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Japan’s Regional Foreign Policy Since 2012: Strategic Realignment and Expanding Partnerships in the Indo- Pacific

- *Summary* -

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Broadly speaking, the paper analyzes the evolution of Japan's regional foreign policy, focusing on the period in-between December 2012 and December 2024. In line with this general objective, the paper attempts to answer specific research questions, each pertaining to their relevant chapter. Striving to achieve the overarching research objective, the paper mainly employs a qualitative methodology to provide a nuanced interpretation of the topic. In regards to data sources, the research combines primary sources (in the form of policy documents and official statements) with secondary sources (mainly books and articles in academic journals). As methodological limitations, the paper prioritizes qualitative analysis in the detriment of quantitative tools (although some quantitative indicators are still used to support existing interpretative, qualitative arguments). Moreover, based on the design of the paper, three major research strategies are used. First, the historical evolution of Japan's political system is explored through historical contextualization. After the historical chapter, content analysis is primarily used to identify and trace the

transformations in Japan's regional foreign policy and security postures. Lastly, a comparative case study approach is adopted to understand Japan's relations with five partners, case studies structured around similar analytical parameters. Overall, the research is confined within several scope limitations. As mentioned earlier, methodologically, qualitative methods were prioritized in the detriment of quantitative ones. Temporally speaking, the analysis is applied to post-2012 developments, even if the historical chapter and the specific case studies do reference pre-2012 events. Geographically speaking, the research is limited by a general framework (the Indo-Pacific regional framework) and by a specific framework (the 5 actors highlighted through the case studies). Other relevant regions and actors are only mentioned, while their relations with Japan remain out of analytical reach.

The first two chapters offer historical context and theoretical grounding. The historical part explored the structural and normative changes that shaped post-World War II Japan and the articulation of its foreign policy. In this sense, the chapter is loosely divided into 5 parts, each pertaining to a specific historical period with defining tendencies. Key milestones during Japan's historical evolution in the Cold War period include the drafting of the Peace Constitution (1947), the development of the low-profile Yoshida Doctrine, which was marked by profound reliance on the US alliance for security, and Japan's role as a developmental aid leader through its Official Development Aid (ODA) programs. In a defining way, these milestones acted as normative pillars that guided Japan's foreign and security politics. The end of the Cold War, however, introduced new challenges, complementing a fragmented political scene on the domestic front. The return of Shinzō Abe in 2012 provided the direction and momentum needed by Tōkyō to reassess its security role, setting the stage for the development of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. Abe step-down amidst the Coronavirus pandemic resulted in a short-lived Suga cabinet (2020-2021) which was ultimately replaced by Kishida's tenure (2021-2024), largely perceived as a continuator of Abe-ism. Moving forward, the theoretical chapter had two fundamental considerations which shaped its form. First, it acted as conceptual guidance points for understanding consecrated International Relations Theories, namely Realism, Liberalism and Social-Constructivism. Second, it defined the research methodology and analytical framework based on Social-Constructivist thought. Key Social-Constructivist concepts (such as identity and norms) were operationalized with practical counterparts to provide a pragmatically-grounded analysis. Additionally, the paper

also analyzed, thorough a Social-Constructivist lens, concepts that are traditionally perceived to pertain materially-oriented theories, such as power and interests.

Chapter 3 sought to understand why 2012 is considered an important year for Japanese politics and why it was selected as the start point of the analysis. The importance of 2012 is divided into two, based on the nature of factors: internal and international. Internally, pre-2012 Japan was largely characterized by political instability in the pre-and-post-Koizumi eras. This was also paired by a political color, as the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP) lost power in favor of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). With the return of Abe in 2012, Japan saw its most stable political leadership in its modern history, creating a basis for the ensuing reforms. This coherence was essential in bringing to fruition security changes initiated by the DPJ administration. Internationally, the regional framework became highly complicated by the ascendancy of Kim Jong-Un and Xi-Jinping. North Korea's military tests and China's aggressiveness in maritime security provided regional anxieties for Japan, who heavily relied on the US for security. In this sense, Obama's re-election and the focus on the Pivot to Asia as a key policy pillar led to the consolidation of the alliance and the 2015 revision of the US-Japan Guidelines for Security Cooperation. Chapter 3 also focused on Japan's enhancement of power capabilities, both in a softer and in a harder sense. In terms of soft power, in 2013, the establishment of the Cool Japan Fund represented a significant initiative for Japan to export its cultural appeal. Moreover, Japan's focus on sustainable development was tied to wider, security-oriented initiatives. In this sense, for Tōkyō, regional development became essential for stability. In terms of hard power, post-2012 Japan engaged in a series of policy shifts and security recalibrations to better address regional realities. This was perceived through the 2014 Proactive Contribution to Peace and the 2015 Security Legislation, which fundamentally allowed Japan to engage in Collective Self Defense (CSD). Moreover, legislative changes were also paired with practical transformations, including expanding the 1% of GDP informal cap for defense spending and the modernization of military forces (including buying F-35 fighter jets). In this logic, the chapter ends by questioning whether Japan can be considered a Great Power – from a Social-Constructivist point of view. Based on the historical norms it adhered to (non-involvement), its legitimacy and how other actors perceive it, Japan is most likely a comprehensive middle power, excelling in softer categories of power (such as economic traits and general cooperation).

Chapter 4 focused on generally understanding how Japan's regional foreign policy (in terms of general directions) has changed since 2012. Overall, it primarily meant strong support for the US, a heightened economic focus and constructive relations with regional neighbors. Moreover, maritime security became a core concept in Japanese policy circles, especially after the heightened Chinese incursions in East and South China Seas. In addition, Japan moved to a more heightened regional role, seeking to participate in the stability of the region. Fundamentally, from 2016, Japan developed its more structured approach known as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, focused on promoting norms, encouraging economic development and ensuring peace. Within the FOIP, Japan enhanced Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the US, India and Australia) cooperation to promote maritime cooperation and infrastructure development. Moreover, the Quad format was replicated in the Malabar maritime exercise, which was aimed to increase interoperability between the 4 partners. The FOIP also promoted the Vientiane and Vientiane 2.0 platforms, focused on boosting the military capabilities of ASEAN states. Fundamentally, FOIP also targeted quality of life enhancements, including infrastructure investment (such as the Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure) and multi-faceted human security cooperation (including the Japan-Mekong Initiative). All in all, the FOIP became an umbrella concept of Tōkyō to promote regional mutual benefit and adherence to international norms.

Chapters 5 to 9 represent the key case studies explored in the paper. Specifically, they follow a similar design, exploring Japan's relations with key actors in the Indo-Pacific: China, South Korea, ASEAN, India and the US. Chapter 5 focused on Tōkyō-Beijing Relations. Pre-2012 relations were relatively stable but the 2012 and 2013 actions (the territorial dispute exacerbated by Japan's nationalization of some of the Senkaku/Diayou Islands, China's declaration of an ADIZ and the maritime incursions) portrayed China as a strategic competitor to Japan. Moreover, these actions also impacted Japan's security changes explored in Chapter 3. High-level dialogues ultimately showcased that, in spite of areas of cooperation (such as economy and diplomacy), security-induced tensions remained persistent and unresolved. In spite of this, the economic component remained one of their most important bilateral pillars, being significantly resilient in face of political shocks. Trade frameworks such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) further anchored economic cooperation. The post-2012 diplomatic cooperation also emphasized people-to-people and cultural ties, although these remain uneven and often shaped by political climates and public perception. In public opinion surveys, the majority

of Japanese respondents hold unfavorable views towards China, largely due to concerns over Chinese assertiveness in the regional framework. Perhaps the most transformative element of Japan-China relations since 2012 has been the intensification of strategic rivalry, especially in new security domains such as gray-zone challenges. Based on these broader security divergences, Japan-China relations will most likely remain structurally competitive.

Chapter 6 explored the dynamics of the Japan-South Korea relations, by showcasing the fundamental importance held by historical disputes in shaping both wider and more targeted cooperation. Historically, Japan and South Korea normalized their political relations in 1965, period followed by a high degree of pragmatism throughout cooperation. This was mostly perceived as a strategic necessity to build-up their relations. However, sensitive topics pertaining to historical memory remained widely unaddressed and ignored. Post-2012, the depth of relations can be divided into 4 stages: 2012 – 2014 – slow deterioration, 2015 – 2017 – relative warmth, 2018 – 2021 – lowest point of relations, 2022 – 2024 – strengthening of relations under US leadership. Among the key milestones, the 2015 History Agreement (focused on solving once and for all the history problems), the 2018 South Korea court rulings against Japanese companies (forcing them to pay compensation for World-War II abuses) and the 2023 Camp David Trilateral JAROKUS Summit (which enhanced the partners' vision for security cooperation) fundamentally highlighted the ups-and-downs mentioned within the 4 historical stages referenced above. As of 2024, two areas remain crucial for Tōkyō-Seoul relations: enhanced cooperation in emerging industries (such as technologies and AI) and extensive focus on comprehensively solving historical difficulties. At the moment, strategic alignment remains conditional on the history problems, as memory continues to affect perceptions and limits deeper trust. While the US-supported trilateralism has helped institutionalize cooperation, domestic political volatility in both countries and possible changes in US policy could impact progress.

Chapter 7 explored how Japan's approach expanded not towards a specific country, but towards ASEAN as a whole. Historically, the cooperation was economically driven, with a focus on trade, ODA and regional diplomacy. The 1977 Fukuda Doctrine promised peaceful engagement and mutual respect, which alleviated regional skepticism towards Japan. Based on the intensification of security dynamics and the changes in domestic politics, post-2012 engagement saw an expansion of perspectives, coupling economic relations with security cooperation and regional connectivity. Through the FOIP, Japan virtually formalized ASEAN's central role in the

Indo-Pacific as a strategic partner for the policymakers in Tōkyō. On a more contrastive note towards multilateralism and an institution-wide approach, Japan mostly prioritized bilateral practical engagement in security topics. In terms of diplomatic dialogue, however, security topics are consistently addressed in multilateral platforms, paired with the introduction of the Official Security Assistance program in 2022. This puts in contrast bilateral initiatives (such as the Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project towards the Philippines Coast Guard) with multilateral for a (such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting – Plus). However, it can be stated that Japan's depth and spectrum of cooperation expanded mostly with ASEAN (in comparison to the other actors analyzed in the paper). Human cooperation came to the forefront, with numerous people-to-people initiatives amongst the partners. In line, Japan came to be perceived as ASEAN's most trusted development partner. Moreover, based on ASEAN's infrastructure needs, Japan's own focus on quality infrastructure and human security development came into contrast with Chinese initiatives, including the Belt and Road Initiative. This yielded a problematic situation for Tōkyō – ASEAN states have sometimes prioritized practical considerations in the detriment of norms-conditioned development. ASEAN will remain a crucial area of investment (of diplomatic efforts) for Japan, but its subtle calls for strategic neutrality might hamper deeper cooperation (such as moving away from bilateral security engagements).

Chapter 8 sought to explore the key drivers and challenges that impacted the evolution of the Japan-India partnership. Overcoming various political obstacles witnessed throughout the 1990s, especially India's 1998 nuclear tests, the 2000s marked India's growing geopolitical importance for the Indo-Pacific. This was adequately perceived by Tōkyō, leading to an upgrade in relations to the status of Strategic and Global Partnership. Post-2012, Abe's return brought along a rather personalized diplomatic environment alongside Modi, which enhanced and facilitated cooperation. This was also paired by Japan's 2016 FOIP and the 'revival' of the Quad format in 2017. In terms of security, the research attempted to showcase the fact that India arguably became Japan's most important partner (excluding the traditional ally – the US). This enhancement of relations coupled a formalization of cooperation (through multilateral platforms and practical exercises) with logistical support and cooperation. While economic cooperation fell short of experiencing a similar growth in collaboration, it yielded a historic-first type of engagement for Japan: the Civil Nuclear Pact (signed in 2016) – the first Japan signed with a non-signatory state of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Even if its economic, practical impact is really difficult to

quantify, its symbolic impact was huge. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine showcased the persistent normative divergence between the partners, as India's non-aligned stance heavily contrasted with Japan's intense pro-Ukraine (and explicitly-mentioned pro-norms based) stance. Similar to the ASEAN case, it is particularly important to see how Tōkyō will manage New Delhi's strategic ambiguity.

Chapter 9 traced Japan-US cooperation during the presidencies of Obama, Trump and Biden. The research was guided by three policy-directions enunciated by the presidents throughout their terms. The United States has remained Japan's most vital strategic partner throughout the postwar period, and this bond evolved even further from 2012 onwards. Under Obama, the "Pivot to Asia" aligned with Abe's proactive diplomacy even if it was more visible in name than in actual practice. Cooperation basically culminated in the 2015 Guidelines revision—broadening joint operational scope, including CSD. Despite expectations of fragmentation, the first Trump era was broadly defined by strategic continuity, as defense cooperation remained robust (with joint exercises, deterrence policies and wider security alignment). Japan's geopolitical value and the personalized approach of Abe mitigated any drastic trajectory changes within the alliance, although certain discursive or symbolic practices highlighted a degree of unpredictability. The 'America is Back' discourse promoted by Biden had the opposite narrative, reinforcing the shared commitment to multilateralism, especially in cases impacted during the previous tenure, including climate change and digital cooperation. However, these global commitments were contrasted with multi-natured crises. All in all, under American guidance, security cooperation expanded through the Quad and through trilateral initiatives alongside South Korea. As of 2024, Trump 2.0 may introduce novel disruptions within the alliance, as equating the impact of his first term with the second one is subject to the same uncertainty, a trait of his administrations.

Finally, Chapter 10 is in itself a sort of analytical conclusion to Japan's foreign policy trajectory in 2024, reflecting the changes within the internal political landscape, as well as the broader international transformations. The political volatility marked by LDP's majority loss and Ishiba's contested leadership signals a moment of uncertainty. The research analyzed Ishiba's approaches to regional politics, concluding that the substance of Japan's foreign policy will remain largely consistent. However, there are still several nuances that have to be mentioned, ranging from political resistance (as Ishiba heads a minority government) to specifics related to policy 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.

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