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## Grand strategy of Japan

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## Grand strategy of Japan

### Abstract

The article's purpose is to study the grand strategy of modern Japan. In East Asia, the current shift in the balance of power has affected Japan's security and defence policy. China's economic growth over the past two decades has been accompanied by military modernization and an increase in the military budget. In parallel with the growth of economic and military capabilities, territorial conflicts in the South China Sea are intensifying. There have been maritime incidents between Japan and China over the islands. The research covered the period from 2012 to the present day. During this time frame, Japan has implemented measures to fortify its security partnerships with the United States and other regional partners during this period.

### Extended Abstract

The article also explores Japan's endeavours to improve its military capabilities, which include the development of new defence technologies and the expansion of its maritime patrol and surveillance capabilities. The study's overarching objective is to offer a thorough examination of Japan's evolving grand strategy in response to the growing security dynamics in East Asia.

The case analysis employs theories of international relations, balance of threat, and neo-classical realism. Through this theory, the paper explains the changes in Japan's grand strategy. In addition to systemic factors such as the distribution of power, the theory also considers internal variables such as the leader's perceptions and ideas. Internal politics, leadership perceptions, and ideas also influence the policies and strategies developed in response to systemic threats and challenges. According to neoclassical realism, grand strategy arises from an empirical assessment of international systemic factors and competition among strategic concepts within a state's foreign policy executive. This viewpoint highlights the need of comprehending both the external factors and the internal variables of a nation-state while examining its grand strategy. Neoclassical realism offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how a state's foreign policy and national security strategy change by considering the interaction between systemic influences and internal variables. In essence, this theory emphasises the intricate and diverse characteristics of developing grand strategies, highlighting the need of a sophisticated approach that takes into account both local and foreign factors.

The research period coincides largely with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's tenure. He became the main architect of Japan's grand strategy. The study examines the reforms implemented in the field of defence and security, strengthening and building regional alliances. He managed to maintain close economic cooperation with China on the one hand and increase Japan's role in the region on the other. Abe has reinforced relations with the United States and other countries, such as India and Australia, in order to balance China. He has also made significant institutional reforms. In order to coordinate foreign policy and grand strategy, he created the National Security Council in 2013 and first published the National Security Strategy. The study provides a detailed analysis of Abe's doctrine. Abe's philosophy is marked by a proactive stance in foreign policy, prioritising the advancement of Japan's interests and values in the region. Abe has aimed to bolster Japan's security and influence in the Asia-Pacific by strengthening regional alliances and fostering deeper economic cooperation with important allies. The creation of the National Security Council and the release of the National Security Strategy have been crucial elements in his efforts to synchronise foreign policy and grand strategy, indicating a more confident and aggressive position on the global platform. In summary, Abe's ideology has played a crucial role in setting Japan's foreign policy agenda and establishing the nation as a significant participant in regional and global events.

**Keywords:** Grand strategy, National security strategy, Defence policy, Defence strategy, Balance of power.

## INTRODUCTION

Japan is the third-largest economy in the world. Its gross domestic product is 4.4 trillion US dollars. It lags behind China (19.3 trillion) and the USA (26.8 trillion) (India, 2024). Japan's population is 123.7 million. The largest export and trade partners are China and the United States of America (CIA, 2024). Japan's military spending in 2022 was 46 billion US dollars, which is 1.1 percent of its gross domestic product. It is significantly behind China, whose

military spending for the same period was \$292 billion (SIPRI, 2023). Along with the growth of China's military budget, we are witnessing the modernization of its armed forces. Beijing actively produces stealth aircraft, submarines, and missile systems. Production of aircraft also initiated (Jentelson, 2014). Along with the rapid growth of China's economic and military capabilities, there have been naval incidents between the Japan and China. In 2013, China announced the East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone, which included the Japanese island of Senkaku. The Prime Minister of Japan called this move dangerous (BBC, 2013). In the following years, China became even more aggressive towards its neighbours in the South China Sea. The construction of military infrastructure began on a large scale. China is building up its naval capabilities to dominate the first island chain, which includes Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan. This will give him the ability to fully control South China, East China, and the Yellow Sea. In such a case, the United States of America will no longer be able to help South Korea in case of war (Mearsheimer, 2014).

The purpose of the paper is to study the grand strategy of Japan. Based realism theory of international relations, this article analyses the process of forming Japan's grand strategy. It examines the factors that have shaped Japan's foreign policy, together with the rise of China and the increasing tensions in the East China Sea. The paper also explores the actions and measures taken by Japan to safeguard its economic and security interests in the region.

The study provided answers to the following research questions:

1. What changes have occurred in Japan's grand strategy since 2012, and what causes have contributed to this change?
2. What is the Abe Doctrine, and how does it balance China's regional influence?

A qualitative research method was used to answer the research questions. Among the techniques of the qualitative method, the so-called case study is used. The case study approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the Abe Doctrine and its impact on Japan's grand strategy. By examining specific instances and events, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of how the doctrine has influenced Japan's response to China's regional influence. This method also allows for the exploration of related factors that may have shaped the implementation and effectiveness of the doctrine.

### **Balance of Threat Theory**

According to the realist view of international relations, nations are independent entities that priorities their own survival and, in certain cases, want to achieve global supremacy. In the anarchic international system, states have two primary approaches to accomplish their objectives: 1. By enhancing their economic and military capabilities through domestic policies,

and 2. By pursuing a foreign policy that allows them to join or strengthen alliances, while simultaneously weakening and narrowing opposing alliances (Waltz, 1979). Naturally, big states use both of these methods. The notion of balance of power posits that the dominant nation in the system is counterbalanced by forming alliances with the less powerful parties. The objective of equilibrium is the safeguarding of the nation's sovereignty. Realists define power as the capacity to accomplish one's objectives, often linked to certain resources that enable a state to enhance its influence. The resources include several factors such as population, territory, economic prowess, and military might, among other elements. In this situation, the force has already taken on a measurable shape (Nye, 2007) Realists attach particular significance to military force among the aforementioned components of power.

Unlike the proponents of the balance of power theory, Steven Walt thinks that states unite not only to balance the most powerful in the system but also against the state that they consider a threat. For example, states balance by entering into an alliance with a strong one if a weak state is more dangerous and aggressive. The following factors are also important for the threat balance: total power, geographical location, offensive power, and aggressive aspirations (Walt, 1985).

Steven Walt's theory guides the development of the hypothesis:

**H1:** To balance the threat from China, Japan strengthens its armed forces and alliance with the United States of America.

### **Neoclassical realism and methodology**

Gideon Rose is considered the founder of the theory of neoclassical realism. The theory is used to study how a country's foreign policy and grand strategy are made. This is done by analysing both systemic and internal variables. According to Gideon Rose (1998) a country's place in the international system and specifically its relative material power capabilities determine the scope and ambition of its foreign policy. The independent variables in neoclassical realism theory are the relative distribution of power and power trends, which are affected by structural modifiers such as technology and location (Ripsman et al., 2016). The clarity of signals and information presented to states by the international system is a crucial systemic variable that can be identified as important to theory and that separates neoclassical realism from structural realism. Essentially, clarity has three components: 1. the degree to which dangers and opportunities are clearly identified; 2. whether or not the system delivers information on threat and opportunity time frames; and 3. whether or not optimal policy choices stand out (Ripsman et al., 2016). Clarity is determined by comparing abilities, stated goals, timeframes, and the significance of best policy reactions.

The next system variable is the strategic environment's permissiveness or restrictiveness. In both permissive and limited settings, the system may offer exceptionally clear clues about the nature of dangers and opportunities, time horizons, and/or policy choices (Ripsman et al., 2016). Gideon Rose asserts that neoclassical realism distinguishes itself from structural realism by incorporating domestic factors that impact the way and degree to which states respond to the global systemic pressures that realists universally acknowledge as the foundation of foreign policy, grand strategy, and international politics (Rose, 1998). Balance of threat theory primarily examines the evaluation of external threats and the resulting strategic reactions, whereas neoclassical realism delves further into the internal dynamics and subjective interpretations that shape the behaviour of states. This provides a more comprehensive understanding of international relations. The application of the theories of balance of threats and neoclassical realism is appropriate in this case, as China's growth is impacting Japan's grand strategy. However, neoclassical realism also takes into account the domestic political and security dynamics that shape this strategy. In the theory, there are four intervening unit-level variables: the images and perceptions of state leaders, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutional arrangements.

This research focuses on factors such as leadership perceptions, concepts, and strategic culture. Nicholas Kitchen emphasizes the significance of ideas within the framework of neoclassical realism. Specifically, this pertains to the notions that have a significant influence on the decision-making process of a leader. According to his perspective, progressive ideas have internal coherence and are in alignment with empirical evidence. As well as the political leader's intellectual abilities and his skill to convince the public of the effectiveness of these ideas. Ideas have a direct influence on the country's political policy, and powerful leaders are the promoters of these ideas (Kitchen, 2010).

The next intervening variable that neoclassical realism suggests is strategic culture. Strategic culture can shape how a state perceives and adjusts to systemic signals and changes in its material capabilities. Culture is utilised to address explanatory gaps by augmenting theories focused on national interest and power distribution. Culture is seen as a variable that might impact behaviour, although it is ranked second to international systemic influences (Gray, 2013). In the paper, the independent variable is the clear threat messages from the international system, and the dependent variable is a change in Japan's grand strategy. The intervening variable is the leader's beliefs, ideas, and perceptions.

Thus, the following hypothesis is formulated in the paper:

**Hypothesis 2: The system's clear messages about threats (independent variable) and Shinzo Abe's ideas (intervening variable) caused Japan's grand strategy and strategic culture to change. (dependent variable)**

In this scenario, the system poses a threat, and Abe's ideas exerted such a strong influence that they not only influenced grand strategy but also shaped strategic culture.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Liddell Hart developed a comprehensive concept of grand strategy. He defines grand strategy as practically synonymous with policy, which guides the conduct of war (Hart, 1991). Grand strategy is concerned not only with war but also with the "peace" that must be built after the war. The purpose of a grand strategy is to use the resources of the state to maintain security and prosperity during war and peace and to achieve deterrence against a possible adversary (Milevski, 2016). John Gaddis states, "Grand strategy is a calculated relationship of means to larger ends". The grand strategy is related to how the state uses the available resources to achieve the goal. Strategy is a bridge that can reduce the gap between large ends and resources (Harrison, 2013). The articulation of grand strategy is manifested via several mediums, such as written papers, policy announcements, public speeches, and the political trajectory of the state. However, it is imperative that the principles and aims of the subject in question are unambiguously delineated (Martel, 2015).

Michael J. Green (2022) examines Japan's grand strategy in the era of Abe Shinzo in his book entitled "Line of Advantage: Japan's Grand Strategy in the Era of Abe Shinzo." The initial tenure of Abe as prime minister, spanning from 2006 to 2007, might be characterised as largely unsuccessful. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) reinstated Abe as party leader due to his strategic approach to addressing the emerging geopolitical dynamics posed by China's rise. At that time, Abe was more progressive than the United States, since the latter was still adopting a policy of "strategic engagement" with China. Abe desired a fruitful relationship with Beijing, but not Chinese hegemony and control. Instead of bandwagoning with China's increasing power, Japan pursued policies of internal and external balance under Abe's leadership (Green M. J., 2002). Overall, Abe's grand strategy was a blend of economic revitalization, strategic international engagement, and robust political leadership, aimed at positioning Japan as a key player on the global stage.

Based on the realism thesis, John Mearsheimer argues that China's ultimate objective is regional hegemony. According to Mearsheimer, China would want to strengthen its economic and military capabilities as much as possible in comparison to other major regional powers such as Japan, India, and Russia. A modernized and prosperous China would most certainly want to

drive America out of the Asian area. China wants the US Navy to be behind the first chain of islands, allowing it to blockade the South China and Yellow Seas. Furthermore, there is a belief in China that it would be ideal to extend to the second chain of islands, which includes territory from Japan's east coast to the island of Guam and down to the Malacca Islands (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Edward Luttwak thinks that the concurrent growth of China's economic and military might go against strategic reasoning, resulting in a predictable unfavorable response from regional stakeholders. Furthermore, he contends that with the 2008 financial crisis, the discourse of China's ruling elite towards the Western world underwent a rapid transformation. China has recently revived dormant territorial disputes with India, Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam, which is against strategic logic. Based on the aforementioned behaviour, Luttwak concludes that China has failed to comprehend its overarching strategy (Harvard University Press, 2012).

### **Rise of China and Strategic Partnership with Russia**

China's gross domestic product (GDP) amounted to \$360.8 billion at the end of the Cold War. Due to a yearly economic growth rate of approximately 10 percent in 2011, the country achieved the status of the second-largest economy (Jentelson, 2014). In terms of research and development expenditure on modern technologies, China ranks second globally. In 2019, 370 billion was allocated to this specific domain. (UNESCO, 2019). The upward trajectory persists. In 2022, China allocated approximately 456 billion dollars to research and development expenditures (The State Council of Republic of China, 2023).

Over the past twenty years, there has been a notable process of modernization within the People's Liberation Army of China, accompanied by a significant rise in its allocated military expenditure. Based on the data provided by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China's military expenditure experienced a notable increase from 86 billion dollars in 2008 to 228 billion dollars in 2017. According to SIPRI the global spending in 2018 witnessed a significant surge, reaching a total of 250 billion dollars, representing approximately 13 percent of the overall expenditure (SIPRI, 2019).

Since Xi Jinping came to power, the military cooperation between Russia and China has been deepening. Joint exercises are being conducted, the main adversary of which is the United States of America and its allies in the region. The crisis in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, and Western sanctions have also forced Moscow to take rapid steps towards a strategic rapprochement with China. According to him, since 2012, Vladimir Putin has planned to conduct a well-calculated, gradual policy with China, but the crisis in Ukraine has changed everything radically. Accelerated relations made Russia a junior partner of China rather than a

power center in East Asia, as Moscow wanted. (Gabuev, 2019). In 2015, the People's Republic of China signed the agreement with the Russian Federation, in which they committed to procuring the C-400 air defence system for \$3 billion. Additionally, China acquired Su-35 military aircraft, incurring a total expenditure of \$2 billion. In addition to the procurement of armaments, collaborative military drills were initiated, encompassing both maritime and terrestrial domains (Gabuev, 2019). From 2015 to 2018, a series of naval exercises were carried out in the Mediterranean Sea, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea. Finally, the financial crisis and sanctions imposed by the West forced Russia to start cooperation with China at a strategic level. The military collaboration between China and Russia getting more and more intense.

China's manufacture of aircraft carriers is the most remarkable feature. In April 2019, satellite images were made public by the media, revealing the ongoing building of the third aircraft carrier at the shipyard (jiāngnán) The Chinese Navy received the first aircraft carrier, Liaoning, in 2012. In 2017, China commissioned a second aircraft carrier (Type 001A), nearly identical in size and capabilities to the first, but entirely produced by the Chinese (China Power Team, 2021.). This fact emphasizes China's uniqueness because it can independently produce aircraft carriers and aviation.

China is now engaged in an ongoing programme to manufacture warships, namely missile cruisers, guided-missile destroyers, and frigates. The programme specifically emphasises the protection of ships against air threats. Moreover, the programme has greatly enhanced the capability to combat ships and submarines. Therefore, due to the continuous process of modernization, it may be inferred that China's objective is to establish itself as the preeminent military force in the area. American analysts think that Chiana's objective is to hinder any third party from executing a large-scale military operation encompassing the realms of air, sea, space, and cyber in the western Pacific region (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2016).

The image vividly depicts the extensive military infrastructure development in progress. When we take a higher perspective, we may see that military modernization is an intrinsic component of the nation's broader economic progress. Considering the activation of territorial disputes by China with its neighbours, it is evident that this rapidly expanding state is actively modernising its armed forces and engaging in territorial disputes with neighbouring countries such as India, Vietnam, Japan, and others in the South China Sea. It is inherent that these processes evoke a sense of danger among the political elite of Japan.



### **The formation of Japan's new grand strategy.**

Shinzo Abe's family had a rich political tradition. His father was Japan's minister of affairs. His grandfather was former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, and his great-uncle was former Prime Minister Eisaku Sato. Abe most respected his grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, who was a pro-U.S. politician in postwar Japan (Sakurai, 2022). Shortly after assuming office for his second term, Shinzo Abe promptly began the development and implementation a new policy and strategy. In 2013, he established the National Security Council to create a forum that will conduct strategic discussions on a regular basis and as required under the Prime Minister's robust political leadership on a variety of national security issues. Abe appointed his trusted advisor, Shotaro Yachi, to lead the newly established organisation. He filled the organisation with professionals from the Foreign and Defence Ministry (Auslin, 2016). The creation of the National Security Council was motivated by the recognition that Japan needed a long-term, reliable, and predictable security policy. It was also necessary to strengthen coordination and interaction between state structures. Naturally, all this was vital to respond to the changed strategic environment (Green,2022).

In 2015, Abe's government approved security-related measures that signalled a radical change in Japan's security policy by allowing the Japan Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) to join more actively in foreign security operations (Sudirman, 2022). Moreover, Abe's government unveiled a series of new policies, including the National Security Strategy, National Defence Strategy, and Defence Buildup Programme. These initiatives were designed to strengthen Japan's defence budget and capabilities, as well as to improve the alliance with the United States (Matsuda, 2023). In addition, Japan has increased its attempts to strengthen its defence ties with nations that share similar values and perspectives. These countries include the United States of America, Australia, and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Shinzo Abe considered that Japan's sense of guilt formed after the Second World War, was restricting the country's ability to participate more actively in international affairs. Therefore, he believed that it was essential to liberate Japan from this feeling of guilt. Moreover, Shinzo Abe envisioned the removal of the military constraints placed on Japan in order to demilitarize the country after World War II. He was well aware of the need to use military power in conjunction with other state instruments to protect the country's security and interest (Hughes et al., 2021).

Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, has a vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific area, with the objective of fostering peace and prosperity via the collaboration of states that have values that are comparable to one another. The concept emphasised how important it is to uphold the rule of

law, guarantee the freedom of navigation, and respect the rules and standards that are established on an international level (National Security Strategy of Japan, 2022). This strategic vision aimed to mitigate China's escalating influence and aggressiveness in the area by the reinforcement of alliances and partnerships with nations that uphold comparable principles and have shared interests (Green, 2022). The idea of a free Indo-Pacific under Abe's concept was also aimed at countering China's Belt and Road Initiative and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, by providing alternative development and infrastructure projects.

### **Military modernization of Japan**

The strategic partnership between China and Russia in the political, economic, and military spheres had a significant impact on Japan. It has begun to review the capabilities and doctrines of his armed forces. After 2013, when China unilaterally declared the South China Sea an Air-Defence Identification Zone, airspace violations in Japan's airspace increased by 30%. There was also a 'radar-lock' incident when a PLAN fire-control radar locked onto a JMSDF vessel. During the year 2014, Chinese aircraft flew in close proximity to Japanese military aircraft, which resulted in an increase in the likelihood of air mishaps and prompted the Japanese government to voice their strong opposition (The Military Balance, 2015). A new concept known as the "Dynamic Joint Defence Force" was introduced by the Japanese Defence Forces in the year 2013. This concept emphasises, on the one hand, the necessity of a dynamic defence force as opposed to the static forces that were in place during the Cold War era, and, on the other hand, the implementation of joint operations between troops of different types (The Military Balance, 2015).

For the first time in 2014, the Abe administration made it possible to export military technology. Additionally, as a result of his judgement, Japan was able to use its armed forces for the sake of collective defence. Collective defence may be used if specific circumstances are met. An assault on a neighbouring country would endanger Japan's very existence, as well as the lives and well-being of its population. Force should only be used as a last option to safeguard Japan and its residents. The use of force should be minimised. It must be in proportion to the military goals (The Military Balance, 2015).

The decision to acquire the F-35 from the United States of America was made by Japan. A new equipment procurement agency has been established by the Ministry of Defence in order to acquire new pieces of equipment. In the year 2015, Japan communicated its intention to take part in an international tender for the manufacturing of submarines for the Australian government. Moreover, it will alter the defence rules of both the United States and Japan (The Military Balance, 2016).

Japan renewed its national security and defence strategy in 2022, focusing on deterring the adversary, but ensuring its armed forces are prepared to defeat them if deterrence fails. This document clearly continues the legacy of Shinzo Abe and his spirit to change Japan's strategic culture and make Japan an active subject in international politics.

## CONCLUSION

We examined Japan's grand strategy from 2012 to the present through the theoretical lens of the realist school of international relations. Although the balance of threats theory has the potential to explain the reasons for Japan's grand strategy change. Signals from the international system, such as China's rise, military modernization, and strategic alliance with Russia, have significantly influenced Tokyo's grand strategy. The paper shows that such Internal variables as the leader's ideas and values have significantly impact Japan's security policy and strategy. Under the immediate leadership of Shinzo Abe, the revision of Japan's security and defence policy initiated. Even after he left office, the policy aimed at balancing China continued, as the training and modernization of Japan's armed forces. It further strengthens and deepens the existing alliance with the United States of America. The stability of the aforementioned process also indicates that Japan's strategic culture is undergoing a transformation. What we see Japan is a changing strategic culture. Whether this process is completed or not is the subject of a separate study and is beyond the scope of our article.

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