

Incrementalism Amid Permanent Obstacles: Japan's Foreign Policy (2012-2022)

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Abstract

The aim is to examine the changes and the continuities of Japan's foreign policy from 2012 to 2022. The main argument indicates that the reforms implemented since 2012 have had the purpose to legitimize Japan's pacifist guidelines and practices, and Japan has gradually abandoned self-imposed restrictions regarding the reinterpretation of the Article 9 of its Constitution, the change of arms export rules, and the revision of the initiatives of official development assistance in a more pragmatic and incremental than an ideological and radical way. Many of these reforms build on longer-term pragmatic trends to the Japanese response to changes of the state's security and economic environment.

Keywords: Japan, foreign policy, Abe Shinzo, Suga Yoshihide, Kishida Fumio

1. Introduction

In December 2022, Japan announced a \$320 billion plan to buy military equipment, which has represented its biggest military build-up since World War II and made Japan the global third-biggest military spender after the United States and China (Kelly & Murakami, 2022). The plan seemed unthinkable in Japan, because the notion of pacifism has been very useful for the state since the World War II as a source of national pride and an example for other states. The reduced priority of military security in favor of a comprehensive security policy – which included social, economic, and political aspects for achieving national interests – was sustained by the non-acceptance of the utilization of military power as a legitimate statecraft tool and a commitment to non-possession of war abilities, incorporated in the post-war Constitution through Article 9. Multiple Japanese administrations have understood that Article 9 allowed Japan to have a force structure strictly for self-defense, and the close ties with the United States prevented Japan from developing active and autonomous foreign and security policies. However, some Japanese leaders worked to dismantle the abnormal and unrealistic aspects of pacifism and replace them with the more realistic and natural “normal state” perspective. Their work was visible particularly after the 2012 Japanese elections, when the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) came back to power, and Abe Shinzo became Japan's Prime Minister again after his first 2006-2007 term. Abe had the ambition to halt the Japan's economic decline and strengthen the state's economy, upgrade the role of the Self-Defense Forces, and boost Japan's foreign position regarding other states – mainly China, in the context of the territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. The crisis flared up nationalism that helped the LDP to gain momentum to win the elections. Abe sought to forestall further degradation in Japan's geopolitical role and bring Japan's strength back by introducing reforms that have given rise to concern, particularly in China and South Korea: the increase of the defense budget; the generation of a National Security Council and a Security Strategy; the relaxation of arms export limitations; and the reinterpretation of the “peace clause” of the Japanese Constitution. Abe seemed to be engineering a relevant transformation of Japan's foreign policy from a position of dependence and subordination in the US-led order to a more proactive and independent one in an uncertain regional environment (Atanassova-Cornelis, 2005; Gustafsson, Hagström & Hanssen, 2019; Pyle, 2018; Sakaki, 2015; Šebok, 2013).

Although the relaxation of military restrictions aimed to bring Japan greater regional influence, Abe rejected fears regarding militarism and emphasized the purpose to actively contribute to international peace. The scepticism of Japanese population about the use of military power and the maintenance of the alliance with the US as a top priority did not stop Japan from intensifying its cooperation with partners such as Australia, India, and some Southeast Asian

states to generate opportunities for manoeuvre, despite Japan's scarce financial resources to play a stronger security role in East Asia. The willingness to have more responsibility for international security – using military force, if necessary – was a response to transformations in the security environment and to growing expectations from the US, a state which no longer wants to assume the role of a “global policeman” after the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq (Gustafsson, Hagström & Hanssen, 2019; Sakaki, 2015; Šebok, 2013).

In 2020, after Abe announced that he would resign due to health concerns, Suga Yoshihide became Japan's prime minister with the promise to focus on the continuity of Abe's political goals, such as the release of Japanese abductees from North Korea. Nevertheless, Suga's premiership had primarily the challenge to respond the COVID-19 pandemic, including overseeing the rollout of vaccines. Suga's term also saw the holding of the delayed 2020 Summer Olympics and Paralympics Games in Tokyo in 2021 and the announcement of a plan for Japan to reach carbon neutrality by 2050. His approval as the Japanese prime minister rapidly fell because of public dissatisfaction with the way his administration handled the COVID-19 pandemic and the delayed Olympic Games. The COVID-19 pandemic created obstacles to Japan's economic recovery and led to a prime minister's premature resignation. He was succeeded by Kishida Fumio, who led the ruling LDP-Komeito coalition and paved the way for relative continuity in national affairs and foreign policy (Liff, 2022).

According to some previous studies (Pyle, 2018; Smith, 2019), Japan's military build-up since 2012 and other offensive initiatives may represent a sweeping transformation of the state's foreign interests. Some even indicate that Japan may completely abandon the self-imposed restrictions regarding its international guidelines and actions to face regional and global challenges, particularly the Chinese and North Korean threats. However, these authors do not indicate that most changes of Japan's foreign policy may not be as radical as they seem. They also mitigate the relevance of elements of continuity of Japanese foreign policy, which limit offensive purposes, but open possibilities for security cooperation and strengthen Japanese influence in regional affairs. This article aims to cover the gap and make a difference in Japan's foreign policy analysis by investigating the interaction among the political, organizational, and legal challenges Japan faces, the maintenance of previous alliances, and the construction of new ones to increment Japan's foreign policy, which does not necessarily contradict traditional aspects that characterize Japan's foreign policy regarding transformations of the security and the economic arenas.

The main purpose of the article is to examine the changes and the continuities of Japan's foreign policy from 2012 to 2022. In line with Liff (2015, 2018b) and Sakaki (2015), I argue that proactive pacifism is a rejection of the idealistic pacifist notions of the Yoshida Doctrine to relax military constraints, generate opportunities for security cooperation with other states, and enhance Japan's capacity to influence regional developments. The reforms implemented since 2012 have had the purpose to legitimize Japan's foreign policy guidelines and practices, and Japan has gradually abandoned self-imposed restrictions regarding the reinterpretation of the Article 9 of the Constitution, the change of arms export rules, and the revision of the initiatives of official development assistance to speed up a “normalization process” in Japanese security and foreign policies, but in a more pragmatic and incremental than an ideological and radical way. Many of these reforms may seem to constitute relevant transformations, but they build on longer-term pragmatic trends to the Japanese response to changes of the state's security and economic environment.

2. Method

The qualitative perspective of categorial content analysis as developed by Arden et al. (2018) had the purpose to organize and deepen the knowledge about the changes and the continuities of Japan's foreign policy from 2012 to 2022. The investigation of highly cited academic productions in Japan's foreign policy was developed to identify trends – particularly the pragmatic and evolutionary trends to the Japanese response to changes of the state's security and economic environment –, reflect on the dominant arguments, and reveal research gaps. According to Arden et al. (2018), the categorial content analysis gives a better understanding of present situations and phenomena – such as Japan's foreign policy in the last ten years –, which brings aspects for criticism by future researchers.

As recommended by Arden et al. (2018), I primarily defined the search procedures based on the scholarly literature and chose the main academic productions with high circulation and use in the analysis of Japanese foreign policy from 2012 to 2022. The database was developed considering the authors', books', and journals' names, as well as their citation count in Google Scholar. Duplicates and books and articles identified inappropriately by search instruments were not considered.

I developed three categories to allocate information: 1) the history of Japanese foreign policy, 2) Japanese foreign policy under Abe Shinzo (2012-2020), and 3) Japanese Foreign Policy under Suga Yoshihide (2020-2021) and Kishida Fumio (2021-2022). First, I aimed to identify the main aspects of Japanese foreign policy from the early 20th century to 2012, particularly the elements of Japanese pacifism and the state's international partnerships. Then I

indicated the main continuities and changes in Japanese foreign policy in the last ten years and the reasons for preserving or transforming foreign policy elements from 2012 to 2022.

The discussion considered the bibliographical research to examine the motivations of continuities and changes of Japan's foreign policy during Abe's rule, identify the role of domestic and international constraints in Japan's foreign policy making, and evaluate if the changes promoted by Abe were more pragmatic / incremental or ideological / radical. This created the conditions to evaluate how Abe's successors – Suga and Kishida – dealt with the pillars defined and consolidated by Abe's foreign policy.

3. Results

3.1 *The History of Japanese Foreign Policy*

By 1900, Japan was an East Asian imperialist power in East Asia. During World War II, almost all the East and Southeast Asia territory was under Japanese military and political occupation, but the Japanese defeat reduced Japan's borders almost to those of the mid-19th century. The Japanese aggressive behavior during its political and military control of East and Southeast Asia created hostilities against Japan and some neighbors, generated public aversion to military adventures in Japan, and gave rise to a commitment to pacifism. The occupation of Japan by the United States military (1945-1952) aimed to pacify and democratize Japan by disarming Japan and abolishing its military services, which was reinforced by the US military presence across Japan. The new US-led international order included reforms that transformed Japan into a permanently disarmed liberal democratic state. The identities as a democratic state and a gradually mature market economy that emphasized universal values such as democracy, freedom, and human rights were incorporated into Japanese diplomatic strategies, which were implemented mainly through international institutions. In multiple situations, these identities were used to differentiate Japanese diplomatic policies from Chinese ones. For example, Japan joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1964 and the Group of Seven (G7) in 1975. During its modernization process from the 1960s to the 1980s, Japan accepted multiple Western institutions, as well as political, cultural, and technological ideas from Western states. Through this process, Japan has become the first advanced Asian state, seen as a bridge between the West and Asia. Although the burst of the bubble economy in the early 1990s plunged Japan into a decade-long recession, the Japanese economy still retained a strong competitive edge because of its provision of high-quality intermediate materials and parts for Asian manufacturing, as well as its advanced technologies and innovative ideas such as energy conservation, next-generation vehicles, and robotics. Japan's highly disciplined system with intellectual property rights, anti-monopoly laws, and transparent regulation consolidated Japan's market economy, despite major challenges such as the 1997 Asian financial crisis. The crisis affected multiple areas of the Japanese economy. Japanese manufacturing companies had established regional production networks in Southeast Asia since 1985, Japanese foreign direct investment and trade in the region had increased expressively from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s, and Japanese banks had expanded their operations in East Asia during the 1990s to support Japanese multinationals, although they had been very exposed and concerned with systemic instability. When the crisis hit Thailand in 1997, Japan proposed a regional solution, the Asian Monetary Fund, which would have created large financial commitments and be independent from the United States. Nevertheless, the downfall of the fund proposal occurred not only because of the opposition from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United States, European states, and China, but also because of the problems in Japanese fiscal and financial health, the split within the Japanese Ministry of Finance over the shape of the fund and its relationship with the IMF, and the opposition of Japan's large export and multinational companies with high stakes in the future structure of Asian economies that feared that injections of "easy money" would undermine the stringent conditions for reforms demanded by the IMF, which could bring more stability for the states affected by the crisis in the future (Envall, 2020; Gustafsson, Hagström & Hanssen, 2019; Katada & Solís, 2010; Potter, 2009; Pyle, 2018; Šebok, 2013; Yoshimatsu, 2012).

The 1947 Constitution provided a democratic framework for Japanese postwar politics, and its Article 9 created a strong limitation on the attempts to create an independent security policy, which meant that Japan would have to rely on the US security umbrella. The Constitution also presented Japan as a responsible state dedicated to world peace, a fundamental aspect to give its international respectability back. Left-Right conflicts over the American bases in the Japanese territory involved local governments and the national government, which created difficulties regarding the management of the US-Japan alliance. However, the Constitution – particularly its notorious Article 9 – stated that Japan renounced war as a sovereign right and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes. The Japanese pacifism – based on the Yoshida doctrine, named after Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru (1948-1954) – reflected in the Japanese foreign policy, with the focus on economic development, the security guaranteed by the

military alliance with United States and a low diplomatic profile. Japan's post-war foreign and security Yoshida Doctrine focused on the restrictions on rearmament, a low-key international insertion, the emphasis on economic relations overseas to assist in the reconstruction of the domestic economy, and the strict alignment with the US. The doctrine allowed Japanese concentration on economic development – particularly the economic reconstruction and the development of relevant export sectors such as consumer electronics, automobiles, semiconductors, and high-tech materials – and the consideration of defense issues as peripheral to national politics. The development of resource diplomacy favored developing states such as Indonesia and the Middle East states that could supply oil, natural gas, and other industrial raw materials. A weak executive and a strong bureaucracy created the basis for the continuity of the Yoshida Doctrine by limiting the capacity of Japanese prime ministers to change the fundamental foreign policy orientations. At the same time, war reparations to Southeast Asian states and South Korea paved the way for trade and investment, and Japan's foreign aid program promoted diplomatic and economic relations with many regions of the world. Foreign aid turned into a relevant foreign policy tool given the lack of military power, although Japan's fiscal deficits created limitations on the use of this tool. Japan also had relevant participation in the UN and its related institutions, as well as the cooperation with regional arrangements, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Japan also helped create the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), which bring opportunities for regional political and business leaders to debate economic issues. The pacifist approach to international politics has contributed to Japan's successful reintegration into the international community, given Japan's global positive recognition and status, and facilitated East Asian peace since the late 1970s. This approach has been supported by most Japanese people, when regional and international stability was threatened (Envall, 2020; Gustafsson, Hagström & Hanssen, 2019; Potter, 2009; Pyle, 2018; Šebok, 2013; Yoshimatsu, 2012).

Although the Yoshida strategy was deeply embedded in Japan's institutions and its economic success would not easily overturned, the move towards a “normal foreign policy” – which questioned whether the Yoshida Doctrine remained sufficient to ensure Japan's vital interests – became necessary with growing international threats, particularly after the end of the Cold War, which called into question the purpose of the security alliance with the United States in the context of the demise of the Soviet Union. Since the end of the Cold War, Japan's leaders have implemented incremental innovations designed to guarantee that the US-Japan alliance adapt to changing regional and global threats. The United States kept acting as an offshore balancer through bilateral alliances, given the Chinese nuclear weapons tests, the Chinese military exercises aimed at Taiwan in the mid-1990s, and North Korea's intention to develop nuclear weapons and missiles. Although the public and many political leaders favored the retention of the fundamental aspects of the Article 9, there was a trend toward the acceptance of some revisions, as well as growing calls for Japan to become a “normal state” that had military capacities to protect the state by itself. The anti-militarist posture and pacifism permeating Japan's international insertion clashed with the norms of UN internationalism, which openly called for Japan's contribution to international peace. Nevertheless, Japan has tried to distance itself from the interventionist element of the humanitarian action and argued that the freedom from fear approach has been instrumentalized as a justification for the use of force in occasions with massive human rights violations. From the Japanese perspective, this approach was controversial and required careful examination on moral, political, and legal grounds. The Article 9 constraints regarding the military intervention in armed conflicts and the strong anti-militarism of Japanese society reflected in Japan's pursuit of a peaceful foreign policy which turns military intervention into a very questionable option (Atanassova-Cornelis, 2005; Auslin, 2016; Envall, 2020; Liff, 2015; Lind, 2004; Moore, 2010; Potter, 2009; Pyle, 2018; Šebok, 2013; Yoshimatsu, 2012).

Since the early 1990s, Japan has participated in UN peacekeeping operations, and throughout the decade Japan has implemented actions regarding development and humanitarian aid and participated more in global crisis management, comprehensive conflict prevention, and environmental protection. However, measures of aggregate defense spending in the early 2000s showed Japan as one of the largest defense spenders and a leader in air and naval powers in the world, although it has abstained from building specific kinds of military forces, such as nuclear weapons, powerful ground forces, ballistic missiles, large aircraft carriers, and other forces for offensive operations. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Japan enacted the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law, which permitted it to provide logistical support for the US and coalition forces in Afghanistan. Then Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro supported the US-led war on terror, although Japan could not send combat troops because of its constitutional ban on the threat or use of force. Koizumi dispatched Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force to the Indian Ocean to support allied combat operations but reinforced that the elimination of terrorism related to the need to deal with diverse threats to individuals because armed conflicts, poverty, and other socio-economic aspects generated opportunities for terrorism to become a stronger threat. The Self-Defense Forces have been used in a non-combat role in post-war Iraq in

2004-2005. Koizumi sent reconstruction troops to Iraq in 2004 and deployed an Air Self-Defense Force team to transport supplies between Kuwait and Iraq. Japan has also pledged \$1.4 billion in aid to Afghanistan between 2002 and 2009 and developed an anti-piracy mission off the Somalian coast since 2009. Despite Chinese opposition, Japan has also claimed its right to a permanent seat at the UN Security Council given Japanese contributions to the organization. China would not support Japan's candidacy unless Japan fully came to terms with its war-time violent behavior. China's veto as a UN Security Council permanent member could derail any attempt to turn Japan into a permanent member. Regionally, regarding North Korea, Japan took an obstructionist position during the Six-Party Talks, which aimed to accomplish the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner. The Japanese have proactively made an already difficult negotiation format even less likely to succeed when they insisted that the normalization of relations with North Korea and the provision of economic assistance to the state could only happen if the issues regarding the North Korean nuclear program and the Japanese abductees were resolved in a comprehensive manner. Far from incorporating immobilism, Japan used diplomatic and economic statecraft to create barriers in the talks if its interests were not considered. The relations with other neighbors were different. Japan, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand endorsed in 2008 projects for the CLV (Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam) Development Triangle, and consolidated the progress of regional projects such as the East-West Economic Corridor and the Second East-West Economic Corridor. The 2009 Tokyo Declaration expressed the Japanese commitment of more than 500 billion yen of official development assistance in the coming three years with stress on hard and soft infrastructure and environment conservation to achieve a "Green Mekong" and, at the same time, limit China's influence in the Mekong region. By 2009, Japan's free trade agreements with Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Brunei, and Vietnam had come into effect. Nevertheless, not all Asian states accepted Japan's desire to implement universal values. Some had little motivation to emulate Japanese practices and institutions, such as the authoritarian governments of Cambodia and Vietnam, which did not completely incorporate values such as democracy and human rights into their political and social systems. Japan tried to create regional mechanisms for dialogue which use universal values at least as political rhetoric (Atanassova-Cornelis, 2005; Auslin, 2016; Envall, 2020; Hagström, 2008; Liff, 2015; Lind, 2004; Moore, 2010; Potter, 2009; Pyle, 2018; Šebok, 2013; Yoshimatsu, 2012).

When Abe first became prime minister after Koizumi's administration in 2006, he pushed through some laws to allow for greater security cooperation with Japan's partners, a review of Japan's ban on sending troops overseas and the creation of a centralized intelligence organization to modernize planning. After a brief first term (2006-2007) characterized by mishaps and bad judgment, Abe was followed by weak prime ministers. From 2009 to 2012, the LDP lost its hold on government to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which was incapable of retaining public confidence. The DPJ's "independent diplomacy" aimed to achieve a mature alliance in which Japan would be less dependent on the United States; establish economic and trade initiatives, historical reconciliation, and multilateral institution-building between Japan and Asian states; provide financing and peacekeepers for the UN and defend the organization's reform; work for nuclear disarmament through international, regional, and bilateral diplomatic initiatives; and modernize Japan's national security apparatus. Nevertheless, Hatoyama Yukio shelved Abe's ambitious security reforms, and his successor, Kan Naoto, was overwhelmed by the 2011 tsunami and the subsequent Fukushima nuclear crisis. He was forced to resign in 2011, and the following prime minister, Noda Yoshihiko, had a more conservative foreign policy, defending close ties with the United States and strengthening the harshness toward China and North Korea. Noda joined negotiations over the Trans-Pacific Partnership to create a free-trade agreement of largely liberal states to contain China and nationalized three islands in the Senkaku chain, also claimed by China and Taiwan. China responded by sending private fishing boats and maritime patrol vessels into the waters around the islands and alarmed Japan regarding Chinese growing military strength and presence in the East China Sea. The defense of the Senkaku islands and the seas around them thus became the focus of Japan's new strategic vision, particularly when Abe came back to power in 2012. Nevertheless, more than representing disruptive innovations, Abe's efforts built on and accelerated some decades-long trends regarding Japanese foreign policy. Besides the LDP, the DPJ – which merged with the Japan Innovation Party and Vision of Reform to form the Democratic Party in 2016 – also accelerated foreign and defense policies reforms during its three years as Japan's ruling party (2009-2012) in response to perceived worsening threats from China and North Korea. In 2011, the DPJ also relaxed the principles on arms exports to make cooperation easier with the US on ballistic missile defense and Japan's involvement in the Joint Strike Fighter program (Auslin, 2016; Easley, Kotani & Mori, 2010; Gries, Steiger & Wang, 2016; Jesus, 2011, 2012; Liff, 2015; Pyle, 2018; Sneider, 2011).

3.2 Japanese Foreign Policy Under Abe Shinzo (2012-2020)

From the 2012 landslide victory that returned Abe Shinzo to the Prime Minister's Office in 2012 to his resignation in

2020, Abe – who died in 2022 after being shot while giving a campaign speech in central Japan – exercised a decisive and pragmatic leadership. He had highest personal priorities with limited success during his administration but facilitated and accelerated reforms compatible with internal and external political transformations in the foreign policy domain taking advantage of Japan’s exceptional political stability and longevity. After saying that “Japan is back”, the second Abe administration reprised the language of the first one with a declarative foreign policy that emphasized universal values, democracy, the rule of law, and the freedom of navigation. Abe’s diplomacy has been based on a hybrid policymaking authority, where the leverage enjoyed by the Prime Minister’s office – the Kantei – rested on politicized personnel appointments and demotions within the bureaucratic apparatus, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The leadership has worked especially when operating within the scope of the US strategic framework in East Asia. Nevertheless, while structural constraints such as the US intense influence and bureaucratic coordination constrained options, Japan was not simply reactive to the US hegemony. The second Abe administration has pushed for a more balancing prone foreign policy that prompted the US fears of entrapment. Nationalist Abe’s insistence on values and ties with the US had the purpose to hug the US mainly to enhance the coercive toolkit against China (Auslin, 2016; Envall, 2020; Liff, 2015, 2018b; Liff & Lipsky, 2022; Pugliese, 2017; Šebok, 2013).

Abe made national security issues top priorities with the promulgation of Japan’s first-ever national security strategy, which called for a more proactive international role. He carried out multiple reforms to Japan’s national security institutions and policies, such as the 2013 establishment of Japan’s first-ever National Security Council, which established Japan’s five-year defense procurement plan, centralized and harmonized foreign and security policy decision-making in the cabinet, and enhanced long-term strategic planning, interagency coordination, and crisis management. As an advisory committee and a de facto decision-making institution, the National Security Council strengthened the prime minister’s office and Cabinet relative to Japan’s bureaucracy, improved interagency coordination, and involved Self-Defense Forces’ officers in security policy discussions more directly. The National Security Council aimed to strengthen Japan’s capacity to deal with an uncertain security environment flexibly and independently in East Asia and beyond. Although the idea for creating a National Security Council predated Abe administration and had supporters beyond the LDP, Abe was one of the most prominent advocates of the decades-old reform efforts to improve foreign and security policies’ decision-making and strengthen Cabinet and prime-ministerial control over these policies, particularly to generate more flexible, effective, and proactive responses to complex international challenges. The conception of “national security” included space and cyber issues, the financial system, terrorism, nuclear counterproliferation, and grey-zone challenges. The National Security Strategy identified strategic challenges and defined the basis of Japan’s proactive pacifism, which aimed to boost its deterrence capacity, strengthen its cooperation with the United States, and develop its diplomatic initiatives around the region. The reforms bolstered deterrence against perceived regional threats by strengthening the missions and capabilities of Japan’s Self-Defense Forces and the US-Japan cooperation and diversifying security cooperation with partners beyond the United States, but in a way typically compatible with the US strategy, such as the US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue; the reinvigoration of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among Japan, the United States, Australia, and India; agreements with Australia – an important partner to develop a US-centric order including security and trade – covering the transfer of defense equipment and technology and an acquisition and cross-servicing agreement for military logistics; and Japanese proposals for a Southeast Asian regional defense framework. Abe also signed new defense equipment and technology transfer deals with multiple US allies and partners and sought to grow Japan’s joint training activities and multiple exercises not only with India and Australia, but with Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, albeit typically in a multilateral framework under the US leadership. The 2013 National Defense Program Guidelines emphasized new technological capabilities, as well as readiness, sustainability, resiliency, and connectivity. The Medium-Term Defense Program for 2014-18 was devoted to responding to ballistic missile attacks and attacks on remote islands, in which Japan increased its military presence, especially in the southwest. The 2015 “peace and security legislation” expanded the roles and missions for Japan’s Self-Defense Forces beyond territorial defense and provided the legal foundation for the controversial reinterpretation of Japanese Constitution’s Article 9 to enlarge the situations under which Japan can aid other states that have suffered an armed attack, the so-called limited exercise of collective self-defense. Nevertheless, Abe fell far short of the call to double expenditures to two per cent of GDP. The legislation also brought opportunities to train, exercise, and plan with military forces of the United States and other states, made it possible to use weapons to protect foreign military forces under limited circumstances, and allowed Japan to engage in international peace support activities, such as search-and-rescue operations and logistical support. The Abe administration has accepted the need for Japan to assume a more relevant role within the alliance with the United States, and Japan’s internal capability building aimed to contribute to this end. In 2020, Abe added a new economic security unit to review

economic issues with national security implications, such as foreign investments, telecommunications, and cybersecurity (Auslin, 2016; Envall, 2020; Liff, 2015, 2018a, 2018b; Liff & Lipsky, 2022; Pugliese, 2017; Šebok, 2013).

The Abe administration sought to prevent the souring of relations between Japan and China but also keep Asia's balance of power from tilting too far toward the Chinese. The managing of both tasks turned into a harder activity when the possibility of conflict with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands – which are administered by Japan, but over which China also claims sovereignty – became more intense after 2012 and a gradually stronger matter of national pride and sovereignty. China claims the tiny Japanese controlled islands – which are also separately claimed by Taiwan – as Chinese core interest regarding the sovereignty of its territory because of historical reasons, the islands' proximity to strategically important maritime routes, the rich fishing areas and the potentially abundant oil and natural gas deposits. Despite the restrictions on using weapons or force, Japan invested in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and transformed the Self-Defense Forces' posture and composition to confront threats more effectively near Japan's southwestern islands in response to China's assertion of its sovereignty claim using primarily non-military government vessels. One of the major reorientations implemented by Abe was the incremental militarization of Japan's remote southwestern islands, including radar sites and anti-ship and surface-to-air missile units; rapidly deployable capabilities closer to major western Self-Defense Forces' bases; and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, for example. Abe aimed to counter the emergence of a "Lake Beijing" with bilateral partnerships in Asia in contrast to previous Japanese multilateral diplomacy. Both Abe administrations tried to bolster Japan's home-bred military and security capabilities and defense posture and sought to counter China by deepening and widening the net of Japan's security relations with other states. The Chinese rise pushed Japan gradually toward rearmament and normalcy, but China has frequently interpreted this as threatening and responded with a more assertive stance toward Japan. The new Abe administration took up the geopolitical strategy inaugurated by then Foreign Minister Asō Tarō in 2006, the so-called "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity", which was briefly rebranded as Japan's Asia Security Diamond and later was raised to a global strategy, the Foreign Policy based on a Panoramic Perspective of the World-Map. These initiatives aimed to create a network of sea powers along the Eastern portion of the Eurasian rimland, based on the belief that naval powers, such as India and Australia, were fundamental in checking Chinese continental power's advancement into the sea. There was also a feeling in China that Japan had not adequately apologized for the conduct of Japan's forces between 1894, when Japan invaded Korea and initiated a war against China, and 1945, when the World War II ended. From the perspective of China and some of its neighbors, Japan has not dealt well with the legacy of its wartime crimes against the peoples of the states it attacked and occupied. They believe the Japanese have not confessed their crimes nor sought the forgiveness of their victims, although Japan believes it has apologized multiple times. Based on a nationalist perspective, Abe defended actions against Chinese and Korean criticism. Abe's insistence on Japan's democratic identity was a nationalistic goal in direct relation with autocratic China's rise to regional economic primacy. The Abe administration instrumentalized these values to forcefully strengthen the relations with the US and its China balancing potential. It is also important to notice that, in Japan, China's patriotic education is seen as the root of the "anti-Japanese" feelings and demonstrations, because it is believed to have detailed descriptions of Japanese wartime cruelty and marginalized Japan's post-war development as a peaceful state. China was thus seen as denying a fundamental element of Japanese self-identity. Both Abe administrations sought to establish the legitimacy of Japan's standing as a status-quo power, which permanently upheld the US-centered postwar liberal order and intended to undermine China's unilateral claims in its multiple territorial disputes with Japan as attempts to demolish the foundations of such liberal order (Auslin, 2016; Envall, 2020; Hemmings & Kuroki, 2013; Jesus, Kamlot & Dubeux, 2019; Koga, 2018; Liff, 2015, 2018b; Liff & Lipsky, 2022; Moore, 2010; Pugliese, 2017; Šebok, 2013).

Although Japan and South Korea were threatened by North Korean nuclear-bombs-wielding regime and the limited range of North Korean missiles and had close military alliances with the US, the scars of the past – particularly the issue of "comfort women" – and the territorial dispute concerning the Dokdo/Takeshima islets created obstacles for a stronger cooperation between the two states. Regarding North Korea, the Abe government was determined to bring Japanese abductees back to Japan. Members of Abe administration reiterated that Japan would not resume aid to North Korea until the solution of this issue was reached, even if North Korea eliminated its nuclear and missile programs. Nevertheless, key elements of Japan's postwar defense policy remained intact, such as the heavy circumscription regarding the use of force in combat. Self-Defense Forces' non-combat roles include ship inspections, search-and-rescue operations, and logistical support for US forces. For example, since 2017, Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces ships have deployed near the Korean Peninsula to guarantee that North Korea would not bypass international sanctions. Abe aimed to reassure that Japan would never engage in offensive war and made

non-military diplomacy a great part of his foreign outreach. He tried to raise Japan's profile in multiple multilateral institutions, such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN, by raising questions of maritime security. In 2015, Japan signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership treaty (Auslin, 2016; Envall, 2020; Gustafsson, 2015; Hosoya, 2015; Liff, 2018b; Liff & Lipsy, 2022; Šebok, 2013).

In 2014, the Abe administration relaxed the arms exports' rules to sustain Japanese producers and help them re-establish their competitiveness through exports that could contribute to national security and world peace in line with Japan's "proactive pacifism". Japan also participated in international collaborative projects – such as the development of missile technology with the UK and submarine construction with Australia – and expected to have new customers in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The relaxation of Japan's restrictions on the use of military force has been criticized by most Japanese people, who see that the main task of Japanese armed forces is to defend Japanese territory in cooperation with the US and contribute to disaster relief and UN peacekeeping missions. Although internationally the relaxation was supported by Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Vietnam, Australia, and New Zealand – states that looked forward to Japan's more active contribution to international security –, South Korea and China criticized Japan's initiative. In the context of his attempt to position Japan as Europe's main Asian partner, Abe formalized in 2014 the Japanese ties to NATO by establishing an individual partnership and cooperation program and indicated his interest in joining a NATO missile-building consortium. Besides updating the ties between the United States and Japan in 2015 to achieve closer collaboration on maritime security, regional stability, and joint work to deal with ambiguous security situations and space and cyberthreats, Abe also signed deals with European states, such as a military equipment and technology transfer agreement with France and a defense equipment cooperation agreement with the United Kingdom (Auslin, 2016; Envall, 2020; Liff, 2018b; Potter, 2009; Sakaki, 2015; Šebok, 2013).

Abe combined internal liberalization under the banner of "Abenomics" – which included monetary easing, fiscal stimulus, the promotion of growth strategies through structural changes, and reforms of politically protected sectors such as agriculture – with international engagement. The guiding framework for Abe's economic diplomacy was the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", which showed Japan's intentions to expand its leadership over a larger geographic area compared to "Asia-Pacific", strengthen relations with partners beyond East Asia such as India to limit China's influence, emphasized liberal principles such as the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and economic openness, and contrasted with China's Belt and Road Initiative. To limit China's initiative, India and Japan proposed the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) to promote development cooperation, infrastructure building, and economic partnerships, with maritime facilities from East Asia to the Middle East and Africa. A 2016 civil nuclear agreement allowed Japanese companies to export nuclear technology to India, despite Japanese domestic opposition because India did not sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The Trans-Pacific Partnership – which were resuscitated by Japan with the remaining members after the 2017 US withdrawal – and the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement led to the assessment that Japan defended multilateralism and free trade more than ever. Abe also had expressive progress on a trade agreement with the United Kingdom and the 15-member Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a multilateral trade agreement including China and South Korea. Nevertheless, during Donald Trump's administration in the United States, Japan emphasized infrastructure investments and trade liberalization, and the Trump administration insisted on the idea of military engagement with regional democracies. To limit Chinese influence and criticism over the supposed insufficiency of existing regional development aid structures, the Abe government established the 2015 Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, a \$110 billion initiative in collaboration with the Asian Development Bank to allow multiple related initiatives, including a Japan-US-Australia trilateral initiative focused on infrastructure, the Quality Infrastructure Investment Partnership with the World Bank, and the Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure with the European Union. In contrast to China's Belt and Road Initiative – which had faced criticism over its management –, Japan aimed to advertise the reliability of projects implemented by existing donors and international aid agencies, as well as their transparency, accountability, and sustainability. The 2013 National Security Strategy referred to official development assistance as a fundamental means of guaranteeing Japanese security, particularly economic and natural resource securities. The Development Cooperation Charter emphasized the role of development assistance as a catalyst for cooperation and reaffirmed its main characteristics, such as decentralized systems and responsibilities for policymaking and implementation; the extensive use of loans; the request-based principle; the focus on Asia and economic infrastructure; the understanding that poverty reduction was essential for eliminating terrorism and other causes of international instability; and the prioritization of sectors such as education, health care, welfare, water, sanitation and agriculture to support human and social development in the developing states. However, even Abe's robust engagement with Taiwan did not significantly derail the efforts to improve bilateral relations with China in the latter

half of his tenure, while relations with South Korea became worse in the context of antagonism over historical issues (Dobson, 2017; Envall, 2020; Kato, 2016; Liff & Lipsky, 2022; Nagy, 2022; Pyle, 2018).

Abe has tried to establish personal relations with Russian president, Vladimir Putin, since 2012. The 2013 Japan-Russia Joint Foreign and Defense Ministerial Consultations were held, but Japan was among the states that imposed economic sanctions on Russia because of the Russian actions in Ukraine in 2014. This position created strong barriers to solve the issue of the North Territories/South Kurils Islands and conclude a peace treaty. Abe adopted a more pragmatic approach to cooperation with Central Asia than previous administrations. His perspective was more based on practical outputs than values. Japan realized that democratization was a longer-term objective in the region, and the possibilities of cooperation created by economic opportunities could be developed. Abe aimed to deepen and strengthen the presence of the Japanese business community in Central Asia with contracts signed for the joint exploration of gas fields in Turkmenistan (Galynikish), Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Japan and Kazakhstan committed to work on building a nuclear plant in Kazakhstan, and Japan agreed to build mineral resource processing factories in Turkmenistan. The Japanese initiatives transcend energy and mineral resources to encompass human resource development, joint university and research facility construction, and human security infrastructure. Abe also supported the construction of a Japanese university in Turkmenistan, the cooperation on IT education in Tajikistan, the creation of the Youth Technological Innovation Center in Uzbekistan, and the beginning of similar educational initiatives in Kazakhstan. When visiting Latin America, Abe looked for support for the Japanese bid for a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council in 2015. He targeted CARICOM as a powerful voting bloc in international organizations. He asked for the same support during visits to South Asian states, even competing candidates, such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. These visits also aimed at intensifying or redefining political bilateral relations, introducing the security dimension and Abenomics elements to intensify trade and investments and open field for Japanese corporations. In 2013, the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) aimed at assisting African economies and supporting cooperation with them. Abe has also visited some African states since 2014 to make known assistance package that should give humanitarian aid and support business capacity building. The Japanese government took advantage of its foreign aid power to assist development in recipient states and preserve its political influence, which generated favorable conditions for Japanese companies to expand trade and investment in some areas. Abe also visited Middle Eastern states, which were sources of over 80% of Japan's crude oil import and about 29% of its natural gas import. He offered sales of nuclear technology and energy industries, humanitarian and other forms of assistance, and cooperation to fight against terrorism (Dadabaev, 2018; Dobson, 2017; Envall, 2020; Liff & Lipsky, 2022; Mitrović, 2015; Pyle, 2018; Yoshimatsu, 2012).

Abe's administration adopted an aggressive stance toward international organizations that paralleled the Trump administration's strong-arm tactics. The 2018 withdrawal from the International Whaling Commission and the threat to cut funding to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) over the organization's decision to include documents related to wartime atrocities in the Memory of the World Register seemed to contradict Abe's idea of Japan as a champion of the liberal order (Envall, 2020; Liff & Lipsky, 2022; Pyle, 2018).

3.3 Japanese Foreign Policy Under Suga Yoshihide (2020-2021) and Kishida Fumio (2021-2022)

The Abe government was very criticized domestically for a slow and ineffective response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While Suga came into office as a relatively popular politician, his administration was widely criticized for a slow vaccine rollout; the shortage of vaccine supplies because of Japan's dependence on foreign production; few medical personnel trained to inoculate people; very strict regulations on new drug approvals; and multiple logistical challenges in administering the shots via local governments. By early August 2021 the rapidity of Japan's rollout surpassed all other G7 states, but the societal and economic fallout was nevertheless significant, including domestic emergency proclamations and strong headwinds against economic growth, such as curtailed business activities, supply chain challenges, and stricter border controls. Most Japanese people feared a rebound in COVID-19 cases, and nearly one-third thought the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics/Paralympics Games should be cancelled entirely, but Suga insisted that the games would be safe and secure and overcome logistical and public health challenges, including a ban on public spectators. The new Joe Biden's administration in the United States took office in 2021 and classified democratic partners such as Japan as "force multipliers". The historic Biden-Suga joint statement brought an extensive agenda for the allies on issues ranging from climate to trade and pandemics. Amid deepening tensions between China and Taiwan, Suga and Biden underscored the relevance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, as well as the peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues. China's heavy investments in its military force and the advances in North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities raised US expectations that Japan could do much more to enhance the extended deterrence provided by the United States. Nevertheless, the debate on constitutional revision

and the movement toward acquiring strike capabilities largely stalled under Suga administration (Liff, 2018b, 2022).

The public frustration with Suga's response to multiple challenges – particularly the COVID-19 pandemic – prompted his abrupt resignation, and the moderate former long-serving foreign minister Kishida Fumio became Japan's 100th prime minister in 2021. Kishida aimed to consolidate a new capitalism to achieve economic growth and address inequality and COVID-19-related disruption. Besides defending Japan's "economic security" in the context of the technology and information revolutions, Kishida adopted a more traditional security affairs perspective regarding issues such as the constitutional revision. His foreign policy did not show great departures from the longer-term guidelines defined by Abe. The US apparent continued disinterest in supporting the ambitious free trade and regional economic integration agenda defended by Japan proves that not much has been transformed, despite relevant initiatives such as China's application to the Japan-led Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in 2021 and the entry into force of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) – of which both Japan and China are members – in 2022. In early 2021, then foreign minister Motegi Toshimitsu reinforced calls for Japan to champion a Free and Open Indo-Pacific and expand free and fair trade through the CPTPP, RCEP, and bilateral agreements with the US, UK, and European Union. Japan also kept bolstering its defense capabilities and defining stronger relations with other states, particularly democratic US allies and partners. In late 2021, Japan and the United States reached an agreement on a new Host Nation Support. The deal indicated that Japan would contribute \$8.1 billion to hosting US forces over a five-year period beginning with fiscal 2022. This commitment represented an increase of \$577 million compared to the previous five-year agreement and covers costs to maintain the facilities used by US troops in Japan and funds to support joint military exercises, which include \$154 million for the purchase of advanced virtual combat training systems. Also in late 2021, US and Japanese militaries stepped up their exercises in Asian waters and included partners such as Canada, Australia and, for the first time, Germany to signal to China the rising costs of its coercion against Taiwan. Another feature of Japanese foreign policy in 2021 was the provision of COVID-19 vaccine doses mostly to neighbors such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and Taiwan (Liff, 2022; Nagy, 2022; Smith & McClean, 2022).

In early 2022, the Security Consultative Committee ("2+2") meeting – which brought together Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa, and Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo – emphasized the US-Japan alliance's role to guarantee regional peace, security, and prosperity and recognized challenges presented by geopolitical tensions, the COVID-19 pandemic – given the spread of the omicron variant –, arbitrary and coercive economic policies, and the climate crisis. The US and Japan also mentioned some threats to regional stability, such as China's activities in the East and South China Seas, human rights issues in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and tensions across the Taiwan Strait. The virtual summit held between Kishida and Biden later in 2022 highlighted similar concerns regarding China as well as North Korea. Both leaders promised to work together to deter Russian aggression against Ukraine. When Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022, Japan kept Japan on pace with the US and the European Union and aligned itself with other G7 states in developing sanctions against the Putin government and Russian economic elites, as well as against Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko's government for supporting Russian action. Japan also imposed sanctions on Russian banks, froze sovereign assets in Japanese banks, and withdrew Most Favored Nation status. The Kishida government also provided financial aid to Ukraine, early with \$100 million for humanitarian assistance and \$100 million in loans. The Kishida's administration also declared that Ukrainians fleeing the war would be welcomed in Japan, and the Self-Defense Forces provided non-lethal military equipment and material for Ukraine, measures that were welcomed by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. The United States, the European Union, and Japan have been working together during the Ukrainian crisis, characterized as a violation of the postwar international order, and consolidating conversations between NATO allies and Japan, which sees a diplomatic opportunity to develop European support should a similar crisis erupt in the Indo-Pacific region (Smith & McClean, 2022).

The LDP initiated a study of Japanese strategic needs which doubles Japan's defense spending to match NATO's target of two per cent of GDP. The party also recommended revising the National Security Strategy, National Defense Program Guidelines, and the Medium-Term Defense Force Buildup Program. Kishida aimed to update the National Security Council and the National Security Strategy to address the rapid transformations changes in the military balance in Japan's neighborhood – particularly motivated by China's military expansion and North Korea's nuclear and missile threats – and define the scope and nature of Japan's military investments over the next decade. Kishida also seemed inclined to develop more counterstrike capabilities. Kishida's administration also worries that Russia's action in Ukraine has set a precedent that may encourage China to attack Taiwan, which may endanger nearby Japanese islands and disrupt supplies of advanced semiconductors. The Ukraine war has reaffirmed the need to sustain a fight, something Japan had not so far been prepared for (Kelly & Murakami, 2022; Smith & McClean,

2022).

The December 2022 plan unveiled by Kishida's administration doubles defense outlays to about two per cent of GDP over five years and eliminates the one per cent spending limit in place since 1976. The plan aims to increase the defense ministry's budget to a tenth of all public spending at current levels, and provide work to Japanese military equipment makers, which will develop longer-range missiles to the state's new missile force and a jet fighter in a joint project with the United Kingdom and Italy. The new deterrent force will also include equipment developed by foreign companies, such as ship-launched US Tomahawk cruise missiles. Japan also aims to have interceptor missiles for ballistic missile defense, attack and reconnaissance drones, satellite communications, stealth fighters, helicopters, submarines, warships, and heavy-lift transport jets. Kishida says Japan will pay for the equipment raising tobacco, corporate, and disaster-reconstruction income taxes. Nevertheless, he also made clear that, in its postwar constitution, Japan gave up the right to wage war and reaffirmed Japan's role as a security provider in the Indo-Pacific region (Kelly & Murakami, 2022).

4. Discussion

The increasing power of politicians such as Abe and the threats represented primarily by China and North Korea showed that passive pacifism was dangerous and irresponsible. In fact, even before these changes, Japan has been under pressure to remilitarize and abandon passive pacifism throughout the existence of the US-Japan alliance. Although the Japanese pacifist identity was defined by pride in military restrictions and far-reaching moderation in security matters, differently from other great powers and Japan's own militarist past, it does not mean that all Japanese people have a monolithic identity. The conservative LDP politicians were compelled to use pacifist language and adopt a pacifist-accommodating stance because the pacifist identity was very strong among most of the public. Nevertheless, even Yoshida, towards the end of his life, regretted having led Japan down the pacifist path and labelled Japan's security policy a deformity in international society, because it would reduce Japan's foreign prestige. The 1992 LDP Commission's report on Japan's future role – known as the “Ozawa Report” – indicated the Japanese Constitution's ideas about pacifism were misunderstood, because, according to the Commission, a positive and proactive pacifism would be substantially different from passive pacifism in the context of the dangers linked first to developments related to China's rise and North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens and later to China's military modernization and North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. The protection of Japanese citizens required a departure from passive pacifism. Abe's “beautiful country” – a perspective of a post-pacifist Japan – highlighted that Japanese constitution has left Japan with a contradictory military unable to defend Japan and allowed other states to believe in Japan's unwillingness to participate in upholding international security. Abe's “beautiful country” indicated the need to revise the constitution and engage in collective self-defense based on Japan's proactive pacifism as a responsible member of the international community. Abe was supported by multiple new conservative groups, who criticized Japan's imposed constitution, its social values, and the hegemonic alliance with the United States. Nevertheless, Abe was very pragmatic in his initiatives, sometimes to the dismay of the conservative sectors that had helped bring him back to power. His pragmatism became clear at the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in 2015, when he put aside his past ideological positions and showed a conciliatory perspective. He acknowledged that Japan had committed aggression and suggested that the Western imperial encroachment on Asia had been fundamental to the strengthening of Japanese militarism. Also in 2015, Abe tried to strengthen security collaboration with South Korea in which he expressed sorrow and remorse for the suffering of the “comfort women” during the war (Gustafsson, Hagström & Hanssen, 2019; Hosoya, 2015; Pyle, 2018).

When Abe returned to power in 2012, he emphasized that his aims were to revive Japan's war-torn economy and revise the 1947 US-drafted constitution, based on the idea that Japan's excessive focus on economic growth had undercut Japanese security issues, but the ambivalence of key political allies and the public stymied constitutional revision. The revision effort was also limited by foreign factors. The 2015 comfort women agreement with South Korea, designed to be “final and irreversible,” proved to be limited in the context of the domestic political opposition in South Korea. The territorial dispute between Japan and Russia because of Russia's annexation of the five islands of the Kuril Islands toward the end of World War II and Russia's expanding military presence on the islands prevented the signing of a peace treaty. Abe aggressively courted Putin to resolve the dispute and negotiate a formal peace treaty, but he left office with no deal. No major progress was achieved with North Korea on abductees. Regarding the domestic politics, the trend of growing centralization of foreign policy-making authority under the prime minister facilitated relevant changes of the pattern of foreign policy formulation toward a whole-of-government approach, as seen in the security and economic aspects of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, institutional reforms have also generated more politicization of Japanese foreign policy-making with incentives given to politicians to pursue more confrontational foreign policy approaches, such as the use of economic

countermeasures in response to historical legacy issues toward South Korea near the end of Abe's term and threats to withdraw funding from UNESCO over history issues. The public also typically agrees with political elites that Japan's regional security environment is volatile and foreign policy must adapt regarding threats such as China – particularly in the context of its rapid military expansion, modernization, and controversial territorial and maritime claims in the East and South China Seas – and North Korea – a state that developed nuclear weapons and missile capabilities – with the acquisition of stronger indigenous defense capabilities. Regarding economic issues, the public generally supports Japan adopting an active leadership role in promoting free trade, but Abe did not have a free hand to pursue foreign policy ambitions in a context in which he would be vulnerable if he pushed too far when approaching issues that could generate relevant voter backlash. Public ambivalence and opposition to policy priorities regarding major political and economic issues constituted an important domestic constraint throughout his administration, as well as fiscal constraints due to health and pension spending associated with a rapidly aging population. It is also important to say that the longevity, stability, and moderating effect of Abe's key advisers – particularly then chief Cabinet secretary Suga Yoshihide – had the effect to moderate some of the prime minister's ambitions. The US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership threatened a key pillar of Abe's domestic and foreign policy agenda, as well as China's Belt and Road Initiative to gain geopolitical advantages which challenged Japan's regional leadership (Bukh, 2009; Liff, 2018b; Liff & Lipsky, 2022; Sakaki, 2015).

The Abe administration showed signs of continuity with past Japanese security practices, although its foreign and security policy prescriptions point towards Japan's repositioning to deal with immediate strategic issues, such as China's rise, North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, and the United States' ambivalent commitment to the region. Abe showed his desire for strategic autonomy to achieve power and security, which means that Japan needed to redefine its security institutions. He downplayed Japan's wartime conduct, characterized the passivity of Japanese foreign and security policies as too dangerous for a more threatening world, and asserted Japan's view regarding territorial disputes. Nevertheless, he frequently reinforced the relevance of the alliance with the United States and defined Japan as a pragmatic actor operating in a rules-based order as a reliable US ally. He also preserved long-standing principles of Japanese international insertion, such as exclusive defense, the non-nuclear principles, and a relatively moderate defense spending. The election that brought Kishida into power suggests a basic preference within the LDP and the population for stability, continuity, and moderation, despite the pressures for more reforms created by the COVID-19 pandemic and an increasingly complicated international political context (Envall, 2020; Liff, 2022).

It is possible to say that, from 2012 to 2022, Japan saw China as a threat to the rules-based order which worked as the basis of stability and development, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Japan sees that China tried to destroy ASEAN's unity on critical issues to Chinese core interests and understands the Belt and Road Initiative as a Chinese geo-economic attempt to redefine Asian's regionalism that strengthens China's influence throughout Eurasia. The Japanese Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision aimed to provide a rules-based alternative to China's efforts to create a Sino-centric order and prioritized economic integration, infrastructure, and development in the Indo-Pacific states through Japanese investment to strengthen each state's capability to provide for their own security and enhance their intra-regional economic integration. Japan is Southeast Asia's partner in dealing with maritime challenges in the South China Sea, and Southeast Asia states see that partnering with Japan might reduce the possibilities of being drawn into security dilemmas and other traps associated with being perceived to pick sides in a great power competition between the United States and China. China's military and economic growth also preoccupies India, which cooperates with Japan to focus on connectivity and development, as well as counter the Belt and Road Initiative in a coordinated manner to outreach to Southeast Asia and the Bay of Bengal states (Nagy, 2022).

5. Final Considerations

Japan's diplomacy has highlighted regional economic relations to support security, economic, and political relations that stabilize its neighborhood. The diplomacy can also be seen as the exercise of indirect leadership in international affairs, especially in East Asia, where Japan prefers to engage in behind-the-scenes consensus building and mediation among antagonistic parties, and intergovernmental institutions in which it can act as a representative of Asian interests as its financial power gives it political clout, such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the UN. Nevertheless, the regional security environment was not necessarily safer given the Chinese economic and military power and North Korea's diminished constraint by China and Russia. These changes proved that Japanese security could no longer be defined exclusively by the US-Japan alliance or economic interdependence alone, although the alliance and the economics remain fundamental to Japan's foreign policy. As Japan lacks the political will and the constitutional provisions for a radically more robust security policy, economic policy instruments still prevail by necessity in its foreign policy. What seems to have changed is Japan's willingness to consider policy tools beyond the economic

ones (Potter, 2009).

Far from transforming Japan's defense and foreign policies completely, the Abe administration preserved long-term trends initiated by previous LDP and DPJ governments. The changes in Japan's defense and foreign policies reflect the growing concerns about regional security, particularly regarding North Korea's increasingly advanced nuclear and missile programs and China's maritime advancement and efforts to assert its sovereignty claims in the South and East China Seas. The Abe Doctrine seemed to prioritize deterrence in cooperation with the United States over full strategic autonomy in the face of the diminishing of Japan's economic and strategic weight. Abe recalibrated risks and made a systematic and concentrated effort to revise the pacifist constitution. He aimed at managing a more challenging regional security environment and took up a more proactive security role in a narrower space that does not extend much beyond the region instead of a global civilian power. A more active foreign policy did not necessarily mean a more aggressive one, and the US commitment to Japan remains unwavering. The changes of the role of Japanese armed forces could be more precisely understood to bring more international stability and turn Japan into a more reliable partner for the US (Envall, 2020; Liff, 2015; Šebok, 2013).

As Kishida was Abe's foreign minister from 2012 to 2017 – when fundamental aspects of Japan's foreign policy were defined –, many foreign policy orientations remain such as the main guidelines of the 2013 National Security Strategy, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision, and the US-Japan alliance to expand security and economic linkages with other likeminded states (Liff, 2022).

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