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# Japan's quest for a rules-based international order: the Japan-US alliance and the decline of US liberal hegemony

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## ABSTRACT

The decline of US liberal hegemony raises the following questions for Japan: What is Japan's vision of international order and strategy? How does the Japan-US alliance influence Japan's vision? Some have argued that Japan is reactive and lacks a strategy, whereas others have claimed that the country has pragmatically pursued its interests within the given circumstances. This paper argues that Japan has maintained its own vision and strategies since the Cold War. Also, in the 2010s, Japan's diplomatic tradition was updated to focus on actively shaping the Asia-Pacific region. Japan seeks to preserve existing liberal international (rather than domestic) rules; however, its method is classical as it includes a balance-of-power approach involving military expansion and alliances, and a diplomatic approach to making agreements with a variety of political regimes, whether democratic or authoritarian, including China. I call this emerging vision in Japan a 'rules-based order'.



## KEYWORDS

Japan; the United States; grand strategy; liberal international order; China; power transition

## Introduction

Japan stands at a crossroads in the age of US decline as its post-war diplomacy is, in part, based on US dominance. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the US liberal hegemony has been in decline as China's power has been rising and the US-led liberal international order has been in crisis. During this period of power transition, several crucial questions must be asked. What desirable international order do Japan's policy-makers and experts envision for the future? What is Japan's grand strategy for enacting this vision? How is Japan's alliance with the US connected to Japan's vision and strategy?

These questions are themselves controversial, as scholars have cast doubt on the very existence of a grand strategy or vision for the international order in post-war Japan. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, researchers regarded Japan as a reactive state; its foreign policies reflected the pressures of outside powers, '*gaiatsu*', especially the US. According to this argument, Japan lacked any political initiatives or strategies of its own and, instead, only incrementally and bureaucratically reacted to *gaiatsu* (Calder, 1988; Lincoln, 1993).

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However, after the end of the Cold War and with greater military cooperation between Japan and the US and the expanded activities of the Japanese self-defence forces (SDF), scholars have increasingly identified Japan's proactive foreign policies and the strategic logic behind its ostensibly passive behaviour. As these studies have evolved, experts have assessed the extent of Japan's policy shifts. Some scholars who focused on Japan's pacifism accentuated the nation's continued diplomatic passivity even after the Cold War (Berger, 2003; Katzenstein, 1996; Oros, 2008).

In recent studies, on the other hand, particularly after the emergence of Shinzo Abe's second cabinet in 2012, scholars have emphasised the transformation of Japan's foreign policy. Some of these studies have claimed that right-wing nationalism has pushed Japan towards more assertive and autonomous military policies (Hughes, 2016), whereas others have focused on Japan's pragmatic pursuit of its own security and economic interests. In the latter group, some authors have emphasised the transformation of Japan's policies to counter threats from China and North Korea (Green, 2003; Pyle, 2007), but others have argued that developments in post-Cold War Japanese security have been merely updated (within traditional strategies or normative restrictions), rather than radically transformed (Lind, 2016; Oros, 2017; Samuels, 2007; Samuels & Heginbotham, 2002). The arguments that focus on Japan's proactivity imply that the country is pursuing pragmatic material interests; the vision is not one in which the world or regional order would reflect Japan's interests and identity.

Compared to these previous studies, this paper argues that post-war Japan has retained its own vision of international order since the Cold War and, in the 2010s, this long tradition of Japan's diplomacy has shifted to a more active process of shaping the international order in the Asia-Pacific region. Given the decline of US liberal hegemony, this paper argues that Japan seeks to preserve existing liberal international (rather than domestic) norms and rules; however, its method is rather classical, as it includes balance-of-power approaches that involve military expansion and alliances, and classic diplomatic approaches of making agreements with a variety of political regimes, whether democratic or authoritarian, including China. I call this emerging vision in Japan a 'rules-based order'.

Some scholars (especially Japanese experts) have already pointed out that Japan's diplomacy after the Cold War reflects the nation's identity as a liberal democracy, adapting to the US-led liberal global order (Berger, 2007; Ōba, 2019; Shiratori, 2018). This US-led order has a hierarchical structure with liberal international rules, and it has provided the foundation for post-war Japan's peace and prosperity. Compared to other US allies, Japan's motivation to align itself with the US and adapt to its order was 'ontological' rather than 'transactional'; US liberal hegemony was a pre-existing condition for post-war Japan (for a detailed discussion of the concept of international order and ontological/transactional framework, see the introduction to this Special Issue by Goh and Sahashi).

In the age of power transitions, some argue that the Abe administration also promotes liberal values, including democracy and human rights, and thus intends to defend the US-led liberal international order from the rise of China. Moreover, the Abe administration itself has advertised these liberal values and refers to a rules-based order in its own statements (Suzuki, 2017). Some claim that while Abe pursues liberal values, his administration lacks a coherent strategy to counter against China (Jimbo, 2018). Others doubt Abe's emphasis on liberal values due to his nationalism and historical revisionism, and they suggest that the administration pursue these values to deter China's expansion by

appealing to liberal norms (Soeya, 2017). Despite the divergent perspectives on Abe's liberal internationalist credentials, these interpretations share the assumption that Japan's emphasis on liberal rules clashes with China.

Nevertheless, the Japanese government still continues to seek common ground with China and other authoritarian regimes. Throughout those negotiations, Japan aims at retaining existing diplomatic/international rules, which was the status quo created by US liberal hegemony. Japan, however, does not primarily aim at promoting democracy or human rights, and other states' domestic regimes or humanitarian conditions have rarely influenced Japan's policies towards those nations. This also means that Japan attempts to engage with China to make China's policies more acceptable for Japan from a stronger position, which is sustained by Japan's own military expansion and strengthening the Japan-US alliance (i.e. balance of power). This paper, therefore, argues that Japan now pursues liberal international (rather than domestic) rules via the classical balance-of-power approach and classical diplomatic negotiations, and is distinguishable from previous major arguments, including the following: (1) Abe's own self-portrait, which describes him as a liberal internationalist; 2) arguments depicting Japan as an anti-China balancer; (3) the claims identifying Japan as a seeker of pragmatic interests; and (4) a reactive state theory.

This paper consists of five major parts. First, I contextualise the historical foundation of Japan-US relationships and substantiate the existence of a vision for international order in post-war Japan. I argue that the US-led liberal order was the basis of Japan's foreign policy, though the order was not regarded as immutable. Japan has attempted to modify a part of the US-led liberal order, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, to suit its own interests and identity. In the second part, I clarify the existence of Japan's strategic rationale by surveying the logic of the economic peace strategy during the Cold War towards Japan's adjustment in the post-Cold War two decades. The third part investigates the impact of the decline of the US liberal hegemony. Along with its growing concern for the relative decline of US power, Japan began to commit to the maintenance of international order regarding national security issues in the 2010s, which was a substantial departure from Japan's past strategies. In the fourth part, I outline Japan's management of Donald Trump's US government and China's rise in the age of power transition. In the last part, I argue that Japan's vision of order and strategy are now focused on the pursuit of a rules-based international order via classic diplomacy and balance of power.

## **Post-World War II ontological foundations: adapting and modifying US-led liberal order**

The nature of the Japan-US alliance is inextricably linked to the US-led liberal international order. After the end of World War II, following its devastation and defeat in the summer of 1945, Japan had no choice but to join the US-led international order. Whereas the US was invited into a pact with Western European nations (Lundestad, 1986), in the case of Japan, the Japan-US alliance enacted in 1952 was an ontological prerequisite of post-war diplomacy rather than a transactional security pact.

Japanese leaders also calculated that the alliance with the US would provide crucial assets for Japan's recovery, namely free trade and the freedom of navigation for the Japanese industry in secure international circumstances. This alliance with the US, according to

Japanese leaders at the time, would have ensured Japan's membership in the beneficial US-led international order (Yoshida, 2016).

Military cooperation between allies is the essence of a classical symmetric alliance, and Japan's inactivity regarding military cooperation with the US epitomises the country's primary incentive to form the alliance. Scholars in international relations have defined alliances as alternatives to military expansion (Snyder, 1997). However, Japan's Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida, who decided to join the alliance, as well as subsequent Japanese leaders, did not consider military cooperation with the US as necessary; rather, due to US supremacy in the post-war world, Japanese officials estimated that the likelihood of direct military invasion by a communist nation was low, and they intuited that the US military's presence in Japan would deter such actions.

Post-war Japanese society has been deeply suspicious about the Japanese military and pre-war regime in general, and the power of Japan's leaders has been limited on solid legal grounds. The Japan-US alliance has been based on two contradictory US-initiated documents. US officials drafted the first document, Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, promulgated in 1946, which restricted Japan's defence capabilities to ensure its demilitarisation. The second document, the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the US (enacted in 1952; revised in 1960), contained provisions that allowed the US to establish military facilities in Japan in exchange for its defence of the nation. The two documents created a conservative and progressive bifurcation in Japanese society. The former, under the leadership of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), supported the alliance and held most of the political power in the post-war years. The latter group praised Article 9 and resisted both Japan's rearmament and the alliance with the US; this faction retained partial political power in the National Diet and had a strong influence on public opinion. Any conservative attempts to revise Article 9 would have resulted in domestic instability. For Japan's conservative leaders, including Yoshida, the nation's military expansion and security cooperation with the US were of secondary importance (Kusunoki, 2009).

During the Cold War, Japan invented a diplomatic tradition to adapt and contribute to the US-led order focusing on economic rather than military issues. Japan's motivation came partly from the economic benefit of the US-led order, in light of Japan's repeated struggle to gain full membership of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

At the same time, Japan sought to increase its status and identity within the US-led liberal order. Japanese officials attempted to consolidate Japan's membership in this order and improve its reputation. The nation's attempts reflected its repeated struggle in the diplomacy of the United Nations (UN) to repeal the Enemy Clauses and gain a permanent UN Security Council seat.

As a result of rapid economic growth in the 1960s, Japan developed into the second-largest economic power, and its influence, contribution, and commitment to the liberal economic order surged through the 1970s. During this time, Japan increasingly committed to the management of the liberal order through several international organisations, such as the Group of 7, the International Energy Agency, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (Shiratori, 2015). In the post-war era, Japan first adapted to the US-led international rules and joined international organisations, and then committed to the management of the economic order.

However, Japan did not just adapt and commit to the US-led order; rather, it also sought to modify a part of the order based on its unique identity. In the 1970s, Japan began to engage actively in diplomatic relationships with Asian nations through economic diplomacy, which is known as Asian diplomacy, emphasising peaceful and non-military methods of promoting peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. The 1977 Fukuda Doctrine (named after Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda) was the foundation of this vision (Wakatsuki, 2002).

Japan's Asian diplomacy first sought to secure offshore markets for the Japanese industry by exporting its 'economic miracle'. The institutionalisation and augmentation of official development assistance (ODA) provided effective economic policy tools that allowed Japan to embody Asian diplomacy and implement significant economic aid to Southeast Asian nations, South Korea, and China.

The second goal was to create a secure, regional Asian order. The major threat to Asia at that time, according to Japan, was the region's domestic politics, which was undergoing a period of instability as the result of decolonisation and much-needed nation-building. Japan considered economic aid and social assistance as the best methods to stabilise the region and ensure its security, wherein economic development would elicit domestic political stability, leading to moderate foreign policies. In addition, Japan intended to ensure the peace and prosperity of the region by supporting multilateral institution building, and its efforts were centred on Southeast Asia (Miyagi, 2017).

Japanese Asian diplomacy also represented the nation's identity and nationalism. Japan deemed it appropriate to assist Asian nations in learning from its own economic miracle, and presented a model of development that emphasised the government's role in nurturing domestic industry and not interfering in other countries' domestic issues, especially the values of the regimes in power, which were in opposition to the US model that accentuated market competition, democratisation, and political reforms. Japan, instead, sought to demonstrate that its achievement differed from the US and pre-war imperial Japan by exporting its knowledge and experience to a variety of Asian regimes (Hatano & Satō, 2004).

Along with adapting to US hegemony, Asian diplomacy added another dimension to Japan's vision of order: reshaping surrounding international circumstances through economic measures and diplomatic consensus-building. The economic miracle of the 1970s and 1980s allowed Japan to export its development model, the essence of which was non-intervention within the territories where its model was received. Japan did not challenge US hegemony, but it insisted on autonomy when the US, which believed in free-market competition, grew frustrated with Japan's emphasis on the government fostering economic development.

The Japan-US controversy escalated after the end of the Cold War in 1991, when Japan attempted to legitimise its economic approach. Yasushi Mieno, a governor of the Bank of Japan, stated: 'Experience[s] in Asia have shown that although development strategies require a healthy respect for market mechanisms, the role of the government cannot be forgotten'. Furthermore, in 1997 and 1998, in the face of the Asian Financial Crisis, Japan proposed the Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) and argued that the cause of the crisis was the market liberalisation in Thailand, which US-led financial globalisation had spearheaded. The US and the International Monetary Fund, however, opposed the AMF, arguing that Asian economic structures had been the drivers of the catastrophe (Iida, 2013; Mieno, 1991).

Japan's attempts to create regional order based on its own image triggered competition with the US. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Japan used economic assistance and diplomatic normalisation to reach out to Vietnam hoping to moderate that nation's foreign policy and encourage its relationships with other maritime Southeast Asian nations. The US, however, especially during the Nixon and Carter presidencies, strongly opposed Japan's initiatives; thus, Japan's Indochina peace initiative failed (Nobori, 2016).

Japan's defeats showed the limits of its Asian diplomacy; for example, Japan's concept of regional order was only a variant of – rather than an alternative to – the larger US-led international order. Nevertheless, repeated Japan-US friction regarding the region's future illustrated the originality and distinctiveness of Japan's concept of regional order, as embodied in Asian diplomacy.

### **Japan's grand strategies: from the Yoshida Doctrine to internationalism**

What policy resources, then, did Japan use to realise its visions of order? During the Cold War, Japan invented the strategy known as the Yoshida Doctrine, which originated from the diplomatic practices of Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida. Scholars have described the Yoshida Doctrine as a strategy for delegating security to the US so that Japan could focus on economic development (Kōsaka, 2008). Yoshida, however, did not regard his policy as a long-term national strategy, which is why he believed that Japan should rearm after completing its recovery from the wartime devastation.

However, what was once a foreign policy response to a particular set of circumstances, has become a dogma applied to a variety of disparate contexts. This occurred because of Japan's domestic dynamics. The conservative governments throughout the 1950s repeatedly attempted to overcome progressive resistance to the alliance with the US, but the nationwide opposition to the revision of the security treaty in 1960 caused a conservative policy change. Afraid of losing domestic political power, the conservative government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Hayato Ikeda, decried seeking military cooperation with the US.

Although the succeeding Eisaku Sato government attempted to overcome progressive resistance, the Vietnam War triggered another widespread anti-war and anti-US movement in Japan. As a result, the second half of the 1960s and the early 1970s marked a turning point in Japanese diplomacy, where progressive intransigence was institutionalised in Japanese policies. In 1967, the Japanese National Diet adopted three principles for arms export; within a few years, arms sales from Japan were banned. From 1967 to 1971, Japan stated that the country should neither possess nor manufacture nuclear weapons nor allow them into the country; moreover, in 1976, Japan placed a limit on the defence budget of one per cent of the gross domestic product (GNP). Over time, due to concerns regarding Japan's domestic instability, the US reluctantly and tacitly accepted the fact that Japan's military cooperation was limited to its territory. As this alliance system developed, literature on the Yoshida Doctrine surged, particularly in the late 1970s and 1980s; thus, Yoshida's temporary policy choices gradually morphed into a national strategy (Nagai, 1985; Sakai, 1991).

Japan's SDF advanced the nation's military cooperation with US military forces even during the Cold War; for instance, in the 1970s, the US defeat in Vietnam, the US–China rapprochement, and the US retreat from Southeast Asia resulted in the 1978 Guidelines



for Japan-US Defence Cooperation, which enhanced Japan-US military cooperation. However, as Japan was under no serious external threat at the time, its 'basic defence force concept' limited its military capability to small-scale aggression (Michishita, 2009). Furthermore, in the 1980s, in the face of the expansion of Russian naval forces, Japan advanced its military cooperation with the US Navy. Japan's military contribution supported the US-led order in the region, but its military activities were still restricted to the lands and waters around Japanese territories.

In summary, under the Yoshida Doctrine, Japan's military activities and its security cooperation with the US were restricted to the defence of Japan's territories during the Cold War. Japan's measures to commit to international order were focused on non-security measures, particularly economic policies. Japanese officials believed that Japan's economic prosperity under the Yoshida Doctrine offered the ideal model for Asian nations that would lead to peace in the region. It is not a coincidence that Asian diplomacy grew rapidly in the 1970s, when the Yoshida Doctrine was formulated as a strategy. Despite the ostensible differences in these policies that ran counter to US interests, Japan attempted to retain autonomy for as long as possible, protecting economic and security interests through economic measures, and exerting its influence on the international order to modify, in part, the US-led order. Subsequently, Japan established its security logic in the 1970s.

From the 1990s to the 2000s, however, Japan's strategy experienced substantial adjustments due to the end of the Cold War. First, Japan's traditional strategy faced limitations in the 1990s; in particular, its economic stagnation, combined with other Asian economic miracles, limited the usefulness of Japan's ODA. Second, more importantly, throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, the US-led liberal international order was regarded as the only available option, which yet again provided Japan with aspirations to adapt to and gain respected status within the liberal global order.

In the post-Cold War era, therefore, some influential Japanese officials and experts advocated for the alignment of Japan's perceptions of the international order with those of the US and other Western liberal nations. According to this argument, expanding Japan's activities to pursue universal liberal values (including democracy, liberalism, and human rights) would further bolster the order and assure Japan's status. This concept was called *kokusaishugi*, which means 'internationalism' or 'liberal internationalism'. The uniqueness of Japan's internationalist vision for order is evident in its open advocacy of liberal values through diplomatic efforts. An example is the Taro Aso administration's concept of the arc of freedom and prosperity (Jimbo, 2018; Shiratori, 2018; Soeya, 2017).

Such discourse, however, was not fully reflected in policies; for instance, regarding economic policy, the Development Cooperation Charter in 1992 declared that Japan would focus on the promotion of democracy, a market-oriented economy, and basic human rights in developing countries where it was active (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [MOFA], 1992). However, the annual report of 1993 also stressed Japan's reluctance to intervene in developing nations' domestic politics by 'setting the standard of democracies' as a condition for implementing the ODA (MOFA, 1993). Furthermore, in the early-2000s, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA, a major government-related organisation for development assistance) declared that the nation's approach to democratisation 'does not necessarily aim to build systems and institutions' that are 'closely connected to the political values of the country' and that, 'unlike assistance provided by



the US, Japan's assistance for democratic institutions does not aim at expansion of the democratic system itself' (JICA, 2004).

Nevertheless, Japan's security policy experienced substantial changes after the end of the Cold War and the resulting disappearance of the threat of the Soviet Union. In security policy, the redefinition of the US–Japan alliance with the enlargement of SDF's activities represented the impact of internationalism, which originated in the crises of the alliance in the early years of the post-Cold War era. The end of the Cold War also raised questions about the necessity of the alliance, particularly when Japan engaged in severe trade conflicts with the US. The Gulf War in 1991 triggered another friction in the alliance. During this first military conflict of the post-Cold War era, Japan offered 13 billion USD to support US coalition forces. However, the international community did not appreciate Japan's offer of a financial contribution without a military presence (or so Japanese officials and the Japanese public thought), which deeply traumatised Japanese policymakers.

After the emergence of the Clinton administration in 1993, US–Japan trade disputes worsened further. Moreover, the Japanese government requested experts to draft the Higuchi report, which aimed to redefine Japan's security policy. The report's emphasis on multilateral security institutions was suspicious for the US defence officials, as it seemed to depart from its bilateral alliance with the US (Green, 2017).

In the face of these crises, the US attempted to redefine and strengthen the US–Japan alliance in the mid-1990s. From 1996 to 1997, Japan and the US agreed to extend the alliance beyond the defence of Japan in the following documents: the Japan-US Joint Declaration on Security; a joint message from Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto and President Clinton; and revised Guidelines for Japan-US Defence Cooperation. Emerging external threats also influenced the redefinition of the alliance, such as the 1994 North Korean nuclear crisis and the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis. In 1999, the Japanese government successfully passed a set of bills in the National Diet to provide a legal basis for collaboration with US military forces for ship inspections, rear-area logistic support, and search-and-rescue operations. This was a direct result of North Korea's launch of a long-range ballistic missile in 1998 that flew over Japan. From a short-term perspective, the most important change concerned the US suspension of the reduction of US forces and the reassurance of its commitment to the defence of Japan.

From a long-term perspective, however, the enlargement of the alliance's scope (i.e. the globalisation of the US–Japan alliance) had a more enduring influence. The Japan-US Joint Declaration on Security and revised Guidelines for Japan-US Defence Cooperation accentuated the significance of US–Japanese cooperation in the regional security of the Asia-Pacific area, as well as the global 'common agenda'. Specifically, they covered non-traditional security issues, such as environmental issues, humanitarian assistance for failed states, nuclear non-proliferation, terrorism, the stability of the global economy and global finances, food security, and global health. In other words, the focus of the alliance's redefinition was on the SDF's cooperation with US military forces outside of the Japanese territory, especially regarding non-traditional security issues, to help maintain the US-led global liberal order. The US war on terror in the early 2000s, therefore, caused Junichiro Koizumi's government to respond swiftly to US requests. Koizumi, enacting the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law, decided to send SDF ships to escort US naval ships in the Indian Ocean, and dispatched ground forces to Iraq. Some Japanese officials believed that Japan had a responsibility to commit to the stability of the US-led global liberal

order, viewing Japan's cooperation with the US in emergencies as a way to increase the nation's voice and prestige in the order. Others believed, based on the 'lessons' learned from the Gulf War, that the collaboration with the US was necessary for an alliance and for Japan's status within the order (Satake, 2016; Yamaguchi, 2012).

Despite these controversial SDF activities, Japan was still cautious about using military force throughout the 1990s and the 2000s. Rather, Japan's value-oriented diplomacy focused on improving the social and economic circumstances of developing nations and fragile states through economic assistance, utilising the SDF in non-traditional security issues and risk-management issues. In other words, although Japan enlarged the geographic sphere of the SDF's activities, these operations did not include traditional national security issues.

Japanese internationalism consisted of three assumptions. First, that US supremacy and the spread of universal liberal values were irrevocable. Second, that the US pursued and respected a liberal international order in which Japan could be assured of its status as a respected member by means of economic and non-traditional contributions to this order. Third, that Japan did not need to commit to directly securing the order by military or diplomatic means; rather, such efforts were counterproductive due to Japan's history and economic supremacy. Gradually, these assumptions became unsustainable by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

### **National security and rules-based order: Japan's perceptions of US decline in the 2010s**

Japan's strategy experienced a major turning point from the late-2000s to the early 2010s due to the expansion of Chinese maritime activities. In October 2008, Chinese military ships, for the first time, manoeuvred around the Japanese archipelago, which alarmed Japan's defence officials. A more alarming call came in 2010 and 2012, when Japan experienced severe diplomatic strife with China regarding sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands in Okinawa. Under the government of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which was more liberal than the LDP and sought favourable relations with Japan's Asian neighbours, Japan faced a direct threat to its territory for the first time since the end of World War II.

As a result of the Senkaku Islands dispute, Japan deepened its concerns about aggressive Chinese activities, such as China's creation of artificial islands to claim control of the open sea, its unilateral declaration of an air defence identification zone, and its attempts to establish economic rules through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. These concerns, in particular, tacitly but substantially changed Japanese perceptions of US power in the 2010s. The Barack Obama administration, following the Senkaku crisis, confirmed its commitments to the defence of Japan and the Senkaku Islands (US Department of State, 2010). However, Japanese officials did not think these US declarations were enough to counter Chinese activities. If Japanese officials had thought so, Japan would have continued to avoid direct commitments to military issues during the Obama era, in keeping with the nation's traditional diplomatic stance from the Cold War through the 2000s. In contrast, however, after the Senkaku crisis, Japan's diplomatic strategy clearly changed, returning to traditional national security issues when it committed to the international order.

For security policy, in addition to confirming the commitment to the US, Japan sought to maintain and increase the capabilities of the US–Japan alliance. Some scholars have investigated the enhancement of SDF’s capabilities and interoperability with US military forces, particularly those beginning with Shinzo Abe’s LDP administration in 2012. Abe revised important brakes (such as the three principles concerning arms exports), limits on the military budget, and restrictions on alliance cooperation by enacting controversial new Japanese military legislation titled Japan’s Legislation for Peace and Security. In 2015, Japan and the US again revised the Guidelines for the Japan–US Defence Cooperation, further expanding the nations’ peacetime cooperation. For the defence in the East China Sea, the SDF deployed the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, increased SDF’s naval and air capabilities, and strengthened Japan’s Coast Guard (Smith, 2019).

In diplomacy, the Abe administration rapidly deepened its security cooperation not only with the US but also with Australia, India, and European nations. The Abe administration also framed Japan’s security policy based on the ‘security diamond’ consisting of Japan, India, Australia, and the US. Furthermore, Japanese government officials started to use more often the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ rather than ‘Asia-Pacific’, emphasising liberal coalitions against China (Dian, 2019).

Japan also transformed its economic policy and accelerated its capacity-building of the naval patrol capabilities of the Southeast Asian nations by providing vessels and training for their coast guards. Moreover, even in its policies affecting economic institutions, Japan attempted to lead Asia’s rule-making to counter China’s increasing influence. Japan refused to join the China-led AIIB, while promoting the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with Asia-Pacific nations and the US, which was regarded as a major venue for competing with China over economic rule in the Asia-Pacific region.

Most of Abe’s foreign policies were inherited from the legacies of the DPJ government from 2009 to 2012 (Sahashi, 2017); for example, in December 2010, the DPJ government revised a key document in Japan’s defence policy, the National Defence Programme Guidelines. This document established the concept of the Dynamic Defence Force, which aimed at enlarging the SDF’s peacetime operations, including intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities, as well as international security cooperation. The document, designed to ‘stabilise the Asia-Pacific region’, also emphasised the need to strengthen ‘a security network’, especially with South Korea, Australia, ASEAN countries, and India (Ministry of Defence of Japan, 2010). At the end of its administration, the DPJ also increased SDF’s capabilities to counter China, and it implemented capacity-building activities in Southeast Asian nations.

In the 2010s, along with Chinese expansion and the erosion of US supremacy, Japan’s officials became increasingly interested in national security issues in its grand strategy. Beyond parties and ideologies, Japan, in the 2010s, for the first time in its post-war history, included SDF activities in the national security sphere to commit to and preserve the desirable international order.

Japan’s reiteration of universal values in its diplomacy after the Senkaku crisis is relevant to understand what the country is pursuing as a desirable international order through those new policies. Prime Minister Abe’s influential aides have repeatedly expressed their passion for value-oriented diplomacy (Suzuki, 2017). In 2013, the Abe administration described its vision by emphasising the protection of ‘the freedom of thought, expression, and speech’. It also ensured that the seas were ‘governed by laws and rules, not by might’,

and it pursued ‘free, open, and interconnected economies’. The aim of these principles was to preserve Japan’s national interest, which ‘lies eternally in keeping Asia’s seas unequivocally open, free, and peaceful’ (MOFA, 2013).

The distinctiveness of Japan’s values after 2010 is evident in its focus on preserving the status quo of the international rules and order, epitomised in Japan’s repeated emphasis on the rule of law. In 2014, Abe gave a keynote speech at the 13th International Institute for Strategic Studies Asian Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue) titled ‘Peace and Prosperity in Asia, Forevermore: Japan for the Rule of Law, Asia for the Rule of Law, and the Rule of Law for All of Us’. Standing before leaders of Asian nations whose regimes represented a variety of forms of government – ranging from authoritarianism to democracy – Abe advocated the importance of three principles to promote the rule of law: ‘The first principle is that states shall make and clarify their claims based on international law. The second is that states shall not use force or coercion in trying to drive their claims. The third principle is that states shall seek to settle disputes by peaceful means’ (MOFA, 2014b). In 2015, before the US Congress, Abe again reiterated the same three principles when discussing ‘the state of Asian waters’ (MOFA, 2015).

This is a substantial change in the values of Japanese diplomacy. Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, as discussed, Japanese diplomacy focused on the domestic economic or social conditions of fragile and developing nations. Abe’s three principles, however, emphasised the international rules that restrict the diplomatic activities of great powers.

The MOFA document about Japan’s well-known ‘Indo-Pacific concept’ explains what are the ‘rules’ that Japan desires. Japan seeks diplomatic principles and ‘international public goods’ that promote ‘peace, stability and prosperity across the region’. The document states that Japan’s concept of the ‘rules-based international order’ includes ‘the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful settlement of disputes, and promotion of free trade’ (MOFA, 2019).

Japan’s declarations are not directly aimed at promoting democratic regimes or improving human rights in other nations’ domestic politics; for example, Japan’s Indo-Pacific concept noted that ‘Japan will cooperate with any country that supports this idea’, listing a variety of Asian nations, including authoritarian states, in its projects (MOFA, 2019). Moreover, as the following sections demonstrate, Japan is trying to find common ground with authoritarian nations, including China. Its approach to embodying a desirable order was inherited from its Asian diplomacy, and the nation is still reluctant to intervene in other nations’ domestic issues.

Japan’s quest for a rules-based order is not an isolated or unique phenomenon. The decline of US liberal hegemony along with China’s rise have either forced or encouraged regional powers partnered with the US to commit to creating a desirable order within their own regions, as shown by the cases of Germany, India, and Turkey (see Helwig’s, Mukherjee’s and Buhari’s contributions to this Special Issue). Also, our research reveals that some nations in the Asia-Pacific region share the idea of a rules-based order, including Vietnam and the Philippines, as Australia’s case in this volume also suggests (see Henry’s contribution to this Special Issue).

Ultimately, Japan is pursuing a rules-based international order that ensures the principles of peaceful conflict resolution, freedom of navigation, and free trade, rather than promoting democratic regimes or human rights. This does not mean that Japan does not believe in democracy or human rights; however, the promotion of democracy or

human rights is not included as a direct and short-term diplomatic goal in Japan. Through the Indo-Pacific concept, Japan intends to demonstrate the democratic and liberal alternative to other Asian nations, which differs from the Chinese authoritarian model. In addition, Japan's rules-based order differs from the US liberal international order in this regard, even though the US established these rules.

## Managing the US's decline and China's rise

If Japan desires a rules-based order, how does the Japanese government embody its vision? As the previous section illustrated, Japan's strategic priority is to verify the US's commitment and supplement its declining power. Japan seeks to achieve this goal by strengthening its military cooperation with the US, establishing security networks with other liberal like-minded nations, and promoting Japan's own military expansion. Japan's traditional strategy of restricting allied military cooperation under the Yoshida Doctrine has shifted to a bonding strategy that encourages the US to defend Japan and the existing order. Preserving the balance of power is an indispensable component of Japan's strategy.

In addition to China's rise, Trump's appointment as US President in November 2016 further damaged Japan's perceptions of US power. This is because Trump's foreign policies have eroded the US-led order, including the administration's abandonment of the TPP, renegotiations of South Korean trade agreements and the North American Free Trade Agreement, attacks on allies concerning burden sharing, and a trade war with China. In the face of Trump's 'America first' policies, influential Japanese experts have openly expressed concerns about both the US's ability and intentions to preserve the liberal international order. Some experts have described Trump's government as a revisionist power rather than as a status quo power, at least with regards to the economic order (Shiraishi, 2018). Other experts have accentuated how important it is for Japan to preserve the liberal order in the Asia-Pacific region (Kamiya, 2018).

Despite the major shocks resulting from Trump's victory, Japan's management methods have continued to be a bonding strategy. Prime Minister Abe rushed to meet with Trump after the US presidential election, and the meeting was regarded as successful amid efforts to construct a close personal relationship between the two leaders. As for the Senkaku Islands, during the Japan-US summit meeting held in February 2017, Abe and Trump issued a joint statement opposing 'any unilateral action that seeks to undermine Japan's administration of these islands' (MOFA, 2017a). Compared with Trump's turbulent relationship with Western European nations, it seemed, as of early 2020, that Japan's bonding strategy has worked well, even in the case of Trump, which rather resembles Polish approaches coming from its concerns over the Russia's revanchism (see Lanoszka's contribution to this Special Issue). In other words, faced with China's rise, Japanese officials believe that Japan needs the US's capabilities to maintain the balance of power in this region, even during the Trump presidency.

However, Trump's lack of respect for liberal institutions and his abrupt foreign policy shifts, such as his changes on the North Korean nuclear issue and on Iran, could trigger friction with Japan. Trump has repeatedly criticised Japan for acting as a free-rider with regard to US security protection. Japan avoided being attacked by Trump during the first two years of his presidency. However, his harsh and unsophisticated negotiation

style regarding host nation support for US troops in South Korea, as well as the military expenditures of NATO nations, can also be applied to Japan. The strategy of bonding with the US is not enough when the US president shows his antagonism towards free trade and US alliance networks.

In addition to maintaining a relationship between Abe and Trump, and increasing its own military power, Japan has sought to find common ground with China in pursuing a rules-based order.

In retrospect, even during the Obama administration, Japan attempted to establish diplomatic networks not only with liberal nations but also with authoritarian regimes. Based on its liberal values, the Obama administration took a hard stance towards the leaders of the military regimes of Thailand and President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines. In Japan's view, however, these idealistic interventionist policies would have only exacerbated these nations' authoritarian tendencies and driven them into China's embrace, thus eroding international support for the existing rules and order. Japan sought stable relations with Duterte, and when humanitarian violations occurred in Myanmar, Japan did not pressure the government. Instead, Japan tried to assist the refugees by providing economic aid (MOFA, 2017b).

Japan's circumspect attitude towards interfering in the domestic issues of other nations has also been applied to China. Japan clarified its belief in democracy and human rights with its support for declarations concerning the human rights situation in Xinjiang in 2019. Japan, however, has been reluctant to link domestic issues and international relations. For instance, unlike other Western nations, Japan remained relatively silent in the face of Hong Kong's anti-China student movement in 2014, and in the protests that began in 2019 (MOFA, 2014c). Japan also tried to find common ground with China through negotiations even after 2010. Japan's diplomatic efforts gradually improved Japan-China relations, especially after Prime Minister Abe and President Xi Jinping held their first official meeting in November 2014, which was also the first Japan-China summit meeting following the Senkaku crisis (MOFA, 2014a).

Under the Trump administration, the US policy towards China has rapidly hardened, as if the aim were to create a bifurcated world based on a divided supply chain. Japan, however, has continued to seek good relations with China. Abe delivered a message of appreciation for China's One Belt One Road initiative to Xi in May 2017, when LDP Secretary-General Toshihiro Nikai visited Beijing. Japan's attempts to improve its relationship with China led the premier of the State Council of China, Li Keqiang, to visit Japan in May 2018. Abe visited Beijing in October 2018 and again met with Xi in June 2019, declaring that Japan and China were 'shifting from competition to collaboration, working together as partners that will not threaten each other, and developing a free and fair trading system' (Kobara, 2018). This resulted in President Xi Jinping's forthcoming state visit to Japan in 2020.

In the twilight of US liberal hegemony, the Japanese government perceives its current diplomatic approaches, including its China policy, as a continuation of previous practices. Japanese officials reiterate that the US is an indispensable ally of Japan and its security guarantee provides a foundation for Japan's foreign policy. The Japanese government regards its rapprochement with China as mending their once disastrous relationship. China still poses a serious threat to Japan's maritime security, which was true even

during Abe's visit to Beijing. Japanese officials believe that they are operating in continuity with the past (Kawashima, 2018).

Japan's perception of the Japan-US alliance, especially its implications for Japan's vision of the international order, has changed, however. During the Obama administration, particularly after the Senkaku crisis, Japan strove to consolidate US supremacy. For Japan, this would preserve the existing liberal order by strengthening the Japan-US alliance and its diplomatic efforts. Under Trump's presidency, reinforcing the alliance with the US is still necessary. It is not enough, however, for Japan to secure international rules and regional stability, as the US president has not respected them. Considering that China is still rising and the future of the US is unpredictable, Japan cannot exclude the possibility of another US president emerging who antagonises alliances in the future.

The world has changed, and thus, the role of the Japan-US alliance in Japan's grand strategy has also changed. The US's retreat from the liberal order triggered the nascent transition in the nature of the Japan-US alliance within Japan's grand strategy, from membership in the liberal order towards one of the most important policy tools for maintaining a rules-based order.

In summary, Japan is pursuing a rules-based international order, which is implemented via both the balance-of-power approach and diplomatic consensus-building involving China; Japan is attempting to find common ground with China based on strengthened alliance networks. Regarding Japan's vision and strategy, the Japan-US alliance is now the most important policy tool, yet only one of the policy tools for realising a rules-based order.

Japan, however, is not a monolith; Japanese officials, experts, and the public do not completely agree on what rules Japan should pursue. Should Japan seek diplomatic concessions from states that, from a Japanese perspective, do not appear to follow existing agreements or have no incentive to find common ground? Abe administration has pursued good relations with Russia despite opposing voices among Japanese experts. Also, in July 2019, regarding the export of vital chemicals for the manufacture of semiconductors in South Korea, Japan declared that South Korea's favoured trade status as a 'white nation', held since 2004, should be rescinded. The incident was the result of emotional friction between Japan and South Korea over historical issues and the radar lock-on incident. Japan's leaders are reportedly frustrated with South Korea's repeated disregard of existing agreements; Prime Minister Abe clearly stated that South Korea had broken international rules and existing agreements with Japan.

Regarding China's policy, the leadership of the Abe administration, as well as experts on economic diplomacy and Asian nations, are pursuing improved relations with China. However, some Japanese officials and experts, especially those in charge of security or cyber issues, strongly support Trump's confrontational approach to China. They regard China as a rule breaker that does not intend to find common ground with Japan. At the end of 2019, for instance, LDP politicians openly opposed President Xi's upcoming state visit to Japan despite Prime Minister Abe's preponderance in LDP and enthusiasm for advancing Japan's relationship with China (Asahi Shimbun, 2019). On the one hand, Japan now stands between exclusionist tendencies that could divide the world, and, on the other hand, an inclusive rules-based order that searches for common ground with the diverse regimes of other Asian nations.



## In search of a rules-based order

This paper proposes three related claims. First, post-war Japan's diplomacy consists of two diplomatic traditions: adapting and committing to the US-led liberal order and the imperatives to shape the Asian regional order along with Japan's experience and identity. Second, those traditions, along with post-Cold War internationalism, shared an important characteristic: Japan refrained from committing efforts to traditional national security issues and, instead, primarily focused on economic and non-traditional security issues. Third, due to the decline of US liberal hegemony, Japan has increasingly committed to the management of the liberal order in the traditional security field throughout the 2010s and currently seeks a rules-based international order via classic diplomacy and balance of power.

At a first glance, recent Japanese policies contradict each other. The Abe administration, in the name of the rule of law and liberal values, has sought to strengthen its alliance with the US, promote free trade through the TPP, criticise Chinese maritime activities, and enlarge military cooperation with Australia, India, and some European nations. Despite this emphasis on democratic coalitions, Abe has also deepened Japan's relationships with authoritarian nations and illiberal democracies, such as Turkey, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Southeast Asian nations, to contrast the increasing Chinese influence. Abe has additionally sought to improve Japanese relations with China, and cooperation with China in overseas development projects, even though some of them are part of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

Previous studies, as highlighted in the introduction of this paper, focused only on one of the above claims when they interpreted Japan's recent diplomacy. Some experts emphasised Japan's military expansion and democratic coalition building, concluding that Japan is the defender of the liberal international order. These diplomatic activities, however, when coupled with Abe's nationalistic tendencies and historical revisionism, might also convince some scholars that Japan is seeking to simply contain China. Some experts who are interested in Japan's engagement with China regard these policies as contradictory, depicting Japan as a reactive state, or criticising the Japanese government's lack of vision. Others claim that Japan is pursuing economic interests from China and security protection from the US. Accordingly, Japan is seen as pragmatically seeking hedging without any visions of order.

This paper, on the other hand, argues that Japan's ostensibly contradictory diplomatic behaviours since 2010 are based on the coherent strategic logic of the vision of the rules-based international order. By using the term 'rules-based order' rather than 'liberal international order', I accentuate the following aspects: (1) Japan's enthusiasm for preserving the international rules between sovereign states, especially the principles of peaceful conflict resolution, the freedom of navigation, and free trade; and (2) its tendency to regard promoting democracy and human rights in other states' domestic politics as long-term ideals rather than short-term diplomatic goals.

The existing liberal international rules were established through the US liberal hegemony, and so Japan is striving to preserve the status quo. Japan then opposes other states' challenges to these rules, especially China's expansion, not only via economic and non-traditional security measures but also by using military powers in the traditional national security field. Japan has expanded its military capabilities, enlarged its security networks, and strengthened its alliance with the US.

Japan primarily aims to preserve the rules that dictate diplomatic behaviours, as it is not seeking to exclude China and other authoritarian states from the order but rather to find a common ground with these nations. At the same time, Japan has continuously sought its military expansion and alignment; in other words, Japan ignores Chinese reactions when it pursues balancing efforts. Japan's actions are not fully explained as hedging or as 'insurance' policies. Nevertheless, Japanese officials do not think that these diplomatic efforts contradict Japan's balancing behaviours. This is because maintaining a favourable balance of power provides Japan with a solid foundation for negotiating with China, which mirrors classic diplomacy in the modern European international system.

The Asia-Pacific region contains a variety of political regimes, ranging from democratic to authoritarian states. The Japan-US alliance that was once the institution that assured Japan's membership in the liberal order has now become the most important policy tool for Japan's strategy, not only to counter China but also to find a common ground with the nation. In an era of great power competition, Japan desires a rules-based international order that seeks coexistence on a diverse world stage.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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