of mutual interest. This was also marked by an opening of the US towards India, also prompting Japanese policymakers to shift their approach.

Overcoming the political hiccups generated by India’s nuclear tests, the 2000s indicated a new trend in New Delhi–Tōkyō relations. With Yoshirō Mori’s visits to the Indian subcontinent in August 2000, the two governments identified various key areas for cooperation, including nuclear nonproliferation, ODA, economic partnerships and youth exchanges under a “Global Partnership [...] in the 21st Century”⁶⁶⁴. Set against the political disputes pertaining to India’s nuclear tests, the reignition of the partnership marked a profound symbolic shift, highlighting Japan’s commitment to initiating wider engagement with India. Consequently, this led to the Joint Declaration of 2001⁶⁶⁵, which emphasized the need for the partners’ cooperation to ensure regional stability and peace. Additionally, at the level of bilateral relations, the declaration underscored the need for establishing high-level dialogues on various topics, including defense cooperation and human exchanges. However, in spite of a series of high-level meetings organized under the new Koizumi administration, several missile tests conducted by India (between 2001 and 2004) sparked substantial concerns within Japan’s policymakers, particularly

⁶⁶² Badar Alam Iqbal, “Indo-Japanese Economic Relations in the 90s” in *India Quarterly*, vol. 52, no 1/2, January-June 1996, p. 47.

⁶⁶³ *Ibidem*, pp. 60–61.

⁶⁶⁴ *Japan–India Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 23, 2000, https://warp.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/8896781/www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0008/india_s.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁶⁵ *Japan–India Joint Declaration*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, December 10, 2001, <https://warp.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/8896781/www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/joint0112.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

regarding the regional security dynamics and Tōkyō's calls for compliance with nonproliferation norms. In this dynamic, the relations were guided by the 2000 objective of a Global Partnership, but mainly in economic terms. During the 2004 Foreign Ministers' Meeting and the Summit Meeting, the discussions were heavily economy-oriented. The two partners agreed to focus on the Japan–India Joint Study Group for a Comprehensive Study (JSG-CS)⁶⁶⁶ to explore untapped economic potential. Nonetheless, with Koizumi's visit to India in 2005, Japan and India focused on the strategic undertone of the relations, which resulted in almost annual high-level dialogues⁶⁶⁷. As in the case of the Global Partnership, the nature of their engagement was shifted towards a new "Strategic Orientation"⁶⁶⁸, with an emphasis on interests' alignment in the broader Asian continent. A key highlight of this period was the upgrading of bilateral relations into the Japan–India Strategic and Global Partnership in 2006 under the guidance of Abe⁶⁶⁹. Complementing a strengthened economic dimension (including negotiations for an Economic Partnership Agreement) and increased developmental cooperation (such as ODA, and science cooperation), the strategic dimension focused on augmenting political and security cooperation, including joint maritime exercises. Additionally, in 2007, India was a key pivot in the four-country security framework that would later transition into the Quad. Facing increased criticism from Beijing, the format quickly dissolved as Abe was replaced as prime minister and the framework lost coherence given Australia's ambivalence. However, it succeeded in showcasing the consolidation of the strategic undertone of their relations, which were moving away from a strictly economic and ODA-oriented focus. This was also paired by a diversification of cooperative instances, with the establishment of the Executive Committee for Japan–India Friendship and Exchange Year⁶⁷⁰ (the year 2007)

⁶⁶⁶ *Japan–India Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 29, 2004, <https://warp.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/8896781/www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/meet0411.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁶⁷ Asano, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁶⁶⁸ *Japan–India Partnership in a New Asian Era: Strategic Orientation of Japan–India Global Partnership*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 28, 2005, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/partner0504.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁶⁹ *Joint Statement Towards Japan–India Strategic and Global Partnership*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, December 2006, <https://warp.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/8896781/www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/pdfs/joint0612.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁷⁰ *The First Meeting of Japanese Executive Committee for Japan–India Friendship and Exchange Year*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, June 1, 2006, <https://warp.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/>

and the Japan–India Science and Technology Initiative⁶⁷¹. The focus on security cooperation was further institutionalized in 2008, with the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between Japan and India⁶⁷². The framework reflected the partners’ recognition that such cooperation was fundamental in ensuring regional peace and prosperity. Moreover, the comprehensive framework identified security topics that go beyond conventional challenges, focusing on disaster management efforts, counter-terrorism and transnational crime. Nonetheless, Beijing’s increasing defense spending in 2007 and 2008 underscored the urgency of strengthening Japan–India security collaboration⁶⁷³. In spite of Japan’s political shift in 2009, the DPJ government continued the strong strategic focus of its engagement with India. This was further influenced by the political controversies between Beijing and Tōkyō in 2010, which provided both the opportunity and the political convenience for Japan to pursue extensive cooperation with India. Especially impacted by the threat of China, Japan sought to diversify its security partnerships with regional actors. This was also the case for Tōkyō’s relations with New Delhi, which increasingly brought to the forefront strategic and defense collaboration, driven by their shared concerns about regional security.

Post-2012: Blessed Relations⁶⁷⁴

Based on the comprehensive foundations established in the 2000s, which focused foremost on economic relations and followed by newly found strategic directions, the post-2012 era initiated a significant deepening of the partnership. Under the leadership of Abe, Japan sought to elevate the partnership with India to build upon the countries’ converging interests in the Indo-Pacific. Coinciding with Japan’s more proactive approach, substantial progress was achieved in security

pid/8896781/www.mofa.go.jp/announce/event/2006/6/0601.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁷¹ *Summary Report. Japan–India Science and Technology Initiative Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 17, 2006, https://warp.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/8896781/www.mofa.go.jp/policy/s_tech/summary0610.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁷² *Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between Japan and India*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 22, 2008, https://warp.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/8896781/www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/pmv0810/joint_d.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁷³ Madhuchanda Ghosh, “India and Japan’s Growing Synergy: From a Political to a Strategic Focus” in *Asian Survey*, vol. 48, no. 2, March/April 2008, p. 293.

⁶⁷⁴ Based on Abe’s declaration quoted below.

topics, with a focus on joint maritime exercises and technology transfers. Additionally, complementing its heightened strategic focus, the post-2012 era also witnessed the expansion of economic collaboration. Overall, the nature of this strong bilateral partnership, which developed multi-faceted cooperation during the Abe era, was shaped by a series of regional forces: the shared concerns related to Beijing's strategic encirclement (the String of Pearls in the Indian Ocean⁶⁷⁵ and the actions in East and South China Seas) paired with its grand economic ambitions, India's recent strong engagement with the US (which was positively received by Japanese policymakers) and New Delhi's economic consolidation in the last two decades⁶⁷⁶. Underscoring this commitment, Abe believed in 2012 that the "Japan–India relationship is blessed with the largest potential for development of any bilateral relationship anywhere in the world"⁶⁷⁷. Additionally, this was also reinforced through the Emperor's visit to India in December 2013. On the diplomatic front, the extensive engagement was formally acknowledged with the January 2014 Summit, which ended with a Joint Statement on intensifying the strategic and global partnership⁶⁷⁸. All in all, the summit was politically-centered, as Abe emphasized the importance of maritime freedom and regional rule of law in the Indo-Pacific, in the context of Japan's new NSS and NSC. Aside from the political dimension, the economic component became crucial, especially given Japan's decision to utilize its own high-speed railway system for enhancing India's infrastructure. On the human side of things, Japan announced the introduction of visa liberalization measures for Indian citizens, reinforcing the expanding depth of their partnership.

During prime minister Modi's visit to Japan in 2014, the Special Strategic and Global Partnership was institutionalized with the Tōkyō Joint Declaration⁶⁷⁹.

⁶⁷⁵ The 'String of Pearls' refers to a strategic network of Chinese military and commercial facilities along key maritime trade routes in the Indian Ocean.

⁶⁷⁶ Vinay Kaura, "India–Japan Relations and Asia's Emerging Geopolitics" in *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, vol. 29, No. 1/2, June–December 2016, p. 18.

⁶⁷⁷ *Telephone Talks between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and India Prime Minister Manmohan Singh*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, December 28, 2012, https://warp.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/8896781/www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/121228_01.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁷⁸ *Japan–India Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, January 25, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sw/in/page3e_000138.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁷⁹ *Tōkyō Declaration for Japan–India Special Strategic and Global Partnership*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 1, 2014, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000050532.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

Moreover, the rather close personal relations between Abe and Modi also translated into a significant level of bilateral engagement between the two partners, based on Abe's vision of the partnership. Consequently, Japan and India manifested significant political and strategic alignment (including defense cooperation) and wider economic integration during a shifting regional order, defined by China's growing influence (paired with its aggressive stance) and regional power competition. Moreover, starting with 2014, the aforementioned strategic alignment was also encapsulated in similar regional visions. For India, the Act East Policy (AEP) launched in 2014 replaced the ongoing Look East Policy (LEP) initiated in 1994. As the name suggests, the AEP proposed a more active, dynamic and influential approach towards this region. Accordingly, it emphasized the developing of more substantial relations and engagement with ASEAN, including a variety of dimensions especially due to the necessity to adapt to the recent security dynamics and also the elevation of India's role and identity in the region. However, it was also meant to geographically expand India's influence and cooperation to other areas. Therefore, it had a wider scope, focusing on intensifying "strategic engagement with Japan, China, South Korea, Australia, New-Zealand and the Pacific Islands as part of a broader strategy for engaging the Asia-Pacific region"⁶⁸⁰. This represented India's aspirations to become more engaged in the regional security framework as to counterbalance China's aggressive stance and behavior. In addition, AEP emphasized economic integration and bilateral and multilateral cooperation between India, ASEAN states, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. Accordingly, two major dimensions can be identified within AEP: on the one hand, it seeks to promote development through regional economic connections and growth, and, on the other hand, it aims to limit regional hegemons (especially China) in their rise to destabilize or restabilize the security framework. Naturally, Tōkyō and New Delhi sought to synergize their shared regional priorities by harmonizing the efforts between the AEP and the later FOIP⁶⁸¹. During the 2015 Japan–India Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue⁶⁸², Japan's more proactive

⁶⁸⁰ Amitendu Palit, "India's Act East Policy and Implications for Southeast Asia" in *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2016, p.83, <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814695671-009>.

⁶⁸¹ Kaura, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁶⁸² *Eighth Japan–India Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, January 18, 2015, https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sw/in/page3e_000295.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

approach towards regional politics and its recent legislative changes enabled a deeper level of cooperation, especially in terms of harder aspects of security. In 2015, the JSDF became a permanent participant in the Malabar Exercise, a former US–India bilateral military exercise. This showcased the paramount importance of maritime security both in a more specific bilateral note, but also as part of multilateral cooperation alongside the US. However, based on a more historical autonomous direction of its foreign policy and “considering India’s ambivalence toward the US, it would be easier for Japan and India to strengthen bilateral rather than trilateral cooperation”⁶⁸³. Surprisingly, under the Trump administration, the Japan–US–India trilateral relations gained momentum, especially with the reinvigoration of the Quad in 2017. Fundamentally, the relationship was driven by strategic concerns over China’s rise, especially in the case of India. Modi developed a very personal relationship with Trump, aiming to advance India’s defense interests (both in terms of technology transfers and wider defense ties)⁶⁸⁴.

During 2016, Japan also formally launched its FOIP strategy which gained resonance in India’s AEP, as both emphasized the importance of a rules-based regional order. Moreover, in 2016, India officially became a subscribing state to the Hague Code of Conduct regarding ballistic missile proliferation⁶⁸⁵. This marked a significant normative milestone in their relations, as it signaled India’s commitment to non-proliferation norms, heavily supported historically by Japan. All in all, the 2016–2020 period can be considered the golden age of Japan–India modern relations, with a visible deepening of relations, both factually and symbolically. At the diplomatic level, state visits became a norm (Modi visited Japan in 2016 and 2018, Abe visited India in 2017, while 2019 saw two Japanese foreign ministers visiting India). This period was also marked by regular summit and specialized meetings to address and implement more practical areas of cooperation. Two significant factors underlined the heightened degree of interaction between Japan and India. First, the partners’ shared interests in maintaining the status-quo, in promoting

⁶⁸³ Asano, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁶⁸⁴ James Crabtree, Alexander Lipke and Elli-Katharina Pohlkamp, “When East meets West meets Trump’s America: European diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific” in *European Council on Foreign Relations*, November 21, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/article/when-east-meets-west-meets-trumps-america-european-diplomacy-in-the-indo-pacific/>. Accessed December 15, 2024.

⁶⁸⁵ *India Becomes a Subscribing State to the Hague Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation (HCOC)*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, June 3, 2016, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001168.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

regional stability and economic modernization through a somewhat common regional view encouraged closer bilateral and multilateral cooperation in achieving these goals. Consequently, this argument helps in understanding the substantial progress achieved in strategic, economic and socio-cultural relations. Second, the personal leadership styles of both Abe and Modi marked a pivotal point in Japan–India relations, on the one hand, and in the evolution of the regional priorities within the Indo-Pacific on the other hand. In the case of Modi, his “foreign policy is driven by his personality and he seeks to establish close relations with other national leaders”⁶⁸⁶. This leadership style also resonated with Abe’s equally personal approach to diplomacy with India, which facilitated the drafting and implementation of various initiatives. One of the most significant milestones of the period was the signing of the civil nuclear cooperation agreement in 2016⁶⁸⁷. Marking a historic step, as it was the first time when Japan signed such an agreement with a non-NPT signatory, the agreement stood as a green light for Japan’s exports of its own nuclear technologies towards India, being perceived as vital for New Delhi’s energy security and committed development⁶⁸⁸. The progress in bilateral relations also seeped into the economic side. The flagship project became the Mumbai–Ahmedabad High Speed Rail (MAHSR) Project, agreed upon in 2016 and launched in 2017⁶⁸⁹.

The security dimension saw the most remarkable growth, especially given the increased “[u]ncertainty about Chinese power and intentions in the region as well as of future American commitment to maintaining the balance of power in Asia”⁶⁹⁰. The increased engagement also influenced trilateral cooperation, both in terms of their partnership alongside the US and alongside Australia. As mentioned earlier, this became visible in the Quad format, as the 2017 Malabar exercise reunited all Quad members. Moreover, gray-zone challenges became significant topics of

⁶⁸⁶ Pavan Kumar, “India–Japan Relations under Modi 1.0: Exploring Political, Economic and Security Cooperation” in *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, vol. 24, no. 3, July–September 2020, p. 48.

⁶⁸⁷ *Agreement between the Government of Japan and the Government of India for Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 11, 2016, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000202920.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁸⁸ Thomas F. Lynch and James J. Przystup, *India–Japan Strategic Cooperation and Implications for U.S. Strategy in the Indo-Asia-Pacific Region*, Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 2017, p.7.

⁶⁸⁹ *Japan–India Joint Statement*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 11, 2016, p. 2, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000202950.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁹⁰ Kaura, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

discussion throughout diplomatic engagement. As an example, the Second India–Japan Cyber dialogue held in 2017⁶⁹¹ marked a milestone in the expansion of security cooperation, introducing the cyber space within the framework. Additionally, the institutionalization of the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in 2019 enabled both Tōkyō and New Delhi to comprehensively structure and address defense issues⁶⁹². The momentum of security cooperation was kept significantly high, with the first space-oriented dialogue in 2019 and the ongoing negotiations towards the signing of the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) in 2020⁶⁹³. Moreover, the period also saw increased collaboration concerning multilateral platforms, especially focused on the “denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, terrorism and UN reforms”⁶⁹⁴.

The positive development of relations continued through the 2020s, however, it was fundamentally shaped by different domestic and global forces, impacting international and regional politics. In Japan's domestic politics, the stable tenure of Abe was followed by the one-year term of Suga and by the relatively cohesive term of Kishida. However, the coronavirus pandemic and the War in Ukraine shifted the dynamics of cooperation. If the coronavirus pandemic provided opportunities for cooperation, demonstrating the “‘friendship between Japan and India’”⁶⁹⁵, the War introduced a degree of ambiguity in their partnership. In contrast with Japan's unprecedented alignment with its G7 allies, India adopted a more pragmatic and neutral (at least in declarations) stance. The invasion highlighted a series of strategic discrepancies between Tōkyō and New Delhi, especially concerning their commitment to defending a rules-based order⁶⁹⁶. India's multi-factor alignment indicated

⁶⁹¹ *Joint Press Release Second Japan–India Cyber Dialogue*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 18, 2017, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001698.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁹² *Japan–India Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 29, 2018, https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sw/in/page3_002603.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁹³ *Agreement between the Government of Japan and the Government of the Republic of India Concerning Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services between the Self-Defense Forces of Japan and the Indian Armed Forces*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 9, 2020, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100091751.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁹⁴ Pooja Bhatt, “Emerging Pillars of India–Japan Relations in the Indo-Pacific” in *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, vol. 16, no.2, April–June 2021, p. 146.

⁶⁹⁵ *Japan–India Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 23, 2021, https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sw/in/page4e_001170.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁹⁶ Viraj Solanki and Mariko Togashi, “India and Japan enhance cooperation despite their differences” in *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, May 23, 2022. <https://www.iiss.org/de->

a pragmatic concern related to its dependency on Russia. In the case of Japan, the ambivalence could have serious normative implications, leading to blockages in cooperation. Nonetheless, in spite of these differing perceptions, the relations continued to evolve. The Kishida–Modi era continued the sustained cooperation across multiple dimensions, as highlighted with 2022 Summit Meeting Joint Statement⁶⁹⁷. The partners reaffirmed their strategic partnership, with a multimodal focus:

- (A) Security and defense, including practical military exercises, such as Dharma Guardian and Malabar.
- (B) Economy, focusing on bilateral trade and the MAHSR project.
- (C) Digital and tech cooperation, highlighted through the formalization of the Japan–India Digital Partnership.
- (D) Climate and sustainable development, also based on the Japan–India Clean Energy Partnership.
- (E) People-to-people interactions, through the promotion of language learning programs and skill-development programs.

On the same note, multilateral cooperation also expanded. The 2023 Quad Leaders’ Summit proposed an ambitious agenda of cooperation, including security, infrastructure, health and emerging technologies cooperation⁶⁹⁸. By 2024, the depth of Japan–India relations expanded significantly, in spite of certain normative or practical setbacks.

Defense and Security-Related Collaboration

Since the two partners share multiple regional challenges, the security-oriented cooperation between Japan and India became a fundamental pillar of their bilateral relations. The deepening of defense cooperation was shaped both by the extensive institutionalization of their engagement, and by the pragmatic

DE/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/05/india-and-japan-enhance-cooperation-despite-their-differences/. Accessed December 20, 2024.

⁶⁹⁷ *Japan–India Summit Joint Statement. Partnership for a Peaceful, Stable and Prosperous Post-COVID World*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, March 19, 2022, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100319162.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁶⁹⁸ *Quad Leaders’ Summit Fact Sheet*, The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, May 20, 2023, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/20/quad-leaders-summit-fact-sheet/>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

efforts aimed at increasing interoperability of their defense forces. In particular, maritime security became a key facet of their defense cooperation, based on the fact that both Tōkyō and New Delhi depend heavily on maritime channels for trade. In this sense, guaranteeing the safety of “sea-lanes of communication (SLOC) requires systematic efforts by India and Japan in view of their overlapping interests”⁶⁹⁹. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that the two partners extensively focused on practical cooperation in terms of maritime security. In this expansion of defense interactions, maritime security remained a key area for channeling resources and efforts. As a practical implementation step of the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between Japan and India issued in 2008, the first Japan–India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) was organized in 2012. The bilateral exercise became a cornerstone of their maritime collaboration, reaching eight iterations between 2012 and 2024. The exercise’s main purpose was to augment the interoperability of the JMSDF and of the Indian Navy. However, its main focus expanded beyond a traditional security-oriented approach, including a variety of non-traditional (or gray-zone) challenges, such as anti-piracy operations, SAR missions and various maritime scenarios (anti-submarine or anti-air)⁷⁰⁰. In terms of ground forces cooperation, the Dharma Guardian exercise has become a key initiative launched in 2018, which reached its fifth episode in 2024⁷⁰¹. Similar to JIMEX in the case of maritime initiatives, the Dharma Guardian exercise emphasized ground forces collaboration through joint tactical exercises, also focused on semi-urban missions under UN mandates⁷⁰². Such on-the-ground exercises are aimed at increasing interoperability among the troops. Additionally, in 2023, cooperation also expanded in the realm of air force. The Veer Guardian and the Shinyū Maitri exercises became historical firsts for the partners in terms of air force drills. Moreover, they also complemented the existing efforts in ground force and maritime force collaboration, providing

⁶⁹⁹ Kaura, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁷⁰⁰ *First Japan–India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) in Indian Waters from 19–22 Dec*, Ministry of Defence of India, December 17, 2013, <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=101825>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷⁰¹ *India–Japan Joint Exercise ‘Dharma Guardian’ Commences in Rajasthan*, Ministry of Defence of India, February 25, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2008775>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷⁰² Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “India–Japan ‘Dharma Guardian’ Exercise” in *The Diplomat*, February 29, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/india-japan-dharma-guardian-exercise/>. Accessed December 22, 2024.

a comprehensive and holistic nature to their defense partnership. This focus was further complemented by the partners' participation in several bilateral and multilateral exercises. Japan and India found themselves participating in other multilateral practical exercises, such as the Malabar Exercise or LAPEROUSE⁷⁰³. In 2021, India joined LAPEROUSE, an exercise coordinated by France in the Indo-Pacific since 2019. Moreover, New Delhi also focused on expanding multilateral cooperation in 2024 by organizing a major exercise named Exercise Tarang Shakti, which included 10 partners in addition to Tōkyō and New Delhi.

Complementing the practical, on-the-ground defense exercises, Japan and India channeled significant resources to also institutionalize and formalize their cooperation. As previously mentioned, this significant institutionalization began with 2008. By 2014 when the Special Strategic and Global Partnership was announced, the vice-ministerial 2+2 dialogue launched in 2010 was a sign that the subtle yet palpable institutionalization of their defense cooperation was taking shape. This dialogue provided a structured platform for addressing shared security concerns and aligning strategic priorities. Fundamentally, enhancing cooperative relations with India was prominently reflected in Japan's formal policy frameworks, including the 2013 NSS⁷⁰⁴ and the 2015 Diplomatic Bluebook⁷⁰⁵. India came to be perceived as a strategic partner in maintaining regional stability. At the same time, to further their shared concerns and interests, the policy papers underscored the necessity of strengthening bilateral and multilateral ties in the evolving security architecture of the Indo-Pacific. In 2019, the 2+2 vice-ministerial dialogue was upgraded to a full ministerial level. Based on the successful implementation of the initial vice-ministerial meetings, the first official 2+2 meeting was aimed to "further enhance the strategic depth of bilateral security and defence cooperation"⁷⁰⁶. Based on both partners' commitment to an open and rules-based region, the expansion of formal cooperation was also highlighted through the depth of practical engagement

⁷⁰³ *Mission JEANNE D'ARC 23 – exercice LAPEROUSE pour la sécurité maritime de la zone Indopacifique*, Ministère des Armées et des Anciens combattants, March 16, 2023, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/marine/actualites/mission-jeanne-darc-23-exercice-laperouse-securite-maritime-zone-indopacifique>. Accessed December 22, 2024.

⁷⁰⁴ *National Security Strategy*, 2013, p. 23.

⁷⁰⁵ *Diplomatic Bluebook 2015*, 2015, p. 175.

⁷⁰⁶ *Joint Statement. First Japan–India 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 30, 2019, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000544338.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

mentioned above. Additionally, the bilateral cooperation was also synergized within a broader, regional context that brought together the Quad, minilateral cooperation (including the US and Australia), but also ASEAN-centered topics, such as the AOIP, Vientiane Vision 2.0 and the EAS. The full upgraded platform also expedited cooperation in diverse areas, such as counterterrorism and emerging-technologies threats, moving beyond a simple view of maritime security (i.e., focused solely on traditional, military threats). Another significant milestone was the signing and implementation of the ACSA in 2020, which was aimed at enhancing their capacity to provide logistical support during joint exercises and during HA/DR missions. Moreover, ACSA also serves as a strategic tool to enhance the partners' operational reach, supporting their interoperability by allowing their ships and aircraft to use each other's facilities and bases. The agreement with India was, historically, the 6th such treaty Japan has signed with various partners (the US, Australia, the UK, France and Canada), however it holds significant importance, being the first signed with a mainland Asian actor. Japan's earlier ACSAs were signed with traditional Western allies, while the agreement with India reflects Tōkyō's normative recognition of India's role and importance as a regional security provider. By being a strategic tool, the ACSA with India also holds a significant geopolitical value – it stood as a message delivered to China, showcasing the alignment of interests of the two partners in relation to an increasingly assertive regional power.

Another significant component of their security partnership is the potential for arms and technology exports, rather sensitive topics for Japanese policymakers. Following the increased institutionalization and diversification of defense collaboration, Japan and India also signed an Agreement on Defense Equipment and Technology Cooperation in 2015⁷⁰⁷. As per the specific articles of the agreement, it emphasized joint research and development of the defense equipment (technology or materials) aimed at bolstering the security of the partners. However, negotiations for the export of Japanese *ShinMaywa* US-2 amphibious aircraft, which perform flawlessly even in harsh waters, have commenced since 2011⁷⁰⁸. India sought to

⁷⁰⁷ *Agreement Between the Government of Japan and the Government of the Republic of India Concerning the Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology*, December 2015, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000117470.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷⁰⁸ Ankit Panda, "Japan-India Maritime Surveillance Aircraft Deal May Come Before the New Year" in *The Diplomat*, November 30, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/11/japan-india->

procure several of these aircraft for patrolling purposes. Moreover, as the first significant defense export initiative between the two partners, it represented a key highlight of the 2016 Summit Meeting, presented as a clear symbol of the deepening of Japan–India defense ties⁷⁰⁹. However, the process is virtually frozen, mainly due to pricing issues and production localization concerns⁷¹⁰. Despite the setbacks, the potential for such collaboration became evident in their defense cooperation. Consequently, to “open doors for further Japan–India collaboration, any such deal must take into consideration the need to strengthen the manufacturing base in India”⁷¹¹. Based on Japan’s recalibration from historically conservative in terms of arms exports, to a more comprehensive approach towards its strategic partnership, Japan and India sought new opportunities in terms of defense and technology transfers. Earlier in 2024, the two partners focused on a deal of transferring Japan-made NORA-50 radar systems to India⁷¹² (or more commonly known as UNICORN – United Combined Radio Antenna). The procurement of such high-level technology (already present on JMSDF vessels) from Japan would also reduce India’s dependence on arms imports from Russia. Aside from this, India’s acquiring of such systems would also yield two consequences. First, the radar would prove beneficial in New Delhi’s surveillance infrastructure, complementing the maritime security in the Indian Ocean. Second, by incorporating Japanese technology, deemed a crucial ally for India, it would also provide, on the one hand, opportunities for skill transfers to domestic industries and, on the other hand, extensive opportunities for enhanced multilateral and bilateral cooperation. Based on sustained dialogues, a Memorandum of Implementation was signed in November 2024 under the guidance of ATLA, for the co-development of the UNICORN antennas⁷¹³. In 2018, through the same

maritime-surveillance-aircraft-deal-may-come-before-the-new-year/. Accessed December 25, 2024.

⁷⁰⁹ *Japan–India Joint Statement*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 11, 2016, p. 2, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000202950.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷¹⁰ “Despite Defense Buildup, Japan’s Arms Industry Struggles” in *The Asahi Shimbun*, December 29, 2021, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14512775>. Accessed December 25, 2024.

⁷¹¹ Asano, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁷¹² Yusuke Takeuchi, “Japan Eyes Export of Stealth Naval Ship Antennas to India” in *NikkeiAsia*, March 10, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Aerospace-Defense-Industries/Japan-eyes-export-of-stealth-naval-ship-antennas-to-India>. Accessed December 25, 2024.

⁷¹³ *Memorandum of Implementation Signed with Government of Japan for Co-Development of UNICORN Masts for the Indian Navy*, Ministry of Defence of India, November 16, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2073843>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

ATLA, Tōkyō and New Delhi initiated a cooperative research project for the development of Unmanned Ground Vehicle (UGV) navigation technologies⁷¹⁴. Being the first such cooperative endeavor between the two partners, the project was deemed a success⁷¹⁵ that could serve as a model for broader defense cooperation. Overall, such navigation technology could serve as a dual-use system: both defense and civilian purposes, including HA/DR operations or humanitarian assistance scenarios in hard-to-reach areas.

Economic and Civil Nuclear Cooperation

The economic dimension of Japan–India relations became a central topic during high-level dialogues between the partners. Especially after India's liberalization, the trade relations between the two partners started to slowly develop. This became evident during the 2000s, a time when Japanese ODA funds fueled India's development. Trade relations with New Delhi accounted for only 2.23% of Tōkyō's overall trade relations on an annual average, despite a 60.09% growth in Japan's total imports from and exports to India between 2008 and 2022⁷¹⁶. In spite of significant institutionalization efforts, the economic engagement did not yield the same results as their strategic-oriented cooperation.

By looking at the numbers in the graph below, it is clear that the trade values remained relatively stable. Even though the trade volumes peaked in 2022, they were still very low: India ranked as Japan's 13th largest exporting partner and 29th largest importing partner, while Japan ranked as India's 25th largest exporting partner and 15th largest importing partner⁷¹⁷. In terms of FDI, India became a top ten destination for Japanese investments for the first time in 2023, ranking 6th in the total outward flows, after the US, the UK, Australia, Singapore and the Netherlands⁷¹⁸.

⁷¹⁴ *Defense of Japan 2019*, 2019, p. 441.

⁷¹⁵ *Joint Statement. Third Japan–India 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 20, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sw/in/pageite_000001_00002.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷¹⁶ The graph centralizes data from *Japan–Yearly Trade*, Observer of Economic Complexity (OEC), <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/jpn>. Accessed December 25, 2024.

⁷¹⁷ Data is adapted from *India – Yearly Trade*, Observer of Economic Complexity (OEC), <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/ind>. Accessed December 25, 2024.

⁷¹⁸ Data collected from *Japanese Trade and Investment Statistics*, Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), <https://www.jetro.go.jp/en/reports/statistics/>. Accessed December 26, 2024.

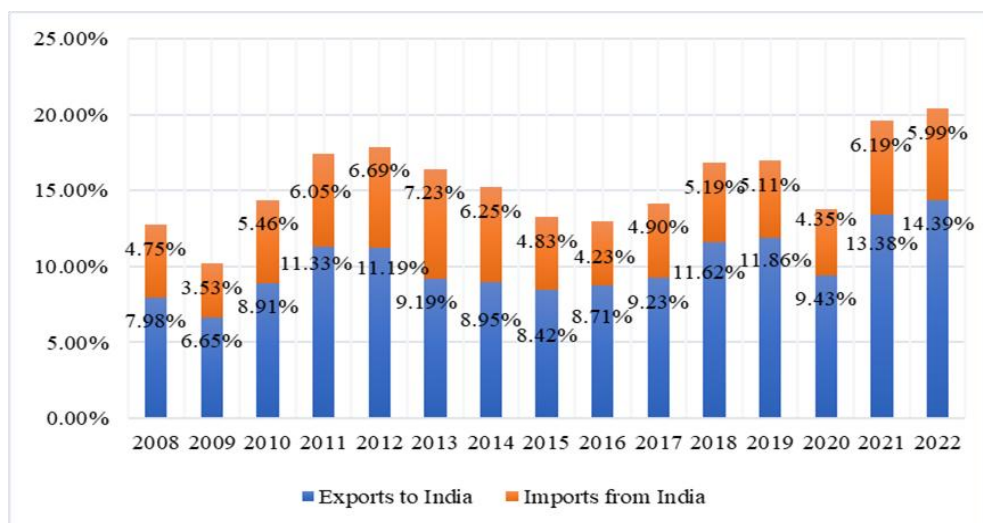


Figure 17: Graph detailing the total trade relations (Japanese imports and exports) between Japan and India (2008–2022)

At the same time, Japan became India's 5th FDI source in 2023, with investments “mainly concentrated in sectors including automobile, electrical equipment, telecommunications, chemical, financial (insurance) and pharmaceutical sectors”⁷¹⁹. To enhance their ties, the two partners focused on developing a series of institutional frameworks to guide and enhance economic relations. After 14 rounds of negotiations, the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between Japan and India was signed in 2011⁷²⁰. As its name suggest, the agreement was comprehensive in scope, focusing on eliminating or reducing tariffs for numerous trade goods⁷²¹ and creating a favorable environment for FDI by mutually granting each other the “Most-Favored-Nation treatment”⁷²², among other priority areas. The CEPA held ambitious objectives and garnered very high expectations, with a series of simulations yielding positive results in terms of trade expansions⁷²³. According

⁷¹⁹ *India–Japan. Economic Synergies*, Confederation of Indian Industry, 2024, p. 24, https://www.cii.in/International_ResearchPDF/India_Japan_Partnership_Report%202024_Web.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷²⁰ *Comprehensive Partnership Agreement Between Japan and the Republic of India*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, February 16, 2011, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/epa/201102/pdfs/ijcepa_ba_e.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

⁷²² *Ibidem*, p. 81.

⁷²³ Shamshad Ahmad Khan, “India–Japan Economic Partnership: Potentials, Promises and Prospects” in *Ministry of Finance of Japan, Policy Research Institute*, August 9, 2019, p. 16.

to the graph above, the trade streamline yielded short-term increases in export and imports, but the CEPA's total impact on trade and investment flows remained below expectations. Moreover, it fundamentally widened the trade imbalance gap that existed between Tōkyō and New Delhi⁷²⁴. The CEPA became the main institutional framework for deeper economic engagement, but its limited impact also highlighted the need for more targeted and adaptive frameworks of cooperation, such as the Japan–India Digital Partnership (JIDP) and the India–Japan Industrial Competitiveness Partnership.

Another significant step in their cooperation was the Civil Nuclear Pact signed in 2016⁷²⁵. The agreement, which basically allows Japan to export its nuclear technology to India for civilian purposes⁷²⁶, holds significant normative importance given two significant elements: first, due to the fact that India is not a signatory state of the NPT and second, based on Japan's historical and more accentuated recent anti-nuclear stance. The anti-nuclear norm is deeply embedded in the Japanese domestic framework, based on the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings and reinforced after the Fukushima disaster. Between 2018 and 2020, 17% of all demonstrations in Japan promoted the anti-nuclear topic⁷²⁷. On a political note, the pact held significant importance in high-dialogue forums, being celebrated as a “new level of mutual confidence and strategic partnership”⁷²⁸. Aside from these normative implications on Japan's side, the treaty holds profound meanings for India's energy security, by pairing its needs with Japan's nuclear technology. This is significant based on New Delhi's energy needs, including reducing dependence on coal and non-renewable energy sources. Accordingly, the pact has significant economic implications for both partners: if in the case of India, its focus on development is clear, Japanese companies virtually dominate the global nuclear energy scene (in spite of anti-nuclear norms). For example, as of 2017, Japan produced approximately 80% of the global nuclear reactor cores, dominating the

⁷²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

⁷²⁵ *Agreement Between the Government of Japan and the Government of the Republic of India for Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 11, 2016, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000202920.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷²⁶ Kaura, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁷²⁷ Laura Sorica, “Trends in Anti-Nuclear Demonstrations in Japan: 2018–2020” in *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED)*, March 10, 2021, <https://acleddata.com/2021/03/10/trends-in-anti-nuclear-demonstrations-in-japan-2018-2020/>. Accessed December 27, 2024.

⁷²⁸ *Japan–India Joint Statement*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 14, 2017, p. 6, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100002878.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

market with companies such as Toshiba and Hitachi⁷²⁹. However, despite its milestone status, its more ideas-inclined impact and the high expectations surrounding it, the agreement has not led to significant collaborative projects related to nuclear energy. All in all, there are still high hopes that “the India–Japan nuclear deal will help both nations to achieve harmony in the Indo-Pacific region”⁷³⁰.

Takeaways – Natural Partners, Divergent Approaches

New Delhi came to occupy a favored position in Tōkyō’s diplomatic horizon. Post-Cold War controversies related to India’s nuclear and missile tests were gradually overcome, and a cautious engagement became a strategic relationship. From an early economy-dominated relationship, as India became Japan’s largest ODA recipient of the past decades⁷³¹, security cooperation has emerged as the most dynamic component of their relationship, shaped by regional (including shared concerns about China) and global (such as the Trump administration) dynamics. The foundation of defense cooperation was solidified with consistent high-level engagements and institutional frameworks, including the 2+2 vice-ministerial and later ministerial dialogue, the ACSA and the partners’ shared visions. In this sense, Tōkyō and New Delhi also sought to harmonize their regional visions, striving to align priorities, in spite of occasional diverging perspectives. Especially in the case of democratic values, the recent restrictions on media and civic organizations, as well as minority rights, have shown a values-based divergence between the two partners⁷³². Additionally, the different reactions to the War in Ukraine also underscored strategic discrepancies⁷³³. Japan’s alignment with the Western allies was contrasted with India’s more pragmatic approach, also influenced by its long ties with Russia.

Aside from strategic discrepancies, the difference also highlighted the difficulties of harmonizing their visions and approaches to addressing global crises. In an effort to strengthen their economic links, the partners tried to institutionalize

⁷²⁹ Piyush Ghasiya, “India–Japan Civil Nuclear Cooperation: The Journey and Its Future” in *Air Power Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2, April–June 2018, p. 114.

⁷³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 118.

⁷³¹ *Japan–India Relations (Basic Data)*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 12, 2024, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/data.html>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷³² Toru Ito, “Japan and India” in Michito Tsuruoka (ed.), *Japan in an Era of Geopolitics: A New Foreign and Security Policy Direction*, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Japan Office: Tōkyō, pp. 162–163.

⁷³³ Solanki and Togashi, *op. cit.*

collaboration through various initiatives, with rather mixed results. However, a significant normative milestone for Japan and pragmatic one for India was the 2016 Civil Nuclear Pact. Alongside this, collaborative research projects in the fields of culture and technology were launched, broadening collaboration beyond conventional boundaries. For this development, the tenures of Abe and Kishida played a primordial role in shaping the trajectory of relations, by laying the foundation and expanding the Special Strategic and Global Partnership. What can be defined as the golden age of modern India–Japan relations witnessed the significant expansion of cooperation, especially including a certain degree of strategic collaboration both bilaterally and multilaterally through established frameworks, especially the Quad.

The first Summit between Shigeru Ishiba and Narendra Modi in October 2024 represented a success, concluding that India and Japan are “‘natural partners’”⁷³⁴. The first dialogue between the two leaders highlighted an extensive focus on the human element, as Modi seeks “to dramatically expand people-to-people exchanges with Japan”⁷³⁵. Ishiba’s vision, however, could prove problematic in two instances. First, his calls for more reciprocity in the Japan–US alliance⁷³⁶ may upset trilateral relations, affecting their cooperation within the Quad. Second, Ishiba’s calls for an Asian NATO may raise anxiety in New Delhi. India’s pursuit of a more autonomous foreign policy would prove a challenge for such an alliance, especially in a nuanced regional context including sustained engagement with China and Russia.

⁷³⁴ *Japan–India Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 10, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sw/in/pageite_000001_00566.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷³⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷³⁶ Jio Kamata, “Ishiba Shigeru Wants a Stronger Japan–US Alliance. He Has an Unorthodox Vision For Doing That” in *The Diplomat*, October 3, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/10/ishiba-shigeru-wants-a-stronger-japan-us-alliance-he-has-an-unorthodox-vision-for-doing-that/>. Accessed January 2, 2025.

9.

The United States: A Tale of Three Presidents

The US has been the most important actor that shaped Japan's postwar trajectory, achieving three key objectives: it supported in realizing its economic recovery, it ensured its security under the alliance framework and it managed to integrate it in the liberal international order. The partnership solidified during the Cold War and faced various challenges in the post-Cold War world. As the relations between Washington and Tōkyō are extremely comprehensive, this chapter focuses on how these relations evolved during three presidencies: the 2nd Obama administration (2013–2017), the 1st Trump administration (2017–2021) and the Biden administration (2021–2025).

In this sense, it is important to understand the impact of several key strategic concepts. First, the 2011 'Pivot to Asia' or 'Strategic Rebalancing' garnered high expectations from the Asian allies, while its practical implementation faced significant challenges, being even deemed "dead on arrival"⁷³⁷. Second, the 2017 'America First' strategic policy introduced a non-conventional US policy, impacting alliances through the fluctuating rhetoric on security commitments. Third, the 2021 'America is back' vision became a slogan constrained by the realities of an era defined by chronic instability⁷³⁸, in which the US faced struggles in reclaiming its global leadership role.

The Obama Era: The Pivot to Asia

The importance of Asia for American policymakers and political thinkers predates the Pivot. In 2009, during the Atlantic Council's Makins Lecture, Henry

⁷³⁷ Peter Birgbauer, "The US Pivot to Asia Was Dead on Arrival" in *The Diplomat*, March 31, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/the-us-pivot-to-asia-was-dead-on-arrival/>. Accessed January 4, 2025.

⁷³⁸ Ben Rhodes, "A Foreign Policy for the World as It Is" in *Foreign Affairs*, June 18, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/biden-foreign-policy-world-rhodes>. Accessed January 4, 2025.

Kissinger highlighted the importance of Asia, stating that “the center of gravity of international affairs is importantly shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific and Indian Oceans.”⁷³⁹ These prevailing perspectives underscored the need for the US to reorient its strategic priorities, a theme that became dominant during Obama's presidency with its Asia-Pacific-focus policies. Obama's policy was intended to resettle the American commitment to the Indo-Pacific, focusing on bilateral alliance consolidation, multilateral cooperation and economic expansion⁷⁴⁰. For Japan, however, the timing of the presumed Pivot was not exactly ideal, as it coincided with a rather unstable domestic situation, marked by the DPJ leadership, further impacted by the discussions surrounding the relocation of the US Futenma Air Base from Okinawa. Additionally, it was also marked by the increasing tensions surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands disputes alongside China. Fundamentally, the American strategy of engagement with China was further impacted by the coming to power of Xi Jinping, as Washington was rather unprepared to tackle all these changes at once (the DPJ, Xi's ascendancy and the maritime tensions)⁷⁴¹. For these reasons, in the eyes of Washington, “[m]ore than China, [...] the biggest strategic surprise in Asia was domestic-political change in Japan”⁷⁴². Hatoyama's focus on addressing asymmetries in the US–Japan alliance and the various debates surrounding the Futenma airbase created a subtle gap in relations, perceived by Washington as a potential weakening of Japan's alignment with American strategic priorities. Moreover, these disruptions emerged during a time when the Indo-Pacific political landscape was changing. Consequently, these transformations also impacted Tōkyō, by creating a complex scenario for Japan to fully engage with the American rebalancing. However, the return of Abe in December 2012 marked a significant point in Japan's domestic and foreign politics (for the better, or for the worst).

In a transformative manner, Abe brought about a new focus on Japan's more proactive approach as a key player in the Indo-Pacific, which resonated

⁷³⁹ “Transcript: Kissinger's Remarks at 2009 Makins Lecture” in *Atlantic Council*, January 15, 2009, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/transcript/transcript-kissinger-s-remarks-at-2009-makins-lecture/>. Accessed January 4, 2025.

⁷⁴⁰ Michal Kolmaš and Šárka Kolmašová, “A ‘Pivot’ That Never Existed: America's Asian Strategy Under Obama and Trump” in *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 1, January 24, 2019, p. 62.

⁷⁴¹ Michael J. Green, *By More Than Providence. Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific since 1783*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, p. 527.

⁷⁴² Nicholas D. Anderson and Victor D. Cha, “The Case of the Pivot to Asia: System Effects and the Origins of Strategy” in *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 132, no. 4, 2017, p. 606.

with American views. In official policy frameworks, Obama's rebalancing was formally acknowledged and highlighted as a critical component for ensuring regional stability. For instance, the 2013 NSS identified efforts towards strengthening the alliance as core objectives of Japan's foreign policy⁷⁴³. Strategically, the NSS also focused on expanding cooperation in multimodal manner, including the interoperability of military forces, joint training for improving SAR and ISR capabilities and enhancing their mutual capacity of dealing with non-traditional security challenges⁷⁴⁴. Most importantly, the NSS explicitly mentioned the intention of both partners of working upon revising the 1997 Guidelines for Cooperation. Subsequently, these debates became top priorities for high-level dialogues, including the February 2013 Summit Meeting⁷⁴⁵ and the October 2013 2+2 Security Consultative Committee⁷⁴⁶. As highlighted in Chapter 4, the 2015 Guidelines outlined a really comprehensive framework for bilateral security and defense collaboration, emphasizing both more practical elements (including on-the-ground collaboration between the military forces) and more general topics (such as Japan's allowance for CSD under the constitutional reinterpretation). With the ensuing cooperation starting with 2013 and the revision, the Pivot seemed to gain traction, moving Japan and the US a "step closer to the kind of joint and combined command relationships that make NATO and the U.S.-ROK alliance such effective deterrents"⁷⁴⁷. This cooperation was centered around various initiatives, including the first Japan-US Cyber Dialogue in 2013⁷⁴⁸, the first Japan-US Development Dialogue⁷⁴⁹ and the continuation of the Japan-US Cooperation in R&D⁷⁵⁰. These efforts were clearly aimed at addressing topics not usually covered by a traditional

⁷⁴³ *National Security Strategy*, 2013, p. 6.

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 20–23.

⁷⁴⁵ *Japan–U.S. Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, February 22, 2013, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/pmv_1302/index.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷⁴⁶ *Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee. Toward a More Robust Alliance and Greater Shared Responsibilities*, 2013.

⁷⁴⁷ Michael J. Green, *By More Than Providence*, p. 528.

⁷⁴⁸ *Joint Statement. Japan–U.S. Cyber Dialogue*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, May 10, 2013, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page22e_000001.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷⁴⁹ *The First Japan–U.S. Development Dialogue (senior level)*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, February 21, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/ic/dapc/page3e_000148.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷⁵⁰ *Extention of the Agreement between Japan and the US on Cooperation in Research and Development in Science and Technology*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 23, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press22e_000015.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

alliance. In the case of the Cyber Dialogue, both Washington and Tōkyō understood the growing importance of cyberspace in regional and global security frameworks. The purpose of the consultations was primarily to enhance cooperation against cyberthreats, bringing together various priority areas, including information exchange, consistent cyber politics and national defense strategies. In the case of the Development Dialogue, it tackled a wide range of challenges (including humanitarian assistance and social empowerment), expanding bilateral cooperation in the realm of sustainable development. Additionally, the underlying goal of the forum was to enhance bilateral cooperation, reflecting a shared concern for developmental topics in the Indo-Pacific. To top it off, in April 2014, President Obama visited Japan and the two partners issued a Joint Statement, according to which their partnership “is founded on mutual trust, a common vision for a rules-based international order, a shared commitment to upholding democratic values and promoting open markets, and deep cultural and people-to-people ties”⁷⁵¹. The cohesion of the alliance was strengthened both by the American Pivot and by the Japanese Proactive Contribution to Peace. President Obama’s visit was matched by Abe’s visit and subsequent address to the Congress in April 2015, which was also followed by a Joint Vision Statement⁷⁵². Based on the statement, the Japan–US cooperation was focused around several key points:

- (A) Bilateral security and defense cooperation – both leaders reacted positively to the revision of the Guidelines.
- (B) TPP negotiations – both leaders expressed optimism over the progress.
- (C) Regional focus – both leaders reaffirmed their commitment to a free and open region, denouncing unilateral claims to change the status-quo and explicitly mentioning China, North Korea and Iran as revisionists.
- (D) Global focus – both leaders focused on the degrading international situation, including the Russian infringements on Ukrainian sovereignty and climate change issues.

On the economic front, the TPP negotiation efforts became the cornerstone of engagement during this period. The initial expectations were held high, as it

⁷⁵¹ *U.S.–Japan Joint Statement: The United States and Japan: Shaping the Future of the Asia-Pacific and Beyond*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 25, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/na/na1/us/page24e_000045.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷⁵² *U.S.–Japan Joint Vision Statement*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 28, 2015, https://www.mofa.go.jp/na/na1/us/page4e_000250.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

was perceived that the TPP “could influence other trade agreements in the region as it is considered a high quality FTA with new approaches to commitments in response to the changing trade environment”⁷⁵³. As a comprehensive FTA across 12 countries (Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the US and Vietnam), the TPP set a series of objectives, including the reduction of trade tariffs, supporting overall regional integration and providing resources and means for addressing modern challenges (including digital trade and intellectual property)⁷⁵⁴. From the Japanese side, the TPP negotiations were rather complex, partly due to its own protectionism related to domestic agriculture⁷⁵⁵. However, the future of the agreement in its envisioned comprehensive form was jeopardized following the election of Donald Trump, who decided to withdraw the US, the largest partner in the TPP, from the agreement, undermining the presumed multilateral ambitions of the treaty. Japan took the leading role, transitioning the TPP into the CPTPP, which entered into force in December 2018. For Japan, the CPTPP represented more than a trade agreement, as the process became “a national strategy intended to ensure its sustainable economic development and external influence in the Asia Pacific region”⁷⁵⁶. Additionally, for Abe, Japan’s participation in the CPTPP went beyond simple economic integration, positioning Japan as a rule-setter and enforcer in the regional order. This was particularly important in a regional context in which ASEAN, based on fears of marginalization, also launched negotiations for the RCEP⁷⁵⁷. Thus, these considerations showcase the fact that the TPP also carried a notable geopolitical dimension, seen as a strategy to counterbalance China’s growing influence⁷⁵⁸. By

⁷⁵³ Yose Rizal Damuri, “How Might the Trans-Pacific Partnership Affect the Game?” in Jane Drake-Brockman and Patrick Messerlin (eds), *Potential Benefits of an Australia-EU Free Trade Agreement: Key Issues and Options*, Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2018, p. 76.

⁷⁵⁴ *Summary of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement*, Office of the United States Trade Representative, October 4, 2015, <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2015/october/summary-trans-pacific-partnership>. Accessed January 6, 2025.

⁷⁵⁵ Masayoshi Honma, “Japanese Agricultural Policy in Disarray” in *East Asia Forum*, November 15, 2013, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/11/15/japanese-agricultural-policy-in-disarray/>. Accessed January 6, 2025.

⁷⁵⁶ Yoshikazu Kato, “US–Japan–China Trilateral Relations: How Their Dynamics Will Shape Asia Pacific” in *ASIAGLOBAL Papers – Asia Global Institute*, The University of Hong Kong, June 2019, p. 25.

⁷⁵⁷ Damuri, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

⁷⁵⁸ Jane Perlez, “U.S. Allies See Trans-Pacific Partnership as a Check on China” in *New York Times*, October 6, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/07/world/asia/trans-pacific-partnership-china-australia.html>. Accessed January 6, 2025.

introducing high level trade rules, the TPP could potentially limit Beijing's ability to shape the regional economic agenda.

Overall, the Abe–Obama (2013–2017) period was defined by a strategic realignment, facilitated by the election of Abe as prime minister, and by a shared response to regional challenges. Overall, the Pivot “was more successful in terms of building strong legitimation through referring to international norms and a liberal world order”⁷⁵⁹. On a more specific note, however, the Pivot achieved more concrete results in the case of Japan, as the domestic changes under the Abe administration (including the FOIP vision) proved conducive to deeper alignment with the American strategic goals. The election of Donald Trump hinted towards a potential change in the dynamics of the Japan–US relationship, most importantly through his transactional approach to international politics. This approach contrasted with the predecessor, especially in relation to the discursive and normative legitimation sought through the Pivot.

The Trump Era: America First and Normative Ambiguity

Trump's victory in the 2016 elections was initially marked by a series of uncertainties for Japan, stemming from his discursive practices. In 2017, during a meeting in Tōkyō with American and Japanese business leaders, President Trump stated that the American authorities “want free and reciprocal trade, but right now, our trade with Japan is not free and it's not reciprocal”⁷⁶⁰. Moreover, during the 2019 Ōsaka G20, President Trump characterized the defense treaty with Japan as unequal, deeming that it has to be changed based on its perceived disadvantage⁷⁶¹. This rhetoric amplified concerns particularly related to the future of bilateral trade relations and introduced unpredictability in the alliance especially concerning the renegotiation of one of its most critical security frameworks. Taking these into consideration, the bilateral relations remained surprisingly consistent in terms of structural engagements (especially the areas of interest highlighted in

⁷⁵⁹ Kolmaš and Kolmašová, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁷⁶⁰ “Trump Says Japan Trade Not Free, Not Reciprocal” in *NikkeiAsia*, November 6, 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Trump-says-Japan-trade-not-free-not-reciprocal2>. Accessed January 11, 2025.

⁷⁶¹ Hiroyuki Akita, “Take Trump Seriously When He Bashes Japan–US Security Treaty” in *NikkeiAsia*, July 11, 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Take-Trump-seriously-when-he-bashes-Japan-US-security-treaty>. Accessed January 11, 2025.

2015). In a symbolic manner, Abe held a meeting in November 2016 with then-President-elect Trump. At the level of ideas, the meeting held significant value, showcasing Tōkyō's efforts towards ensuring continuity within the alliance, amidst Trump's more unconventional political style.

At the official level, Abe visited the US in February 2017 for the Summit Meeting. Consequently, the two partners issued a joint statement which starkly resembled the cooperative dialogue sustained during Obama's presidency⁷⁶². Among the most important consistent provisions, topics concerning the regional security framework remained predominant. In this logic, the Summit focused on Japan assuming "larger roles and responsibilities in the alliance"⁷⁶³, in line with the upgraded Guidelines. Moreover, the two partners confirmed that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands fall under the American security guarantees. Lastly, both Washington and Tōkyō reiterated their harder stance on North Korea's military programs, aspects which will be reinforced through sustained practical engagement. The cooperation was remarkably visible also in terms of economic discussions. In April 2017, the US–Japan Economic Dialogue was organized⁷⁶⁴, focusing on enhancing trade relations and, most importantly, on addressing trade imbalances especially for the American side. Additionally, the discussions centered around three pillars: the need for expanded sectoral engagement (including energy and advanced tech); macroeconomic policies (including alignment with G7 strategies); and trade and investment rules. The dialogue, organized in the aftermath of the American withdrawal from the TPP, was regarded as an important step towards a potential bilateral trade agreement. The extensive collaboration in strategic forums was also consistent through the 2+2 meetings. In August 2017⁷⁶⁵, this dialogue highlighted a series of common challenges for the Indo-Pacific, projecting a shared perspective on the regional stage. On a specific note, the discussions were centered around the Chinese actions in the South and East China Seas, and the North Korea factor.

⁷⁶² *Joint Statement*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, February 10, 2017, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000227768.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶⁴ *Joint Press Release from Vice President Mike Pence and Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso on the U.S.–Japan Economic Dialogue*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 18, 2017 <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000248229.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷⁶⁵ *Japan–U.S. Security Consultative Committee (Japan–U.S. "2+2")*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 17, 2017, https://www.mofa.go.jp/na/st/page3e_000714.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

Moreover, to increase overall capabilities and to extend cooperation with like-minded partners, the Japanese side announced an assistance package totaling 500 million US\$, aimed at improving the maritime capabilities of partner states in the region, especially ASEAN. Hence, in spite of controversial declarations which impacted the level ideas, bilateral and minilateral engagement, especially the trilateral partnership alongside India, Australia and South Korea, witnessed a heightened focus from the two partners. Regarding practical cooperation, 2017 reunited all Quad members in the Malabar exercise. The continued implementation of the Keen Sword and Resilient Shield⁷⁶⁶ exercises underscored the partners' focus on practical applicability of the military alliance, especially in a complex security landscape, mired with traditional and non-traditional (gray-zone) security challenges. Moreover, the joint exercises are part of the flexible deterrent options (FTO) introduced with the 2015 Guidelines, which aim to prevent crises through coordinated diplomatic, military and economic strategies and actions⁷⁶⁷. Overall, the overt discursive practices did not fundamentally alter the directions of the alliance, showcasing the continuation of their established cooperation⁷⁶⁸.

However, Trump's criticism of traditional partners (especially Japan) and his perceived disregard for multilateral efforts and processes generated a normative impact for an ally deeply embedded into the traditionally US-backed liberal order⁷⁶⁹. The Pew Research Center Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey⁷⁷⁰ showcased the public opinion confidence changes between the Obama and the Trump administrations. In the case of Obama's presidency, between 60% (lowest in 2014) and

⁷⁶⁶ They represent well-established practical exercises, aimed at increasing operational readiness. Keen Sword involves the cooperation of all military components (air, maritime, ground forces), while Resilient Shield is a computer-based exercises designed especially for improving interoperability against ballistic missile threats.

⁷⁶⁷ Tomohiko Satake, "Japan: The US–Japan Alliance Amid Uncertainty" in Shinji Hyodo (ed.), *East Asian Strategic Review 2018*, The National Institute for Defense Studies Japan: Tōkyō, 2018, p. 229.

⁷⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 220.

⁷⁶⁹ Jennifer Lind, "The Art of the Bluff: The US–Japan Alliance Under the Trump Administration" in Robert Jervis, Francis J. Gavin, Joshua Rovner and Diane N. Labrosse (eds.), *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, p. 239.

⁷⁷⁰ Richard Wike et al., "Trump's International Ratings Remain Low, Especially Among Key Allies" in *Pew Research Center*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/10/01/trumps-international-ratings-remain-low-especially-among-key-allies/>. Accessed January 15, 2025.

85% (highest in 2012) of respondents had confidence in the US president, while between 59% (lowest in 2009) and 85% (highest in 2011) of people questioned held a favorable view of the US. In the case of President Trump, 24% (in 2017) and 30% (in 2018) of respondents had confidence in the president, while US approval rates remained high with 57% and 67% of the people questioned holding favorable opinions of Washington. This discrepancy actually highlights the distinction between perceptions of the US as a partner nation for Tōkyō and confidence in its leader. On the one hand, the US is a long-standing ally, intertwined with Japan through economic, cultural (including pop-culture and human-to-human interactions) and security frameworks. On the other hand, Trump's rhetoric often undermined confidence in his leadership, especially in cases where consistency is highly valued. His more transactional approach (including calls for increased financial contributions to the alliance and criticism for Japan's trade approaches) could have been perceived as destabilizing. This was also paired by his withdrawal from the TPP, which was considered a departing point from the economic order that Japan supports through its norm-setter identity. Japan positions itself as a promoter of rules-based cooperation, while Trump's leadership style impacted the normative component related to American legitimacy and reliability as a regional strategic partner. This perspective was also reinforced through the attention received by regional multilateral frameworks. Aside from the TPP withdrawal, President Trump has never participated in any of the four EAS meetings during his term, while President Obama personally attended three out of the four organized during his second term (in 2014, 2015 and 2016). While the 2017 EAS saw the participation of the Secretary of State, and the 2018 the participation of the Vice President, the 2019 and 2020 EAS were marked by a more distant American approach, as Washington has sent the Secretary of Commerce in 2019 and the Assistant Secretary of State in 2020 as the highest attending officials. This was also visible in the bilateral ASEAN-US Summit Meetings. During the Obama administration, the annual ASEAN-US Leaders Meeting was upgraded to the status of Summit Meeting in 2013⁷⁷¹, witnessing the direct participation of the President in three out of the four organized between 2013 and 2016. In the case of President Trump, only the

⁷⁷¹ *Chairman's Statement of the 1st ASEAN-U.S. Summit*, The ASEAN Secretariat, October 9, 2013, <https://asean.org/speechandstatement/chairmans-statement-of-the-1st-asean-u-s-summit/>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

2017 Summit saw the direct participation of the President, while the rest were attended by the Vice President (in 2018) and the National Security Advisor (in 2019 and 2020). Based on Japan's preference for ASEAN centrality in its FOIP and the commitment to institutionalized cooperation, Trump's reduced engagement in regional multilateral platforms was perceived as a retreat from the leadership role that the US had traditionally occupied, yielding the perception of a leaderless world⁷⁷².

During the 2017 Vietnam APEC Summit, President Trump rolled out the American vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific⁷⁷³, coordinating regional objectives with Japan's FOIP. At the level of discourse, it highlighted a more consistent objective for the Indo-Pacific. However, if, for the previous administration the focus was more on the normative dimension of promoting a liberal order, during Trump's presidency the regional context was better defined through Washington's sustained competition with Beijing⁷⁷⁴. This came in line with the 2017 National Security Strategy, which emphasized a tailored approach to specific regions, based on US strategic interests⁷⁷⁵. For the Indo-Pacific, it maintained a vision of freedom and openness, reinforcing alliances and promoting democratic values. If, in the case of economic engagement, it specifically focused on the need to "pursue bilateral trade agreements"⁷⁷⁶, on the security front it offered a more diverse approach, calling for alliance reinforcement and minilateral cooperation (especially, the Quad). Moreover, Japan was identified as a key ally in the Indo-Pacific, commending its more proactive approach on the regional framework. However, on the political vision spectrum, these principles, embedded in the international multilateral order, were "fundamentally misaligned with the president's own view of the world and incongruent with the administration's America first message"⁷⁷⁷. This perspective

⁷⁷² Ryo Sahashi, "Japan's Strategy amid US-China Confrontation" in *China International Strategy Review* 2, no. 2, November 18, 2020, p.245, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-020-00061-9>.

⁷⁷³ *Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit | Da Nang, Vietnam*, The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, November 10, 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam/>. Accessed January 18, 2025.

⁷⁷⁴ Lindsey Ford, "The Trump Administration and the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'" in *Brookings Institute*, May 2020, p. 3.

⁷⁷⁵ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 47

⁷⁷⁷ Ford, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

also created issues with those topics which became sidelined during Trump's tenure, including non-proliferation, climate change, regional developmental cooperation and the coronavirus pandemic. By 2020, the US–Japan collaboration highlighted both points of alignment and divergence. The partners' FOIP visions resonated to a certain extent. However, for Tōkyō, the FOIP cooperation was also development-oriented and extensive, contrasting with Washington's sharp security focus. Additionally, this also led to more strenuous discussions about perceived strategic disagreements. Japan's conditional acceptance of Beijing's BRI contrasted with America's harder China-narrative, "creating the impression that ties with China may come at a cost of relations with the United States"⁷⁷⁸. This was also complicated by the reduced American participation in regional multilateral forums, which hold significant legitimacy-importance for Japan, especially in the context of CPTPP negotiations.

Fundamentally, however, the momentum of the alliance was kept high, due to two significant reasons. First, Japan's geopolitical importance as a crucial ally in the Indo-Pacific became even more pronounced amidst China's growing regional influence⁷⁷⁹. As Beijing expanded its influence, going beyond a simple military and traditional security facet including gray-zone strategies, Japan came to be perceived as Washington's most important ally in counterbalancing these developments. Moreover, Japan's strategic role is multifaceted, pairing geographical considerations with hard power and soft power elements. Its continued support for hosting American troops plus its advanced technological and defense capabilities made Japan a "potent force multiplier for U.S. foreign policy objectives in a region that successive U.S. administrations led by presidents from both major parties have defined as vital to U.S. security and prosperity"⁷⁸⁰. Second, Abe's management of his personal relationship with President Trump had an important role in alliance cohesion. Through consistent diplomatic and more informal episodes of engagement, ranging from summit meetings, phone calls and rounds of golf, Abe developed a more personal relationship with Trump, serving as a potential mitigator in case of friction points (such as trade discussions). In this case, the alliance dynamics

⁷⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁷⁷⁹ Tomohiko Satake, "Japan: The US–Japan Alliance", p. 222.

⁷⁸⁰ Adam P. Liff, "Japan: America's Indispensable Ally" in *The Brookings Institution*, September 16, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/japan-americas-indispensable-ally/>. Accessed January 18, 2024.

remained consistent with previous administrations, even if in several cases “his response to Trump’s transactional approach to alliance management mutated into a spectacle of one-sided concessions and humiliations”⁷⁸¹. These factors reinforced Tōkyō’s centrality for the American Indo-Pacific strategy, sustaining its continued relevance despite shifts in leadership style and priorities during the Trump administration.

The Biden Era: Is America Back? Continuity within Change

The years 2020–2021 introduced a political shift both in Japan and in the US, in a context severely impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. Additionally, the period highlighted both continuity and change in relation to the previous administration, especially in terms of multilateralism and non-traditional topics. In this logic, it was marked by an apparent recalibration of strategic priorities, including a revived focus on multilateralism and the upholding of the rules-based order. This commitment was reinforced through American symbolic actions, such as the decisions to reverse the withdrawals from the Paris Agreement and from the World Health Organization. Discursively and normatively, Biden projected the message that America was back⁷⁸², with a consolidated political leadership on the stage of world politics. With this approach, the Biden administration sought to restore confidence in US political, security and economic commitments, following the perceived unpredictability of the Trump era in managing Washington’s traditional allies. In spite of the resonance with the multilateral focus and the more constructive and conciliatory manner of diplomacy, “multiple international crises have created a perception of continuous tumultuousness in American foreign policy”⁷⁸³. The coronavirus pandemic, the Russia–Ukraine War and the Israel–Palestine War further complicated the US and Japanese foreign politics. Moreover, despite the normative

⁷⁸¹ Paul O’Shea and Sebastian Maslow, “‘Making the Alliance Even Greater’: (Mis-)Managing U.S.-Japan Relations in the Age of Trump” in *Asian Security* 17, no. 2, November 5, 2020, p. 196, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2020.1838486>.

⁷⁸² *Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World*, The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, February 4, 2021, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>. Accessed January 24, 2025.

⁷⁸³ François de Soete, “Trump, Biden, and U.S. Foreign Policy: Analyzing the Role of the Modern Presidency on America’s Standing in the World” in *Kwansei Gakuin University International Studies*, vol. 11, no.1, March 2022, p. 2.

multilateral component, the US' Indo-Pacific strategy showed practical continuity with Trump-era directions. The Biden administration maintained a strong stance on countering China's regional influence. This was explicitly detailed during the March 2021 2+2 Meeting, where the Chinese actions in the South and East China Seas were deemed "inconsistent with the existing international order", standing as "political, economic, military, and technological challenges to the Alliance and the international community"⁷⁸⁴.

In April 2021, prime minister Suga became the first leader to visit the White House during Biden's term, showcasing the importance of the alliance. During this meeting⁷⁸⁵, the two sides specifically addressed China and North Korea as revisionists of the status-quo. Moreover, Tōkyō and Washington agreed on two new strategies, underrepresented during Trump's administration: the Japan–US Competitiveness and Resilience (CoRE) Partnership, focused on coronavirus response and sustainable development, and the Japan–US Climate Partnership on Ambition, Decarbonization, and Clean Energy. These approaches ideationally resonated with Japan's FOIP vision, including an extensive cooperation in upholding normative commitments. Moreover, the Quad focus developed during Trump's term was accentuated in 2021, with the first in-person Summit Meeting⁷⁸⁶. Fundamentally, Quad cooperation expanded, indicating several areas of high-level focus, complementing the harder traditional security-oriented focus: global health cooperation, sustainable regional infrastructure development, climate action and human-to-human interactions. Following prime minister Suga's step-down, this cooperation also continued throughout prime minister's Kishida's term. In addressing trade-related topics, such as trade practices, environmental and digital concerns, the two partners conducted the first meeting of the Japan–US Partnership on Trade in early 2022⁷⁸⁷. This was followed by the establishment of the Indo-Pacific

⁷⁸⁴ *Joint Statement of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee (2+2)*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, March 16, 2021, p. 1, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100161035.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷⁸⁵ *Japan–US Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 16, 2021, https://www.mofa.go.jp/page4e_001123.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷⁸⁶ *Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders' Summit*, The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, September 24, 2021, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-summit/>. Accessed January 24, 2025.

⁷⁸⁷ *The First Meeting of the Japan–U.S. Partnership on Trade*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, March 1, 2022, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_003088.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) in May 2022, an economic initiative (or rather vision) comprising the US, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam⁷⁸⁸. In simpler terms, the IPEF sought to deepen regional economic collaboration, while also addressing key challenges for such sustainable development. Moreover, it set out four pillars as objectives of cooperation: trade, supply chain resilience, climate-friendly practices and anti-corruption considerations⁷⁸⁹. However, the practical element of cooperation consistently endorsed by Japan and the US fell short of a trade deal. Accordingly, on its practical side, the IPEF was presumably described by an Asian official as “‘a hamburger without the beef’”⁷⁹⁰. In this context, Tōkyō became a strong supporter of the IPEF as a complementary vision to its economic relations both bilaterally with the US and the other regional actors, and multilaterally. But its limited practical scope questions its real impact, especially in comparison to the ambitions of the RCEP and the CPTPP. Nonetheless, the IPEF mechanism also stood as a significant avenue of dialogue in its symbolic value. By bringing together various regional partners, its symbolic value stood high in facilitating debates about potential “trading structures and new standards”⁷⁹¹. This approach is further reinforced through the IPEF’s diversity of partners and multilateral, norms-guided nature.

In the context of seemingly permanent episodes of crisis, Japan and the US issued a joint security-centric statement following the May 2022 Summit, named “Strengthening the Free and Open International Order”⁷⁹². The focus was extensively directed towards the ongoing issues in the global and regional contexts. Through the name, the partners’ free and open Indo-Pacific vision was expanded to cover global affairs, based on the intensification of security dynamics. Aside from its

⁷⁸⁸ *Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF)*, Office of the United States Trade Representative, <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/agreements-under-negotiation/indo-pacific-economic-framework-prosperity-ipef>. Accessed January 25, 2025.

⁷⁸⁹ *Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) Ministerial*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 10, 2022, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press3e_000449.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷⁹⁰ “What Is The Point of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework?” in *The Economist*, June 9, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2022/06/09/what-is-the-point-of-the-indo-pacific-economic-framework>. Accessed January 25, 2025.

⁷⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁹² *Japan–U.S. Joint Leaders’ Statement: Strengthening the Free and Open International Order*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, May 23, 2022, https://www.mofa.go.jp/na/na1/us/page4e_001260.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

routine diplomatic nuance, the Summit held significant value based on the extensive normative importance of its support for the international order. At the core, the Summit was explicitly focused on the Indo-Pacific. The references to Chinese actions towards Taiwan, Hong-Kong and the Xinjiang situations highlighted the shared support for the norms-governed status-quo. However, the partners' normative alignment came in a context in which Tōkyō and Beijing were also shaping their bilateral and regional relations in a self-assumed constructive direction⁷⁹³. This is indicative of Japan's balancing policies, trying to achieve a high degree of cooperation with both China and the US. Moving forward, the Summit also tackled the wider implications of the War in Ukraine, which underscored the fragility of the liberal international order. Japan's alignment with the US and its other like-minded allies in imposing sanctions on Russia and its more vocal positioning marked a point of discontinuity with its traditional, more cautious stance. For the Japanese side, the unilateral attempt to change the regional order spurred concerns related to the Taiwan and North Korea factors. Additionally, it also showcased the global nature of the security challenges faced by the alliance.

Overall, the Kishida–Biden period witnessed the continuous unfolding of serious episodes of political crises. These moments of tension also revealed potential gaps in strategies, as the American share of global responsibilities could derail cooperation. In line with this, Japan made serious efforts to enhance its bilateral and trilateral engagement alongside the US, Australia, India and South Korea, while it also focused on expanding its regional and global roles. Therefore, 2022 witnessed an upgrade of Japan's security papers to better reflect the needs of the contemporary challenges. The 2022 NSS explicitly identified China as “the greatest strategic challenge in ensuring the peace and security of Japan and the peace and stability of the international community, as well as in strengthening the international order based on the rule of law”⁷⁹⁴. Additionally, it denounced the expanded military and strategic cooperation between Moscow and Beijing. In terms of power assets, even though it firstly focused on using diplomatic means towards shaping a constructive international framework, the NSS highlighted that defense military capabilities “cannot be replaced by any other means”⁷⁹⁵ in

⁷⁹³ *Japan–China Summit Meeting*, 2022.

⁷⁹⁴ “*National Security Strategy of Japan*, 2022, p. 9.

⁷⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

guaranteeing the defense of Japan. This more direct language expanded Tōkyō's diplomatic tone, aligning with the heightened concerns of the US. The 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS)⁷⁹⁶ that replaced the NDPG laid a more detailed process for implementing the objectives and key aspects of the NSS. Aside from building its own capabilities (including the extensive focus on enhancing counterstriking capabilities and defense budget increases), the NDS identified the Japan–US alliance as a cornerstone of Japan's security policy. Fundamentally, the NDS focused on four pillars, historically present in Japan–US security dialogues: strengthening joint deterrence, enhancing practical interoperability, strengthening the response capabilities (including gray-zone areas, such as cybersecurity) and stabilizing support for the US troops in Japan⁷⁹⁷.

Through these strategic alignments of the 2021–2024 period, Japan's geopolitical importance grew, as its priorities became even more embedded in the American Indo-Pacific strategies. All in all, Washington's and Tōkyō's multilayered cooperation was marked by extensive institutionalization, including the novel IPEF, the Indo-Pacific Business Forum, the Framework for Space Security Cooperation and the US–Japan Southeast Asia Policy Dialogue. The extensive engagement also resonated within minilateral platforms, especially the Quad and their trilateral cooperation alongside Australia, India and South Korea. This was highlighted in the case of South Korea in Chapter 6, as the evolution of the alliance was fundamentally guided by American leadership, especially with the unfolding of the 2023 Camp David Summit. As of 2024, the alliance remained indispensable for Japan, but its expanding role and identity as a regional leader and norm-setter complemented US efforts. To conclude, between 2022 and 2024, diplomatic engagement expanded significantly, complementing new bilateral areas of cooperation, such as their strategic dialogue on democracy resilience and the agreement on critical minerals, with minilateral engagement, including the US–Japan–South Korea Indo-Pacific Dialogue and their cooperative platform for observing North Korea's cyber threats. The alliance, however, continued to face pressure to adapt to the rapidly evolving global security landscape. The efforts undertook within their strategies were slowed down but also conditioned by the realities of the episodes

⁷⁹⁶ *National Defense Strategy*, Ministry of Defense of Japan, December 16, 2022, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/policy/agenda/guideline/strategy/pdf/strategy_en.pdf. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 18–20.

of crisis. In a period dominated by geopolitical uncertainties, the success of Japan–US cooperation lies in balancing practical cooperation with normative commitments, ensuring the Japan’s growing regional leadership will complement American strategic objectives. Looking ahead, the Trump 2.0 administration could identify new points of discontinuity in American strategic priorities within the Indo-Pacific. The new American administration will also find a new Japanese counterpart, in a period of post-stability fractures, as Abe’s 8-year terms were followed by Suga’s 1-year tenure, Kishida’s 3-year term and Ishiba’s rather unpopular government. At this point, the growing leadership mentioned above remains an open question, in an increasingly fragmented world and paired with significant domestic changes.

10.

The Year of Elections: 2024 at the Brink of Change

Domestic Stage of Politics

The year 2024 marked a pivotal moment for Japan and its international partners, shaped by significant political forces, especially related to the global electoral dynamics and by the ongoing global crises.

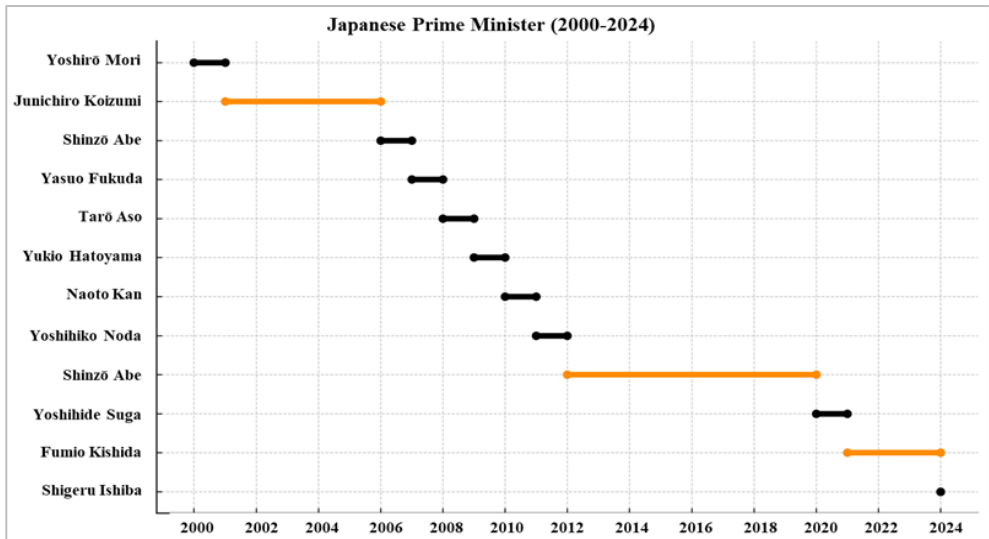


**Figure 18: Timeline of Japanese Prime Ministers
and the duration of each of their terms (2000–2024)**

In the domestic context, the end of 2024 was marked by a new political mechanism triggered by three rounds of elections. As highlighted in Chapter 1, since 2000, Japanese politics were highly dynamic and fragmented in terms of political power. As the graph shows, between 2000 and 2020, the term ‘consistency’ can be used to describe only two political terms: Koizumi (2001–2006) and Abe (2012–2020). Other than that, the political stage was dominated by rather unstable one-year terms. Within this fragmented political landscape, Kishida’s tenure indicated

the beginning of a similar, stability-inducing period, which, however, was cut short in 2024.

As mentioned above, 2024 was marked by three rounds of elections. First, on September 23rd, 2024, former prime minister Noda was elected president of The Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ), the main opposition party towards the LDP. This was particularly important as, in the October 2024 general elections, the CDPJ secured its best results. However, the diverse composition of the CDPJ in terms of political spectrum alignment might prove a challenge even for an experienced politician in upholding consistency⁷⁹⁸. Even in this case, his proven experience and assumed moderation in basic policy directions, such as maintaining a strong connection towards the US, positioned Noda as a political counterweight to the LDP. In August 2024, then prime minister Kishida announced that he will not run for re-election as the leader of the LDP in the party's internal elections. Traditionally, as the president of the LDP is the designated choice for the prime minister position, this clearly meant that Japan would be experiencing a subtle political change. Moreover, this came in a domestic context heavily impacted by an LDP slush funds political scandal, presumably involving approximately 4 million US\$ redirected for political goals⁷⁹⁹. In this context, Kishida's approval rating was dismal, indicating an increased public discontent with LDP politics, in spite of the relative degree of continuity. This led to the second round of relevant elections as on September 27th, 2024, Shigeru Ishiba succeeded Kishida as LDP president and prime minister in a rather heated 9-candidates contest. Ishiba's leadership began under a heavy shadow of public skepticism and the decision to dissolve the *Shūgiin* (The House of Representatives) and trigger snap elections proved unfavorable for the LDP. During the third relevant round of elections, the governing coalition comprising the LDP and Komeito lost its majority, while the main opposition party, the CDPJ secured its most successful election⁸⁰⁰. The LDP-led

⁷⁹⁸ "Noda's Election as CDPJ Leader: Can New President Build Party Unity with Centrist Approach?" in *The Japan News – Yomiuri Shimbun*, September 24, 2024, <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/editorial/yomiuri-editorial/20240924-213119/>. Accessed January 26, 2025.

⁷⁹⁹ "Japan's Ruling Party Hit by Scandal Over Undocumented Political Funds" in *CNN World*, December 19, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/12/20/asia/japan-ldp-politics-fund-scandal-intl-hnk/index.html>. Accessed January 26, 2025.

⁸⁰⁰ "Japan PM Seeks Partners after Ruling Bloc Loses Lower House Majority" in *Kyodo News*, October 28, 2024, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2024/10/33076ebdd8e3-japan-pm-seeks-partners-after-ruling-bloc-loses-lower-house-majority.html>. Accessed January 26, 2025.

coalition maintained the reins of power through the establishment of a minority coalition cabinet, however this reliance on a minority vote or the formation of 'compromise-coalitions' for political concessions could lead to delays or even blockages in policymaking. Additionally, Ishiba's minority government struggles to project political stability. This is highlighted through the declining approval ratings of the cabinet – from 46% in October to 34% in November⁸⁰¹. As 2024 drew to an end, Ishiba's tenure began in a rather complex domestic scenario for the LDP, with public disillusionment heightened by scandals.

Nonetheless, even in this scenario, the LDP and implicitly Japan experienced a political change in a rather heated contest (both in the LDP-internal elections, and in the general elections). Although this change brought in a different leadership touch, the legacy of Abe and Kishida, primarily in terms of national strategies and foreign policy, remained a reference point for policymakers. In this case, it is rather safe to assume that Japan's fundamental security strategies will remain consistent, impacted by a developing domestic normative framework, which sensitized public audiences to Japan's strategic challenges. Moreover, these very strategic challenges mentioned above define Japan's security horizon, in a regional context plagued by geopolitical competition and emerging gray-zone challenges. To a certain extent, Ishiba's policy directions manifest points of continuity with several of Kishida's and Abe's visions. For this reason, Japan will not experience a fundamental shift of its foreign policy goals and strategies, but the specific conditions and pace of achieving these goals might suffer changes. In terms of his leadership style, Ishiba was perceived as "a rival of Abe and marks a move away from Abeism – in style more than substance"⁸⁰². In this logic, it is also important to understand what changes are brought into the equation by the Ishiba government, even if they are stylistic, normative or purely discursive. More generally speaking, Ishiba was portrayed as "an idealist in a party that has become increasingly wedded to bureaucracy"⁸⁰³. In terms of domestic considerations, his emphasis

⁸⁰¹ "Ishiba Cabinet Approval Rate Tumbles; 61% Say No Need to Resign" in *The Asahi Shimbun*, November 4, 2024, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15494098>. Accessed on January 26, 2025.

⁸⁰² Matthew Kaminski, "What Japan's New Prime Minister Means for the US" in *Politico*, September 29, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/09/29/japans-prime-minister-ishiba-00181546>. Accessed January 26, 2025.

⁸⁰³ Tobias Harris, "The Idealist. Ishiba Shigeru and the Deep Roots of Conflict in Japanese Politics" in *Observing Japan – Substack*, September 24, 2024, <https://observingjapan.substack.com/p/the-idealist>. Accessed January 29, 2025.

is on transparency and principled politics, seeking to reintegrate the citizen at the center of policymaking. This contrasts with Abe's focus on enhancing national power (in a comprehensive note) to project a strong Japan internationally⁸⁰⁴. On the international stage, Ishiba's leadership style might introduce a subtle discursive and normative shift. Complementing Japan's consecrated foreign policy directions, his approach could emphasize a more collaborative rhetoric, indicating Tōkyō's role as a regional stabilizer. However, Ishiba is not ignorant to the complexities of regional security dynamics. In his first policy speech⁸⁰⁵, the prime minister directly focused on the need of defending the country, referencing a series of serious security challenges for Tōkyō. Among the top factors, his speech directly indicated the War in Ukraine, which, through its extensive references during both Kishida's and Ishiba's tenures, became one of the most (if not the most) significant transformative events for Japanese security perspectives of the last two decades. The speech followed on, directly highlighting the unilateral actions undertaken by Beijing on the regional stage, however the prime minister emphasized more cooperative engagement and collaboration on topics of strategic interest, showcasing a feeling of managed or structured competition. The paper also acknowledged the consistent security threat posed by North Korea, throughout its missile programs and repeated violations of UNSC Resolutions. At the same time, the policy paper reaffirmed Japan's post-2012 commitment to the FOIP vision, also acknowledging the centrality of the Japan–US alliance. Beyond the US alliance, Ishiba emphasized the importance of expanding ties with like-minded partners, specifically mentioning South Korea, Australia and ASEAN. However, the cooperation with these partners expanded beyond traditional security topics, becoming a “wide-reaching”⁸⁰⁶ engagement. Through the content of his first policy speech, Ishiba reiterated Japan's security-conscious approach of the last decade. Fundamentally speaking, the prime minister signaled continuity in Japan's overarching security and diplomatic strategies. It is, thus, important to understand how Japan's relationship with the five partners analyzed throughout the paper will evolve under Ishiba, by also taking into consideration the external dynamic

⁸⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁰⁵ *The First Policy Speech by Prime Minister ISHIBA Shigeru*, The Government of Japan, November 8, 2024, https://www.japan.go.jp/kizuna/2024/11/the_first_policy_speech_by_ishiba.html. Accessed January 30, 2025.

⁸⁰⁶ *Ibidem*.

of geopolitical currents, strategic alignments and changes in domestic politics of the partners themselves.

A More Cooperative Approach on China

In the case of Beijing, Ishiba is perceived a supporter of “a more diplomatic and engagement-oriented approach toward China”⁸⁰⁷. However, both Abe and Kishida were rather pragmatic throughout their engagement with China, highlighted through consistent high-level dialogues on various topics (ranging from security to human-to-human exchanges). At a nuanced level, Ishiba does not uphold the “‘China threat’ theory within Japan, arguing that it is possible to acknowledge security threats and seek to strengthen deterrence while continuously seeking opportunities to reduce tensions and bolster cooperation”⁸⁰⁸. While he aims to prevent the excessive deterioration of relations (similar to the 2010–2013 period), structural tensions within the partnership would still shape its evolution. Moreover, potential avenues for cooperation could deepen, including significant areas of interests, such as environmental and regional development topics, but the predominant component of their strategic competition would most likely not change. Ishiba’s more balanced stance could also prove problematic by actually fueling the spiral of insecurity. As Chubb highlighted when analyzing Beijing’s and Tōkyō’s assertive maritime actions, “[t]he timing of behavioral changes in the East China Sea does suggest an intriguing link with domestic Japanese political developments”⁸⁰⁹. Accordingly, Chubb concluded that during periods of non-LDP leadership, namely Murayama’s tenure (1993–1995) and the DPJ rule (2009–2012), which were diplomatically warm of China, Beijing’s attitudes towards East China Sea aggravated, also prompting harsher reactions from Tōkyō. Although the conditions are not exactly the same (neither domestic, nor international), Ishiba’s approach and the conditions of a minority government could increase pressure both on policymakers and on public opinion in relation to Beijing. Furthermore, Ishiba also introduced

⁸⁰⁷ Aya Adachi, “Ishiba’s Japan: Navigating Diplomacy and Security in the Post-Abe Era” in *Central European Institute of Asian Studies*, October 7, 2024, <https://ceias.eu/ishibas-japan-navigating-diplomacy-and-security-in-the-post-abe-era/>. Accessed February 1, 2025.

⁸⁰⁸ Tobias Harris, “The Idealist”.

⁸⁰⁹ Andrew Chubb, “The East China Sea Dispute: China’s and Japan’s Assertiveness from Mao to Xi” in *Asia Society Policy Institute*, November 14, 2024, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/east-china-sea-dispute-chinas-and-japans-assertiveness-mao-xi>. Accessed February 1, 2025.

a more controversial dynamic through his vision of a collective security framework, similar to an Asian NATO⁸¹⁰, not directed towards any particular country. Such a discursive categorization of a NATO-like structure is a clear red line from China's point of view, being perceived as a Western-like military alliance that displays a clear containment purpose. This is particularly important as, in the past, China has associated the Quad as a form of Asian NATO, criticizing its perceived anti-China deterrence purpose⁸¹¹. Moreover, at the level of its multilateralism, such a framework becomes problematic in a region with varying threat perceptions: a Japan traditionally wary of China, a South Korea more moderate in its criticism, an ASEAN divided between economic advantages and geopolitical shifts and an India as a BRICS member but a pragmatic regional challenger.

Hard-to-Predict Relations with South Korea

As indicated in his first policy speech where cooperation with Seoul was perceived as “of extreme importance”⁸¹² in a strained regional framework, South Korea is definitely a priority. This approach builds upon maintaining the momentum of their engagement developed during Kishida's term, in expectation of 2025 as a landmark 60 years since normalization of relations. Highlighting the symbolic importance of their relations, the Summit with South Korea was Ishiba's first bilateral high-level face-to-face meeting organized since assuming office, on October 10⁸¹³. In light of Ishiba's historical awareness and more conciliatory approach towards Japan's colonial past, there is a growing “anticipation within South Korea for a more progressive stance from Japan on historical issues”⁸¹⁴. However, in spite of the increased expectations from the South Korean side, barriers still remain in their engagement. Three important elements influence the

⁸¹⁰ Titli Basu, “Ishiba's Push for an ‘Asian NATO’ Is a Non-Starter” in *The Diplomat*, October 10, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/10/ishibas-push-for-an-asian-nato-is-a-non-starter/>. Accessed February 1, 2025.

⁸¹¹ “Quad Setting Itself up as Core of Divisive, Disruptive ‘Asian NATO’” in *China Daily*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202303/06/WS6405d400a31057c47ebb2941.html>. Accessed February 1, 2025.

⁸¹² *The First Policy Speech by Prime Minister ISHIBA Shigeru*, 2024.

⁸¹³ *Japan–ROK Summit Meeting*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 10, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na1/pageite_000001_00001.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁸¹⁴ Choi Eunmi, “South Korea-Japan Relations: Navigating the ‘Minority Party’ Ishiba's Second Cabinet and the Post-Sado Mine Memorial Ceremony Disruption” in *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies*, December 12, 2024, p. 1.

strategic dynamics of relations between Seoul and Tōkyō. First, the US is essential to strengthening bilateral and trilateral security-related ties. The US leadership is crucial to the developing trilateral momentum. Second, public perceptions still play a decisive role throughout the partners' dynamic engagement. In recent years, public sentiment towards Japan–South Korea relations experienced significantly positive developments on both sides. But there are still important divisions in public opinion: on Seoul's side, critics considered that the Yoon administration has conceded too much to Japan without necessary reciprocity⁸¹⁵, while in the case of Tōkyō, for some, any issues surrounding the history problems should be long solved and addressed⁸¹⁶. Third, Ishiba and Yoon are both dealing with unfavorable domestic political circumstances. In the case of Ishiba's government, three points of pressure can be identified: the political opposition; LDP conservatives, who may contest significant policy changes; and public discontent. In the case of South Korea, the April 2024 legislative elections can be interpreted as an evaluation of Yoon's presidency. The opposition parties maintained their majority, but the result of the elections did not fundamentally shift Seoul's foreign policy directions towards Japan⁸¹⁷. This also came as a consequence of their strategic shared interests related to the US, but also to North Korea and China, which provided a basis for continued cooperation. But much more impactful than the elections, Yoon's decision to impose martial law, may significantly change how South Korea–Japan relations develop after 2024. This is impacted by the opposition's very vocal stance on Japan and the history problems. As a specific example, Lee Jae-myung, the leader of the Democratic Party defined the May 2023 Summit Meeting as “the most humiliating and dreadful moment in the history of our diplomacy”⁸¹⁸. All in all, Ishiba's diplomatic approach presents an opportunity for stability (also given the increased height of relations following Kishida), but the most poignant challenge, however, comes from Seoul. In this sense, expectations should not be

⁸¹⁵ Nishino Junya, “Managing Relations with South Korea” in *The Asan Forum*, November 12, 2024, <https://theasanforum.org/managing-relations-with-south-korea/>. Accessed February 2, 2025.

⁸¹⁶ Eunmi, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁸¹⁷ Andrew Yeo, “Will South Korea Change Course following Yoon's Election Loss?” in *The Brookings Institute*, April 17, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/will-south-korea-change-course-following-yoons-election-loss/>. Accessed February 2, 2025.

⁸¹⁸ “Main Opposition Leader Slams Korea-Japan Summit As 'Most Humiliating' Moment in Diplomacy” in *The Korea Times*, March 17, 2023, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2025/02/113_347302.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

set too high, given the rather fragile political situations in both countries and the policy shift in Washington.

India and ASEAN – The More Autonomous Actors

In the case of India and ASEAN, the directions would most likely remain consistent, without any major transformations. This is impacted by the structural importance of these partnerships, which became key pillars in Japan's regional vision, reciprocated with the partners' own regional outlooks. The 27th ASEAN–Japan Summit and the Japan–India Summit Meeting, organized on October 10, 2024 were Ishiba's first strategic meetings alongside these partners⁸¹⁹. Based on these discussions, Japan will remain a key partner for overall developmental cooperation, highlighted by the consistent focus on infrastructure development (the MAHSR probably being the most important one), energy collaboration (including ASEAN's sustainability goals and the nuclear civil cooperation alongside India) and digital and cybersecurity cooperation. However, from a security point of view, Ishiba's perception of an Asian NATO could fuel anxieties both within ASEAN and within India, as they uphold varying threat perceptions and balancing strategies in the regional framework. In the case of ASEAN, "an 'Asian version of NATO' would formalise a mechanism that identifies a particular country (read: China) as a target or threat"⁸²⁰. Primarily, such a security pact, even without its presumed containment strategy, would contracting the AOIP, which aims to avoid direct confrontations in the Indo-Pacific. Traditionally, Japan's regional identity was showcased as a stabilizer for ASEAN, providing guidance and cooperation in defense matters without coagulating a formalized security bloc. This is why ASEAN has preferred security-related cooperation within multilateral and minilateral mechanisms, including bilateral cooperation and the various defense fora. Moreover, "ASEAN member states are unlikely to deviate outside the comfort zone of the status quo, which is undergirded by US-led alliances and partnership in the region"⁸²¹.

⁸¹⁹ Prime Minister Ishiba Attends ASEAN-related Summit Meetings, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 11, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/pageite_000001_00604.html. Accessed February 15, 2025.

⁸²⁰ Tang Siew Mun, "Ishiba's New Security Proposals: A Bridge Too Far for ASEAN?" in *Fulcrum – ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute*, October 14, 2024, <https://fulcrum.sg/ishibas-new-security-proposals-a-bridge-too-far-for-asean/>. Accessed February 3, 2025.

⁸²¹ *Ibidem*.

In the case of India, its Quad membership provides a rather flexible platform that brings together security topics with wider cooperation. This is visible in Japan–India cooperation in areas such as infrastructure development and technology transfers, facilitated by mutual Quad membership⁸²². Based on its multimodal approach, the Quad also facilitated military cooperation through naval exercises, while also encouraging bilateral cooperation. Moving beyond Quad cooperation through a proposal that resembles an Asian NATO could prove a hot topic for New Delhi, who preferred strategic autonomy and flexibility in its relations. Hence, “[i]f India joins an Asian NATO, it would potentially limit New Delhi’s ability to maintain a balanced relationship with major powers like Russia”⁸²³. All in all, Ishiba’s focus on the Quad is a good sign for Japan–India cooperation, being a strong foundation for minilateral regional cooperation. Overall, Tōkyō’s engagement with ASEAN is rather expected to continue along the established stable lines. On a more specific note, to avoid any anxieties within ASEAN, Japan must ensure that the security engagement is complemented with the multilateral frameworks into which the two partners are embedded. For India, Japan should avoid antagonizing Beijing as this could fuel a spiral of insecurity⁸²⁴ and frame its security ties alongside Quad cooperation.

The US and Continued Uncertainty?

The US is Japan’s most important ally, being the cornerstone of its security strategy. However, Washington is also the most important partner to keep an eye on, since Ishiba’s ascendancy was also mirrored by the electoral victory of Trump. In this logic, it is safe to assume that both partners could initiate smaller or more impactful changes in the alliance. From Tōkyō, Ishiba has called for Japan assume a greater role within the alliance, envisioning a more equal and balanced relationship. Subsequently, “his uneasiness about Japan’s relationship with the United States probably sets him apart from his LDP colleagues more than any other issue”⁸²⁵. Moreover, for some, on security matters, “Ishiba has sounded more disruptive

⁸²² Ulupi Borah, “What Shigeru Ishiba’s Leadership Means for India–Japan Partnership” in *Centre for Joint Warfare Studies*, September 30, 2024, <https://cenjows.in/what-shigeru-ishibas-leadership-means-for-india-japan-partnership/>. Accessed February 3, 2025.

⁸²³ *Ibidem*.

⁸²⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁸²⁵ Tobias Harris, “The Idealist”.

than either the Japanese or U.S. establishment would like”⁸²⁶. In a Hudson Institute commentary, Ishiba himself declared that “Japan must have its own military strategy and become independent in terms of security until it is willing to share its own strategy and tactics on equal terms with the US”⁸²⁷. In the same interview, the prime minister also hinted towards changing the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) to also allow the JSDF to be stationed on American soil, particularly Guam. Even if the direction highlighted by Ishiba, namely to reduce the asymmetries within the alliance, is somewhat natural considering the last decade of expansion of hard power capabilities, his rhetoric could prove flammable⁸²⁸. Since Abe, however, Japan sought to extensively expand its defense capabilities to meet the demands of the regional context. Post-2024, two scenarios became probable in the Japan–US alliance, even if Ishiba might not hold control of the government for a long-term period⁸²⁹: Japan might increase its military and defense involvement while staying within the US security horizon, or it may work towards regional autonomy to strengthen both its regional influence and its say within the alliance. One thing is certain – Japan will continue to increase its military assets, both in terms of harder aspects (defense capabilities) and softer ones (political legitimacy).

Trump’s return to the White House in 2025 could instill a relative degree of unpredictability within the alliance. However, despite similar expectations, the first Trump administration did not fundamentally reverse or shift the dynamics of the partnership. In this logic, *prudence* should be the keyword that defines the expectations towards Trump 2.0. In terms of bilateral dynamics, the changes were limited or stopped due to the two factors mentioned in Chapter 9. His rhetoric and discursive undertone, however, often showcased an element of uncertainty for traditional partners (including Japan) and a disregard for multilateral fora. Moreover, a key distinction between Trump’s first and second terms is the

⁸²⁶ Kaminski, *op. cit.*

⁸²⁷ Shigeru Ishiba, “The Future of Japan’s Foreign Policy” in *Hudson Institute*, September 25, 2024, <https://www.hudson.org/politics-government/shigeru-ishiba-japans-new-security-era-future-japans-foreign-policy>. Accessed February 3, 2025.

⁸²⁸ Yukari Easton, “Ishiba’s Shaky Ground Further Upset by Tremors of a Trump Presidency” in *East Asia Forum*, December 12, 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/12/12/ishibas-shaky-ground-further-upset-by-tremors-of-a-trump-presidency/>. Accessed February 3, 2025.

⁸²⁹ Urs Schöttli, “A New Era is Dawning in Japan–U.S. Relations” in *Geopolitical Intelligence Services*, January 13, 2025, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/us-japan-relations/>. Accessed February 3, 2025.

political context in Japan and the differences between 2017 and 2025. When Trump assumed office in 2017, prime minister Abe was heading Japan in a rather stable period in terms of political continuity. The very relationship cultivated by Abe and Trump managed to avoid fundamental shifts within the alliance. In the January 2025 scenario, Ishiba will be heading a couple-months old minority government, after a heated 8-sided internal LDP contest. Accordingly, “Japan’s political landscape is less stable making it harder to replicate such personal ties with Trump’s team”⁸³⁰. From an economic point of view, Japan might not be immune to Trump’s tariff-driven politics, but the brunt of the measures might be mitigated as, between 2019 and 2023, Japan remained the largest and most important foreign investor in the US⁸³¹. This could prove a shield for Tōkyō, but the Trump administration could reassess the importance of the IPEF as a multilateral economic vision. On security topics, the ‘hot’ one could prove to be talks related to burden-sharing and increased military spending on Japan’s side. By overcoming a series of historical taboos, Abe and then Kishida significantly ramped-up both the military spending and the actual practical development of defense capabilities envisioned by the increased expenditure. On the ideational side, Trump’s previous calls for an increased defense spending align with Ishiba’s view of a more self-reliant defense strategy. This is also paired with the intensification of regional security dynamics and the prioritization of American commitments. Looking ahead, Japan might need to follow-up on Trump’s demands for increased defense spending, based on the harsher regional security challenges. Even though Ishiba is expected to continue the expansion of Japan’s defense strategy and assets (in line with Abe and Kishida’s legacies), the actual implementation of such measures depends on two factors: domestic normative acceptance and political stability. In the case of the first element, the gradual shift in public attitudes towards defense expansions became more visible. The Cabinet Office opinion polls on JSDF and defense issues showcased that the Russia–Ukraine War impacted public opinion by highlighting a growing recognition of security threats. If, in 2015, 29.9% of respondents favored increasing JSDF

⁸³⁰ “Trump 2.0, Seen from Asia” in *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, November 20, 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/trump-2-0-seen-from-asia-191394>. Accessed February 3, 2025.

⁸³¹ Edo Naito, “Japan Has Nothing to Fear from Trump – Except in Maybe One Area” in *The Japan Times*, January 17, 2025, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2025/01/17/japan/japan-nothing-to-fear-from-trump/>. Accessed February 3, 2025.

defense capabilities, in 2022, 41.5% were in favor of such actions⁸³². These changes, while significant, do not actually indicate a consensus within public opinion⁸³³. For sure constitutional revision of Article 9 remains extremely sensitive from a political and public point of view, but the trend for accepting and acknowledging the need for greater defense spending is a significant element of the current debates. In the case of the second element, public support has to be backed by political stability within the government to enact and formally acknowledge such changes. As a minority cabinet, the Ishiba administration might face challenges in building political consensus on defense expansion and his ambitious security initiatives might be diluted or even blocked⁸³⁴. All in all, Japan's rather irreplaceable role in the Indo-Pacific for American interests would mean that no major disruptions are expected within their relations. Moreover, the other American policy priorities, including tackling Chinese influence (where Japan is essential), the Russia–Ukraine War (where Japan has aligned itself as a defender of the liberal order), the Israel–Palestine War and potential European security debates, would reduce the immediacy of any drastic policy shifts towards Japan⁸³⁵. The real challenge could prove to be Tōkyō's balancing of its growing defense ambitions (which extend beyond the bilateral partnership alongside the US) and the apparent political instability. However, Trump's uncertain approach related to the norms underlying the liberal order, particularly in the case of the Ukraine crisis, could generate two distinct effects on Japan. First, based on Trump's more China-centered strategic inclination, the Indo-Pacific could be characterized by deeper US–Japan security cooperation (in one form or another), without strategic disparity in Washington's European engagement. This could prove beneficial for practical engagement and deterrence, especially given Japan's fragmented political landscape. Second, on a more

⁸³² Based on the results of the 2018 and 2022 Public Opinion Surveys conducted by the Japan Cabinet Office. “「自衛隊・防衛問題に関する世論調査」の概要 平成30年3月” [Overview of ‘Public Opinion Poll on Self-Defense Forces and Defense Issues – March 2018], Japan Cabinet Office, 2018 and “「自衛隊・防衛問題に関する世論調査」の概要 令和5年3月” [Overview of ‘Public Opinion Poll on Self-Defense Forces and Defense Issues – March 2022], Japan Cabinet Office, 2022.

⁸³³ Aldea, Claudiu-Bogdan. “From Trump to War”, pp. 93–94.

⁸³⁴ Naito, *op. cit.*

⁸³⁵ Jesse Johnson, “As Trump Returns, Will Japan Be Able to Weather the Storm?” in *The Japan Times*, January 19, 2025, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/01/19/japan/politics/us-japan-relations-trump-ishiba/>. Accessed February 3, 2025.

problematic note, a more transactional and reactionary approach to the liberal order could weaken Japan's regional standing, especially if Trump prioritizes short-term economic gains over long-term normative commitments. Moreover, the limits of American security guarantees could impact the cohesion of the liberal order itself. On a practical note, this contrasts with Japan's recent efforts in engaging with the Western allies beyond simple discursive practices. For example, under Kishida, Japan practically engaged with NATO through the signing of an Individually Tailored Partnership Program, marking a milestone in such cooperation. Amidst this and alongside Japan's own regional anxieties, Trump's uncertainty in international politics "highlights the growing divergence between Japan and the United States on the importance of defending a 'free and open international order'"⁸³⁶.

Summing it up

Towards the end of 2024, the public disillusionment with the LDP led to the emergence of a minority government under a rather unusual leadership style. While Ishiba's foreign policy approach introduces a new nuance and tone, Japan's diplomatic and security-related horizons showcase continuity rather than radical change. In its immediate vicinity, engagement with Beijing continues to be dominated by a feeling of managed competition, underscoring the deep economic ties with (in)security-induced anxieties. Stable relations with China are crucial but an overtly passive and accommodating approach outputs its own challenges. South Korea, India and ASEAN remain integral partners, part of Tōkyō's diversification strategies. However, the evolution of these relations also hinges on factors directly outside of Japan's control. Moreover, Ishiba's own Asian NATO might prove a simple mirage, but the potential of such a collective agreement exacerbated the varying depth of security concerns. Finally, perhaps the most immediate challenge goes towards and comes from Washington. The stabilizing factor known as Shinzō Abe is no longer present in the equation. Ishiba most certainly would not be able to develop the same personal approach as his predecessor, aspect also paired with the lack of a political stability which helped managed the Trump unpredictability. The seemingly similar desires for a more equal alliance could also risk initiating

⁸³⁶ Tobias Harris, "Japan and the Ukraine question" in *Observing Japan – Substack*, February 18, 2025, <https://observingjapan.substack.com/p/japan-and-the-ukraine-question>. Accessed February 24, 2025.

contentious debates about burden-sharing, defense commitments and relocation of troops. Japan enters 2025 with a significant question: how effectively can it adapt to the new geopolitical realities? Ishiba's leadership and administration would be subjected to a series of tests. First, it is important to see how it will manage the new expectations and demands coming from Washington. Second, it is equally important how it will balance or enhance Tōkyō's regional partners beyond the diplomatic and discursive levels. Third, it is equally important how it will react and adapt to the seemingly unending episodes of crisis impacting the liberal order. Japan's steadfast reaction to the War in Ukraine and its surprising calibration alongside the Western allies reinforced its commitments to genuinely becoming a proactive contributor to peace, setting a standard of reaction. However, American uncertainty, even if it might not mean a practical disengagement from the Indo-Pacific but rather a normative rift in the liberal order, could make Japan strategically vulnerable in a world more sensitive to shocks coming from authoritarian regimes.

Conclusion

This book set out to make sense of Japan's regional foreign policy evolution between 2012 and 2024, a period of rather significant transformations for both Japan and the Indo-Pacific. As such, it followed a rather linear flow, seeking to understand the shifts that occurred across these twelve years. In general terms, Tōkyō experienced significant domestic changes, in a context of rising regional tensions. These changes highlight a move from a cautious, passive agent to a norm-shaper in the Indo-Pacific. However, Japanese security and foreign policy visions are still heavily influenced by the legacy of its pacifist frameworks and by the limits of domestic consensus. However, probably the most stringent factor is political instability, which resurfaced following the 2024 elections.

The first two chapters define a broader framework, needed to understand these transformations. Post-World War II Japan was significantly shaped by historical landmarks that represented both opportunities and blockers for the drafting of foreign policy strategies. The 1947 Peace Constitution had set up a normative framework that constrained Japan's security policy and shaped its foreign policy. This direction had influenced Japan to significantly develop its alliance with the US (with the 1951 Security Treaty and its 1960 revision), initiating a close alignment within the American-led Cold War Strategy. This also marked the establishment of the Yoshida Doctrine and the use of diplomatic and economic tools as forms of Tōkyō's power assets. Soon, Japan became a regional economic leader, strengthening cooperation through its ODA focus. However, the Gulf War exposed security gaps, as its passive stance was defined as “‘checkbook diplomacy’”⁸³⁷. The end of the Cold War also introduced various pieces in Japan's security equations, complemented by the internal effects of the lost decade(s). The potential for reconsidering several aspects within its security posture were also constrained by the political fragmentation of the 2000s, which created a rather unsystematic foreign policy framework. The Chinese aggressive actions during the DPJ administration

⁸³⁷ Tadokoro Masayuki, “Japanese Diplomacy and the First Gulf War” in *The First Gulf War in Historical Perspectives – 2021 International Forum on War History: Proceedings*, The National Institute of Defense, September 2022, p. 81. (pp. 81–90)

influenced Japan in considering moving towards a more active security role, paving the way for the acceleration brought forth by Abe. Hence, the post-2012 framework was influenced by four elements of historical change. First, there was a change from pacifism to a more proactive approach, mainly shaped by security threats. Second, there was a change from economic and diplomatic engagement to a more strategic conceptualization incorporating security considerations. Third, there was a change from a stricter vision of national security to a broader interpretation, which also signaled its multifaceted regional engagement. Lastly, there was a change from disparate visions on a regional focus to a strategic coherence in the form of the FOIP, mirrored by similar approaches of other regional actors.

The second chapter followed two narrative strings. First, it painted a picture of the dominant International Relations theories, introducing key conceptual guidance points for Realism, Liberalism and Social-Constructivism. Second, it defined the analytical framework by drawing insight from Social-Constructivist thought. Social-Constructivism, as a facet of IRT, proved useful for understanding how Japan's identity, norms and perceptions impacted its policy shifts. However, Social-Constructivism does not ignore or disregard the importance of power politics and the theory is not inherently portraying an idealist scene of international politics. By applying this framework to Japan's security and diplomatic strategies, the alliances and partnerships it developed were fundamentally impacted by material and non-material conditions. Moreover, these allowed us to see how Tōkyō came to perceive its regional responsibilities, its norm-setting identity (agency) and the shift in regional and global security challenges (structure).

The narrative then turned towards the temporal framework, analyzing the return of Shinzō Abe at the head of the government. Abe's second term marked the beginning of a longer, more stable leadership period, contrasting the political fragmentation of the 2000s. In line with this domestic stability, the increasing assertive regional framework, characterized by China's actions towards regional actors and North Korea's military provocations slowly brought to the forefront the need for a more engaged security posture. Also, Abe's strong political leadership and his long-term in office ensured continuity in foreign policy, which also allowed Tōkyō to develop a cohesive strategy (that brought together various directions), rather than simple policy reactions. All in all, even Japan's security identity evolved, transitioning into an incipient phase of regional leadership.

Regarding its status, Japan is mostly fit as a middle power, with its post-2012 regional engagement defined both through significant soft power assets, and most importantly through its security cooperation and capability development. The political horizon post-2012, however, does not represent a complete decoupling from the past, but, as seen, it rather showcased an evolution of various foreign policy trends consolidated under the FOIP vision. Japan's regional strategy developed to encompass a broadened view on security, moving beyond traditional military defense. Through this focus, it leveraged multilateralism, countering unilateral actions but avoiding an overtly engaging approach. Hence, the FOIP provided a unifying framework which broadly emphasized maritime security, infrastructure connectivity and rules-based engagement, especially through legitimized multilateral fora alongside regional partners. This approach also helped consolidate regional cooperation, particularly with ASEAN and India. With the 2014 Cabinet Decision on Development of Seamless Security Legislation and the 2015–2016 security legislation, Japan's security role began to expand (both in terms of capabilities and partnership-wise), but remained within the constitutional limits of Article 9. Generally speaking, Japan's regional priorities were coagulated under a conceptual umbrella, pertaining to a *Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, giving coherence to Japan's historical diplomatic engagement. This was paired by an expansion towards Tōkyō's security role. However, the very term *security* came to encapsulate various meanings, including gray-zone challenges which induced mixed threats, neither full warfare, nor full peace.

The middle chapters which make the heart of the book examined Japan's relations with five key actors: China, South Korea, ASEAN, India and the US. With China, Japan faced its most complex challenge: economic interdependence which coexists with significant security competition. With South Korea, historical memory continues to complicate pragmatic relations, though recent efforts hint towards efforts to address these structural gaps. With ASEAN, Japan developed its identity as a trusted development partner, but it continues to be timidly seen as a security provider. With India, shared concerns over Beijing provided ground for cooperation, which spilled over in other areas, but strategic ambiguity could derail progress. With the United States, Japan's most important ally, the partnership remained remarkably stable despite political changes, but *uncertainty* is its most important threat. Taken together, these cases underpin Japan's evolution

towards a multifaceted middle power. This also shows how Japan has expanded its set of foreign policy tools to comprehensively incorporate security, norms-compliance and normative leadership in its cooperation with regional actors.

At the end of 2024, Japan found itself once again in a rather gray scenario. The political volatility marked by LDP's majority loss and Ishiba's contested leadership signaled a moment of uncertainty, resembling the post-Koizumi era. Japan's foreign policy will remain largely consistent, normatively anchored within the FOIP, but it might show different nuances in implementation. On China, as historical trends suggest, an overtly accommodating approach could exacerbate maritime tensions. Moreover, the China factor is sensitive to a proposed Asian NATO, also unconventional for ASEAN and India. South Korea would benefit significantly from Ishiba's more conciliatory approach, but the evolution of relations is heavily impacted by domestic considerations (both political and at the level of public opinion). The US alliance remains Japan's most critical foreign policy pillar, but it could suffer a dual impact: Trump's approach to towards the alliance could change, given that the conditions that shaped the trajectory during his first term are changed. Ishiba's approach towards a more equal alliance and towards Japan as a more autonomous defense partner could also recalibrate the partnership. 2025 will most likely prove to be a difficult year for Japan's foreign policy perspectives. In the case of the US alliance, normative mismatch, especially related to liberal values, could prove to be a significant barrier, especially in the case of political uncertainty.

Moreover, it is equally important for Tōkyō that its growing regional leadership does not come at the cost of domestic discord. To avoid a potential period of strategic dilution, Japan's current political situation would need to function as a transition phase rather than being the norm. A prolonged state of political fragmentation could risk echoing the post-Koizumi – pre-Abe II era, where the lack of consistent leadership complicated the implementation of long-term strategic objectives. The end of 2024 marks the conclusion of this story, but it also represents the beginning of another chapter in Japanese politics.

Afterword

By the time this book is published, Japan's political landscape has shifted once again. On September 7th, 2025, Ishiba announced his resignation as prime minister, marking the climax of a political crisis that has hit the LDP. This followed two LDP consecutive defeats in electoral cycles – the October 2024 general elections for the House of Representatives and the July 2025 general elections for the House of Councillors.

The political crisis was directly shaped by three dynamics: the internal party fragmentation (paired with the absence of a dominant figure similar to Abe), political scandals to which the previous two prime ministers (Kishida and Ishiba) were directly or indirectly linked and a general public pressure, marked by a sort of LDP-fatigue, deeply influenced by the perception that the lawmakers are disconnected from the hardships of common people.

Since the traditional LDP-Komeitō coalition failed to secure a majority, the Japanese political stage became more dynamic, as other forces have gained leverage in terms of political relevance. The opposition parties *Nippon Ishin no Kai* and the Democratic Party for the People (DPP) expressed their availability to cooperate with the LDP-Komeitō lawmakers, but on pragmatic and selective topics, ruling out the possibility of a grand coalition. But perhaps the most notable factor of the July 2025 House of Councillors election has been the rise of Sanseitō, the so-called “Do It Yourself” party, generally defined as part of the far-right spectrum of politics. Heavily inspired by the Trump's *America First* approach, Sanseitō effectively leveraged the power of digital tools and online campaigns to secure support in the elections.

At the same time, the second Trump administration has introduced a new layer of uncertainty into Japan's strategies. Discussions about trade tariffs, arrangements and alliance commitments drew concerns in Japan regarding the stability of the US–Japan partnership. In the vision of Japanese policymakers, economic considerations trumped security and normative commitments in a complicated period of political fragmentations. Taken together, these developments

reinforce one of the book's central arguments: Japan's foreign policy is dependent on its domestic political dynamics and on the broader shifts within the international system.

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