

## Japan's Foreign Policy on the Truth of China and North Korea Issues

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### Abstract

*This study explores Japan's foreign policy in response to external threats, particularly from China and North Korea. It focuses on Japan's strategic adjustments to China's rising military capabilities and North Korea's continued ballistic missile launches, especially those seen in 2021. By utilizing national interest and foreign policy theories, the article examines how Japan has evolved its defense posture in light of these growing regional challenges. Central to this evolution is the concept of "proactive pacifism," which reflects Japan's shift from a strictly pacifist stance towards a more assertive yet constitutionally constrained security approach. The research underscores how Japan's historical context and identity, shaped by post-WWII pacifism, now intersect with emerging security imperatives. It also highlights the impact of Japan's alliance with the United States and the recalibration of its defense strategies to adapt to the increasingly volatile security environment in East Asia. Overall, the paper illustrates Japan's transition towards a more dynamic foreign policy while maintaining its legal and normative commitments to peace.*

**Keywords:** Defence development, North Korea, China, military, ballistic missiles, proactive pacifism, foreign policy, national interest

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## INTRODUCTION

Japan's security identity has experienced significant transformation over time. Once perceived as an ultra-nationalistic militarist power during the Pacific War, Japan shifted toward pacifism after its World War II defeat, marked by thorough disarmament under Allied occupation. This change was formalized through Article 9 of the Peace Constitution, in which Japan renounced war and committed to maintaining national security by relying on the goodwill of the international community.

Following the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, Japan began reassessing its defense strategy under pressure from the United States. This shift led to the establishment of the National Police Reserve, which would later evolve into the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) (Green, 2001). While Japan aligned with the U.S. during the Cold War, it remained committed to its pacifist stance and refrained from deploying military troops in both the Korean and Vietnam Wars (Hughes, 2004).

Throughout the Cold War era, Japan maintained a non-military posture by avoiding overseas deployment of the SDF, even for peacekeeping missions under the United Nations. It wasn't until the 1990s that Japan began participating in such operations. This long-standing restraint underscored its adherence to the principles enshrined in its Peace Constitution, even as its international influence grew (Samuels, 2007).

However, Japan's approach to national security gradually shifted. While still operating within its constitutional boundaries, Japan incrementally developed military capabilities that paralleled its economic stature. This move marked the beginning of its security normalization, driven by evolving regional threats and strategic demands (Samuels, 2007).

Simultaneously, China's rapid rise as a dominant power in the Indo-Pacific emerged as a major regional concern. Since the 1990s, China had significantly modernized its military, acquiring advanced assets such as aircraft carriers, precision missiles, and space-based systems. These developments aimed to elevate China into a formidable global military force, widely perceived as a bid for regional dominance (Cordesman & Colley, 2015).

In addition to China, North Korea's growing missile capabilities posed another serious threat to Japan. The 2021 ballistic missile launches—some capable of carrying nuclear warheads—underscored Japan's increasing vulnerability. Japan's lack of diplomatic relations with North Korea, dating back to the end of World War II, further complicated its ability to manage these threats (Missile Defense Project, 2021).

Diplomatic attempts to resolve tensions with North Korea reached a notable moment in 2002, when Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi met with Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang. The summit initially promised renewed dialogue, but hopes were quickly dashed. North Korea's admission of a covert nuclear program and acknowledgment of abducting Japanese citizens in past decades reignited tensions and derailed normalization efforts (MOFA Japan, 2002; Cha, 2012).

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research employed qualitative descriptive methods, which aimed to explain the factors underlying various political phenomena. Descriptive research is characterized by its attempt to portray problems, conditions, symptoms, as well as the policies and actions taken in response to them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on interpretation and contextual understanding, qualitative descriptive studies are particularly useful in analyzing complex diplomatic shifts and strategic policies in international relations.

To keep clarity and analytical depth, the author applied specific limitations and delimitations in the research scope. These were intended to narrow the study's focus solely to the phenomenon under examination. This research concentrated on Japan's foreign policy transformation in the post-World War II era, especially how the war's aftermath significantly influenced Japan's national interests and security orientation.

The study particularly examined Japan's diplomatic stance and strategic behavior toward two key countries that were perceived as threats to Japan's regional and global interests. These countries—China and North Korea—were chosen based on their growing military capabilities and regional assertiveness, both of which posed strategic challenges to Japan's evolving foreign policy. The research also analyzed how Japan's pacifist constitution and alliance with the United States shaped its responses to these external pressures.

By examining primary documents, historical policy decisions, and scholarly interpretations, the study aimed to shed light on how Japan balanced its constitutional pacifism with the need to address emerging regional threats. This approach also contributed to a broader understanding of the shifts in Japan's security identity and the recalibration of its role within the Indo-Pacific geopolitical order.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Non-material domestic variables such as national identity, culture, and historical memory received limited attention in post-World War II international relations theory. Dominant approaches, particularly structural realism, treated states as rational unitary actors, driven by the logic of the international system, with domestic contexts often overlooked. However, in the case of Japan, national identity and historical memory have played a key role in shaping its foreign and security policy. Following the devastating events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, Japan appeared as a deeply pacifist state with a constitution that explicitly renounced war as a means of settling international disputes. This marked the beginning of an extended period of strategic restraint, during which Japan prioritized economic development over military expansion and

avoided overseas military engagements. The Peace Constitution, particularly Article 9, became a defining feature of Japan's postwar national identity.

Nonetheless, shifts in the regional and global strategic environment gradually influenced Japan's approach to foreign and security policy. A 2013 Japanese policy paper signaled a growing awareness within Tokyo of the need to redefine its role in regional security, particularly considering mounting threats in East Asia. Japan began to adopt a more assertive role, no longer relying solely on economic soft power but also enhancing its defense posture under the framework of its alliance with the United States. Japan's case has become a central reference point for constructivist scholars, who argue that changes in a country's foreign policy are deeply embedded in changes in identity, norms, and historical narratives.

One of the most pressing issues influencing this shift has been the rise of China. By 2021, China had appeared as a formidable power, rivaling the United States across technological, economic, and military domains. Its assertive actions in the South and East China Seas, especially near the Senkaku Islands/Diaoyutai Qundaos. Although Japan is a maritime nation surrounded by vast sea lanes, its postwar constitutional restrictions limited the development of its military capabilities for decades. Historically, Japan had once been a powerful imperial force in Asia, colonizing several countries across Southeast and East Asia. However, the postwar shift toward pacifism fundamentally changed this trajectory. While Japan's economic recovery and growth propelled it to global prominence, its defense forces remained primarily oriented toward homeland protection.

As China's maritime presence expanded and its naval forces became increasingly capable of operating in contested areas, Japan grew more anxious. There were legitimate concerns in Tokyo that China could restrict freedom of navigation in strategically vital waters, hindering Japan's access to key trade routes and surveillance operations. Furthermore, China's development of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities and its deployment of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines based in Hainan elevated the threat. Analysts predicted that China's long-term goal was to assert regional hegemony in Asia, beginning with East Asia. Japan, with its limited military reach and constitutional constraints, faced increasing difficulty in matching China's assertive posture.

In response to this challenge, Japan began strengthening its security cooperation with ASEAN nations, using a combination of non-traditional security support and capacity-building initiatives. For example, Japan's newly introduced Official Security Assistance (OSA) framework in 2023 enabled Tokyo to provide strategic aid to developing countries in Southeast Asia, particularly in maritime domain awareness and disaster resilience. This move not only reinforced Japan's presence in the region but also helped counterbalance China's growing influence. Japan's emphasis on multilateral partnerships and rules-based maritime order underscored its strategic pivot to a more active security role without abandoning its pacifist principles.

China's emergence as a major power represented one aspect of Japan's security challenges, but North Korea posed a separate and equally serious threat. Since the 1990s, North Korea's determined efforts to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles compelled Japan to reassess its defense policies. A pivotal moment occurred in August 1998, when North Korea fired a Taepodong missile over Honshu, Japan's largest island. This incident sparked strong reactions from both the Japanese public and government, prompting a significant strengthening of the Japan–U.S. security alliance, particularly in the area of missile defense. In response, Japan and the United States began collaborating on missile defense technologies, such as the Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) and later the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense system. These initiatives aimed to protect Japan from potential North Korean missile threats and enhance regional strategic stability.

Diplomatic efforts to normalize relations with North Korea have stalled. Despite first progress marked by the 2002 Pyongyang Declaration—where both parties pledged to abide by international norms and resolve nuclear and abduction issues—tensions soon resurfaced. After North Korea’s public acknowledgment of its clandestine uranium enrichment program in 2002 and continued missile tests, Japan hardened its stance. The prospect of full normalization was made conditional on the complete and verifiable dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear arsenal. Reports wrote down that Japan was prepared to offer North Korea between \$5–10 billion in economic aid, akin to the reparations package it extended to South Korea in 1965. However, this aid would only materialize if Pyongyang made concrete commitments toward denuclearization.

In recent years, North Korea’s technological advancements in hypersonic missiles and claims of tactical nuclear capabilities have only heightened Japan’s sense of vulnerability. Tokyo’s reliance on extended deterrence under the U.S. nuclear umbrella stays a cornerstone of its defense policy. At the same time, Japan has taken steps to strengthen its indigenous capabilities, improve early warning systems, and set up crisis communication mechanisms in coordination with Washington and other regional partners. The threats posed by North Korea are no longer viewed in isolation but rather as part of a broader deterioration in the East Asian security environment.

Recognizing these growing challenges, Japan adopted a more assertive strategic vision. The release of its 2022 National Security Strategy marked a pivotal moment in Japanese defense policy. For the first time, the strategy explicitly mentioned Japan’s intention to get “counterstrike capabilities,” suggesting a move away from exclusive reliance on defensive measures. Additionally, the government committed to doubling its defense spending by 2027, signaling a significant departure from previous postwar norms. This decision was driven by the realization that the regional balance of power was shifting and that Japan could no longer depend solely on external actors for its security.

As part of its strategic repositioning, Japan began to blend economic diplomacy with military cooperation in what has been described as a “smart power” approach. In Southeast Asia, Tokyo’s initiatives supported not just trade and development, but also capacity-building in coast guard operations, cybersecurity, and humanitarian disaster relief. These efforts helped position Japan as a responsible and stabilizing force in the Indo-Pacific.

However, the effectiveness of Japan’s strategy stays contingent on both internal and external factors. Domestically, the challenge lies in maintaining public support for defense normalization amid lingering pacifist sentiments. Externally, Japan’s future will be shaped by the behavior of China and North Korea, as well as the credibility and consistency of the U.S. security commitment in Asia. While Japan has grown more engaged and influential in regional security affairs, it has also become more exposed to geopolitical risks.

Japan’s evolving foreign policy reflects a delicate balancing act. To protect its national interests and support regional stability, Tokyo must continue to build resilient alliances, expand regional partnerships, and pursue principled diplomacy. Its ability to navigate the complex strategic landscape of East Asia will depend not only on military modernization but also on its continued adherence to democratic values, multilateral cooperation, and strategic foresight.

## CONCLUSION

Confronted with the dual challenges posed by China’s assertive regional ambitions and North Korea’s escalating nuclear and missile programs, Japan gradually shifted from its postwar pacifist stance to a more strategic and proactive foreign policy orientation. This transformation was evident in Japan’s commitment to modernizing its Self-Defense Forces, expanding bilateral and multilateral security partnerships, and actively taking part in regional security frameworks.

These efforts stood for a deliberate pivot toward a comprehensive security diplomacy, reflecting Japan's recognition that its long-term national interests could no longer be safeguarded solely through economic strength and reliance on the U.S. security umbrella.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of Japan's evolving security strategy will depend not only on its internal political will and institutional coherence but also on the unpredictable behavior of China and North Korea, as well as the degree of sustained engagement and credibility of the United States as a regional security guarantor. The strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific stays fluid, and Japan's ability to maneuver effectively between these shifting dynamics will figure out its role as a stabilizing force in the region.

As Japan continues to navigate its strategic position between two competing great powers, it must pursue a principled yet adaptive diplomacy—one that balances military preparedness with a steadfast commitment to democratic norms, international law, and regional cooperation. Japan's future as a credible regional stabilizer and security provider will hinge on its ability to harmonize deterrence with dialogue, defense capability with diplomatic outreach, and national interest with global responsibility.

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