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JAPAN'S SHIFT FROM PACIFISM: REARMAMENT AMID SECURITY CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Amidst shifting security dynamics in East Asia, Japan faces an evolving strategic landscape, particularly in response to mounting threats from North Korea and China. Through a descriptive analysis of primary and secondary sources, this study investigates Japan's trajectory towards potential constitutional amendment and further militarization, with a focus on Article 9—a key provision renouncing the use of force and restricting military capabilities. By tracing historical contexts and the U.S.-Japan security alliance, the paper explores Japan's post-war pacifism and the gradual evolution of its Self-Defense Forces (SDF) within constitutional constraints. Despite inherent constraints, Japan has developed a robust military force, challenging traditional perceptions of its rearmament. While the nation has incrementally expanded its defense posture, legal and political obstacles remain, necessitating constitutional revisions to align its military strategy with contemporary security challenges. Externally, Japan faces threats such as North Korea's nuclear ambitions and China's assertive regional policies, while internally, public sentiment, historical legacies, and legal obstacles shape the discourse on constitutional reform. Japan's path towards constitutional amendment hinges on regional security dynamics and the strength of the U.S.-Japan alliance. The extent of US commitment to regional stability and its capacity to address Japanese security concerns may significantly determine the pace and direction of Japan's defense normalization. Although Japan is militarily prepared to address emerging security threats, its constitutional constraints persist as a legal challenge. Findings indicate that through a series of incremental military policies, Japan has effectively rearmed itself with credible self-defense capabilities, despite the continued legal restrictions imposed by its pacifist constitution.

Keywords: Japanese rearmament, Japanese constitutional amendment, U.S.-Japan Alliance, East Asia security.

INTRODUCTION

At present, Japan's defense ministry has prioritized countering regional threats, explicitly identifying China, North Korea, and Russia. In its latest defense white paper, it highlights several key security challenges, notably describing China's military ambitions as the "greatest strategic challenge" to global stability and expressing "grave concern" over joint military activities conducted by China and Russia (Japanese Ministry of Defense, 2024a). The annual report also underscores the threat posed by North Korea, which frequently conducts missile tests in Japan's direction, stating that it presents a "more grave and imminent threat to Japan's national security than ever before" (Japanese Ministry of Defense, 2024a).

The white paper outlines a broad range of regional security issues, including rising tensions over Taiwan and the increasing rivalry between the United States (U.S.) and China. It also points to Beijing's frequent deployment of ships near disputed islands as evidence of its aggressive military ambitions. Additionally, China's advancement of its military capacity, its activities in the maritime and airspace around Japan, and North Korea's continued ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs—coupled with its provocative behaviour (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MOFA], 2023)—have become central to Japan's security policy. The 2024 white paper underscores these concerns, stating that "Japan finds itself in the most severe and complex security environment of the post-war era" (Japanese Ministry of Defense, 2024a).

Reflecting Japan's doctrinal shift from strict pacifism towards a more flexible concept of 'Rearmament for Pacifism,' as discussed by Ormsbee (2020) and Gustafsson et al. (2018), this article argues that Japan is likely to amend its constitution to adopt a more proactive defense posture in response to its evolving security challenges. This shift aims to reduce excessive reliance on U.S. military support. The argument is based on the premise that East Asia's evolving security dynamics are steering Japan towards a more active role in its own defense. While this transformation remains gradual, external threats have accelerated the process. This article further explores the nature of these security threats and examines Japan's gradual rearmament since World War II. Given the advanced capabilities of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and the growing security threats posed by North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, as well as China's increasing assertiveness regarding Taiwan and the South China Sea (SCS), Japan appears poised to transition from its pacifist stance towards a normalized defense posture. This shift is evident in recent policy developments and statements from Japanese leadership emphasizing the need to expand military capabilities as a deterrent force.

There is a significant mismatch between the constraints imposed by Japan's post-war constitution, drafted over 70 years ago, and the country's evolving security needs. Central to this issue is Article 9, enacted on May 3, 1947, which formally renounces Japan's right to engage in war. It also seeks to promote international peace based on justice and order by prohibiting Japan from maintaining armed forces with war potential. However, ongoing debates persist over whether Japan has effectively rearmed or normalized its defense posture despite these constitutional restrictions. Such debates intensify in response to increasing volatility, particularly threats posed by China and North Korea as well as uncertainties regarding Japan's alliance with the U.S.—especially the risk of being drawn into a conflict with China over the South China Sea, or Taiwan. Additionally, North Korea's advancing ballistic missile capabilities and the question of how Japan should respond further compound its security dilemma. The existing literature could be further enhanced with a discussion on the intersection of Japan's perceived threats, its alliance with the U.S., constitutional limitations, and domestic and regional perceptions of its rearmament efforts. Given Japan's geopolitical challenges, this article not

only seeks to contribute to the above discussion but to also examine the contemporary security threats Japan faces while navigating its constitutional constraints.

This article argues that Japan's existing constitutional framework fails to accommodate the realities of the current regional security environment, driving the country towards eventual normalization and gradual rearmament—both of which have already been underway. By analyzing Japanese defense policies and practices, the article contends that Japan has, in practice, rearmed itself despite the constitutional restrictions. This shift reflects a *de facto* rearmament as Japan adapts its security strategy to address emerging threats and evolving regional dynamics.

Several key obstacles hinder Japan's ability to adopt a more proactive defense posture. These include its constitutional constraints, the level of public support, and, to a certain extent, the need for accountability regarding past actions towards neighboring countries. Through a descriptive analysis of primary and secondary sources, this article investigates the key factors influencing Japan's militarization and rearmament policies, focusing on both external and internal considerations shaped by its pacifist constitution. Externally, the article shifts focus from Cold War-era threats posed by the Soviet Union to contemporary challenges, specifically the aggressive posture of a nuclear-armed North Korea and China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea. The discussion will examine how maritime disputes and the potential for conflict escalation with China, alongside North Korea's advancing nuclear and ballistic missile programs, influence Japan's efforts to revise its constitution. Additionally, the article examines external factors influencing Japanese defense policy, particularly the role of U.S.-Japan security alliance and the extent of U.S. efforts to encourage Japan to assume a more significant role in regional security. It also considers how Japan's gradual rearmament and normalization are perceived by neighboring countries, with a particular emphasis on historical reconciliation and accountability.

Internally, the article will assess the legal and political challenges with amending Japan's constitution and evaluate domestic support for such changes. It will also consider the implications of Japan's historical accountability issues in shaping regional perceptions of its defense policy evolution. Overall, this paper aims to answer critical questions: What contemporary threats does Japan face? Has it rearmed itself? If so, why and how has this process unfolded? Finally, what obstacles remain in Japan's path towards full rearmament and normalization?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Underpinnings

To contextualize Japan's rearmament, it is pertinent to examine Japan's security dilemma through the lens of international relations theory. States face diverse security threats and there is no universal definition of what constitutes a threat to a particular state. At their core, states seek to ensure their survival existence and safeguard their national interests. In an anarchic world, in line with realism, power is the primary mechanism that enables a state to secure itself. According to the realist perspective, the international arena operates as a zero-sum game, where one state's security often comes at the expense of another state. The world is deemed as structurally anarchic, necessitating that states take measures to safeguard their security and sovereignty (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2003). The traditional realist and structural realist view embodies the notion that to meet security needs, military strength is a fundamental component of national security. Within the international system, security is not merely

about freedom from immediate threats but also about maintaining territorial integrity and preserving a state's independent identity (Buzan, 1991, p. 432).

Neoliberalism and neorealism, on the other hand, offer a more nuanced understanding of contemporary international relations by incorporating structural global institutions, and interstate cooperation alongside traditional security and power concerns (Powell, 1994; Keohane, 1984; Baldwin, 2014). This view is particularly relevant to Japan's position, as it operates in an anarchic system that is somewhat regulated by a network of adversaries, allies, and global institutions. Unlike classical realism, which portrays international politics as a lawless "jungle," neorealism and neoliberalism acknowledge the role of institutions, trade, cooperation, and 'reputational concerns' in shaping state behavior. While national security and existential threats remain central, states also navigate international norms, alliances, and diplomatic constraints. Both neorealism and neoliberalism recognize that states prioritize security but may pursue cooperative strategies when advantageous (Chatterjee, 2003; Tu et al., 2024).

Building on structural realism, defensive realism offers a compelling framework for analyzing Japan's contemporary rearmament strategy. Defensive realism posits that states prioritize security over power maximization, seeking to maintain stability rather than achieve dominance. Defensive realists, such as Waltz (1979), maintains that if states aggressively pursue hegemony, the international system will react negatively, potentially destabilizing their position. Instead, states aim to accumulate only as much power as necessary to ensure security without provoking excessive counterbalancing from other states. The structural constraints of the international system encourage states to adopt defensive strategies, maximizing their security while maintaining a stable balance of power (Waltz, 1979; Snyder, 1991). This contrasts with offensive realism, where states seek to maximize their power, viewing domination as the only means to achieve security. Offensive realists argue that states are inherently expansionist, (Mearsheimer, 2003) always striving for greater power rather than maintaining a moderate balance.

In the case of Japan, as will be explored in subsequent sections, its approach aligns with defensive realism rather than offensive expansionism. Japan seeks to counter regional threats by adopting defensive policies to strengthen its security while avoiding outright hegemony. As Waltz (1979, p. 40) describes, states seek an 'appropriate amount of power'. Additionally, balance of threat theory helps explain Japan's strategic behavior, particularly in forging bilateral security agreements with countries like the Philippines and South Korea. Despite all three countries sharing a common ally in the United States, they also pursue independent bilateral security arrangements to counter shared threats such as China and North Korea. According to Walt (1985; 1987), states form alliances not merely to balance power but to counter perceived threats, which are shaped by factors such as geographic proximity, hostile intentions and aggregate military capabilities. Throughout this paper, these theoretical perspectives will be applied to analyze Japan's evolving defense policies and rearmament trajectory.

Development of Japanese Rearmament and Alliance with the U.S.

Japan's gradual shift in security policy did not occur overnight; rather, it can be traced to the leadership of Shinzo Abe, Japan's first prime minister born after the World War II. Abe played a pivotal role in reinterpreting Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution. In 2014, he issued a formal 'reinterpretation' of Article 9, allowing Japan to engage in collective self-defense. This change enabled Japan to take military action in defense of its allies should they come under attack (Akiyama, 2014; Richter, 2016; Shinoda, 2023; Takamizawa, 2022). Reaching this stage of reinterpreting Japan's 'Peace Clause' required an acknowledgment that Japan's existing legal constraints were inadequate for safeguarding

its national interests in an evolving security landscape. The following sections will further explore the specific security challenges that necessitated this shift.

Understanding the necessity for constitutional revision in Japan requires an understanding of its post-World War II history. Following its surrender to American and Allied forces, Japan adopted a constitution heavily influenced by U.S. policymakers, designed to prevent a resurgence of militarism (Berkofsky, 2010). Central to this new constitution is Article 9, which formally renounces Japan's right to engage in military conflict to resolve international disputes (Japanese Constitution, 1947: Article 9). The language of Article 9, along with the Constitution's Preamble, underscores Japan's commitment to pacifism, affirming that the nation will never again instigate war (Japanese Constitution, 1947). As a result, the constitution prohibits Japan from maintaining conventional armed forces. However, despite this pacifist stance, Japan went on to establish the SDF, comprising of air, naval, and ground units. This development has fueled ongoing debates over whether the SDF's existence violates the original intent of the Constitution, given that it performs *de facto* military functions (Auer, 1973).

During the Cold War, security concerns prompted the United States to encourage Japan to take on a greater role in its own defense (Berkofsky, 2010), as stipulated in the 1954 U.S.-Japan Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement. The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 and fears of a Soviet invasion prompted the U.S., then occupying Japan, to gradually approve and expect Japanese rearmament. This agreement, alongside the more formal 1960 U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty, significantly shaped Japan's security policies throughout the Cold War era. The 1960 treaty cemented Japan's post-war alliance with the U.S., firmly positioning it within the Western bloc. This alignment ensured Japan's continued reliance on the U.S. security umbrella while ensuring Japan's strategic ties with Western nations and U.S. alliances—an arrangement that remains crucial amid contemporary geopolitical shifts, particularly concerning China's rise.

The U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty is one of the longest-standing mutual defense agreements in the world, playing a crucial role in maintaining the U.S. strategic presence in East Asia. Under this treaty, the United States serves as Japan's principal security guarantor. Articles 3, 4, and 5 of the treaty outline the mutual defense obligations, stipulating that the U.S. will come to Japan's aid in the event of an armed attack or if "the security of Japan or international peace and security in the Far East is threatened" (U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty, 1960). Additionally, the treaty places Japan under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, further solidifying their strategic security partnership.

Although Japan maintains a Self-Defense Force (SDF), its capabilities are highly restricted by the constitution, which limits military deployment to self-defense against direct attacks on Japanese soil. Consequently, the concept of 'mutual' defense with the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty remains somewhat imbalanced, as Article 9 of Japan's constitution renounces war and prohibits the country from maintaining military forces for purposes other than self-defense. This legal constraint prevents Japan from offering reciprocal military support to the United States, effectively making the treaty as a one-sided defense arrangement. Thus, the treaty reflects an asymmetrical security relationship (Auer, 1973).

For many years, the strategic alliance between Japan and the United States has been a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy in East Asia (Garamone, 2019). This partnership is integral to the broader U.S. alliance network, often referred to as the "Hubs and Spokes" system. The importance of this alliance was reaffirmed during Prime Minister Suga's visit to the United States in April 2021, making him the first foreign leader to meet with the Biden administration. This visit highlighted the alliance's critical

role in fostering peace, security, and prosperity across the Indo-Pacific region (Sanger & Rogers, 2021). Additionally, in the preceding month, Japan was the first stop for high-level in-person diplomatic engagements by the Biden administration (Yamaguchi, 2021). In these meetings, U.S. Defense Secretary, Lloyd Austin and State Secretary, Antony Blinken reaffirmed America's commitment to the Indo-Pacific, emphasizing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) as the primary strategy (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

These diplomatic engagements hold significant symbolic weight, reinforcing the United States' unwavering commitment to Japan and reassuring regional allies. At the same time, they serve as a clear signal to China that the U.S. remains resolute in supporting its allies. Previous U.S. administrations, however, introduced uncertainty regarding America's commitment to the region. President Obama's "Pivot to Asia" initiative, while ambitious, struggled to reach its full potential due to competing priorities, particularly conflicts in the Middle East (Kelly, 2014). Under President Trump, regional concerns were further heightened, as his rhetoric suggested a move away from traditional U.S. leadership roles in global affairs. Despite ongoing military exercises and drills by the Pentagon, Trump's unpredictability sparked fears of neglect, and abandonment among allies, including Japan (O'Shea & Maslow, 2020). These concerns were exacerbated by speculation that another term of Trump presidency could further deepen U.S. disengagement from the region and a trend towards isolationism, highlighting Japan's need to reinforce its own security framework.

Previous U.S. administrations have played a significant role in shaping Japan's defense policies, contributing to renewed debates on Japanese rearmament. Under former Prime Minister Abe, Japan sought constitutional reforms aiming at strengthening its security framework in response to evolving threats. These reforms sought to bolster the role of the Japanese SDF, under the principle of 'proactive pacifism' (Nagy, 2017; Oros, 2015; Rajagopalan, 2018). This concept of proactive pacifism aligns with Japan's broader hedging strategies, allowing increased latitude in deploying its military resources (Nagy, 2017). Despite the security challenges highlighted by the Ministry of Defense, Japan remains one of the United States' most critical allies in the region. Japan has the highest number of U.S. military bases and accommodates the highest number of deployed U.S. troops overseas, exceeding 53,000 personnel (U.S. Department of State, 2025). Japan's pivotal role as a U.S. security partner, alongside its own military modernization efforts amplifies the discourse surrounding its rearmament.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a descriptive analysis approach to examine Japan's security dilemma, the resulting consequences, and the measures taken to address these challenges. A qualitative methodology is used to analyze both primary and secondary data, including official government policy documents, and sources that directly report on relevant events. Additionally, scholarly works published on this topic are critically examined to provide deeper insights.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Rearmament? Addressing the Reality of Japan's Military Status

Before delving into the external and internal factors that may drive Japan to amend its pacifist constitution—a move often framed as rearmament—it is essential to assess the current status of the

Japanese SDF. The terminology used to describe Japan's military capabilities often evokes images of the immediate post-World War II era, suggesting a nascent stage of rearmament (Atanassova-Cornelis & Sato, 2019; Frühstück & Ben-Ari, 2002; Miller, 2011; Smith, 2019). However, in reality, Japan has already become a rearmed state. Despite its pacifist constitution and a general societal aversion to war, Japan possesses a highly advanced and well-equipped military. This development has occurred unimpeded and indicates a growing willingness for Japan to take on a greater role in its own defense (Smith, 2019). While regional anxieties persist—particularly from Seoul and Beijing regarding Japanese rearmament (Kim, 2016)—there is also a growing acceptance of this reality. The *fait accompli*, surrounding Japan's gradual rearmament over the years, has been acknowledged even by its neighboring countries, regardless of how it is framed. In essence, Japan is already heavily armed, and the following discussion will further explore the supporting arguments for this assertion.

Japan's Military Capabilities under the Status Quo

Japan is ranked eighth globally in military expenditure, allocating 1% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to defense. Given that Japan is the third-largest economy in the world, this seemingly modest percentage translates into a substantial annual defense budget of approximately \$51 billion (Smith, 2021). While this allocation underscores Japan's strategic priorities, it also positions the country among the top global defense spenders. However, Japan's defense expenditures are set to double to 2% of GDP following the unveiling of its new National Security Strategy, designed to address growing regional security threats. Over the next five years, Japan plans to spend more than \$320 billion in defense, marking the country's largest military build-up in modern history. This expansion aims to bolster Japan's counterstrike capabilities, including Tomahawk missiles and the development of hypersonic weapons (Chellaney, 2023). With this shift, Japan's defense budget will align with the NATO norm of 2% of GDP for military expenditures, making Japan the third-largest defense spender in the world after U.S. and China (Chellaney, 2023).

In response to regional security threats, particularly from North Korea and China, Japan has developed a formidable maritime force, including a highly capable Marines division equipped with amphibious assault ships and combat-ready naval vessels. Additionally, Japan has developed advanced ballistic missile defense systems, such as the Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) and the BADGE air defense systems, further reinforcing its technological advancement and defensive readiness (Smith, 2019).

Japan's SDF are organized into three distinct branches—ground, naval, and air—each with its own specialized command structure and modernized capabilities. The Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) comprises over 137,000 personnel distributed across five regional armies, each with its own dedicated headquarters. The GSDF has well-developed logistics for troop deployment and air transport capabilities, enabling rapid troop mobilization (Hornung, 2020). Additionally, Japan maintains specialized units for electronic warfare and intelligence, and a dedicated space agency, challenging the traditional perception of Japan's military as purely defensive. The Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) comprises nearly 43,000 personnel and operates a fleet of 416 aircraft, of which 349 are combat-ready. This includes modern American-made fighter jets, such as the F-35 and F-15, which significantly enhance Japan's air-to-air combat capabilities. The ASDF also supports advanced unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) operations, aerial refueling, and early warning radar systems, reflecting a highly sophisticated and strategically organized air defense network (Hornung, 2020). Collectively, these developments indicate a clear departure from the constraints traditionally associated with Japan's pacifist military doctrine.

Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) possesses formidable capabilities, with over 42,000 personnel, 135 ships, and 163 aircraft (Hornung, 2020; Mazar et al., 2023). Notably, the MSDF operates aircraft carriers, marking the first such deployment since World War II. It also fields 48 destroyers, each equipped with Aegis guided-missile technology, advanced surface-to-air missiles, and anti-submarine warfare capabilities. Additionally, the MSDF maintains a fleet of 18 submarines, that enhances destroyer operations. These advancements underscore that despite constitutional constraints, Japan's military continues to evolve and expand to address its security needs and commitments under the U.S.-Japan alliance. Successive Japanese governments have incrementally expanded Japan's military capabilities, often pushing the boundaries of constitutional restrictions. The rapid advancements in military technology have blurred the distinction between defensive and offensive weaponry, creating a constitutional grey area. A key example of this flexibility is the reinterpretation of Article 9 of Japan's postwar constitution, which formally renounces war and prohibits the establishment of armed forces. Since the Cold War era, successive administrations have reframed Article 9, asserting that it prohibits only aggressive warfare, not defensive actions (Dower, 1999; Yahuda, 2019; Hornung, 2020; Smith, 2019). This nuanced interpretation has facilitated Japan's gradual yet significant military buildup.

Japan's rearmament has historically occurred with U.S. encouragement and approval, serving as a strategic counterbalance to the Soviet Union and Communist bloc during the Cold War. This strategy aligned Japan with the 'Western liberal' forces, necessitating it to share the burden of regional security. A parallel can be drawn with Germany, which was also permitted to rearm despite reservations from its neighbors and the war-weariness of its domestic population (Ruane, 2000; Miller, 2010).

While Article 9 of Japan's Constitution explicitly renounces war, Germany's Constitution contains similar, albeit less explicit, restrictions on military engagement. Articles 87(a) and 79(1) of the German Constitution incorporate pacifist principles that limit the use of the military and remilitarization. These provisions restrict the German government's absolute right to deploy the military, instead integrating German forces within international security frameworks such as NATO (German Constitution, 1949). This broader post-war rearmament trend reflects a delicate balance between maintaining peace and ensuring regional security, illustrating how key nations were strategically enabled to rebuild their military capacities under international auspices.

Japan's military strategy has historically emphasized defensive capabilities rather than preemptive or anticipatory defense. Currently, Japan's military assets, bolstered by U.S. security guarantees, provide a credible deterrent against potential adversaries. During the Cold War, the U.S. primarily managed Japan's external security, allowing Japan to concentrate on its internal affairs. This arrangement was encapsulated in the Yoshida Doctrine, often characterized as a form of 'free-riding' on U.S. military support (Yahuda, 2019). Japan's approach to burden sharing within the U.S.-Japan alliance is described as the 'shield and spear' model. In this arrangement, Japan acts as the shield, focusing on territorial defense and protection of its citizens, while the U.S. functions as the spear, extending support to the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and projecting power beyond Japan's borders (Hornung, 2020).

Japan has effectively rearmed itself, with the principal barriers to full military normalization being self-imposed legal restrictions and a lack of political will to pursue full constitutional amendments. Over the past three decades, Japan has enacted several ad-hoc legislative measures that facilitate the deployment of its military forces abroad, signaling a gradual shift from traditional pacifist norms. Key examples include the 2001 Anti-Terrorism Special Act and the 2003 Law Concerning Special Measures on Humanitarian and Reconstruction, which enabled Japan to engage its troops in the global "war on terrorism" and to contribute to non-combat reconstruction efforts as part of the "coalition of the willing"

(Hughes, 2004, 2009). These legislative actions expand the role of the JSDF in international aid, peacekeeping, and strategic logistical missions, indicating that the primary obstacles to Japan's full military normalization are predominantly internal and hinge on political and public support for reform (Hughes, 2004, 2009). Interestingly, Japan has cautiously engaged in the export of military equipment and arms, though its defense industry has not reached the same level of success as its civilian automotive sector due to constitutional constraints (Wright, 2021). A major policy shift occurred in 2014 when Shinzo Abe eased the Japanese Arms Export Ban, allowing Japan to export arms internationally. This policy change further supports the view that Japan's pacifist image as a 'peace state' is gradually diminishing (Sakaki & Maslow, 2020).

The incremental deregulation of arms exports underscores a broader transformation in Japan's postwar security institutions, making Japan increasingly resemble a 'normal state' (Berger, 1993; Katzenstein, 1996; Sakaki & Maslow, 2020). However, arms exports policies represent only one dimension of Japan's evolving security trajectory. While anti-militarist norms and principles continue to exert some influence (Oros, 2017; Sakaki et al., 2020), Japan's defense and foreign policies indicate a steady progression towards assuming a greater military role in global affairs (Sakaki & Maslow, 2020). This shift reflects a pragmatic response to contemporary security threats, as Japan reassesses the adequacy of its current security arrangements with the U.S. in addressing its national defense concerns.

Japan's 'reinterpretation' of its pacifist constitution was further exemplified in 2015, when the government passed legislation allowing the country to 'collectively' defend close allies under attack (MOFA, 2015). This significant shift under Shinzo Abe's leadership, reflects Japan's ongoing reliance on ad-hoc legislation to circumvent constitutional constraints. While the 2015 bill faced public opposition, its passage marked a turning point, as it legally enabled Japan to deploy its military overseas for the first time in the collective defense of its allies.

In terms of military strategy, Japan is actively expanding its offensive weapons capabilities. The government has unveiled plans for a gradual increase in defense spending, aiming to align its budget with that of NATO standards. As part of its national military re-orientation strategy, Japan plans to increase its defense budget to 2% of GDP by 2027 (Johnson, 2024). Given Japan's status as the world's third largest economy, this increase would place the country among the top military spenders globally. A key aspect of Japan's evolving strategy is to expand its 'counter-strike' capabilities, particularly through acquiring longer-range missiles to enhance deterrence. This is evident in Japan's accelerated procurement of 400 Tomahawk missiles from the U.S., each with a range of 1,600 kilometers (Gwadera, 2023). Such acquisitions provide Japan with greater autonomy within its security alliance with the U.S., representing a form of burden-sharing (Green, 1995; Hughes, 2011; Samuels, 1994) while allowing for greater flexibility in responding to contemporary security challenges. Possessing offensive assets means that Japan could strike land-based targets in China and North Korea as a form of 'preemptive' self-defense or deterrence. This approach reflects the maxim that "the best defense is a strong offense"—a principle reinforced by the Japanese Defense Minister Kihara, who stated that long-range missiles enhance Japan's stand-off defense capabilities, allowing the country to "disrupt and defeat any forces that seek to invade Japan early and from far away" (Japanese Ministry of Defense, 2024b).

Japan's substantial military capabilities indicate that it has effectively rearmed and normalized in practical terms, even if not formally in legal terms. Historical comparisons show that nations have engaged in military conflicts with far less military capability, as seen in the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict. From a Clausewitzian perspective on conventional warfare, which often equates normalcy with offensive military capacity, self-defense itself can be interpreted as an offensive strategy—a recognized

method of deterrence (Kraig, 2017). Clausewitz would likely argue that Japan's utilization of its military for self-defense is ultimately a tactical means to achieve broader policy goals, much like any other state. Furthermore, international law inherently grants all countries the right to individual or collective self-defense, as articulated in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter (UN Charter, 1945). While international law does not prohibit countries from maintaining military forces, it does permit preemptive or anticipatory self-defense under specific conditions that adhere to the principles of proportionality, necessity, and distinction (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], n.d.).

Japan's situation is unique in that its military constraints are self-imposed through constitutional restrictions. However, successive governments have enacted ad-hoc legislation to circumvent the need for formal constitutional revision, allowing Japan to not only rearm but also effectively normalize its military status. Thus, it is pertinent to recognize the realities of Japan's military capabilities and avoid the misnomers of rearmament and normalization, as Japan has already effectively achieved these statuses in de facto terms.

The viability of the U.S. hub-and-spokes alliance model will be put to the test in Japan, as any regional conflict involving the U.S. could potentially draw Japan into hostilities. This risk is increasingly becoming a reality, particularly as tensions escalate over Taiwan's status—including the potential invasion by China—and as the Philippines faces increasing skirmishes with China in the South China Sea. Given the presence of U.S. military bases in Japan, which serve as forward operating bases for any U.S. engagement in the region, Japan may find itself directly involved in such conflicts. As a result, these bases could become legitimate targets in the event of hostilities, further compelling Japan to develop counter-strike capabilities.

This evolving security landscape means that Japan can no longer remain solely the 'shield' while the U.S. acts as the 'sword' in their traditional 21st century alliance framework (Armitage & Nye, 2012; Nakamura, 2023; Dominguez, 2023). Japan's ongoing rearmament and security policy revisions indicate that it can no longer rely exclusively on defensive capabilities. Instead, it must develop offensive military capabilities to serve as a deterrent and expand its military options in response to its evolving security challenges. To address potential security gaps where U.S. support may not be readily available, Japan must also take on the role of the 'sword' to enhance its self-reliance. This is particularly relevant in lower-intensity conflicts or gray-zone confrontations, such as defending its economic rights within its exclusive-economic-zone (EEZ), securing maritime shipping lanes, or safeguarding its territorial integrity, including areas like the Senkaku islands. In such situations, Japan may need to act independently by becoming the 'sword' itself to assert its security interests and maintain its sovereignty. Additionally, having offensive capabilities enables Japan to complement U.S. forces should a regional conflict arise.

Constitutional Constraints

The primary challenge in Japan's military normalization process lies in the need for legal legitimacy through constitutional amendment. While Japan has, in practice, rearmed and normalized its military capabilities, its status as a democratic nation necessitates a solid legal basis to fully authorize the deployment and use of its armed forces. The key motivation for amending Article 9 of the constitution is to establish legal validity and justification for these actions. This step is crucial to aligning Japan's de facto military status with its legal framework, ensuring that its defense policies are both constitutionally grounded and operationally viable.

Successive Japanese governments have pursued a greater military role and expansion, as previously discussed. However, these policy shifts are political decisions rather than constitutional mandates. A constitutional amendment would solidify these changes, providing a legal foundation that prevents future governments from easily overturning Japan's military normalization.

Amending Article 9 would legally authorize the Japanese government and military to engage in actions beyond traditional defense, including anticipatory self-defense and preemptive strikes. Such an amendment would not only align military operations with constitutional principles and rule of law but also reflect the constitution's adaptability to contemporary security challenges. This reform would help bridge the existing gap between Japan's constitutional limitations and the evolving security threats it faces—an issue that remains a critical concern for policymakers.

Additionally, it is important to note that the Japan's Constitution has remained unchanged since it came into force in 1947, making it one of the oldest unamended constitutions in the world. While Article 96 contains provisions for amendments, the process is not straightforward. According to Article 96, any amendments must first be approved by at least two-thirds or more of all members of both houses of the Japanese Diet (parliament). Once this has been acquired, the proposed amendment must then be put to a nationwide referendum, requiring a majority of affirmative votes by the public to be enacted. This two-stage process is both cumbersome and lengthy. Furthermore, public sentiment—particularly among the older generations wary of Japanese imperial legacy—makes any amendments related to the reinterpretation of Article 9 particularly challenging (Martin, 2007).

Successive Japanese governments have debated constitutional amendments, including under Abe's leadership. However, these efforts faced strong opposition from both the public and by opposition parties (Albert, 2015). The Liberal Democratic Party has long advocated for constitutional revision and, under Abe's administration, sought to justify proposed amendments through a 'panel of experts' (Sterling, 2019; Martin, 2017). Despite these efforts, no formal amendment process was initiated. The rigidity of the amendment process was recognized as early as the Yoshida administration, with some arguing that the process itself should first be reformed to facilitate future amendments (Martin, 2007). In a nutshell, the process of amending Japan's constitution remains a rigorous and difficult process, and at the time of this writing, no amendments have been implemented.

As discussed in previous sections, Japan has been able to meet its evolving security needs through successive legislative measures that 'reinterpret' Article 9, enabling incremental militarization. However, this approach is inherently limited by the political will of the government to push constitutional boundaries. Any significant or major change would require a formal amendment, which relies heavily on public support. This support, in turn, is contingent on the perceived level of external threats facing Japan.

Entangled alliances and mutual defense treaties on a large scale would require a significant level of commitment, particularly given Japan's geographic proximity to potential conflict zones. A potential Trump presidency in 2025 adds another layer of uncertainty. Trump has had a history of calling for its allies to take greater responsibility for their own defense and has expressed isolationist tendencies, which could lead to a gradual U.S. withdrawal from the region—placing Japan's security at greater risk. Geographic distance is a crucial factor; in the event of a major conflict with China, the U.S. would face strategic disadvantages due to logistical constraints. Trump underscored this point in an interview about Taiwan's defense, stating that while Taiwan is only 68 miles from China, it is 9,500 miles from the U.S. (Chung, 2024). If history is any indicator, logistical difficulties faced by the U.S. during the Vietnam

war, highlight the challenges of waging a distant conflict. A revised constitution would give Japan greater domestic legal authority to take proactive measures, allowing it to become both the 'sword' and the 'shield' to protect its national interests.

Regional Threats to Japanese Security

Since 2018, Japan's annual defense papers have consistently identified North Korea and China as its principal regional security threats (Hurst, 2018). The tension with China primarily stems from disputes over the Senkaku Islands, which the Chinese military leadership claims as inherent territory. Japan perceives China's establishment of the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) and its regular maritime patrols as actions that undermine the principle of a free and open Indo-Pacific, reflecting an expansionist and increasingly assertive military posture. The 2020 Japan White Paper states that China "continues to act in an assertive manner," showing a readiness to "realize its unilateral assertions without making any compromises" (Ministry of Defense, Japan, 2020). Despite these strategic military concerns, Japan maintains economic ties with China, adopting a strategy of hedging and balancing, which also aligns with its broader economic diplomacy (Koga, 2016, 2018). However, this economic engagement has not led to any concessions in the ongoing Senkaku Islands dispute.

Japan's apprehensions regarding China's maritime policies are exacerbated with the enactment of the Chinese Coast Guard Law, which authorizes the use of force against vessels infringing Chinese domestic laws within its claimed territorial waters (Okada, 2021). This legislation has raised significant concerns for both Japan and the U.S., as it undermines efforts to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific. The increased presence of Chinese Coast Guard vessels patrolling the South China Sea further escalates security tensions and heightens regional antagonism. Japan views China's aggressive posture in the East China Sea and the South China Sea as violations of the principle of freedom of navigation, a fundamental tenet of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Additionally, Japan remains cautious of China's strategic use of economic coercion to influence neighboring countries. A notable instance occurred in 2010 when China suspended vital mineral exports to Japan following the detention of Chinese fishing trawlers by Japanese Coast Guard vessels in waters controlled by Japan (Bradsher, 2010). This incident highlights the complex interplay of economic and strategic considerations in shaping Japan's regional security environment.

Japan's economic interdependence with China is further complicated by China's assertive maritime policies. The East China Sea and South China Sea are critical conduits for trade, resources, and navigation, which are crucial for Japan as an island nation. While Japan maintains trade relations with Taiwan, the absence of a formal framework akin to the U.S.'s 'Taiwan Relations Act' complicates maritime cooperation, particularly given Taiwan's competing territorial claims.

Nonetheless, Taiwan has expressed a keen interest in enhancing defense cooperation with Japan. In 2022, then-President Tsai emphasized the potential for expanded collaboration, stating, "We look forward to Taiwan and Japan continuing to create new cooperation achievements in various fields such as national defense and security, the economy, trade, and industrial transformation" (Kelly & Murakami, 2022). This initiative reflects a mutual interest in strengthening strategic ties amid evolving regional dynamics.

In addition to tensions with China, North Korea remains a significant external threat to Japan. Although geographically further than South Korea, North Korea's ballistic missile program constitutes a direct

threat to Japanese security. In response, the U.S. and Japan have collaborated to strengthen Japan's Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) system, both to safeguard against North Korean missile threats and to deter potential threats from China. North Korea's ongoing development of nuclear weapons, marked by three nuclear tests, has heightened Japan's security concerns (Kelly, 2018). As the only nation to have experienced atomic bombings, Japan remains acutely aware of the devastating consequences a nuclear-armed missile could have on densely populated cities like Tokyo.

As a result of its pacifist constitution, Japan has maintained its Three Non-Nuclear Principles established under former Prime Minister Sato in the 1960s. These principles prohibit the production, possession, and introduction of nuclear weapons on Japanese soil (MOFA, 1967). Consequently, Japan relies heavily on the U.S. nuclear umbrella as a key component of its deterrence policy. However, the credibility of this reliance is frequently questioned by analysts. For instance, one wonders whether the U.S. would be willing to risk its own coastal cities, such as Honolulu or San Francisco, in a retaliatory nuclear strike should North Korea hypothetically target Tokyo.

Since 2016, North Korea has launched over 40 ballistic missiles, several of which have flown over Japanese territory (Kelly, 2018). Despite the presence of numerous U.S. military bases in Japan, these missile tests have proceeded without significant U.S. intervention to prevent their launch or transit through Japanese airspace. This lack of preemptive action by the U.S. has raised concerns and accelerated domestic discussions regarding constitutional amendments aimed at enhancing Japan's defensive capabilities.

Japan strongly supported UN Security Council Resolution 2371, condemning North Korea's ballistic missile launches as provocative actions and a "grave and real threat" to the international community (MOFA, 2017). By 2022, Japan reported that North Korea had conducted 37 missile launches, including cruise missiles (MOFA, 2022). In response, Japan issued a statement in 2023 vowing to intercept any projectile that directly threatens its territory. The fact that North Korea has successfully launched ballistic missiles over Japan without any preemptive or anticipatory actions from the United States—Japan's principal security guarantor—has led to growing skepticism regarding the reliability of the alliance. Japan's pacifist constitution was originally justified, in part, by the assurance that the U.S. would serve as its principal security protector. However, the perceived disparity in responses to North Korean provocations has fueled concerns about the effectiveness and commitment of Japan's defense partnerships. As a result, there is an increasing sentiment that the U.S. may not be as reliable a security partner as Japan once perceived. This realization has contributed to growing domestic support for rearmament and constitutional revision.

Another significant factor contributing to Japan's rearmament efforts and reconsideration of its pacifist constitution is Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This conflict has reinforced Japan's concerns about the need to safeguard its territory against potential aggression or incursions. The invasion in Ukraine challenges the international liberal order that Japan upholds and has brought security fears closer to its own borders. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida underscored these concerns in his 2022 keynote address, stating that "the very foundations of the international order are being shaken by Russia's aggression against Ukraine", and warning that "unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force, in violation of international law, are continuing. Japan is taking a firm stand against such attempts" (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2022). Japan cannot afford to remain a bystander in this situation, particularly given its ongoing territorial disputes with Russia. Kishida's remarks reflect growing fears that the Ukrainian invasion has set a dangerous precedent—demonstrating that a militarily superior country can forcefully invade its neighbor to change the status quo. This raises alarm over the possibility

of a similar scenario unfolding in East Asia, particularly in the event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Such an escalation would not only threaten regional stability but also endanger Japanese territory and disrupt vital sea lanes that supply Japan with energy resources from the Middle East.

Beyond the immediate implications of the invasion of Ukraine, Japan also views Russia as an unpredictable neighbor that disregards international norms. The two countries have never formally signed a peace treaty to end their World War II hostilities. Additionally, Japan continues to assert claims over four of the southernmost Kuril Islands, which remain under Russian control. Diplomatic tensions have only deepened in recent years. For example, in 2024, Senior Russian Security Official and Former President Dmitry Medvedev dismissed Japan's claims over the islands, stating that "we don't give a damn about the 'feelings of the Japanese' concerning the so-called 'Northern Territories'. These are not disputed territories but Russia" (Osborn, 2024).

Japanese security concerns have been heightened especially by the growing strategic alignment between Russia and North Korea. In June of 2024, the two countries signed a mutual defense pact (Smith & Park, 2024) formalizing a strategic partnership that encompasses military, economic and political cooperation. This agreement signals Russia's implicit endorsement of North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile program, potentially emboldening North Korea to conduct further missile tests and escalate regional tensions. This dramatic shift in the geopolitical landscape presents significant foreign policy challenges for Japan requiring careful navigation of increasingly complex security dynamics. In response to these developments, Japan has strengthened its diplomatic and defense coordination with South Korea. In July of 2024, Prime Minister Kishida met with President Yoon Suk Yeol, where both leaders agreed that North Korea's deepening ties with Russia constitutes a serious security threat. They reaffirmed their commitment to a strategic cooperation and emphasized to foster mutual trust in addressing regional challenges (Karube, 2024).

Statements from Tokyo—whether in keynote addresses, public declarations, defense papers, or strategic policies—convey an unambiguous message: Japan's national security strategy is evolving in response to growing regional threats. This shift signals a clear trajectory towards rearmament, despite the constraints of Japan's pacifist constitution.

Domestic Support for Constitutional Revision and Military Normalization

Public opinion in Japan regarding the revision of Article 9 of the Constitution which renounces war, remains complex and divided. A 2020 poll indicated that 69% of Japanese respondents opposed amending Article 9 (Japan Times, 2020). Historical data from the Council on Foreign Relations (2020) further underscores this fluctuation in sentiment, showing that support from revisions stood at only 41% in 2018, down from 60% in 2000. Similarly, major newspaper polls consistently show a polarized landscape, with approximately 40-50% of respondents in favor of revision while 50-60% opposed, indicating the absence of a clear majority.

However, the geopolitical landscape shifted following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, influencing Japanese public sentiment on national security. Post-invasion surveys indicated a notable shift, with 64% of voters expressing the belief that Japan must strengthen its defensive capabilities (Isobe, 2022). Furthermore, a December 2022 poll demonstrated that 51% of respondents advocated for increased defense spending (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2022), suggesting a growing awareness of national security concerns among the Japanese populace.

This growing momentum in favor of military expansion suggests an ongoing shift in public perception. Given the increasing security risks Japan faces, this trend is likely to continue. If North Korea's ballistic missile program reaches a tipping point and China persists in its unilateral assertions of sovereignty and aggressive maritime manoeuvres, Japanese public opinion for constitutional amendments may intensify. The extent of this shift hinges on the effectiveness of media coverage and public awareness campaigns in highlighting the security implications of China and North Korea's actions for Japan's national security.

While public opinion in Japan may gradually shift toward supporting constitutional amendments, it is crucial to strike a balance to prevent the rise of nationalistic and far-right groups that could undermine Japan's traditionally anti-militaristic culture (Hajimu, 2012). Japan has cultivated a strong international reputation through its active participation in humanitarian missions and disaster relief efforts, both domestically and globally. Notable examples include its response to the Fukushima disaster (Yahuda, 2019; Smith, 2019). Within Japan, the JSDF have increasingly gained public trust and regarded as a reputable institution. However, public perception often aligns the JSDF more as a coast guard rather than a conventional military force, reinforcing its image as a provider of humanitarian aid and national defense rather than an offensive force. This broader societal view frames the JSDF as "defenders and helpers" rather than warriors (Traphagan, 2012).

To further strengthen this perception, efforts have been made to enhance the image of the JSDF through targeted recruitment strategies particularly focused on promoting a peaceful and humanitarian-oriented role. For instance, JSDF recruitment materials, such as a poster featuring a woman declaring "Peace People Japan, Come on!" emphasize this non-aggressive narrative (Fruhstuck & Ben-Ari, 2002). Additionally, the military enforces a rigorous vetting process to exclude radicals or overly zealous military enthusiasts, instead targeting "ordinary people" to ensure a balanced and moderate recruitment base (Fruhstuck & Ben-Ari, 2002). These initiatives reflect a strategic approach to solidify JSDF's internal legitimacy while gradually reshaping public perceptions of Japan's military forces.

Regional Opposition to Japanese Rearmament

International opposition to Japan's military normalization primarily stems from East Asian nations that suffered under Japanese wartime aggressions. China and both Koreas, due to their geographic proximity, were particularly vulnerable to such atrocities such as the Nanjing Massacre and the exploitation of comfort women and forced labor. Additionally, the continued veneration of Japanese war criminals at certain shrines remains a significant point of contention (Xiaokui, 2017; BBC, 2019).

In contrast, Southeast Asian countries exhibit a more nuanced perspective on Japan. During the Cold War, Japan's liberal economic foreign policies facilitated significant economic diplomacy and investment in Southeast Asia (Hughes, 2016; Llewelyn, 2014; Gong, 2019). While Japan has made reparations to some Southeast Asian countries, it has not issued a formal, explicit apology to each affected country, nor has it pursued a policy of atonement comparable to Germany's post-World War II efforts. Unlike Japan, Germany has actively engaged in reparations and public apologies for its historical crimes, including ongoing payments to the Israeli government and formal acknowledgment of genocide in Namibia (Oltermann, 2021). This difference in approaches highlights the varying degrees of reconciliation efforts undertaken by countries with difficult historical legacies.

The impact of Japanese imperialism across East and Southeast Asia has left lingering historical grievances, which continue to shape diplomatic tensions. Anti-Japanese sentiments have persisted, as

seen in repeated protests from neighboring countries over Japanese prime ministers' visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. These shrine visits remain controversial due to the shrine's association with Japanese imperialism and its honouring of individuals convicted as war criminals (Hayase, 2019). Additionally, unresolved issues such as the lack of acknowledgement in Japanese history textbooks and the ongoing disputes over comfort women remain key points of contention, particularly with South Korea (Hayase, 2019). Territorial disputes further exacerbate tensions. One long-standing issue between Japan and South Korea is the sovereignty of the Liancourt Rocks, known as Takeshima in Japan and Dokdo in South Korea. Both nations assert territorial claims over these islands, making them a recurring diplomatic flashpoint. Most recently, in 2024, South Korea summoned a Japanese diplomat in protest after Japan referred to the islands as their territory in its annual diplomatic policy Bluebook (Reuters, 2024).

Fast forward to today, despite these lingering historical tensions, Japan and South Korea share a strategic relationship that extends beyond economic trade. As part of South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy under its current leadership, trilateral cooperation with Japan, and the United States play a crucial role in addressing regional issues. These include North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, supply chain disruptions, and broader vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific based on rule of law and international norms (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2022). South Korea views improved relations with Japan as "essential for fostering cooperation and solidarity among like-minded Indo-Pacific nations" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2022). This strategic cooperation between South Korea and Japan has been further bolstered by the emerging alliance between North Korea and Russia as previously discussed.

Despite Japan historical controversies, its significant economic investments in the East Asian region during the Cold War and its extensive trade with Southeast Asia have helped improve its post-war standing (Llewelyn, 2014). Through neoliberal institutionalism, Japan has fostered cooperation, trade, and cultural exchange, strengthening ties with countries that value economic stability and growth. Consequently, many Southeast Asian nations have maintained strong relations with Japan, often refraining from criticizing its past actions to preserve economic and diplomatic benefits. Japan's status as the region's largest aid donor has played a crucial role in this dynamic (Hayase, 2019). Malaysia, for example, during Mahathir's leadership, embraced Japan's direct investment as part of its "Look East" policy which formed a key component of its economic growth strategy and anti-Western stance (Furuoka, 2007).

However, this does not imply that Japan's neighbors are indifferent to its rearmament. Rather, they are closely monitoring its security policies to assess whether they acknowledge its historical responsibilities. Japan must work not only to maintain economic and diplomatic ties but also to earn the respect of its regional counterparts (Bandoro, 2005; Hayase, 2019). The evolving geopolitical landscape, marked by China's growing assertiveness in maritime disputes and territorial claims, is shifting regional priorities. As claimant states in the South China Sea disputes increasingly focus on countering China's revisionist ambitions, historical grievances related to Japan's wartime atrocities may be sidelined. This shift reflects a pragmatic realignment of security concerns in response to contemporary geopolitical challenges.

Southeast Asian states most affected by China's policies in the South China Sea have adopted a more pragmatic approach to national security. The Philippines, for example, has frequently encountered naval skirmishes with Chinese vessels in the South China Sea. In response, it has strengthened security ties with Japan, recently signing a defense pact that allows military forces from both nations to deploy in

each other's territory for live-fire drills, combat training, and military exercises (MOFA, 2024). Despite its historical experience of Japanese occupation during World War II, the Philippines has prioritized contemporary security concerns, forging an alliance with Tokyo as both nations face an increasingly assertive China (Gomez & Nuga, 2024). The Reciprocal Access Agreement between the two countries reflect a bilateral initiative to what they perceive as China's dangerous and escalatory actions (Gomez & Nuga, 2024). Rather than solely relying on the U.S.-led hub-and-spoke system, bilateral initiatives between the 'spokes'—such as Japan and the Philippines—serve to complement their individual defense pacts with the U.S.

Further south, in Australia, Japan and the U.S. have pursued initiatives to strengthen closer relations among their allies. A key example is Japan's inclusion in the U.S.-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) alongside India, Australia, and the U.S. (Chanlett-Avery, 2018). The quadrilateral grouping, beyond diplomatic engagement, conducts strategic military collaborations, including the Malabar naval exercises (Eisentraut & Gaens, 2018). Under the Abe administration, Japan played a leading role in institutionalising the Quad, aligning it with its broader strategic objectives (Koga, 2022). Originally rooted in joint disaster relief operations, the Quad has since evolved into a platform for bolstering defense capabilities, with a particular focus on countering China's assertiveness (Eisentraut & Gaens, 2018).

Thus, the Quad is one of the several strategic initiatives involving Australia, another country that once fought against Japanese imperialism. However, due to its alignment with the U.S. and its regional security concerns, has come to acknowledge Japan's rearmament and normalization as part of shared strategic security goals. As a result, military cooperation between the two nations is driven by strategic rationale rather than historical apprehensions. While the Quad facilitates security collaboration, critics argue that the diverging geopolitical interests of its members limit its effectiveness (Mahbubani, 2021). For example, South Korea has shown little urgency in joining the Quad, and efforts to 'contain' China face challenges, given that its members maintain significant economic ties with Beijing. Some view the Quad as another example of 'minilateralism,' where a small group of countries collaborates on specific issues—a strategy that can be seen as a form of hedging rather than outright confrontation.

This approach to threat management aligns with the balance of power theory, in which states form alliances as a means of 'balancing' against perceived threats (Walt, 1987). While this theory explains the rationale behind their defense policies, neoliberal and constructivist theories remain relevant in complementing the positions of Japan and the Philippines. This is primarily because China is the largest trading partner of both countries. Despite viewing China's actions in the South China Sea as escalatory and a threat to their national interests, both Japan and the Philippines continue to uphold institutions of rule of law and maintain economic cooperation with Beijing. While tensions may escalate further in the future, whether trade between these countries will be completely severed as a result of conflict remains uncertain.

Moreover, geographic proximity and varying levels of threat perception between East Asian and Southeast Asian states play a crucial role in shaping their foreign policies despite shared historical experiences with Japanese imperial rule. Some smaller Southeast Asian states, for example, engage in hedging strategies and tend to avoid taking explicit sides in the broader U.S.-China rivalry (Kuik, 2021). On the other hand, East Asian states have pursued policies that balance against their common perceived threats while simultaneously countering rival powers through alliances and strategic cooperation (Cha, 1999; Waltz, 1979; Snyder, 1991). Overall, Japanese rearmament has progressed with minimal opposition from states in the region. For many of these states particularly those sharing common

security threats—the historical grievances surrounding Japan’s wartime actions are not a primary focus of their security agendas. However, countries such as North Korea, China, and, to a certain extent, Russia, maintain strong symbolic and military opposition to Japan’s rearmament. Despite this, international law does not prohibit the establishment of armed forces and upholds a state’s right to self-defense. Ultimately, Japan’s rearmament remains constrained by its own constitutional limitations—restrictions that are self-imposed and continue to shape its defense policies.

CONCLUSION

The intensity of U.S. efforts to promote a Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy and to consolidate allies in support of a rules-based international order will significantly influence the pace at which Japan moves towards constitutional amendment. These multilateral initiatives are central to aligning regional actors with shared objectives and may accelerate Japan’s constitutional revisions in response to evolving geopolitical dynamics.

Unless China halts its aggressive maritime pursuits and North Korea’s nuclear capabilities are contained, Japan is likely to continue advancing its defense posture by reinterpreting its pacifist constitution through legislative measures. Should circumstances require it, Japan may eventually pursue formal constitutional amendments. However, if the United States consistently demonstrates its efficacy as a primary security guarantor—providing robust political, military, and diplomatic support—Japan’s push for constitutional revision could slow considerably. That said, the findings suggest that Japan’s commitment to rearmament—legally, in policy and in practice—is now stronger than ever, and this trend will likely persist. This underscores the pivotal role of U.S. engagement in shaping Japan’s strategic decisions. Domestically, public sentiment in Japan increasingly supports rearmament, as reflected in the polls that indicate an increasing public awareness of security threats. The Japanese armed forces have also gained a more favorable reputation among the public, viewed as a necessary institution for self-defense against more assertive regional adversaries.

The findings of this study illustrate how Japan has incrementally expanded its military capabilities by gradually reinterpreting its pacifist constitution without formally amending it. This process has been facilitated through successive legislative measures that bypass constitutional constraints, enabling greater strategic use of its armed forces. Successive Japanese governments, particularly under Abe’s leadership, have utilized this approach. As a result, Japan has developed a highly sophisticated military force comparable to those of other states.

The external threats highlighted in this study—including China’s increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea, and North Korea’s ballistic missile program—are unlikely to disappear in the near future. Japan’s confidence in the rule of law and international institutions to mitigate its security concerns has further weakened in light of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and its strengthening alliance with North Korea. The broader regional instability, including the potential for a Chinese invasion of Taiwan and militaristic ambitions in the South China Sea, presents serious implications for Japan’s freedom of navigation and vital shipping routes. Ultimately, Japan’s historical legacies of imperialism is not a primary concern for its regional allies, who are more focused on strategic cooperation and balancing against shared security threats.

Internally, Japan’s leadership has proactively advanced rearmament through a cumulative and balanced approach. This includes implementing legislative bills that ‘reinterpret’ its pacifist constitutions,

acquiring military assets, strengthening alliances with the U.S., expanding defense spending, and enacting military policies that progressively distance Japan from its pacifist stance. The gradual shift in public sentiment in support of normalizing its defense forces, and a stronger military role further indicates a broader recognition of contemporary security threats. In essence, the findings suggest that Japan has already de facto rearmed itself, and on a continued trajectory towards full rearmament, regardless of its pacifist constitutional framework. In practice, Japan's military reality diverges from its legal constraints, with its actual defense capabilities surpassing what is formally recognized in law. Therefore, from an internal standpoint, if both the leadership and the public continue to support Japan's evolving military strategy—which increasingly resembles a conventional armed force for deterrence and possibly beyond—the remaining hurdle is primarily legal.

The theories of defensive realism, balance of threat, and structural realism effectively portrays Japan's security dilemma. Japan seeks to safeguard its national security and maintain an appropriate level of power for defense without aspiring for regional hegemony. Moreover, to its security alliances with its principal guarantor, the U.S., Japan has extended its bilateral security cooperation with other states that share common security concerns, such as South Korea and the Philippines. While prioritizing its security, Japan remains committed to international institutions and the established global order by engaging in diplomacy, trade, and cooperative dialogue. These theoretical frameworks provide valuable insight into Japan's foreign policy decision-making and the complex interplay between its pacifist constitution and evolving defense strategies.

If Japan continues to reinterpret its constitution through ad-hoc legislation measures, the question arises as to whether a formal constitutional amendment will eventually become necessary. Given Japan's strong adherence to constitutional supremacy and its deep-seated aversion to war—rooted in its historical legacy—any amendment would require substantial political will and consensus. The stringent procedural requirements, including a nationwide referendum, pose a formidable challenge, demanding a heightened level of political commitment from both policymakers and the public. With Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba now at the helm, Japan's defense policies and strategic direction in the coming years will be critical to observe. Furthermore, future research should explore the intricate balance between military rearmament and its potential to trigger an arms race—an outcome that could ultimately undermine Japan's broader goals of peace and regional stability.

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