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**Japan's promotion of liberal values in the Indo-
Pacific: between internal and geopolitical realities**

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Par Rémi Moonen

Signature



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Moonen', is written over a long, thin horizontal line that spans the width of the signature area.

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Foreword

Japanese terms first introduced will appear in italics, using the Hepburn romanisation system (*Hebon shiki* ヘボン式), followed by the original Japanese characters (for example, *sakoku* 鎖国/鎖國). Words of Japanese origin that are well-established in English dictionaries (like samurai, kamikaze, etc.) will not be italicised. Personal names will follow the traditional East Asian order: surname first, then given name (for example, Abe Shinzō). For more details on the Hepburn system, see Kudo (2011).

The dates in parentheses following a political actor's name show the duration of their mandate.

Abbreviations table

APEC: Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation

ARF: ASEAN Regional Forum

ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations

ASEAN + 3: ASEAN summit with Japan, South Korea and China, also known as APT

ASEAN + 6: ASEAN summit with Japan, South Korea, China, Australia, India and New Zealand

BRI: Belt and Road Initiative

CEPEA: Comprehensive Economic Partnership

CPTPP/TPP: Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership/Trans-Pacific Partnership

DPRK: Democratic People's Republic of Korea – North Korea

EAFTA: East Asia Free Trade Agreement

EAS: East Asia Summit

FOIP: Free and Open Indo-Pacific

JICA: Japan International Cooperation Agency

LDP: Liberal Democratic Party

ODA: Official Development Assistance

PRC: People's Republic of China – China

Quad: Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

RCEP: Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

ROK: Republic of Korea – South Korea

SCAP: Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers

Glossary

Note: We have not included the Japanese proper names used in this thesis, nor the different periods of Japanese history.

<i>Rōmaji</i> given by the Hepburn method	Japanese characters	Translation and brief explanation
<i>Gaiatsu</i>	外圧	Literally means “pressure from the outside” or “external pressure”, this term was often used by Japanese analysts and officials to describe how certain foreign policy decisions were made under the pressure of the United States
<i>Heiwa Kenpō</i>	平和憲法	The Peace Constitution, one of the other names given to the Japanese Constitution of 1947
<i>Ianfu</i>	慰安婦	“Comfort women”, a euphemism used to designate all Asian women exploited as sexual slaves by the Japanese army during World War II, especially the Korean women.
<i>Jieitai</i>	自衛隊	The Japanese Self-Defence Forces/JSDF established in 1954
<i>Jiyū Minshutō</i>	自由民主党	The Liberal Democratic Party, abridged to LDP, the largest political party of Japan which governed the country since 1955 (except from 1993 to 1995 and from 2009 to 2012)

<i>Keisatsu Yobitai</i>	警察予備隊	The National Police Reserve of Japan established in 1950
<i>Kokkai</i>	国会	National Diet, the Japanese Parliament, composed of two houses : the House of Councillors (the upper house, <i>sangiin</i> 参議院) and the House of the Representatives (the lower house)
<i>Kōmeitō</i>	公明党	A Japanese political party which serves as the junior coalition party of the LDP to form the government from 1999 to 2009 and from 2012 to 2025
<i>Nihon-koku kenpō</i>	日本国憲法	The Constitution of Japan supervised by Douglas MacArthur was promulgated on November 3, 1946, and came into effect on May 3, 1947. Article 9 of the Constitution states that Japan renounces war and prohibits the country from maintaining the war potential
<i>Nihon koku to no Heiwa Jōyaku</i>	日本国との平和条約	Treaty of Peace with Japan, the other name given to the San Francisco Treaty of 1952
<i>Nippon koku to Amerika gasshūkoku to no Aida no Sōgo Kyōryoku oyobi Anzen Hoshō Jōyaku</i>	日本国とアメリカ合衆国との間の相互協力及び安全保障条約	The Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan was first signed in 1952 and applied in 1960, considered as an “improvement” of the San Francisco Treaty as the United

		States were allowed to establish American bases in Okinawa in exchange for mutual assistance in case one of two countries were attacked
<i>Rengōkokugun saikōshireikan</i>	連合軍最高司令官	Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, a title created by a coalition of powers to designate a military governor of an Asian country. The most famous bearer of this title is General Douglas MacArthur
<i>Rikujō Jieitai</i>	陸上自衛隊	Japan Ground Self-Defence Force/JGSDF, the largest of the three branches of the Japan Self-Defense Forces, created in 1954
<i>Sakoku</i>	鎖国/鎖國	Isolationist foreign policy of Japan from 1650 to 1842. Japanese people were forbidden to leave the country, and almost all foreign countries were banned to have commercial affairs with Japan. One of the only states allowed to do business with the country was the Dutch Republic
<i>San Furanshisuko kōwa Jōyaku</i>	サンフランシスコ講和条約	San Francisco Treaty of 1952 in which Japan regained its full sovereignty
<i>Sengo kenpō</i>	戦後憲法	The Post-war Constitution, one of the other names given to the Japanese Constitution of 1947
<i>Shimonoseki Jōyaku</i>	下関条約	The Shimonoseki treaty of 1895, which

		ended the first Sino Japanese war
<i>Shūgiin</i>	衆議院	The House of Representatives of Japan, which has legislative authority.

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Introduction

The Indo-Pacific¹ has consistently piqued the interest of numerous international relations (IR) scholars; however, this region appears to lack theoretical research. As explained by Acharya (2022), although we can apply all the key concepts present in various IR perspectives, such as hegemony, national interest, and the distribution of power, the number of studies examining the region from any IR perspective is limited (Acharya, 2022, p. 55-56). The author states that the Indo-Pacific has not been studied theoretically because a significant majority of regional analysts did not see the necessity for such a study (Acharya, 2022, p. 55). Despite limited theoretical studies for this region, we can consider it essential for the whole world for different reasons: most of the world's population and 40% of global gross domestic product lie within this region, and all the politics happening there have a significant impact on international politics (Hurst and al., 2025). Other researchers, such as Rameau (2021), argue that the Indo-Pacific is more likely to be the centre of the world's major crisis factors because half of the world population will be present in South and Southeast Asia, while important actors like China or India will rise and challenge the current global order (Rameau, 2021, p. 168-169).

Amid these critical matters, it is worth analysing Japan's role in the region. Japan is emerging as a key player in both regional and international systems. Although the country has long been regarded as having "average" power in Asia and has been relatively discreet, its importance has increased significantly over the last decade, particularly during the second and third tenures of Abe Shinzō (2012-2020), Kishida

¹ The Indo-Pacific is a geopolitical concept that first appeared in 2007, when a marine officer, Gurpreet S. Kuhura, used it. It was officially established the same year by the Japanese prime minister at the time, Abe Shinzō (2006-2007), during his first mandate. The concept encompasses the space bounded by the Pacific and Indian Oceans, with India as a major actor. Prior to these declarations, and since 1980, the region was designated as Asia Pacific (Alles and Jaffrelot, 2024, p. 8-9). In this thesis, we will most of the mention this region as such because of it encompasses multiple other major actors such as India and Australia.

Fumio (2021-2024), and Ishiba Shigeru (2024-2025), and is likely to continue with the arrival of Takaichi Sanae in October 2025 (Taniguchi, 2023, p. 34; Liff, 2023, p. 63-83; Pajon, 2024, p. 1-10). This evolving role has become crucial enough that the United States has considered it at the end of Joe Biden's term (2021-2025) and in the context of the US elections, stating that "regardless of who is elected in November, Japan will remain an indispensable partner to the United States in the Indo-Pacific. No other U.S. ally provides the combination of strong strategic alignment and resources to shape regional geopolitics in favour of the existing rules-based order" (Johnstone and Szechenyi, 2024, p. 22). Japan's significance in the Indo-Pacific varies depending on the perspectives applied: If we take a look at the major ones, the realist lens views Japan as part of a balance of power and rivalries, particularly with the People's Republic of China (PRC), which is increasingly seeking to strengthen its national security; liberalism regards Japan as integral due to its involvement in various economic alliances, despite its rivalry with China (Acharya, 2022, p. 60-69). Currently, Japan has appointed Takaichi Sanae, the former president of the *Jiyū Minshutō* 自由民主党 (the Liberal Democratic Party/LDP)², as the new Prime Minister, a woman considered "ultraconservative" who advocates a nationalist stance (Khalil and Tan, 2025). During her tenure in office, these labels are likely to shape Japan's role in the Indo-Pacific, notably within the various institutions the country is involved in, since Prime Minister Takaichi emphasised that her primary focus is on the economy and national defence (Mesmer, 2025).

This research will not focus on every aspect of Japan's foreign policy (although we will mention some), but rather on how Japan, which is considered a peaceful and pacifist state, promotes liberal values within the Indo-Pacific region. Additionally, this research will be grounded in various disciplines, including international security

² Japanese concepts, the names of political parties, and all other essential elements for our study are provided alongside their corresponding Japanese reading and writing. These terms are arranged in alphabetical order based on their transcription in *rōmaji* within the glossary.

studies, foreign policy analysis, regional geopolitics, and international and regional organisations.

Principal question

After briefly presenting the subject of this research, we can now define our primary research focus and the problem we aim to address. As previously explained, this study seeks to understand how Japan promotes liberal values in the Indo-Pacific region and how these values have evolved over time. A related question is how this evolution may position Japan as a key factor in maintaining a liberal order in the Indo-Pacific amid geopolitical and internal tensions.

This research question is relevant for multiple reasons. Firstly, it allows us to examine how Japan upholds, maintains, and reinforces various liberal principles such as cooperation, diplomacy, and normative leadership. Secondly, it sheds light on Japan's response to the increasing challenges posed by regional rivalries, particularly with other major powers such as China or North Korea. Ultimately, this question allows us to offer a historical perspective by tracing Japan's evolution regarding its foreign policy since 1945 and after 2012.

To answer our principal question, we will endeavour to structure our chapters correctly. In the first chapter of the study, it would be relevant to examine the evolution of Japan's foreign policy, beginning with the historical background of the country (the alliance with the United States, Article 9, etc.) which would explain some aspects of Japan's current position on sensitive subjects such as war, as well as Abe Shinzō's projects and their continuation and/or adjustments under Kishida, Ishiba and Takaichi's mandates.

In the second chapter, we will clarify how Japan promotes liberal values in the Indo-Pacific, primarily through its interactions with multilateral institutions and normative frameworks. We will analyse Japan's role and significance within ASEAN-centred organisations,

economic agreements, and development and normative initiatives to highlight how the country promotes liberal values in the Indo-Pacific.

The third and final chapter will examine how both internal and external tensions challenge the liberal multilateralism Japan aspires to follow. We will highlight some of the key dilemmas Japan faces, such as the fear of abandonment by the United States, the desire for autonomy, or the conflict between liberal values and geopolitical realities. It will also serve as an occasion to analyse how Japan responds to the fragmentation of multilateralism, with minilateral coalitions, institutional fatigue, strategic flexibility, and more.

Literature review

Before explaining why and how our subject could be considered original, it is essential to present key academic references to guide our research. For clarity, we will begin by listing major recent academic works by theme before discussing the types of sources we will use. We will first examine general works on the main multilateral and minilateral institutions present in the Indo-Pacific. We will then highlight the various sources on Japan's foreign policy and its implications for the region and these institutions. Finally, we will review the different international relations studies made on the subject.

Regarding multilateralism and minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, we can cite the article proposed by He K. (2019). In this article, the author explains how "multilateralism 2.0" is also facing a crisis and outlines alternatives, such as what he calls "institutional balancing". Another essential reference is the book edited by Singh and Marwah (2022), which compiles a dozen studies on multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific region, with an emphasis on analysing the evolution of institutional challenges. We will draw notably on Saha (2022), which focuses on the Quad and the role of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. In the same vein, Biba's (2026) work is a recent and particularly comprehensive study of Indo-Pacific minilateralism, explaining the concept and providing multiple examples. Finally, we also find the study by Allès and Fournol (2023) pertinent, as the authors explain some of the central multilateral and minilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

We will now proceed to the literature specifically regarding Japan's foreign policy in the region and within the institutions. To our knowledge, there aren't many studies on Japan's role and its evolution in the Indo-Pacific institutions we will address abroad, since the concept is recent. Studies such as Terada (2019), Satake (2019), and Koga (2019) mainly focus on a single institution or framework, though not always from an international relations perspective, and these works remain

important. Regarding Japanese foreign policy in general, the second edition of Edström's book on its history (2025) was recently published. The first edition of this work, released in 1999, analysed Japan's foreign policy from the post-war period until 1993. In this new edition, the author explains how Japan shaped and implemented its foreign policy until Abe Shinzō (Edström, 2025, p. v-vi). This book will be essential to our chapter on Japan's foreign policy history due to its thoroughness, quality, and rigorous methodology. Another important study is the article by Liff (2023), which, according to us, proposed a comprehensive overview of Kishida's and post-Abe decisions regarding Tōkyō's foreign policy.

Finally, regarding international relations studies on the subject, divergent interpretations are evident, and the liberal lens has been less studied. The book edited by Berger, Michizuki and Tsuchiyama (2007) is particularly interesting and, as we mention later, will serve as one of our main guidelines. In this book, the authors and especially Berger developed the concept of "pragmatic liberalism" to characterise Japan's foreign policy from 1945 to 2006 as that of a "liberal adaptive state" rather than applying a realist approach towards the Indo-Pacific and its institutions (Berger, 2007, p. 260-261). On the contrary, Koga (2019), Yuzawa (2005) and Matsumara (2019) argue that many decisions Japan has made regarding institutions or frameworks, such as the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", were not guided by a liberal attitude but were taken in the context of external constraints and to contain China. Also, we can cite Govindasamy (2023), who proposes an evolution of Japan's foreign policy from an international relations perspective from Yoshida to Fumio Kishida.

This literature review shows that Japan's role in multilateral and minilateral institutions has been studied mainly through single-institution, realist approaches. Few studies combine a historical analysis of Japan's foreign policy, especially after Abe, with an examination of its institutional role, considering external and internal constraints

through a liberal lens or both. This thesis aims to integrate these elements, including recent developments, engaging with both realism and liberalism, especially Berger's concept of "pragmatic liberalism" (2007). It seeks a more comprehensive view of Japan's role in the Indo-Pacific liberal order amid external and internal tensions. We acknowledge Green's (2001) "reluctant realism", which describes Japan's post-Cold War shift towards realism due to circumstances, despite a preference for cooperation. However, we argue that Berger's pragmatic liberalism better explains Japan's institutional role, as we will see further.

Methodology

This thesis will consist of a qualitative approach. Our objective is to propose a research thesis exploring a topic that has received less research attention: how Japan promotes liberal values in the Indo-Pacific region and how these values have evolved over time. A related question is how this evolution may position Japan as a key factor in maintaining a liberal order in the Indo-Pacific amid geopolitical and internal tensions.

Two hypotheses can be formulated around this question. One hypothesis is that Japan is promoting liberal values while navigating geopolitical and internal tensions by adopting a mix of liberal and realist approaches. We could argue that, on the one hand, Japan is applying a form of soft power, as developed by Nye (1990), to ensure peace and security in the region and towards institutions. This first strategy would not be surprising, as Japan has already applied this concept after World War II to restore its image, albeit by disseminating its culture (Nye, 1990, p. 189; Paquin, 2013, p. 190; McGray, 2002, p. 19). On the other hand, it is also possible that Japan is trying to guarantee its national security when facing growing tensions with nuclear countries like China and North Korea. Japan could either try to rearm itself, as suggested by Abe and Takaichi, or by reinforcing its alliance with the United States or other states.

A second hypothesis is that Japan is adapting to the growing tensions and rivalries between China and the United States. Japan has faced a dilemma over its security alliance with the United States. In fact, the Japanese government has been described as caught in a “fear of entrapment” in a conflict between the PRC and the US, while also fearing a confrontation with China, which views the Japan-US alliance as a threat (Berfosky, 2022, p. 32). This concern may explain why Japan seeks a more prominent role in the Indo-Pacific region to ensure security in the event of an open conflict between these two great powers (Brzezinski and Mearsheimer, 2009).

To collect all the necessary data and information, we will utilise two main types of sources. The first comprises academic sources, such as peer-reviewed articles, monographs, or doctoral theses, as mentioned in the literature review. The second comprises primary sources, including official documents, political speeches from Japan or other countries with which Japan has cooperation agreements, governmental reports, and international agreements. These sources will support our argument and address less-developed points in the literature. It is also important to note that, if necessary, we will utilise non-academic sources, such as press articles or think tank publications, to stay current with potential developments.

Regarding our theoretical framework, some elements should be clarified. Because Japan presents itself as a pacifist and peaceful country, the most pertinent approach to guide our development is liberalism; however, we may also draw on subfields of liberal theory (e.g., institutional liberalism). To further explain the role of liberalism and the subparts we will use, we will rely on significant works on liberalism, such as Moravcsik, A. (1997), which explains the whole concept of liberal theory and all its subparts, or Nye, J. (1990), which develops the idea of “soft power” that will guide us not only in arguing about Japan’s evolving foreign policy but also in the historical part through the liberal theory. However, given geopolitical and internal constraints, we argue that liberalism alone is insufficient. To gain a better perspective on our question, we will confront liberalism with the realist school while also drawing on Moravcsik’s (1997) theory of “state preferences”. Finally, as we mentioned in the literature review, we will also draw on the different interpretations of “pragmatic liberalism” presented by Berger (2007). This concept does not constitute a new IR theory or concept; it will help us understand some of Japan’s decisions.

To conclude our methodology, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of our research. One significant challenge is the language

barrier. We will not exclude any sources and will mobilise as many as possible, but we may encounter difficulties in understanding and utilising academic or primary sources in Japanese. Despite having some basic knowledge of Japanese and access to various tools to assist us, this is insufficient for a complete understanding of Japanese sources. Additionally, we may not have access to certain official Japanese documents due to confidentiality. Finally, due to the distance between Belgium and Japan, we are unable to consult Japanese university libraries.

Chapter I: Japan's foreign policy evolution

Japan's foreign policy has undergone significant changes. While it could be interesting to detail Japan's diplomatic history before World War II, especially during the isolation period (*Sakoku* 鎖国/鎖国, around 1650–1842) and the Meiji era (*Meiji jidai* 明治時代, 1868–1912), which led to the reopening of Japan's borders—this chapter will focus on the most notable shift that occurred after Japan's defeat in World War II. It will briefly cover five key phases: First, we examine the impact of Japan's surrender and the American occupation on its political landscape. Next, we review the period from 1952 to 1989, highlighting key internal changes that influenced Japan's foreign policy. Thirdly, we will look at the post-Cold War period through 2012. Fourthly, we consider Abe Shinzo's foreign policy decisions concerning his plans to amend the Japanese Constitution and the potential implications of such changes. For the fifth period, we will present the post-Abe mandates to understand if there is a pursuit of his objectives or a renewal. Finally, we will address Japanese foreign policy from the post-Abe era to the present day. After each presentation, we will use liberal theory to analyse the events and decisions of this period. As we mentioned in the introduction, this historical overview³, studied through a liberal perspective⁴, will help us understand how Japan shaped its foreign policy, evolving from a pacifist, US-dependent posture to a more proactive stance in shaping the international order. This global question will prove helpful in the following chapter.

³ For the sake of our analysis and readability, and because many studies already treated each period individually in details, we will concentrate on the most important events which shaped Japan's foreign policy. Consequently, some events are omitted.

⁴ The liberal analysis will incorporate the most relevant liberal concepts for each period. This approach was chosen to avoid potential overload.

1. Japan's foreign policy after the American occupation (1945-1952)

Historical background

Japan surrendered on 15 August 1945, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed by the United States with the first two nuclear weapons used in warfare, and following the Soviet Union's declaration of war. The country was devastated, its economy overwhelmed, and its population suffered wartime casualties. In this context, the United States appointed General Douglas MacArthur (1945–1951) as Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) to occupy Japan and oversee its reconstruction, aiming to democratise and demilitarise the country. This role was established on 14 August 1945 by a multinational Far Eastern Commission and an Allied Council in Tokyo, involving the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Commonwealth countries, effectively granting the U.S. authority to govern Japan (Notehelfer and Latts, 2025; Dower, 1999, p. 40). Democratisation involved drafting a new constitution to transform Japan into a parliamentary monarchy, with the emperor remaining a symbolic figure without powers over the government. MacArthur also implemented military reforms, including dismantling and disarming Japan's army and navy. These measures aimed to prevent Japan from once again becoming a threat to the United States or global peace and security (Dower, 1999, p. 40). To achieve these goals, MacArthur supervised the drafting of the current Japanese constitution (*Nihon-koku kenpō* 日本国憲法), known as the "MacArthur Constitution" or "After-War Constitution" (*Sengo kenpō* 戦後憲法), or "Peace Constitution" (*Heiwa kenpō* 平和憲法). Notably, Article 9 of this constitution is significant for understanding Japan's evolution in foreign policy. Here are the official English translation and the

original Japanese version of this article (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2023; E-Gov 法令検索, 2023):

Article 9. Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized⁵

Voted in 1946 before coming into effect in May 1947, this article of Japan's new constitution was crucial in shaping the country's foreign policy for many years. It states that Japan is prohibited from rearming and using war to resolve international disputes (Delamotte, 2010, p. 2). A year later, Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru (1948–1954) reaffirmed the importance of this article by introducing the “Yoshida doctrine” (*Yoshida dokutorin* 吉田ドクトリン). This policy had three main aims: to strengthen the alliance with the United States for Japan's defence against aggression, to focus on international economic relations to support reconstruction, and to maintain a “low profile” in global politics (Potter, 2008, p. 7). To summarise, the Yoshida doctrine emphasised massive economic development while assigning the responsibility for national defence to the United States (Pelletier, 2023, p. 187).

Following the application of Article 9 and the Yoshida doctrine, Japan could not rearm itself and sought to adhere to this strict rule; however, a few years later, a major international event would challenge this pacifist stance. In 1950, the Korean War was launched, opposing North Korea, supported by China and the Soviet Union, and South Korea, which the United Nations and the United States supported. Even though Japan was forbidden to rearm and possess an army, U.S. officials long debated the possibility of Japan's help in this war. After one month of discussions, Prime Minister Yoshida and MacArthur

⁵ To ensure better readability, we will provide only the official or personal translation of long Japanese texts. The original Japanese version will be included in the appendix.

agreed to help the US in the war by providing transportation, military infrastructure and “manning the U.S. military bases in Japan” (Caprio, 2023, p. 68). This aid from Japan prompted US officials to reconsider the country’s “non-armament” policy. Before the Korean War ended in 1952, some adjustments were proposed. 3 days before the start of the war, John Foster Dulles, the American ambassador, met with Prime Minister Yoshida to rearm Japan and create a 300,000-man force to help the United States (Delamotte, 2010, p. 25). Also, a lightly armed national police force called the National Police Reserve (*Keisatsu Yobitai* 警察予備隊) was established in August 1950 to, as stated by Kuzuhara (2006), not only serve as a police force but also provide more national defence capability to the country (Kuzuhara, 2006). In 1951, MacArthur was replaced as SCAP by Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway, a man more eager to rearm the country, and the San Francisco Treaty / Treaty of Peace with Japan (*San Furanshisuko kōwa Jōyaku* / *Nihon koku to no Heiwa Jōyaku* サンフランシスコ講和条約 / 日本国との平和条約) was signed. This treaty was proposed to Japan to affirm the country as an American ally in East Asia by restoring full sovereignty to its government (Seiichi, 1991, p. 108). Starting in 1952, the treaty aimed to permit US forces to remain in Japan even after the American Occupation ended and to establish American bases across the country. However, Japan had nothing to offer in return, as it could not grant bases to other countries without US approval and was required to remain unarmed under Article 9 of its Constitution. Despite this alliance, the treaty stated that the United States was not obligated to help Japan in the event of external aggression (Kapur, 2018, p. 11). This unilaterality concerned Tokyō for many years, as we will explain later, before being revised in 1960 (Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato, 2019, p. 78). Despite this ban on rearming Japan, discussions occurred in the United States. For example, Ridgway informed the Department of the Army that rearming Japan would enhance US security (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, 1951).

Japan's foreign policy was effectively on hold from 1945 to 1952. As previously noted, the 1948 Yoshida doctrine highlighted the importance of aligning foreign policy decisions with the United States (Sugita, 2016, p. 123). The priority was economic growth, with international relations decisions made first in consultation with the US. As a result, Japan did not participate in international organisations or undertake many diplomatic activities; all actions were coordinated with the US, while the Japanese government focused on economic recovery. Japan's diplomatic involvement was primarily aimed at establishing itself as a pacifist nation and distancing itself from the imperialist policies of the pre-war and wartime eras. Otherwise, Japan maintained a "low profile attitude" (Edström, 2025, p. 13-15). This low-profile approach shaped Japan's direction in the following decades, especially on issues such as war and military expansion.

Liberal analysis

The liberal theory can be used to underline several angles from this period. Let us begin with Japan's Constitution. The key aspect of this Constitution that aligns with the liberal perspective is its portrayal of Japan as a pacifist actor. MacArthur even considered this constitution the most liberal one in the world (Pyle, 2018, p. 73). The sentence "Japan forever renounces war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes" positions Japan in a more cooperative manner: it has renounced war as a sovereign right and the threat or use of force to resolve international disputes, promoting pacifism and diplomacy. This Constitution can be seen to institutionalise Japan's domestic and foreign policies, favouring a more peaceful and cooperative approach within the international order, a central idea of liberalism (Nau, 2019, p. 52). As argued by Akimoto (2013), this anti-war stance and idealism reflect a more classical liberal approach (Akimoto, 2013). The author further states that this Constitution not only aligns with classical liberalism but also connects to the neoliberal perspective, as the preamble helped Japan "to facilitate

its participation in post-conflict peace operations” (Akimoto, 2013). Akimoto also emphasised this institutionalisation of liberal norms by comparing the preambles of the Japanese Constitution and the UN Charter, both of which aim to foster peace in the international arena by prioritising human rights over national interests (Akimoto, 2013).

A second liberal point is the cooperation, notably the one proposed by Yoshida’s doctrine, which aims to delegate security issues to the United States. By focusing on the economy and collaborating with the Americans, Japan experienced an economic miracle in the subsequent years and became, between 1950 and the early 1990s, the world’s second-largest economic power (Blancheton, 2020, p. 102-103). This cooperation between Japan and the United States is one of the bases of the liberal theory. This one encourages cooperation to avoid conflicts and periods of uncertainty (Nau, 2019, p. 58). The Yoshida doctrine also seems to be a good application of the theory of commercial liberalism, one of the three pillars of traditional liberalism, as explained by Acharya (2022, p. 64). As a matter of fact, commercial liberalism focuses heavily on economic interdependence and how it helps minimise the risk of conflict and/or war. By prioritising its economy, Japan could adopt a low-profile approach to ease tensions with countries with which it was at war (China, South Korea, etc.).

The final point we would like to address in this period is Japan’s use of “soft power” to improve its image among East Asian states and other international powers. The American occupation of the country until the Korean War provided Japan with an opportunity to enhance its image and avoid being seen solely as an imperialist power (Edström, 2025, p. 22). By adopting a low-profile approach, Japan tended to present itself as peaceful and to reassure neighbouring countries that the government was no longer an imperialist power. All the actions Japan took to present itself as a pacifist state can be linked to Nye’s concept of soft power. Indeed, Nye argued that soft power can be used to

enhance or restore a country's public and international image (Nye, 2005, p. 105 and 112; Lord, 2005, p. 62).

We want to conclude this liberal analysis of the post-war period by revealing certain limits to liberalism. As we saw, Japan's actions could be a good reflection of liberalism, but some points can be made to explain the limits of this pacifist, low-profile attitude. The central point is the Korean War. As we already described and will develop further in the following part, the Korean War was the trigger point regarding Article 9, the Yoshida Doctrine, and the will to disarm Japan. Even though Japan adopted a more pacifist way of behaving, the United States mobilised the country to intervene and support the US in the Korean War, breaking Japan's engagement not to interfere in other states' wars and its unarmed policy. After this war, Japan had to create a new armed force, the National Reserve.

Another point is the San Francisco Treaty. The liberal theory holds that cooperation can reduce the risk of conflict when it benefits all parties (Nau, 2019, p. 52). However, this treaty most likely favoured the USA, which could put military bases on Japanese territory. Still, the latter's government had no guarantee that the American government would defend it in the event of a conflict. The end of the post-war period presents a paradox between Japan's pacifism and geopolitical realities. The "liberal adaptive state" notion of Berger (2007) may be used here to explain the direction Japan's foreign policy is going to take in the following years. The country, which was facing geopolitical challenges, will prioritise its own national interest while also supporting the international order through institutions, though to a lesser extent (Berger, 2007, p. 260).

2. Security reinterpretation and low-profile diplomacy (1952-1989)

Historical background

We saw in the previous part that Japan was prohibited from rearming under Article 9 of the new Japanese Constitution. However, we also studied how the Americans raised the issue of rearming Japan before, during and after the Korean War. These debates led to a new foreign policy pronounced by Japan starting in 1952 and 1954.

The first key measure we'd like to discuss is the establishment of the Japan Self-Defence Forces (JSDF; *Jieitai* 自衛隊) in 1954, driven by a new interpretation of Article 9. As a matter of fact, the Korean War accelerated the rearmament of Japan as it placed Japan in a “vulnerable stance” in which the country could be threatened without the United States, which was not forced to help Japan if it was attacked. In this context, leading Japanese officials, including Prime Minister Yoshida, argued for the reinterpretation of certain provisions of Article 9 (Delamotte, 2010, p. 27). It was then decided in 1954 to reorganise the National Police Reserve into three main branches, with the Japan Ground Self-Defence Force (JGSDF; *Rikujō Jieitai* 陸上自衛隊) being the largest (Delamotte, 2010, p. 28). The SDF could be deployed only if three conditions were met and only in the case of self-defence: if Japan was being attacked imminently and illegitimately, if self-defence was the last resort, and if the use of armed force was limited to the minimum extent necessary (Hornung, 2021, p. 27). Prime Minister Yoshida already explained in 1950 in a speech at the House of Representatives⁶ how he considered self-defence as not an abolition of the Constitution (Delamotte, 2010, p. 29; 国会会議録検索システム, 1950):

⁶ The House of Representatives (*Shūgiin* 衆議院) is the lower chamber of Japan's National Diet (*Kokkai* 国会), the country's parliament. It holds legislative authority, and it is within this building that the Prime Minister is elected (Britannica, 2025).

The proclamation of renunciation of war certainly does not mean the abandonment of the right to self-defence. Our national policy will be dedicated to democracy and pacifism, and the resolve of the people to act forever in accordance with this principle will earn us the trust of democratic, peace-loving peoples; this mutual trust will guarantee our security and defend our country⁷.

As Yoshida explained, even though Japan reinterpreted Article 9 by allowing self-defence, the objective was not to abandon the country's peace-making attitude, but to ensure better national security (Cooney, 2006, p. 26). This rearmament of Japan, with the agreement of the United States, will lead to a revision of the San Francisco Treaty, the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan (*Nippon koku to Amerika gasshūkoku to no Aida no Sōgo Kyōryoku oyobi Anzen Hoshō Jōyaku* 日本国とアメリカ合衆国との間の相互協力及び安全保障条約), signed on 19 January 1960. This treaty, ratified by US President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Japanese Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, guaranteed that the US would defend Japan if a foreign country attacked it. Another essential point of this treaty was that the USA had to consult the Japanese Government if the American Government wished to introduce and use nuclear weapons on Japanese territory (Kapur, 2018, p. 16).

During the Cold War, Japan faced a particularly delicate strategic situation, as it was allied with the United States yet geographically close to the Soviet Union. Although the country was allied with the US, it was privileged to focus on economic growth and regional diplomacy. However, there are debates about Japan's role in the international arena. While some papers argued that Japan adopted a more discreet approach, not wanting to be too active in world politics, but to be trusted and respected (Quei Quo, 1988; Edström, 2025, p. 59), others, such as Presselo, A. (2024), pointed out the major roles Japan played during this period (Presselo, 2024, p. 583 and 604). Indeed, Japan seems to have adopted a mediation approach, with varying

⁷ This English translation is derived from the French translation of the original text suggested by Delamotte (2010).

success, in some conflicts in Southeast Asia to support not only its economic and geopolitical security interests but also to continue improving its international image (Presselo, 2024, p. 586). We can list Japan's peace diplomacy in the Indonesia-Malaysia conflict⁸ (1963-1966), in the Vietnam War and the Cambodian conflict⁹ (1978-1993). Not only did Japan try to act as a mediator in some of these countries, but it also paid war reparations to them to stabilise Southeast Asia and avoid communism and Chinese expansion (Presselo, 2024, pp. 586 and 604). Pressolo (2024) identified four types of diplomacy used by Japan in Southeast Asia that could be easily linked to soft power. The first one is described as a diplomatic approach focused on "facilitating dialogue through an inclusive and non-confrontational approach". The second diplomacy is "combining quiet diplomacy and public initiatives". Thirdly, Japan used economic incentives as a diplomatic tool. Finally, Japan's diplomacy rested on a "not acting alone" policy (Presselo, 2024, p. 600-603).

It is also during this period that Japan began to join international organisations, including the United Nations (UN) in 1956, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1964, and the Group of Seven (G7) in 1973.

Finally, this period is considered the beginning of a key but debated concept in Japanese foreign policy: *gaiatsu* 外圧, meaning "pressure from the outside", especially from the United States (Cooney, 2006, p. 134). While Japan retained a degree of autonomy regarding its foreign policy decisions, some analyses and Japanese officials argued that many choices were made under external pressure from the United

⁸ The Indonesia-Malaysia conflict, also called *Konfrontasi* in Indonesian, was a military dispute for the creation and the independence of the state of Malaysia. Indonesia considered such an act as a British neocolonial project whose goal was to allow the United Kingdom to control the region (EBSCO, 2023).

⁹ The Cambodian conflict was a dispute which happened just after the civil war in Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge regime (Communist party which led the government from 1975 to 1979) confronted the People's Republic of Kampuchea party (a satellite state of Vietnam), supported by Vietnam, for the control of the country (Britannica, 2020).

States. The reinterpretation of Article 9 illustrates how foreign policy decisions can be made under external pressure (Cooney, 2006, p. 134).

Liberal analysis

Several liberal concepts we mentioned in the previous part remain valid for this period. The most obvious liberal concept is the importance of institutions. During the post-American occupation period, Japan tended to become a quieter actor, gradually improving its international image. By joining institutions like the international organisations, such as the United Nations, Japan could position itself as a country promoting world peace, as Yoshida proclaimed, while also ensuring a new form of national security distinct from that provided by the United States (Hishizuka, 2023, p. 262). In addition, by joining international organisations, Japan could promote itself as open to cooperation. This spirit of collaboration can be found in Japan's diplomacy during the Southeast Asia conflict. Indeed, one of the points of Japan's diplomacy in the region was that the country adopted a "not acting alone" policy and cooperated with countries (such as Malaysia and Indonesia) and with other regional organisations, such as ASEAN, after the Cambodian war (Presselo, 2024, p. 603).

A second liberal point for this period is, again, one we can like with commercial liberalism. During the Cold War, we saw that Japan adopted a confident "peacemaker" attitude towards Southeast Asian countries, notably through economic assistance. It could be argued that Japan did so to privilege its national interest by containing communism and Chinese expansion; however, the country still used financial means as a tool for peace and stability, typically a commercial liberal approach (Acharya, 2022, p. 64; Moravcsik, 1997, p. 528-529). Indeed, this attitude could also be linked to the concept of *soft power*, as Japan is improving its image through non-violent, pacifist approaches (Nye, 2005, p. 105).

As in the previous part, we would like to underscore the limits and paradoxes of liberalism in this period of Japanese foreign policy. Paradoxes created by the opposition between liberal values and realist objectives or realities. First point is the will of Japan to keep a pacifist attitude, while rearming itself with the JSDF. This decision can be analysed through a mix of liberal and realist lenses. While Japan promotes pacifism and cooperation as a means of soft power and to upgrade its image, it decided to re-arm itself as a “fear” of abandonment by the US in case of an attack, a distrust which is more aligned with the realist scope (Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato, 2019, p. 78; Nau, 2019, p. 42). The second point is the new alliance treaty with the United States. Indeed, Japan found itself in a more “protected” alliance with the US; however, this protection through cooperation comes at the cost of freedom and independence, confronting the liberal value with the bandwagoning¹⁰ concept present in realism and neo-realism theories (Keohane and al., 1986, p. 126-127). Finally, as we exposed earlier, Japan adopted a commercial liberal attitude toward Southeast Asia by providing economic assistance to countries at war or in the aftermath of war. Still, Japan's original plan was to contain communism and China's expansion, which could again be linked to the distrust presented in realist theory. We can argue that these points are nuanced. Japan indeed tried to rearm itself with a realist assumption of distrust towards the United States; this newfound military power was not used to place Japan as an active player in the international world, the country following a more low-profile attitude for decades (Berger, 2007, p. 262). This observation can make us understand that Japan is adopting an adaptive position as it selected different liberal elements (commercial liberalism approach and liberal institutionalism), compatible with the security constraints, rather than abandoning them.

¹⁰ Bandwagoning is a concept found in the realism theory of international relations, which explains that some states will align themselves with a stronger state and become partners. However, the stronger state is, most of the time, benefiting from more advantages (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 162-163).

3. Post-Cold War period (1990-2012)

Historical background

The post-Cold War period is a more complicated one for Japan's foreign policy. Firstly, as Cooney (2006) argues, its role as the United States' ally was diminished with the fall of the Soviet Union, a fall that brought the USA an independence Japan was not ready for (Cooney, 2006, p. 131). Another point is that Japan faced significant criticism for its policy of non-intervention during the Gulf War (1990-1991)¹¹. Indeed, because Japan had become an important economic power, the United States and other actors involved in the Gulf War asked Japan to provide financial and military assistance. Nevertheless, Japan considered itself not ready to intervene in the conflict, even under UN command, and preferred to follow Article 9 and adopt a more pacifist approach (Cooney, 2006, p. 38-40). Japan invested 13 billion dollars in the conflict (without a military intervention), but only days after being asked for support, raising questions among allied states – notably the United States – about whether or not Japan was “stingy” and criticised a “checkbook diplomacy” from Japan, believing the country should play a more “proactive political role” in the international arena and in conflicts (Cooney, 2006, p. 39; Purrington, 1992, p. 162).

Because of this war and the criticism Japan faced, the country's officials decided to revise its foreign policy to better align with international expectations. In 1992, the Diet passed a law concerning “Cooperation for United Nations peacekeeping operations and Other Operations” (PKO), enacted to remain compatible with Article 9, so that Japan could play a more “proactive role” by allowing the SDF and Japanese civilians to participate in UN peace operations. Still, only in the case that these operations did not require the use of force and if the host nations consented to these missions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024). Cooney explained that after the Cold War, Japan seemed

¹¹ The Gulf war started when Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, invaded Kuwait for economical and territorial reasons, notably for oil (Noushi, 2014, p. 226-227).

to ally itself with the UN to compensate for its bilateral relations with the US, to ensure better security and in the hope of getting a permanent seat in the Security Council (Cooney, 2006, p. 144-145). To contribute to PKO, Japan deployed its Self-Defence Forces on 28 missions between 1992 and the early 2000s, in line with Japan's principles (Angola, Mozambique, Cambodia, etc.). This deployment was a turning point in the country's foreign policy, as it was the first time the SDF were sent on missions outside the country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2005). The PKO played an essential part in Japan's foreign policy, so much so that it was revised three times: in 1998, 2001 and in 2015.

A third historical moment in Japanese foreign policy is during Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō's mandate (2001-2006). Koizumi sought to give Japan a more prominent role in the international arena, notably through international cooperation. Koizumi believed that "interdependence was essential to international relations" and to achieve national peace (Edström, 2025, p. 258). One of his main objectives was also to consolidate the alliance with the United States, an objective that became precise at the time of the 9/11 attacks. Not wanting to issue a response like the one used during the Gulf War, Koizumi met with US President George W. Bush (2001-2009) and promised support, without the use of force, for compliance with Article 9. The Diet institutionalised this statement by enacting two new laws, the Anti-terrorism Special Measures Law in 2001 and the Law Concerning the Special Measures on Humanitarian and Reconstruction Assistance in Iraq in 2003 (Ministry of Japan, 2025). Japan played a significant non-combat role during the Afghanistan (2001-2021) and Iraq (2003/2004-2006) wars, providing non-combat logistical support to the allies and contributing financial resources to help the reconstruction of the countries (Dobrinskaya, 2022, p. 99-102; Yukiko, 2009, p. 352). This support marked the first time in Japan's history that the SDF were sent to conflict zones, even if they did not use any force. It was also during Koizumi's mandate (although it was finalised after

his departure) that the Japanese government created its Ministry of Defence. This one ministry led the SDF (Edström, 2025, p. 260)¹².

It is also during this period that Japan began to have tensions and fears with China and North Korea¹³. Even during the Cold War, in 1971, Japan and China began a territorial dispute over the Diaoyu-Senkaku Islands, with each country reasserting sovereignty over them (Le Monde, 2012). Regarding North Korea, the latter sent ballistic missiles in 1998 and 2009 while claiming they were “satellite launch vehicles” (BBC, 2017). These examples of events also pushed Japan to change its foreign policy.

It is essential to explain how Japan’s foreign policy evolved, especially between 2006 and 2007, during Abe Shinzo’s first tenure as Prime Minister. Even though his actions became more concrete starting in 2012, Abe’s first tenure already pointed the direction Japan’s foreign policy would follow. First, although the project was launched under Koizumi, it was Abe who finalised the creation of the Ministry of Defence, thereby allowing Japan to establish an official department dedicated to national defence. Also, presenting himself as a successor to Koizumi, Abe has longed for a more “proactive role” for Japan in the international arena. Abe also began discussing a revision of Article 9, stating that Japan should no longer be limited to self-defence. It is also with Abe’s initiative that Japan joined the Quad in 2007. However, this first tenure was cut short because of political scandals and sickness (Edström, 2025, p. 279-282).

The last historical point we’d like to address is Japan’s transition to regional and international organisations. Indeed, out of fear of a rising China, Japan joined a minilateral grouping called the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the United States,

¹² This Ministry of Defence will be further developed in the following period.

¹³ These events will not be analysed at this stage, as they constitute central elements we will explore in chapter III.

Australia, and India to confront China's growing power and perceived menace, but also to ensure Indo-Pacific becomes stable, peaceful and prosperous (Le Monde, 2020; Australian Government: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2025; Saha, 2022, p. 89).

Liberal analysis

This period is interesting to examine from a liberal perspective, as it marks the beginning of Japan's adoption of a more "proactive" approach in international relations. Our analysis will primarily focus on institutions and liberal institutionalism.

As previously noted, joining international organisations often provides opportunities to promote liberal values such as cooperation and free trade, or to achieve security goals (Barnett, M. and Finnemore, 2009, p. 162). This applies to Japan's intent to use the United Nations as a counterbalance to its alliance with the United States. To secure a permanent seat on the Security Council, Japan made significant contributions to the UN, particularly through PKO missions and participation in various UN operations, while respecting Article 9 (Cooney, p. 144-145). This example aligns with liberal institutionalism, which, according to Keohane and Martin (1995), emphasises the role of international institutions in shaping state preferences and encouraging cooperation (Keohane and Martin, 1995, p. 42). The PKO was initiated amid criticism of Japan's passive role during the Gulf War. By engaging with the UN via this principle, Japan could collaborate with other states and the organisation without violating its domestic principles outlined in Article 9. Liberal institutionalism also explains the US-Japan alliance. While Japan sought to expand its relationship with the UN, under Koizumi's leadership, one of its foreign policy priorities was to strengthen its alliance with the US, a commitment confirmed when Japan supported the US after 9/11. This alliance can be seen as the institutionalisation of a security pact that reduces mutual uncertainty and promotes cooperation, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq (Keohane and Martin, 1995, p. 42). Lastly, the 2007 Quad is an example

of liberal institutionalism. Although some argue it was created to counter Chinese influence, it demonstrates Japan's use of institutions to manage regional issues, while respecting the pacifist principles of Article 9.

What are the paradoxes of liberalism in this period? Some points can be indicated. First, we saw that Japan's pacifist nature began to cause trouble for other countries, especially during the Gulf War. Also, we can note that although Japanese Prime Ministers during this period sought to respect Article 9, some evidence suggests that this Article is beginning to cause trouble and that some people would like to reinterpret it, as Abe did in 2006. This will is caused by the rise of regional tensions, such as those between China and North Korea, which are more likely to be understood through realism. Again, if we must nuance these decisions and limits, the first thing is that, as during the Cold War, Japan was still reluctant to use military force. Another element is that, despite regional tensions, notably with China, Japan still sought to maintain cordial relations by adopting a liberal approach. For example, Tōkyō pursued its foreign aid to Beijing, sought to improve cooperation through communication and diplomacy, and engaged in bilateral and multilateral talks with Beijing and Pyongyang. Like Berger (2007), Japan in this period is still adopting a liberal pragmatic attitude as it emerges from "its post-war pacifist cocoon to become an important military as well as economic power [...] however not as a player in the balance-of-power game in Asia, but as a regional stabiliser to strengthen a regional and global security order..." (Berger, 2007, p. 278-279).

All the changes Japan made to its foreign policy after Abe Shinzō were carried out during his second and third terms as Prime Minister. The next section will clarify and analyse Abe's goal of Japan taking on a more proactive international role.

4. Japan's foreign policy under Abe Shinzō's second and third tenures (2012-2020)

Historical background

Abe Shinzō is considered one of the most prominent and influential Prime Ministers Japan has ever had, especially during his two other mandates between 2012 and 2020, which were the longest in Japanese history (Panov, 2024, p. 5; Hornung, 2021, p. 23). In the previous part, we mentioned that Abe had already served as prime minister and how he had tried to shape Japan's foreign policy. However, his ambitions were cut short after one year. The two Abe Shinzō's mandates and all the implications they had regarding foreign policy still have repercussions in current Japan, having brought "international respect, and a forward-leaning commitment to strengthen Japan's defences and uphold the major tenets of the international order" (Hornung, 2021, p. 22).

The ambitions of Abe's foreign policy can already be understood through his campaign slogan *Nippon o torimodosu* 日本を取り戻す (to take back/restore Japan). By his own admission, Japan's security and diplomacy needed drastic reshaping, and Japan needed to play a more proactive role on the international stage (Edström, 2025, p. 324).

Abe's mandates, in terms of foreign policy, were, first, marked by diplomacy and attempts to calm existing tensions, notably with China, North Korea, and South Korea. Even though Abe was often criticised for his "conservative, almost revisionist" views on Japanese and Asian history, he managed in 2015 to reach an agreement with South Korea that "permanently" resolved the comfort women¹⁴ issue

¹⁴ Comfort women (in Japanese, *ianfu* 慰安婦) is a euphemism for all Asian women exploited as sexual slaves by the Japanese army during World War II. This issue

that had divided the two countries (Hornung, 2021, p. 24). Regarding China, Abe first sought to build a personal relationship with General Secretary Xi Jinping. He spoke positively about the One Belt, One Road initiative¹⁵ if it did not contradict the principles of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. However, this ambition to get closer to China ended when Donald Trump, the American president at the time, sought to form a coalition to contain China's expansionism (Panov, 2024, p. 16-17). For North Korea, the situation proved to be complicated since Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un conducted ballistic exercises in Japan's seawater. Finally, Abe sought to strengthen the relationship between Japan and the USA even more as he thought Japan and the US could both benefit from each other in terms of strategy and security (Hornung, 2021, p. 34-35). Panov (2024) explained that Abe's ambition was to prove he was a "loyal ally" of the USA, and he took several actions to achieve his objectives. First, he sought to develop military cooperation with the United States. Secondly, the Abe cabinet demonstrated "its willingness to 'work' with Japan's Asian neighbours to involve them in supporting the American strategy in the region". Thirdly, Japan made concessions to the U.S to resolve several trade and economic contradictions. Finally, Abe became friends with both Barack Obama and Donald Trump (Panov, 2024, p. 13-14).

Another aspect of Abe's foreign policy was his intention to revise Article 9 and to use the Self-Defence Forces, in contrast to Yoshida's approach. As previously discussed, the SDF was only permitted to use force in self-defence cases. However, Abe's ambitions and his views on the international order prompted him to consider altering the first condition for deploying the SDF. In 2014, Abe's

worsened tensions with South Korea, as many of these women were Koreans (Ramaj, 2022, p. 476).

¹⁵ The One Belt, One Road initiative, later known as Belt and Road initiative (BRI), is a Chinese strategic plan regarding trade and production, introduced by Xi Jinping in 2013. This plan consists on creating a network composed of roadways, railways or ports between all continents through Central Asia in the hope of re-creating a Silk road (Council of Foreign Relations, 2023).

government introduced a new legislation which stated that the SDF could deploy force when:

“An armed attack against Japan has occurred, or when an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan occurs and as a result threatens Japan’s survival and poses a clear danger to fundamentally overturn people’s right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness” (Hornung, 2021, p. 27; Ministry of Defence, 2025b).

This new first rule on the use of the SDF made it clear that the SDF could be employed in the context of “collective self-defence”, exercising force to protect its allies even if the country itself was not a victim of aggression. This reinterpretation drew mixed reactions: the US and South Korea approved it (though the latter demanded no SDF intervention inside). At the same time, China pointed out a “brutal violation” of the Japanese constitution and “doubts” about Japan’s willingness to respect this “peaceful development” (East Asia Forum, 2014, p. 1). However, because revising the Constitution required too many political conditions, the revision could not be considered. Abe then passed the Security legislation in 2015, not to revise Article 9, but to reinterpret it as Yoshida did. This security legislation allowed limited collective self-defence by the SDF without violating Article 9 (Hornung, 2021, p. 27-29).

Abe, as we will see in the next chapter, was also one of the main investors in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a multilateral free trade agreement established in 2016 that involved 12 countries and was proposed in cooperation with the United States (Hornung, 2021, p. 23). However, under President Trump’s first administration, the United States withdrew from the agreement because it had never ratified it. Japan, under Abe, then took a major leadership role in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in 2018 and, in 2024, extended it by admitting new members such as the UK.

Finally, Abe was the investor in a policy called Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). This strategy consists of three points: first, the promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade. Second, the pursuit of economic prosperity. Thirdly, commitment to peace and stability (Hornung, 2021, p. 39). Finally, it was under these two mandates that Quad became a *de facto* minilateral agreement. Indeed, the Quad was scaled back in 2007-2008 due to China's criticisms, but at Abe's initiative in 2012, it was revived (Hornung, 2021, p. 40; Saha, 2022, p. 97).

Liberal analysis

Two points can be developed to apply liberalism to Abe's mandates: diplomacy and institutions, and interdependence.

Abe's mandates between 2012 and 2020 are often considered as one of the "value-oriented diplomacy" even if this term was first used for Asō Tarō (Junghwan, 2024, p. 184). Already appearing in 2006 during his first mandate, value-oriented diplomacy is the diplomatic policy Japan sought to apply to gain recognition as a "global normative leader" (Junghwan, 2024, p. 184). This diplomacy emphasises "universal values" such as freedom, democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and the market economy. By promoting these values, Abe sought to cooperate with and reinforce alliances with other regional states and the US, marking the beginning of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy (Junghwan, 2024, p. 181). This reinforcement of alliances and institutions can be analysed through the lens of liberal institutionalism. Abe promoted institutions and sought to institutionalise the partnership with the US as the central pillar of Japan's foreign policy. This statement can be understood in the recreation of the Quad, as well as in the CPTPP and TPP leadership role Japan assumed after the USA withdrew. All these examples seem to align with liberal institutionalism's explanation of how to achieve peace

and cooperation through information sharing and the regulation of state behaviour, as in China (Acharya, 2022, p. 65).

The second point is the significance of interdependence. Abe portrayed himself as a successor to Koizumi, who already valued independence as essential. This is reflected in Abe's actions to lead economic partnership initiatives, such as the TPP and, later, the CPTPP. Abe likely aimed to preserve these economic institutions because they help lower transaction costs (Acharya, 2022, p. 65). Similarly, the FOIP appears to have been influenced by interdependence, as it encourages open trade, freedom of navigation, and related initiatives.

For this period, the limits of the liberal lens are more linked to realism. Whether for the revision of Article 9, the FOIP's purpose, or the creation and leadership of multilateral organisations, these decisions are more likely to be understood through realist lenses: fear and balancing in response to China's expansion and the region's instability. This is one of the reasons the Quad was shut down in 2007: China criticised the creation of this minilateral agreement as an Asian NATO to counter it (The Guardian, 2017). Taken together, these elements show that Abe's foreign policy is a good illustration of the "pragmatic liberal" attitude Japan has followed for years. Liberal values are not here as an objective for Abe, but rather to face external challenges, a use we will further explore in the next chapter.

5. Post Abe until today: Continuation or Reversal?

Kishida Fumio's mandate (2021-2024)

Abe's assassination left the country in a state of disbelief, notably regarding foreign policy, as Abe never achieved the actions he had begun. In this context, and amid the COVID-19 pandemic, followed one year later by the start of the Ukrainian war, which Japan condemned,

Kishida Fumio assumed the role of Japan's Prime Minister¹⁶. Coming from the LDP as his predecessor, Kishida positioned himself as an accelerator of Abe's ambitions by proclaiming the "Kishida's vision for peace" and by arguing that the foreign policy Japan should take is to ensure an extension of "diplomatic and security role for Japan" (Govindasamy, 2023, p. 61; Liff, 2023, p. 63). Indeed, this aspect of the Japanese foreign policy direction set by Abe and pursued by Kishida can be summarised as three main points. Firstly, concerned by the growing tensions with the PRC and the DPRK, and by the beginning of the Ukrainian War, Kishida implemented a measure in 2022 so that Tōkyō would no longer spend 1% of the country's GDP on the defence budget, as it had been since 1976, but 2% starting in 2027, provoking a considerable rupture with Japan's position on the question since the end of the Cold War (Liff, 2023, p. 70). Secondly, like Abe, Kishida believed in the strengthening of the Japan-US alliance as the United States would be the "anchor that will shape" Japan's foreign policy in the future (Liff, 2023, p. 71-72). Finally, Kishida pursued a policy of deepening the defence ties with third parties. For the Prime Minister, the regional context of the rising China and Russia's implication in the Ukrainian war was also an element that could threaten Japan's security, thus pushing Tōkyō to reinforce its alliance with the United States, but also to seek the support of NATO and G7 countries (Govindasamy, 2023, p. 61-62). It is also for these reasons that Japan has begun to form and reinforce minilateral alliances with countries such as the UK, South Korea, India, and Australia (Liff, 2023, p. 73). A final point we could add is the importance of FOIP to Kishida, who considered it important for its diplomatic use. However, Kishida tried to transform this free and open Indo-Pacific into a "free and open international order" (FOIO), which retained the main components of FOIP but, at the same time,

¹⁶ We should note that Kishida was not the direct successor to Abe. Before him, Suga Yoshihide, Abe's former Chief Cabinet Secretary, was designated as Japan's Prime Minister. However, as stated by Jain (2026), his mandate ended after one year and he did not have any major impact on Japan's foreign and defence policy (Jain, 2026, p. 43).

created what Koga (2026) considered a “conceptual distortion, leading to the view that FOIP has withered” (Koga, 2026, p. 25).

These different elements of Kishida’s foreign policy of Japan are interesting to analyse through the IR theories. As we explained, Kishida is following different actions initiated by Abe, reflecting an evolution in Japan's international approach. The diplomacy used by Kishida is esteemed by Govindasamy as a “realist” one since Kishida is focusing on promulgating universal values, to protect the country stability and security and to position it as a major international power due to the anarchic international context due to North Korea’s missiles threats, the rising and fear of China and Russia’s war with Ukraine, elements explained by the realist approach (Govindasamy, 2023, p. 64; Nau, 2019, p. 42-46). Despite this more assertive and realist approach, we could also observe that Kishida is still following a liberal approach to ensure his objectives, notably by not erasing the pacifist and peaceful approach which characterised Japan for a long time, preferring dialogue and cooperation to create or reinforce alliances with other major international powers, but also with its own bureaucrats (Govindasamy, 2023, p. 64-65).

Ishiba Shigeru’s mandate (2024-2025)

Ishiba’s mandate and foreign policy are, at the same time, easier and more difficult to analyse than Kishida’s, as he held the Prime Minister’s office for only a year, and his resignation was only months ago at the time of this thesis. Despite this difficulty, some elements from this mandate are worth exploring. The main point for Ishiba was his ambition to create and implement an Asian equivalent of NATO, though he never really used this term in his speeches (The Diplomat, 2024). Like Abe and Kishida, Ishiba is cautious of China’s growth and its potential threat for Japan’s security in case the PRC decide to expand itself, so one of Ishiba’s ambition was to create a form of NATO with other regional countries to counter China, further pushing the security

issues by stating the possibility of sharing nuclear weapons with the United States to not only counter China, but Russia and North Korea as well (Azuma, 2024, p. 10). Another important element of Ishiba's foreign policy was his will to reinterpret the Japan-US Status of Forces agreement and, like his predecessors, the reinforcement of the Japan-US alliance, stating in November 2024 at the National Diet, the United States is still the "cornerstone" of Japan's diplomatic and security policy (*Anzen hoshō seisaku no kijiku* 安全保障政策の基軸, Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2024). Finally, Ishiba confirmed that the country would still follow the vision of a rule of law and assert the importance of regional security and stability under the FOIP developed by Abe, although the importance of this framework was less present for Ishiba than it was for Kishida, Ishiba preferring to create alliances with the European Union (Koga, 2025, p. 23-24).

With these elements, the liberal approach Japan had long followed diminished under Ishiba, who preferred a more assertive, realist approach, as many of Japan's foreign policy decisions were driven by fear of China. Japan under Ishiba is maintaining a liberal stance, preserving its global image as a peaceful and pacific state, while also adapting to the international context and the potential threats posed by China, Russia, and North Korea. The pragmatic approach of Berger (2007) is increasingly being tested, as many of Ishiba's decisions and ambitions are driven by realist assumptions, even though he still respects liberal instruments, as we saw with the "Asian NATO".

Takaichi Sanae's mandate (2025-present)

As with Ishiba, Japan's foreign policy under Takaichi's government is difficult to establish and analyse, as the government has only been in office since October 2025. However, the elements and events that occurred during this short period are still worth noting and analysing. Takaichi, like Kishida, presented herself as Abe's successor and a continuator of his foreign and security policy (Smith, 2025). Not

long after her inauguration, she made multiple policy speeches in South Korea and in Malaysia at the ASEAN and APEC summits, in which she emphasised the continuation of Abe's FOIP (Jain, 2026, p. 47-48). In a speech delivered at the beginning of May 2026, Takaichi stated that she would give Japan an even more proactive role in the Indo-Pacific than before to create an international liberal order by reinforcing relations with ASEAN and helping Global South countries gain autonomy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026). A second element of Takaichi's foreign policy is the continuous reinforcement of the Japan-US alliance, again, to counter China's influence (Jain, 2026, p. 47-48). Rather than pursuing a rapprochement with the United States, Takaichi was also instrumental in the deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations. We will explore further this relationship's degradation in Chapter III, but at this point, we can say that since October 2025, multiple events created frustration and anger from Beijing and Tōkyō, a combination of factors which began in November 2025 when Takaichi announced that Japan would employ military means against China in case it attacks Taiwan militarily (House of the Representatives, 2025). Another point is that since 10 February 2026, Takaichi and the LDP have obtained a supermajority in the national Diet for the first time since 1986, which could allow Takaichi to implement realist reforms in the future, such as revising Article 9 (Le Monde, 2026).

These elements of the current foreign policy under Takaichi's government show that Japan's liberal approach, as with Ishiba's, is further declining towards a more realist stance. Some elements were omitted from this section, as they will be explored further in Chapter III. Still, we can say that the pragmatic liberal framework is facing certain limits. Takaichi is still promoting liberal values through liberal application, but with the realist elements we saw in this chapter and others we will see in Chapter III.

6. Chapter conclusion

This chapter focused on the main evolutions in Japan's foreign policy through a liberal lens. We tried to explain how Japan evolved from a pacifist, US-dependent posture to a more proactive stance in shaping the international order.

We have seen that Japan's foreign policy has undergone several significant changes. With a new constitution that included Article 9, Japan resigned itself to using coercive means internationally, even for self-defence, favouring instead a more diplomatic approach aligned with American desires. This foreign policy could be understood as the institutionalisation of the country through Article 9, the use of soft power to restore Japan's image, and cooperation with the United States, as in the delegation of military actions. These three elements were the pillars of Japanese foreign policy for many years. Over the decades, as regional and international issues evolved, Japan had to adapt its foreign policy to ensure both its national security and to meet expectations. Thus, since the end of the Cold War, the Japanese government has emphasised institutions and interdependence as pillars of its foreign policy and has played a more active role on the international stage.

However, although many liberal points have been addressed, certain limitations of this theory have become apparent. Whether it be China's rise to power, discussions on revising Article 9, or regional issues, the desire for cooperation alone is insufficient to explain all of Japan's choices. Abe was a considerable game-changer in Japan's foreign policy. With him, Japan began to adopt certain elements from realism to ensure its security against potential regional threats. This evolution was further advanced under Kishida and Ishiba but seems to have been achieved under the current mandate of Takaichi Sanae.

To understand the evolution of Japan's foreign policy, we could say that Japan adopted an "adaptive liberal state" or a "pragmatic liberal" attitude progressively. Indeed, we could see that Japan calibrated its liberal norms to some geopolitical constraints without abandoning them. This posture will be further explored in Chapter II through Japan's relations with institutions and the promotion of liberal values, and in Chapter III with contemporary challenges.

Chapter II: Japan's liberal values in the institutions

Japan underwent an evolution in its foreign policy regarding the Indo-Pacific over time, and the previous chapter showed how the country attempted, or did not, to apply liberal values. To support its goals of promoting liberal norms, Japan established or joined multiple institutions, whether multilateral or minilateral, and used many frameworks. Institutions are one way to promote liberal values, and the historical background of Japan's foreign policy shows that Japan has long regarded these concepts as highly important in its diplomacy.

As Singh (2009) noted, Japan took the lead in supporting regional cooperation and the development of institutions at the beginning of the Cold War (Singh, 2009, p. 90). Following the Cold War, the country sought to improve the creation, cooperation, and strengthening of institutions across different periods, including participation in and/or creation of regional forums such as ASEAN or the ARF, not only for its own interests but also with the will to be perceived as a "liberal country" (Singh, 2009, p. 90).

In this chapter, we will analyse Japan's role and its efforts to apply liberal values within multilateral institutions, economic agreements and through frameworks. We will first examine ASEAN-based institutions. Next, we will focus on the various economic agreements the country has with other states. Finally, we seek to clarify Japan's role in more development-oriented and normative frameworks. All these parts will be analysed using concepts from the liberal perspective, and, for the sake of the thesis, we will focus on two main arguments. We will also briefly utilise certain concepts from realism to explain geopolitical and internal realities associated with the elements we will examine¹⁷.

¹⁷ The geopolitical and internal constraints will be further analysed in Chapter III.

1. ASEAN-based institutions

ASEAN+3/ASEAN+6

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations is a regional organisation founded in 1967, and its ties with Japan were not well established at the outset. The organisation was created by five countries and now has ten members¹⁸, but Japan is not among them. Although Japan is not a member of this organisation, it certainly plays an important role in two meetings that could be considered an “extension” of ASEAN: ASEAN +3¹⁹ and ASEAN +6²⁰. The first connection between the institution and Japan dates to 1977, during Fukuda Takeo’s (1976-1978) tenure as Japanese Prime Minister. In that year, Fukuda gave a speech that would be known as Fukuda’s doctrine (*Fukuda dokutorin* 福田ドクトリン). In this speech, Japan’s Prime Minister advocated for the development of a *kokoro to kokoro no fureau* 心と心の触れ合う (heart-to-heart meeting) relationship with the organisation to foster regional strength as equals (Solís, 2023, p. 172; Wallace, 2019, p. 874). This doctrine has shaped the ASEAN-Japan relations for the previous 50 years and was, according to Ishida (2018), based on three “basic principles” of diplomacy towards Southeast Asia:

“Japan is committed to peace, and rejects the role of a military power; Japan will do its best for consolidating the relationship of mutual confidence and trust based on “heart-to heart” understanding as an equal partner; Japan will cooperate positively with ASEAN while aiming at fostering a relationship with the countries of Indochina and will contribute to the building of peace and prosperity throughout Southeast Asia” (Ishida, 2018, p. 19).

¹⁸ ASEAN is composed of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and East Timor.

¹⁹ Also known as ASEAN-Plus Three or APT, it describes the different ASEAN summits with Japan, China, and South Korea

²⁰ ASEAN summits with Japan, China, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and India.

Since the Fukuda Doctrine, Japan and ASEAN have maintained a robust relationship, with Japan acting as a leader in ASEAN's interactions with other powers. Notably, Japan has sought to position itself as a facilitator of economic partnerships within the organisation. For example, it provided loans to Asian countries affected by the 1997 Asian financial crisis and strengthened investment and supply chain links to support this (Suzuki, 2020, p. 9). Japan's role with ASEAN can be further explored by noting that the country is engaging in efforts to attain regional cooperation between Northeast and Southeast Asia, and to profit from ASEAN's relationships with other countries, such as China and the ROK, to pursue economic exchanges, though indirectly (Singh, 2009, p. 97).

A significant shift occurred during Abe Shinzō's second term. The former Prime Minister sought to deepen cooperation between Japan and ASEAN, particularly in response to China's expansion and perceived threats. Consequently, Japan and ASEAN contributed to the development of a "regional" diplomacy centred on three main points: the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy; strengthening the Japan-United States alliance; and enhancing maritime cooperation among Asian nations. However, initially some ASEAN members were sceptical of FOIP. Despite the Japanese government's declaration that FOIP was not meant to contain China but to create a "rule-based framework" for regional integration, many experts viewed it as a geopolitical strategy to "contain" Chinese expansion. Some ASEAN members feared that ASEAN's role would be overshadowed by FOIP and the Quad, and that Asia might be divided and forced to choose between two blocs: the USA and China (Satake, 2019, p. 77; Suzuki, 2020, p. 5). This potential Cold War 2.0 may place ASEAN in the middle of a competitive region over which it has little to no influence, while also prompting fears of China's reaction if it considers FOIP a countermeasure to the BRI (Satake, 2019, p. 77; Koga, 2019, p. 301). ASEAN also feared its declining centrality and being drawn into a security dilemma with China (Akimoto, 2021, p. 91). Since not all ASEAN members had accepted FOIP, the organisation sought to

implement its own FOIP as a “consensual but ambivalent document” (Koga, 2019, p. 304). The main difficulty with FOIP is that, despite Japan’s and ASEAN’s willingness to cooperate, differences in their objectives may hinder the promotion of their liberal values.

Although Japan and ASEAN have managed to maintain good relations, Ishida (2018) highlighted potential challenges for this strategic partnership: given ASEAN’s internal issues, the author suggests that Japan should not only strengthen its connection to ASEAN but also to the “ASEAN centred regional security” to ensure liberal values such as peace, stability, open seas, freedom, or democracy (Ishida, 2018, p. 35).

ARF

The ASEAN Regional Forum was established in 1993 and held its inaugural session in 1994 as the first “regionwide Asia-Pacific multilateral forum for official consultations on peace and security issues”. This institution comprises ASEAN members and eleven international powers, such as Japan, China, Russia, the USA, North and South Korea, and the European Union. It aims to discuss regional issues and security (Severino, 2009, p. 1). Japan’s relations and role within this multilateral institution are straightforward to understand, since the country was one of the precursors to the ARF’s creation, under the recommendation of the Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, Nakayama Tarō (Kawasaki, 1997, p. 481; Singh, 2009, p. 92). Indeed, when the project to create an institution that included not only all ASEAN members but also other states or international organisations, such as the European Union, was launched, Japan supported and invested in it. The ideological reasons for Japan’s decision to support the creation of the ARF are discussed in the field of international relations between realists and liberals. For the realist school, the ARF was not an institution but an international organisation that Japan would use as a tool against China. This statement from realists seems worth considering, since decades later, Japan did indeed use the ARF, at the

32nd annual ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in 2025, as a way to criticise China's dominance in the South China Sea by saying that:

“Unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force are unacceptable [...] Japan is seriously concerned about the continued and intensified actions that increase regional tensions, including militarisation and dangerous and coercive activities in the South China Sea”(ASEAN Regional Forum, 2025).

The liberal school members argued that Japan intended to support the creation of the ARF to facilitate cooperation with other Asian states while still pursuing its alliance with the United States (Kawasaki, 1997, p. 484). This claim is also supported by evidence, as Japan used the ARF to coordinate bilateral meetings with China and to foster cooperation, and considered it important to promote a “rules-based framework, openness, transparency, and inclusiveness” (ASEAN Regional Forum, 2025).

Japan's role and investment in the ARF were initially aligned with Tōkyō's desire to present the country as a pacifist and liberal state. Indeed, through its support for and leadership in regional cooperation, Japan appeared to promote not only political and economic cooperation but also the development of multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific through this organisation (Hook, 1999, p. 160). This cooperation would have been facilitated by dialogue and the easing of tensions between the Japan-United States duo and China. As liberal IR theorists suggest, the ARF served as an assurance to the three countries that the United States had no intention of becoming the hegemonic power in the region (Kawasaki, 1997, p. 491). Furthermore, Japan used the ARF to promote mutual reassurance and policy transparency while assuring its own security without breaking the US-Japan alliance (Kawasaki, 1997, p. 491).

We would like to conclude this part on the ARF by noting that Japan has recently seemed to take some distance from the organisation. As already argued by Singh (2009) and Yuzawa (2005), the Japanese government was unsatisfied with the ARF's policy as it was not sufficiently constraining, lacked a guarantee of the security of multilateralism and because dialogue wasn't always established (Singh, 2009, p. 97-98; Yuzawa, 2005, p. 470). Because of this dissatisfaction, Tōkyō decided to prioritise its alliance with the United States for some years thereafter.

EAS

The East Asia Summit was established in 2005 and comprises ASEAN members and eight dialogue partners: Japan, Australia, China, India, South Korea, Russia, the USA, and New Zealand. By its own admission, the institution aims to promote “dialogue and cooperation on broad strategic, political, and economic issues of common interest and concern with the aim of promoting peace, stability, and economic prosperity in East Asia” (East Asia Summit, 2026).

This institution is particularly interesting for understanding Japan's promotion of liberal values and the country's role. Because the organisation is a multilateral forum, liberals could argue that Japan is using the EAS to facilitate dialogue with other countries, such as China, and to discuss regional stability and security issues. This view is present in the literature, for example, in Yoshimatsu (2023), who explains that, even though both countries are in a case of rivalry, the ASEAN institutions, and notably the EAS, are pushing Tōkyō and Beijing to cooperate and to “cultivate relational networks, actualize opportunities, and enlarge partnerships in a mutually reinforcing and mutually beneficial manner, in due course institutionalizing ASEAN centrality” (Yoshimatsu, 2023, p. 418; Kuik, 2022, p. 369).

We should, however, note that the arbitrated role of ASEAN and the EAS seems limited, as the rivalry between Japan and the PRC

continues to influence the Indo-Pacific region. The most notable example is the confrontation between two different partnerships proposed by each country. Japan proposed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership for East Asia (CEPEA) at the EAS Second Summit to promote a free trade area with most of the actors and states present in the Indo-Pacific, except for the United States (Katada, 2023, p. 144). China, on the other hand, proposed the East Asia Free Trade Agreement (EAFTA), which contains the same promises Japan proposed with the CEPEA. This partnership was proposed for implementation among ASEAN+3 (Katada, 2023, p. 144).

Liberal analysis

Japan is adopting a cooperative approach with every ASEAN-based institution. Whether with ASEAN, ARF, or EAS, Japan has long collaborated with these bodies to promote liberal values such as dialogue, cooperation, and interdependence. Because of this commitment and Japan's efforts to advance liberal values within these institutions through cooperation, as well as its role in establishing certain ASEAN-based bodies, the liberal institutional framework can be exemplified in this context. We already mentioned in the first chapter that liberal institutionalism, notably developed by Keohane and Martin (1995), asserts that, despite the recognition that the international system is anarchic and states are self-interested, institutions can influence state preferences and foster cooperation (Keohane and Martin, 1995, p. 42).

Although Tōkyō was never a member of ASEAN, it actively engaged with the organisation by participating in ASEAN+3 and ASEAN+6 meetings and by making significant contributions to the development of ASEAN's extensions, such as the ARF and the EAS. This engagement demonstrated that Japan could benefit from cooperation, as these institutions enable interaction with countries with which it previously had limited contact. For example, the ARF, the region's first multilateral forum, allowed Japan to engage directly with China and South Korea, fostering opportunities for dialogue and

collaboration. As Kawasaki (1997) argued, Japan helped create the ARF to facilitate dialogue and cooperation with other Asian countries (Kawasaki, 1997, p. 484). Similarly, the EAS encouraged Japan and China to work together and discuss mutual interests. These examples reflect key principles of liberal institutionalism: the institutions support reciprocity, as outlined by Keohane and Martin (1995), and, in theory, they can promote cooperation between diverse countries, although the reality is more complex (Keohane and Martin, 1995, p. 47; Grieco, Ikenberry, and Mastanduno, 2026, p. 97).

A second argument is Japan's ambition to establish a cooperative regional order through a "rules-based framework, openness, transparency, and inclusiveness" (ASEAN Regional Forum, 2025). Liberal institutionalism holds that the anarchic world can be organised through rules, norms, and cooperation promoted by institutions (Grieco, Ikenberry and Mastanduno, 2026, p. 97). This idea is reflected in Prime Minister Fukuda's statement, which expressed Japan's aim to foster a "heart-to-heart" relationship with ASEAN, implying an equal relationship. Japan primarily supported ASEAN in maintaining a central role in the Indo-Pacific, even providing financial assistance to some ASEAN members during crises. By recognising the organisation as an equal, Japan, with the help of the institutions discussed in this chapter, was able to advance this concept of a rule-based order during summits such as the CEPEA at the second EAS, which aimed for a free trade area, or the FOIP, which we will explore further in the following sections of this chapter, advocating for freedom of navigation and other principles. According to liberal institutionalism, institutions can foster regional cooperation when states have a "function" and reasons to collaborate (Grieco, Ikenberry, and Mastanduno, 2026, p. 97). By promoting a rule-based order via institutions, Japan offered other regional nations a framework for cooperation.

However, despite Japan's opportunities to promote certain liberal values within ASEAN-based institutions, there are limits that

must be acknowledged through a realist lens. Hook (1999) explains that some of these institutions, such as ARF, lack coercive power because they are not sufficiently “institutionalised,” meaning they cannot punish states that overstep their rights (Hook, 1999, p. 174). This limitation of institutions and multilateralism can be further illustrated by the cases of the ARF and the EAS. We saw that the various failures of the ARF regarding Japan’s foreign policy placed the country in what Yuzawa (2005) calls a “pessimistic realist perspective,” which means Tōkyō has gradually begun to distance itself because the ARF was not able to guarantee the national security aspect present in realism (Yuzawa, 2005, p. 478). In the case of EAS, the EAS created opportunities for China and Japan to collaborate and benefit from each other, but the institution could not prevent the resurgence of competition and rivalry between the two states, which had proposed free trade agreements (CEPEA vs EAFTA). Another limitation of liberal institutionalism is that Japanese support for the creation of certain institutions, such as the ARF, can also be explained through a realist lens. It was suggested by Japanese authorities as a way to constrain the regional influence of Russia and China while preventing the United States from withdrawing, a move typically understood through realism, which states that states are more likely to focus on their own survival and that institutions and organisations are tools they can use to support their interests (Hook, 1999, p. 174; Battistella, Cornut and Baranets, 2019, p. 123).

In conclusion, Japan’s relationship with ASEAN-based institutions can be explained through the lens of liberal institutionalism, but certain geopolitical and internal realities reveal the limits of this perspective: engagement in these institutions is not entirely normative but also serves to advance strategic interests, reflecting a pragmatic attitude.

2. Japan's role in economic agreements

CPTPP

The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, also known as TPP11, is a trade agreement whose context of creation is worth examining. In fact, this trade agreement is a renewal of the original Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which ended when the American president, Donald Trump, decided to withdraw the country from the agreement only a few days after taking office for the first time in 2017 (Capling and Ravenhill, 2011, p. 563). The TPP was originally a 12-member²¹ economic agreement led by the US during the second Obama administration (20 January 2013- 20 January 2017) and promised regional economic integration by presenting 30 articles focused on major points such as customs and trade facilitation, as well as environmental and labour provisions (Terada, 2019, p. 1042; Schott, Kotschwar and Muir, 2013, p. 1 and 5). The CPTPP was then established in December 2018 and originally comprised the 11 founding members (excluding the US) until the United Kingdom's accession in 2024.

To explain Japan's role in the CPTPP and how it aims to promote liberal values within it, we first need to clarify these elements in the original TPP, as both are largely similar. Japan joined the TPP negotiations in 2013 during Abe Shinzō's second term, using this agreement, as described by Terada (2023), as a "major pillar of its diplomatic policy" to counter China's economic growth and to strengthen its ties with the US at the start of Obama's second administration (Terada, 2023, p. 114). Abe's administration cited four reasons for Japan's willingness to join the TPP: joining the USA to build a new economic sphere; joining an agreement with countries that share esteemed values such as freedom or democracy; creating new economic

²¹ Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam and the United States.

and trade rules with these shared-values nations; and deepening mutual economic dependence to enhance Japan's security and regional stability in the Asia-Pacific. (Terada, 2023, p. 116-117). These statements are illustrated by Abe's speech on 22 February, in which he stated:

Firstly, when the Asia-Pacific or the Indo-Pacific region becomes more and more prosperous, Japan must remain a leading promoter of rules. By rules, I mean those for trade, investment, intellectual property, labour, environment and the like. Secondly, Japan must continue to be a guardian of the global commons, like the maritime commons, open enough to benefit everyone²² (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2013).

The realist school could also argue that by supporting the creation of the TPP, Japan sought to become, with the United States, a trade leader in the region and to counter China's rise.

After the US withdrawal, Japan quickly became what Terada (2023) describes as a "standard-bearer of free trade", meaning that Japan took the lead in protecting and shaping the agreement before finally creating the CPTPP in 2018 (Terada, 2023, p. 127; Katada, 2023, p. 142). Japan's main role in the CPTPP was then called the "new leader of the free trade".

A challenge occurred when China applied to join the CPTPP in September 2021. At first, Beijing refused to join the TPP negotiations because it considered the agreement a means of countering it (Kim, 2016, p. 28). As time passed, China began to adopt a more positive attitude towards the TPP, even indicating in a 2020 speech by President Xi Jinping its consideration of joining the CPTPP. This application from China put Tōkyō in what Katada (2023) calls a "gate-keeper dilemma": because of its role in the creation of the CPTPP, which made the country one of the four main states responsible for deciding whether an applicant state can join, Japan is torn between the economic benefits that the accession of China may bring to the CPTPP and the risk to its economic security if China joins. There is also concern about potential

²² The full text in both Japanese and English will be given in the appendix.

increases in tensions with the United States, given the rivalry between the two countries (Katada, 2023, p. 152-153).

RCEP

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership is a free trade agreement among all the Asia-Pacific states, created in 2011, and is widely recognised as the world's largest free trade zone (covering more than 30% of the world's population). It was signed in 2020 and came into effect at the beginning of 2022. This agreement is considered by many scholars to be a rival to the CPTPP, as it promotes free trade and multilateralism while being less demanding on agreements regarding state-owned companies and intellectual property rights. Another reason is that the CPTPP is more US-led and less likely to be dominated by China, whereas the RCEP is more likely to be dominated by China (Kim, 2016, p. 20 and 34). This agreement is followed by 15 states (ASEAN members and their partners²³) and aims to sustain the economies of its member states, accelerate economic integration, and improve economic cooperation among its members (Kim, 2016, p. 29).

Japan's role in this agreement is considered that of a leader seeking to advance discussions on regional integration (Oba, 2022, p. 142). Kawashima (2020) explains in *The Diplomat* that Japan wanted to use the CPTPP and the RCEP to “try to promote the formation of highly liberal and advanced economic and trade frameworks around the world, for instance with the conclusion of the Japan–EU Economic Partnership Agreement” (The Diplomat, 2020). This leadership role was an ideal opportunity to continue promoting the liberal values and norms we had seen before, such as democracy and the importance of economic cooperation. Japan's goal in promoting these values was to

²³ Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea. Originally, India was also a member of the RCEP but the country withdrew in November 2019.

become a more proactive promoter in the establishment of a new regional order (Oba, 2022, p. 148).

APEC

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation is an intergovernmental economic forum comprising 21 members²⁴, established in 1989 to facilitate economic growth, cooperation, exchange, and investment in the Asia-Pacific (Boulanger and Mottet, 2024, p. 4, note 2).

By the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' admission, the APEC is an important institution for Japan, notably for its economic growth and for the promotion of economic cooperation throughout the Asia-Pacific, which is considered by Tōkyō to be a good way to prevent "regional divisions in the world" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003). Again, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan has used this institution to pursue its aim of promoting free and open trade and investment and supporting regional economic integration. We should also note that Japan is scheduled to serve as the chair of this economic forum in 2031, marking the third time it has held this role (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026c). This forum is also used by Japan for economic discussions, as negotiations on other subjects are prohibited (Hu, 2013, p. 72). However, it is also argued that the APEC is used as a tool by both China and Japan to assert geoeconomic interests and to counter each other's (Yoshimatsu, 2023b, p. 148-176).

Liberal analysis

After presenting these economic institutions, it appears that the relationship these institutions have with Japan and its role can be applied through the lens of commercial liberalism. As with liberal institutionalism, we already mentioned in the first chapter that this

²⁴ ASEAN members, Mexico, Russia, Peru, Vietnam, Chili, Papua New Guinea, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, South Korea and Japan.

approach emphasises economic interdependence, its role in minimising the risk of conflict and/or war by increasing the costs of such outcomes, the incitement of cooperation via trade and how economic integration can stabilise regions (Acharya, 2022, p. 64).

If we again look at the TPP and CPTPP, one of the reasons listed by Shinzō Abe to explain Japan's willingness to join the TPP was to deepen economic interdependence with the other countries so Japan and the other countries that joined the economic agreement could strengthen both their economic resilience and their national security, which aligned with some ideas and principles promulgated by commercial liberalism and the role of interdependence to diminish the rise of tensions (Moravcsik, 1997, p. 528-529). The hypothesis that Japan is seeking to achieve regional peace and stability by promoting economic integration can be further supported by the two multilateral economic agreements, APEC and RCEP. Even though the literature indicates that the RCEP is more likely to be dominated by China, Japan's role in this institution remains a leadership role. The fact that Tōkyō is using the RCEP to further promote a regional economic and trade framework could reinforce the application of commercial liberalism, namely that Japan is trying to ease tensions between China and the United States through the RCEP (Kim, 2016, p. 29; Moravcsik, 1997, p. 528-529). This also seems to be the case with APEC, as evidenced by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' statement that APEC is useful for Japan to "prevent divisions in the world" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003). We can find in this sentence a promotion of open regionalism and economic cooperation, as reflected in commercial liberalism (Acharya, 2022, p. 64).

We then saw that Japan took the initiative in leadership after the US's withdrawal in 2017, consolidating the CPTPP and thus becoming what scholars call the "new leader of free trade", another element explained by commercial liberalism. Indeed, by taking on the United States' role in helping to create the CPTPP, we could argue that Japan

sought to contribute to establishing a transborder economic and trade forum, with the objective of achieving a measure of regional stability and peace in the Indo-Pacific. This affirmation can be found in Baldwin (1993), who states that these elements of transborder trade and transactions can link peace and free trade (Baldwin, 1993, p. 4). Japan could have sought to help shape a new regional economic order through its leadership and by leveraging multilateral economic agreements.

As with the previous part on ASEAN-based institutions, some limitations are evident. Firstly, we propose to examine Japan's reasons for creating and/or supporting these economic institutions. If we examine the TPP once more, Terada (2023) argues that Japan's priority in joining the TPP was to establish rules for a free and open economic sphere in the Asia-Pacific, but at the same time, the author explains that joining the TPP could help Japan to counter the PRC's economic expansion, something that can be understood from the realist theory and the fact that institutions are used by states to advance their interest. In this case, balancing China's economic expansion (Terada, 2023, p. 114 and 117; Battistella, Cornut and Baranets, 2019, p. 123). Also, it appears that some institutions are beginning to be constrained in their functions, a trend promoted by liberal institutionalism. Indeed, if we take the example of the RCEP, it could not avoid the rising of tensions between Japan's CEPEA and China's EAFTA, reinforcing the realist view that institutions are sometimes used by states to advance their own national strategies and that they are limited when facing these national interests (Nau, 2019, p. 49-50).

If we focus on Japan's leadership in other economic agreements, such as RCEP, Oba explained, Japan could have leveraged its institutional role to become a more hegemonic power in the Indo-Pacific. This hypothesis could partially echo the neorealist view of hegemonic stability theory, developed by Charles Kindleberger (1910-2003) in 1973, which holds that the economy is a tool guaranteed by a leading power that determines how it flows (Paquin, 2021, p. 80).

3. Normative and development frameworks

FOIP

We already mentioned in the first chapter some basic elements of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy (in Japanese, *jiyū de hirakareta Indotaiheiyō* 自由で開かれたインド太平洋) launched by Abe Sinzō in 2016 and what this strategy consists of: the promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade; the pursuit of economic prosperity; commitment to peace and stability (Hornung, 2021, p. 39). Japan claimed to pursue this strategy by creating what scholars call a “rule-based international order”²⁵. In this section, we will examine how Japan sought to promote these liberal values through this strategy.

By promoting this FOIP, Japan is trying to attain two main goals: increasing its own defence capabilities while reinforcing the Japan-US alliance and changing some of its partnerships with Indo-Pacific countries such as India into more diplomatic, or, according to Koga (2020), even into military agreements (Koga, 2020, p. 55).

There is an ongoing debate regarding the reasons behind Tōkyō and Abe’s decision to announce the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. This debate emerged due to the perceived fog of the FOIP’s objectives (Akimoto, 2021, p. 89). Certain academics explain that the FOIP is a containment strategy to counter China and its Belt and Road Initiative

²⁵ The phrase “rules-based international order” is often used by scholars to summarise Abe’s view on the FOIP. Our different research led us to understand that this phrase is more likely an interpretation, as there is no equivalent term in Japanese. The closest Japanese term that can be linked to the phrase is *hō no shihai* 法の支配, which can be translated as “rule of the law”. This phrase appears in Abe’s speech at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI) in 2016. The former Prime Minister discussed Japan’s future role and stated that: *Nihon wa, Taiheiyō to Indoyō, Ajia to Afurika no majiwari o [...] hōnoshihai yutaka ni suru sekinin o ninaimasu* 日本は、太平洋とインド洋、アジアとアフリカの交わりを[...]法の支配 [...]豊かにする責任をにないます, which literally can be translated as “Japan bears the responsibility to nurture and enrich the region where the Pacific and Indian Oceans meet, and where Asia and Africa converge, ensuring [...] the rule of law [...]” (MOFA, 2016).

(Sahashi, 2019; Koga, 2019, p. 288). This argument is further fuelled by studies on the subject within the realist school, which state that Japan, with its FOIP, can be described as a sea power that is proposing an upgraded version of the Quad to oppose China and its BRI, which is more of a land power (Akimoto, 2021, p. 90). However, other academics, such as Satake and Sahashi (2021), challenge this statement and argue that FOIP is more about “maintaining an open and inclusive regional order” (Satake and Sahashi, 2021, p. 18-35). This assertion is followed by liberal analysts who put an emphasis on the explicit declaration of Tōkyō that the FOIP will be a perfect example of liberal vision, also saying that in the case of success, the FOIP should become an “attractive liberal alternative to China’s BRI” (Akimoto, 2021, p. 91; Brown, 2019).

A new evolution of the FOIP was highlighted in May 2026. As we mentioned, Takaichi made a policy speech in Hanoi (Vietnam) by mentioning Japan is going to be more proactive in the Indo-Pacific in the hope of creating an international liberal order, by reinforcing relations with ASEAN and by helping Global South countries acquire autonomy. Thus, Takaichi created a third pillar of the FOIP, the economic security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026).

JICA/ODA

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (*dokuritsu gyōseihōjin kokusai kyōryo kukikō* 独立行政法人国際協力機構) and Official Development Assistance (*Seifu kaihatsu enjo* 政府開発援助 in Japanese) are Japanese programs that may seem different at first but are two sides of the same coin. The Official Development Assistance is a foreign aid program whose concept was first advanced in 1954, when Japan joined the Colombo Plan, an international organisation that aims to improve the well-being of populations in South Asia and other developing countries. More precisely, the ODA was established shortly

after Japan gained independence from the United States' occupation. This program was then placed under the direction of the JICA (Huda, 2016, p. 16). According to Huda (2016), ODA can be divided into three main directions: bilateral cooperation, multilateral cooperation, and strengthening the country as a more dominant power in the Asia-Pacific (Huda, 2016, p. 25).

Japan sought to promote certain liberal values with this plan; however, these values have changed over time. At the creation of ODA and before the end of the Cold War, Japan aimed to make itself a “peaceful nation” and, to achieve this objective, led ODA to pursue “economic cooperation” with various developing countries (Shiga, 2023, p. 1-2). After the Cold War, the world faced globalisation issues such as terrorism and drugs, and ODA, which had been an economic project, had to shift its direction by incorporating human security into its objectives. This also meant that, as some countries were building themselves, Tōkyō decided not to involve itself in other states' governance by adopting a charter (Shiga, 2023, p. 1-2; Korkietpitak, 2012, p. 180). The objectives of ODA were to “support developing countries by providing low-interest, long-term and concessional funds to finance their development efforts” (JICA, 2024).

JICA was created in 1974 to centralise ODA projects, and in 2003, the Japanese government implemented reforms allowing ODA to include both loan and grant operations, with JICA providing supervision. The role of JICA is essentially the same as that of ODA, but with a focus on human security (Huda, 2016, p. 25, 20).

This project, as we understood it, aligned with Japan's intent to present itself as a liberal and peaceful state. One example of this statement is Japan's support, assistance, and investment through JICA and ODA for ASEAN members' economic projects, such as the Southern Economic Corridor and Sihanoukville Port, a corridor project

investigated by the Asian Development Bank intended to link Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam (Koga, 2019, p. 304).

Liberal analysis

Japan's role in promoting liberal values within these normative and development frameworks is interesting to analyse through a liberal lens, as this theory appears to be the most relevant for examining them. Unlike in the previous two parts, we will utilise two liberal concepts for this analysis: soft power and liberal institutionalism.

The soft power concept, developed by Nye (2005), appears well-suited to the normative frameworks and institutions discussed in this section. In fact, both FOIP and JICA/ODA demonstrate that Japan is pursuing a soft power agenda based on the diffusion of norms, economic integration, or development. The Japanese government announced the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy to promote liberal values such as freedom of navigation, free trade, and a commitment to peace and stability (Hornung, 2021, p. 39). When we look at JICA/ODA, Tōkyō stated that these agencies were established to assist developing countries across the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. Consequently, we can identify liberal values in both institutions, such as the promotion and dissemination of norms, stability, and cooperative security (Battistella, Cornut and Baranets, 2019, p. 180 and 187). The promotion of such strategies can be linked to arguments Nye explores in his work on soft power. The author explains that an international actor can pursue strategies that enhance its reputation and image; these strategies can be embedded in a country's foreign policy (Nye, 2005, p. 105). In our case studies, Japan could be propagating normative and developmental frameworks to establish itself as a liberal “rule promoter” rather than a military power for its FOIP project and as a “peace-loving nation” through JICA/ODA. This perspective is echoed in a report from the EAS (2025), which discusses the role of soft power in the FOIP and ODA initiatives (EAS, 2025). Through these frameworks, Japan

appears intent on shaping a new regional order aligned with its ideals without resorting to coercion.

The second liberal concept applicable here is liberal institutionalism. Typically, we observe Japan using these institutions to establish a “rule-based international order”. This phrase is often employed by scholars to summarise, as seen earlier, the FOIP’s strategy and Abe Shinzō’s 2018 declaration. The liberal values advocated by the FOIP strategy might lead us to believe that Tōkyō is applying the liberal institutionalism theory, as the FOIP strategy can promote the establishment of an institution which could foster cooperation, promote regional and international peace and stability, and also minimise conflict risks by increasing their costs and implementing rules (Acharya, 2022, p. 64; Grieco, Ikenberry and Mastanduno, 2026, p. 97). The JICA/ODA agencies exemplify “institution-building” as found in liberalism and liberal institutionalism (Grieco, Ikenberry and Mastanduno, 2026, p. 97). These agencies represent Japan’s effort to establish this rule-based international order. Notably, Japan promotes aid to developing countries through infrastructure development, loans, and support for economic corridors or development initiatives. Many of these elements can be linked to the creation of an institution that may contribute to regional stability (Keohane and Martin, 1995, p. 42).

Finally, geopolitical realities, constraints, and limits of liberalism’s application regarding the FOIP and the JICA/ODA can again be highlighted. The FOIP may be the framework with the most limits pointed out. We have already discussed the ongoing debate between realist and liberal schools concerning the creation and establishment of the FOIP: realists argue that Abe’s strategy primarily aims to counter the Belt and Road initiative announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013. This view is supported by realists, who contend that Japan is one of the first states to officially recognise the Indo-Pacific as a region. Japan’s FOIP and China’s BRI can both be viewed as propaganda tools to promote their respective interests (Matsumara,

2019, p. 133 and 145; Shiga, 2023, p. 5). JICA/ODA can also be seen as a mechanism employed by Tōkyō to support the country's military capabilities, particularly in the maritime sphere, thus safeguarding its own national security (Shiga, 2023, p. 3).

The normative and development frameworks would then be a blend of liberal norms and geopolitical strategies to safeguard Japan's national security and counterbalance China's initiatives, such as the BRI.

4. Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, we sought to explain how Japan used certain institutions and frameworks to promote liberal values. This question was addressed by examining Japan's role in certain organisations and its promotion of liberal values. We then divided the chapter into three parts, which served as the basis for our analysis: ASEAN-based institutions; economic institutions and agreements; and normative frameworks and development agencies.

Respectively, we used liberal concepts such as liberal institutionalism, commercial liberalism, and soft power to explain Japan's behaviour and engagement with regional institutions and with its frameworks. The post-Cold War period was an opportunity for Japan to advance multilateralism, economic integration, and normative influence. Japan appears to have sought to create a new liberal regional order that aligned with its vision through non-coercive means.

However, we also identified limits to the liberal theory. Certain attitudes from Japan could also be explained by its will to preserve its national security; a few institutions lack coercive mechanisms in case of trespassing and were unable to avoid the rise of rivalry between Japan and China, making the region into a strategic competition area; frameworks like the FOIP, while in theory promoting liberal values, is

perceived either as a realist strategical tool or as the prelude to a new Cold War by ASEAN.

If we are looking at Japan's position today towards these institutions, agreements and frameworks, Takaichi, in her investiture speech, clearly expressed support for the FOIP and for JICA, stating that she believed in the future of the FOIP and that Japan should help Global South countries, thereby aligning with the use of JICA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026). Regarding the various institutions, the current Prime Minister attended several summits and repeatedly expressed her support for ASEAN institutions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026). Finally, she also mentioned the pursuit of the economic agreements (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026).

The three dimensions we explored in this chapter reflect the consistency of Japan's adaptive and pragmatic liberal approach: most of the time, liberal instruments are promoted by liberal intentions, but these elements are also calibrated to serve more strategic objectives.

These strategic objectives and the various internal and external challenges Japan face in promoting liberal values will be examined in the following chapter.

Chapter III: Internal and external challenges

This chapter examines the limits of Japan's promotion of liberal values, stemming from both internal and external factors. While Chapter II focused on the importance of multilateral institutions, liberal frameworks, and agreements to Japan's foreign policy, this chapter proposes to show how these are challenged by geopolitical tensions, internal crises, or alliance dilemmas. Indeed, while the institutions, liberal frameworks, and agreements proved important in shaping Japan's liberal approach, certain elements linked to the geopolitical or internal context showed that the reality is more complex. This reality partially reveals the limits of liberal institutionalism; even though the creation of institutions increased cooperation, it proved limited in the face of power dynamics or domestic pressures.

Two sub-questions to our principal one will guide this chapter: Does Japan maintain a coherent liberal approach rooted in norms and institutions, or does it adopt a more pragmatic liberal approach, selecting certain norms under internal and external pressure?

To answer these questions, we will focus on four major points: Japan's geopolitical tensions with other regional states and, more precisely, China, North Korea, and Russia. Secondly, we will focus on the alliance Japan shared with the United States and how both countries are trapped in an "alliance dilemma". The third part of this chapter will focus on the multilateralism crisis and on whether the rise of minilateral institutions brings greater security for Japan, enabling it to continue promoting liberal values. Finally, we will focus on domestic tensions and constraints, notably within the ruling Japanese party, over the debate on Article 9 and on economic and demographic issues.

With this chapter, we should gain a clearer understanding of Japan's evolving foreign policy and role in the Indo-Pacific region.

1. Geopolitical tensions

China

Japan and the PRC have a long and complex history dating back more than 2 000 years. We saw that Japan and China maintain good economic relations, both states being part of the same economic agreements in the world or in the Indo-Pacific region, but also possess geopolitical tensions, notably because of their rivalry and because of historical tensions like the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the different war crimes and responsibility allegations China accused Japan of. We will examine two of the most important recent geopolitical events that contributed to the degradation of Sino-Japanese relations to what scholars call “the lowest point of the past decade” (Lee, 2026). We will try to further our analysis by assessing whether Japan’s liberal values are constrained by its rivalry with China, or whether the “pragmatic liberalism” view can be applied.

A point we already mentioned in the first chapter regarding the tensions between China and Japan is the Diaoyu-Senkaku Islands dispute. This dispute emerged in 1971 between China, Japan and Taiwan and arose because these islands are strategically important. Not only do the islands contain reserves of gas, oil, and hydrocarbons (essential materials for national security, as they influence a country’s energy security or economic stability), but the Diaoyu-Senkaku Islands are also located in the East China Sea, lying along vital maritime routes for both states (Wohlforth, 2010, p. 212). Zhongqi (2007) notes that control of this area would grant access to an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of 40,000 km² and military and economic advantage (Zhongqi, 2007, p. 72; Szanto, 2016, p. 267). Machida (2020) also argues that both countries are trapped in “the worst kind of security dilemma”²⁶ because

²⁶ The security dilemma is a concept developed by the realist school of international relations and, more precisely, by Herz (1950). The author defines this concept as states, because they fear being attacked, trying to attain a certain level of security by acquiring more power. This action leads neighbouring countries to become more insecure and then “compels them to prepare for the worst” by also increasing their power. This action then creates a vicious circle in which every actor is threatening the

every effort these two states are trying to “avoid the worst for themselves is combined with a sense of mistrust towards the other” (Machida, 2020, p. 256). Furthermore, the alliance between the United States and Japan also appears to be exacerbating tensions (Kapur, 2018, p. 16). Although this alliance may well deter an escalation of the conflict, it nevertheless remains a source of tension in the region and on the international stage. China appears to perceive this “American presence” in these islands as a threat to its regional ambitions (Szanto, 2016, p. 265). Although this dispute began in the 1970s, a shift occurred in 2010 and 2012 because of two accidents²⁷. Even if Japan is opposed to China on this question, the country still decided to find means to ease tensions, as discouraging local fishermen from visiting the area to avoid a confrontation with the Chinese ones and by adopting a “proactive restraint” attitude vis-à-vis China, meaning to avoid direct confrontation while still claiming territorial sovereignty on the islands by using a law-enforcement method (Furuya, 2025). This event seems to show that when facing a security dilemma, liberal institutions are limited in their actions.

A second recent point of tension between China and Japan concerns Taiwan. Taiwan has long been a sensitive issue between China and Japan²⁸, but recent events have once more raised tensions between the two states. On the 7th November 2025, Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae made a speech at the National Diet, in which she stated that a Chinese military attack on Taiwan would be an “existential crisis

other with a mutual search for power to prevent the other from attacking (Herz, 1950, p. 157).

²⁷ In 2010, a Chinese trawler refused to leave territorial waters after being prevented by the Japanese Coast Guard, which led to his arrest. In 2012, the Japanese government proposed to buy the islands directly, which led to China’s response.

²⁸ Japan’s link with China begun after the first Sino Japanese war (1894-1895) which opposed the Japanese Empire under Emperor Meiji (1868-1912) and the Chinese Empire under the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) and which resulted in China’s defeat. The end of this war also provided in the *Shimonoseki Jōyaku* 下関条約 (Shimonoseki treaty) which resulted on a Japanese occupation of Taiwan by the Japanese empire (Rowe, 2009, p. 233-237). Japan then ceded Taiwan to China after its defeat by the American forces in 1945 and then definitely ended any territorial revendications in 1952 with the San Francisco peace treaty (Seiichi, 1991, p. 108-110).

for Japan's survival" (*Sonritsu kiki jitai* 存立危機事態)²⁹ and would justify a Japanese military intervention from the Self Defence Forces³⁰ (Pons, 2025; House of the Representatives, 2025). China reacted to this assessment by condemning Prime Minister Takaichi's words, demanding an apology, and imposing economic restrictions on exports of rare earth elements and other strategic resources to Japan, as well as on tourism and cultural exchanges (Wong, 2026; Lee, 2026). On Japan's side, Prime Minister Takaichi did not refute her words but declared to be more careful in her choice of words the next time and called for an easing of tensions (Wong, 2026). Even though a meeting between Prime Minister Takaichi and Chinese President Xi Jinping took place at the end of October, Prime Minister Takaichi's declaration on Taiwan contributed to the deterioration of relations between Tōkyō and Beijing, which reached their "lowest point in the past decade" (Lee, 2026). This situation shows a limitation of the liberal approach: although a dialogue framework exists, it is insufficient to guarantee Japan's security in the face of China's military and economic pressure and strategic developments.

Other recent events continue to cause geopolitical tensions between China and Japan: Chinese aircraft flying over, which supposedly locked Japanese fighters in their sights in Okinawa at the beginning of December 2025, a Japanese Self-Defence Forces individual armed with a machete who illegally entered the Chinese embassy in Tokyo in March 2026, or even the publication in early 2026 of a Japanese foreign policy document that downgrades China to the status of "important neighbouring country" and no longer considers it "one of the most important bilateral relations of the country", all these elements, along with the two previously mentioned, have only contributed to the deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations (Courrier

²⁹ The full original Japanese text and personal translation are provided in the appendix.

³⁰ This statement is not coming from nowhere, as in August 2022, China launched several ballistic missiles in Japan's EEZ by mistake while conducting exercises around Taiwan. According to Julienne (2026), this episode led Japan to believe that a military escalation in the region would include the country too (Julienne, 2026).

international, 2025; Lee, 2026; Govella and Kim, 2025). We should note, however, that Japan often sought to de-escalate tensions stemming from these events in a pacifist manner, sometimes by seeking assistance from international institutions.

These elements show that the various organisations and agreements to which Japan and China are both parties are insufficient to prevent conflict and tensions between the two states, and that cooperation, even when it exists, is, as we saw previously, mainly based on national interests. These elements could then lead us to think that Japan is choosing a more realistic approach. However, some facts suggest that this isn't really the case and that Japan's attitude could still be guided by a liberal approach while also adapting it to China's potential threat by selecting certain realist elements. Indeed, as argued by Katada and Koga (2026), even if Japan is facing an assertive China, Japan is not reacting but "adapting" its positions towards the country (Katada and Koga, 2026, p. 41-76; Lee, 2026). If Japan were fully adopting a liberal approach in the strictest meaning of the term, the country would have been promoting cooperation or dialogue with the help of the ARF or the EAS, while if it were adopting a more realist approach, Tōkyō would have only chosen to develop its military capabilities to attain a realist "balance of power" or to secure major alliances with other states to counter it. At first glance, it seems that Japan is applying a mix of both approaches to address tensions with China. Even if the country is developing its military capabilities or threatening China, as the realist school might suggest, Japan is also trying to promote cooperation and dialogue to avoid direct conflict with China, suggesting that the country is not abandoning a liberal approach. Japan is still trying to use diplomacy and dialogue to de-escalate tensions with China, but when this liberal approach proves insufficient, it is adapting its liberal stance pragmatically by incorporating elements of realism to secure its sovereignty (Berger, 2007, p. 260-262). We can further explore this possibility by asking why Japan continues to participate in multilateral institutions such as the ARF and the EAS with

China, even though these institutions are limited in their ability to prevent rising tensions. It is possible that Japan is following the idea of inclusive institutional balancing developed by He (2019). The author suggests indeed that some states will include or be a part of the same institutions of another threatening one, either to rely on the institutions' norms and rules to constraint this state's behaviour (inclusive), in this case, even if the institutions are somehow limited, Japan could still be expecting that multilateral institutions still remain influent enough to balance China's behaviour towards Japan or the Indo-Pacific region (He, 2019, p. 211).

North Korea and Russia

North Korea and Russia are also states whose common tensions with Japan are limiting Japan's liberal approach. However, contrary to the previous sub-part on China, we decided to combine both states in our research because we estimate that China poses a more complex challenge for Japan, while Russia and North Korea pose the same potential direct threats to Tōkyō.

As is the case with Seoul and Beijing, Pyongyang has a long history of animosity toward Japan due to Japan's actions during its imperialist period and World War II (Cha and Kim, 2022, p. 274). In Chapter I, we already mentioned that North Korea, in 1998 and 2009, showed some potential danger for Japan's security by launching ballistic missiles into Japan's sea, already indicating certain tensions between the two countries (BBC, 2017). Nevertheless, some cooperative movements emerged, such as in 2002, when the Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi signed the Pyongyang Declaration, which set out assurances of non-aggression and the normalisation of relations, and to solve the abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korea in the 1970s (Cha and Kim, 2022, p. 274). However, despite having formal relations between the two states, they began to decline sharply when Supreme

Leader Kim Jong-un took office in 2011, notably due to frequent³¹ ballistic missile launches in Japan's seas. Other than these frequent ballistic missile exercises, the most common term used to designate North Korea as a potential direct threat to Japan is its "unpredictability" and its realist approach to the international system (Cha and Kim, 2022, p. 257). As Cha and Kim (2022) explain, North Korea is often analysed through a realist lens because the state itself is a classic example of a realist state (Cha and Kim, 2022, p. 257). This can be confirmed by examining its nuclear policy: Pyongyang's persistence in developing nuclear weapons despite international sanctions can be understood not only as a means of preserving national security but also as a "balancing of power method" in which North Korea seeks to become an equal power to major powers such as the United States, China, or Russia (Popoola, Ebunoluwa Oluwadara and Adesegun, 2019, p. 76-79; Clement, 2018, p. 16-22). Facing these geopolitical tensions with North Korea, Japan, by its own admission, is trying to normalise its relations with the country through dialogue, even though questions of abduction and missiles seem to slow this progress, prompting Japan to collaborate closely with the US and South Korea to prevent the danger of a potential North Korean attack (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

Russia also has a complex relationship with Japan throughout their history, but it has remained stable despite some tensions (Pugen, 2025, p. 7021). A major shift occurred at the beginning of the 2022 Ukrainian War, when Japan followed NATO's lead in imposing sanctions against Russia, adding Japan to Moscow's list of what it calls the "unfriendly countries" (Tass, 2022). Relations between Japan and Russia are also marked by the unresolved dispute over the Kuril Islands, located north of Japan in the Sea of Okhotsk (Piegzik, 2024, p. 251-252), which emerged after World War II. As with North Korea, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that it is in Japan's best interest, and necessary to ensure peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, to

³¹ At the time of writing this thesis, North Korea made four missile launches (Le Monde, 2026b).

conclude a peace treaty with the Russian Federation and to normalise their relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026b). As Pugen (2025) argued, Japan first sought to maintain its pacifist image by adopting “moderate measures” but then, under a more realist approach, joined the West in imposing sanctions (Pugen, 2025, p. 7029). Nevertheless, Tōkyō is seeking to continue diplomatic dialogue with Moscow while also adopting a more hostile approach to confront potential conflicts with Russia (Pugen, 2025, p. 7029-7030).

These factors suggest that Japan is not choosing between a realist and a liberal approach. True to its self-image as a “peaceful” nation, cultivated over the decades, Japan shows no direct hostility towards North Korea and Russia, despite recent geopolitical tensions. Japan is once again employing a more pragmatic liberal approach in which Japan is adopting realist ambitions which it aligns with liberal instruments. On the realist side, Japan continues to utilise its alliances, notably the one with the United States, to ensure its national security, and adopts a firmer stance towards these two states when dialogue fails (Nau, 2019, p. 44-46). On the other hand, Tōkyō continues to promote liberal values by never directly threatening Pyongyang and Moscow. The actions, attitudes and statements listed on the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website show that Japan’s stance remains committed to dialogue, although a cooperation objective with Russia and North Korea appears complicated for the time being, until issues of territorial disputes and past events are resolved (Nau, 2019, p. 58). Japan could again be seen as adopting a pragmatic approach by pursuing dialogue while also preparing to protect itself.

2. US alliance dilemma

As we saw in the historical context from Chapter I, Japan and the USA had long pursued a security alliance. From the San Francisco treaty of 1951 and the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security of 1960 to our days, Tōkyō and Washington have long enjoyed a close

relationship, with the United States influencing many of Japan's foreign policy decisions, such as aligning these decisions with the United States's approval, the progressive rearming of Japan or when Japan provided financial support in the Gulf war (Edström, 2025, p. 13-15; Hornung, 2021, p. 27; Cooney, 2006, p. 38-40). Nevertheless, despite a long history of alliance between the two countries, some scholars argue that the US-Japan Alliance may be trapped in an "alliance dilemma" (Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato, 2019; Sakaki, Maull and Lukner, 2019; Halim and Syawfi, 2020). The alliance dilemma is a concept first introduced by Snyder (1984), who argues that in an alliance, the participating actors face a dilemma between two scenarios: they either cooperate with one another, creating a strong commitment in the alliance, which means the ally should bring full support in case the other is in a conflict, or they can defect to ensure their independence, which means the commitment to the alliance is weaker and so the ally will bring less support in case of a conflict (Snyder, 1984, p. 462; Halim and Syawfi, 2020, p. 105). This alliance dilemma between Japan and the USA arose from a mutual "fear of abandonment and entrapment" by both states, driven by China's economic growth and military modernisation (Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato, 2019, p. 89). Tōkyō fears having to confront either China or North Korea without US assistance, should relations between the USA and China deteriorate, while Washington, according to Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato (2019), fears that Japan might look to form an alternative alliance with China, which could allow Beijing to expand its influence throughout the Indo-Pacific (Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato, 2019, p. 79). The question in this part is whether Japan's actions in its alliance with the U.S. are moving it away from liberalism or whether the country is adapting to it.

This fear of abandonment and entrapment shaped Japan's foreign policy for many years. During the Cold War, Japan rearmed itself despite Article 9, which prohibits the use of military force even for self-defence, out of fears that the United States might abandon it. This decision is more understandable from a realist perspective and

highlights the limitations of liberalism. Japan sought to present itself as a cooperative, pacifist country to reassure its allies, a move that can be linked to Nye's (2005) concept of soft power. At the same time, Tōkyō also adopted a more realist approach to ensure national security by strengthening its military and allowing the United States to station bases in Okinawa through the 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security (Nau, 2019, p. 42). This came at the cost of reduced independence and freedom, aligning more closely with the USA's decisions and with the neorealist idea of bandwagoning (Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato, 2019, p. 78; Keohane et al., 1986, p. 126-127). In this case, Japan followed Snyder's (1984) cooperation scenarios, preferring to invest in the alliance to avoid the United States abandoning it, and followed this scenario during the following periods (Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato, 2019, p. 80-86). Regarding its alliance with the United States, Japan continues to uphold liberal values such as democracy and human rights, as well as liberal concepts like soft power, while also reinforcing its national security.

Although this dilemma has existed for a long time, we could argue that in recent years it has been accentuated by two main factors: China's growing power and the United States' unpredictable stance and demands, notably under President Trump's administrations. We already saw that China's economic growth and military modernisation were among the starting points of Japan's fear of abandonment and entrapment, but we should examine how this phenomenon affects it. Indeed, the rise of China increases the risk of Japan being either abandoned or entrapped by its alliance with the USA. Abandonment could occur because the USA, despite its claim to ensure Japan's security, faces the risk that if Washington shows too much engagement with Japan, the risk of confronting China directly also rises (The New York Times, 2017; Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato, 2019, p. 80). This dilemma could persuade the USA to set aside certain issues of contention between China and Japan, such as the Diaoyu-Senkaku Islands dispute (Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato, 2019, p. 80). At the

same time, if a conflict happens between the USA and China, Japan could be “trapped” into participating in the conflict since it possesses American military bases on its territory. This statement is also true for the United States, whose full commitment to the alliance could prompt Tōkyō to seek greater independence or risk being caught in a Sino-Japanese conflict (Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato, 2019, p. 89). This mutual fear between Japan and the U.S. shows certain limits to the alliance.

Regarding President Trump, we just saw that he promised in 2017 to ensure Japan’s security. However, some changes could occur in the future, as President Trump’s second term begins in 2025. Washington, under Trump 2.0, addressed in its National Security Strategy the United States’s orientation regarding the Indo-Pacific and explained that the USA is demanding increased burden-sharing and defence spending for the US alliance, as well as for minilateral alliances in which both countries are involved (Govella, 2025, p. 25). In a report of the CSIS Geopolitics and Foreign Policy Department, Govella (2025) states that these demands were respected, as far as possible, by Japan, but several concerns about Washington’s reliability arose, and multiple recommendations regarding these policies were made to ensure the stability of the Japan-US alliance (Govella, 2025, p. 28). The 19 March 2026 meeting between President Trump and Prime Minister Takaichi in Washington D.C., highlights the alliance's limits. Trump sought allies’ help in the war in Iran, while Takaichi aimed to limit Japanese SDF involvement due to constitutional constraints and to discuss Taiwan with China (Choong and Lin, 2026). Despite the success of these aims, the meeting raised concerns about the US alliance’s viability, given Trump’s unpredictability and focus away from China’s Southeast Asia challenge (Marquette, 2026). These examples reveal a paradox: Japan’s greater reliance on the US also increases the risk of abandonment or entrapment.

Therefore, what are Japan’s perspectives on its alliance with the United States, and should the country persist with the scenarios

proposed by Snyder (1984), thereby risking abandonment or entrapment? According to some academic sources, Japan has begun to adopt a hedging strategy, notably developed by Kuik (2016). Hedging is a strategy in which a country avoids taking a final position (either full alignment or confrontation) towards another, juggling between bandwagoning and balancing (Ciorciari and Haacke, 2019, p. 367-368). The objective of this strategy is to “pursue a gain-maximisation and risk reduction policies in a state interaction with a bigger power or competitor” (Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato, 2019, p. 80). In the case of the Japan-US alliance, Japan seeks to reinforce its alliance with the US to prevent abandonment while also building other beneficial relationships with other states (most of them US allies) to provide alternatives in the event of US abandonment (Halim and Syawfi, 2020, p. 119; Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato, 2019, p. 80-86).

This hedging theory can be analysed through the realist and liberal schools of thought, although realism is more relevant, as the strategy is often examined through a neorealist lens. However, Japan is not building alternatives through military alliances or hard power; it is relying on liberal elements such as economic interdependence, multilateral institutions, and the promotion of norms. This observation suggests that Japan’s hedging strategy can also be understood through a pragmatic liberal approach. As Nau (2019) notes, realism emphasises cooperation and relationships with other actors as a means of achieving self-help and avoiding succumbing to another nation (Nau, 2019, p. 44). As we will observe in the next part, this collaboration with other states is frequently supported through unilateral or minilateral agreements and institutions, consistent with the principles of the realist school (Nau, 2019, p. 44). In our case, Japan’s efforts to create new partnerships with other countries, notably US allies, in case the USA abandons them, suggest that it is following this self-help concept through a realist lens. This seems even more the case when one reason Japan joined multiple minilateral organisations and agreements was to gain a certain degree of independence from the United States (Langel, 2025). This self-help

conception can also be seen in the willingness of Japan's prime ministers (currently also) to try to reinforce the alliance with the United States to avoid abandonment and to confront potential crises with China or North Korea (Liff, 2023, p. 66-72; The Japan Times, 2025; Le Monde, 2024).

Liberalism is more complex to implement in this context, but it can remain useful for analysing Japan's hedging strategy and understanding how it is applied, while realism clarifies the reasons behind it. Even though Japan is more likely to join institutions and agreements to ensure its own survival, some liberal elements can be identified. Firstly, Japan is avoiding direct conflict with other states, even with China, by joining common agreements like the RCEP or the ARF, which also help both countries to pursue mutual dialogue and cooperation, elements linked to liberalism, which states that institutions favour cooperation through dialogue and reducing uncertainty (Keohane and Martin, 1995, p. 47; Kawasaki, 1997, p. 484). Secondly, the CPTPP and other economic agreements in which Japan and other "rival" states, such as China, are involved reduce the risk of open conflict through economic interdependence, an important aspect of commercial liberalism (Acharya, 2022, p. 64). Finally, as we saw in Chapter II, the various promotions of liberal values that Japan pursued through frameworks like the FOIP could be seen as a complement to its hedging strategy since Tōkyō is still using the institutions even in realist pressures: Japan could still have tried to advance its liberal strategy while also assuring its national security. This statement could be a second argument that Japan's alliance with the USA is not completely opposed to liberalism, but rather that the country is trying to adapt it to a more security-oriented framework by mixing it with realist elements. This hedging strategy is nevertheless not without some challenges. By adopting a dual-ambiguity position, Japan is preparing for a US abandonment, which could mean the United States begins to distance itself in the future. Also, China is concerned about Japan's alliances with other countries in multilateral institutions, seeing these as a counter to it (Biba, 2026, p. 11; Wu and Kim, 2024, p. 871).

To conclude this section, Japan's attitude towards the alliance dilemma with the United States reveals a complex nuance. While the rising power of China and uncertainty surrounding its American ally pushed Japan to seek alternatives, such as partnerships with other states, it still sought to support the United States. This hedging strategy reveals a dual logic: even though Japan looked to other allies as a realist means to ensure its survival in the world and to continue to root its security choice, liberal instruments and their liberal applications remain important. This observation suggests that Japan is adopting a more pragmatic and adaptive approach, blending liberal principles with realist ones to align with geopolitical realities, consistent with Berger's (2007) notion.

3. Fragmentation of multilateralism and minilateral alternative?

Multilateralism has long been considered a means of avoiding conflict between states. Liberalism considers multilateralism a means of achieving peace because it emphasises the importance of cooperation and because multilateral institutions and agreements create interdependence among states, making war and conflict less likely, since they will cost much more. However, a debate emerged after some failures of multilateral institutions to achieve peace or satisfy everyone. This crisis of multilateralism has also been present in the Indo-Pacific for two decades. Indeed, since the 2007-2008 global financial crisis (GFC)³², a rise of dispute against multilateralism has appeared in Asian countries. He (2018) emphasises this phenomenon by introducing the concept of "contested multilateralism 2.0"³³, a multilateralism

³² The GFC was a financial crisis linked to the bank sectors and the shadow banking system (system where some financial operations are made outside the scope regular banking activities) that begun when the "subprimes" (property credits at risk) fell in the United States. This fall created a global financial crisis which resulted in the augmentation of unemployment, bank failures and GDP's fall (Tooze, 2018, p. 1-21; Esposito, 2013, p. 127-158).

³³ The multilateralism 1.0 is defined by He (2018) as the one vague of multilateral institutions instituted in the 1990s and leaded by ASEAN (He, 2018, p. 210).

advanced by non-ASEAN members that created new institutions and reinstated existing ones (He, 2018, p. 210).

Asian multilateralism limits

In the previous chapter, we saw how some multilateral institutions were supported by Japan or even created by the country, but also how this Asian multilateralism was limited. We noted Japan's willingness to distance itself from the ARF because of its lack of coercive power, stemming from not being "institutionalised enough," and because the institution was unable to guarantee the national security aspect present in realism (Hook, 1999, p. 174; Yuzawa, 2005, p. 478). Another element we mentioned in the previous chapter was the case of EAS, which created opportunities for China and Japan to collaborate and benefit from each other, but couldn't avoid the rise of economic competition between the two actors. Finally, we saw with the RCEP that Japan is concerned about China's growing importance. According to some studies, the organisation is most likely to be dominated by China in the future, creating opposition to the CPTPP, which is supported by Japan, thereby increasing the possibility of growing tensions and competition between the two states (Kim, 2016, p. 20 and 34). This Asian multilateralism crisis is not surprising, as the global concept in general has been criticised by world leaders for decades. Multilateralism is criticised for multiple reasons. Firstly, important actors in multilateralism, such as the United States, are not really looking to improve multilateral institutions but to lead them, as seen in the TPP example with the USA's withdrawal (Guehenno, 2014, p. 51-52). Secondly, different institutions are considered ineffective when facing too many strategic objectives, as we saw with the RCEP. Thirdly, the institutions inherited from WWII are not sufficiently representative of the world's population; a common example is the UN Security Council, which has had the same six permanent members since 1945 (Guehenno, 2014, p. 52). Finally, the rise of nationalisms weakened the power of multilateral institutions because nationalist states are more

likely to prioritise their own stability than to accept negotiations that would benefit them only a little (Guehenno, 2014, p. 56).

The minilateralism question

Minilateralism is a still-debated concept, with no conclusive definition, even though it is not recent. Biba (2026) notes that the widespread definition of minilateralism is a “subset of multilateralism,” but he also argues that, since minilateralism and multilateralism are distinct concepts, they should be defined quantitatively and qualitatively (Biba, 2026, p. 8). The definition we can then provide, with Biba’s arguments, is that minilateralism is an international forum that assembles a small number of states (between 3 and 9) and whose objective is to focus on or solve a specific issue (Biba, 2026, p. 8).

There are many minilateral agreements and institutions in the Indo-Pacific, but we will focus on the five in which Japan is involved. We already mentioned the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which Japan joined in 2007 before its fall, and which was later reborn during Abe’s second and third mandates (Hornung, 2021, p. 40; Saha, 2022, p. 89). Japan is also present in a trilateral agreement with the USA and South Korea (institutionalised in 2023, but no name is given), in the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD, Japan-USA-Australia) since 2006, even if discussions already happened in 2002, another trilateral with the USA and the Philippines and finally, Japan is in the emerging Squad with the USA, Philippines and Australia) established in 2024 (Biba, 2026, p. 11; Haldar and Sharma, 2024). These minilateral agreements and institutions have functions that are debated, notably by Chinese scholars who assert that these American-led institutions are made to “constrain China amidst great power rivalries” (Biba, 2026, p. 11; Wu and Kim, 2024, p. 871). Japan also has another minilateral agreement with China and South Korea, the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS), established in 2011 to promote “lasting peace, common prosperity, and shared culture” (TCS, 2026).

There are six main reasons, as classified by Langel (2025), for Japan's willingness to join minilateral institutions. The first reason is that Japan is looking to reduce its dependency on the USA. It can be considered a paradox, as the last part showed that Japan feared being abandoned by the USA, but some academic sources acknowledge that Tōkyō tried to distance itself from *gaiatsu*, pressure from the United States regarding its foreign policy (Langel, 2025). A second reason, linked to the previous point, is that Japan is seeking to reduce its dependence on the United States by diversifying its partnerships with other countries, such as the ROK, the United Kingdom, and France (Langel, 2025). Thirdly, Japan is trying to build counterweights to balance China's expansion (Langel, 2025). These first three reasons are good examples of realist applications. These reasons can also be understood through realism; the first two were already explained, and the third emphasises an important point of realism: the balance of power. In this case, the concept is illustrated by Japan's willingness to counterbalance China (Nau, 2019, 41).

The fourth reason for Tōkyō's will to join minilateralism is that it is trying to advance its standards (regional cooperation) in a multipolar context (Langel, 2025). The fifth reason is that Tōkyō could be trying to create a regional order based on Japan, in which it could advance its agenda (Langel, 2025). The last reason is driven by domestic policies, since Japan has tried for decades to present itself as a peaceful country; joining minilateral agreements and institutions could legitimise a security approach while convincing neighbouring states that Tōkyō remains willing to promote cooperation (Langel, 2025). These last three reasons can be understood through the lens of liberalism, as they coincide with concepts from the theory we already explored. The fourth and fifth reasons can be explained by the normative framework Japan used to promote liberal values, such as the FOIP, while the last reason is a clear example of soft power.

We will use the IR theories of realism and liberalism to explain Japan's stance amid a crisis in multilateralism and the rise of minilateral institutions. As we have stated in the previous chapters, the

liberals argue that the creation of international institutions and organisations facilitates cooperation among states, the major actors, by interconnecting them through dialogue and economic interdependence and by raising the cost of conflict. This is suggested by liberal institutionalism (Keohane and Martin, 1995, p. 42; Grieco, Ikenberry, and Mastanduno, 2026, p. 97). However, the fact that some multilateral organisations, such as the ARF or the EAS, are limited in addressing certain security issues leads us to consider the realist view of international institutions, which are more constrained and balanced when facing sovereign states seeking to ensure their national security (Nau, 2019, p. 43). The consideration of joining minilateral institutions and agreements, because the multilateral powers are unreliable in ensuring national survival, is also an aspect of realism, as stated by Nau (2019, p. 43). Also, the trilateral alliance TCS between Japan, China and South Korea can also be analysed as an inclusive institutional balancing (here with minilateralism and through a realist approach) as it is possible Japan has tried to ensure this minilateral institution would constrain China's behaviour and then ensure its security (He, 2019, p. 211). However, a purely realist approach is insufficient to explain it entirely, as Japan is not fully rejecting multilateral institutions and agreements. In Japan's case, because the country still supports and creates multilateral forums, its willingness to join minilateral ones should be considered more as a strategic adaptation. Thus, Japan is not giving up multilateral cooperation but rather adapts itself to survive in a more competitive Indo-Pacific. This evolution can be linked to a form of pragmatic liberalism: Japan pursues its promotion of liberal values like norms, free trade or democracy through the multilateral institutions, while simultaneously applying a more realist approach by joining minilateral ones to ensure its national security and to address security challenges.

To conclude this part, we would like to examine whether focusing solely on minilateralism is a viable alternative for Japan's future. Even though the regional security cooperation norms in Asia

seem to rest more on minilateral agreements and organisations than on multilateral ones, minilateralism may pose challenges to Asia's regional stability architecture in the future if it is only taken as such. This statement is advanced by Allès and Fournol (2023), who argue that minilateralism could erode spaces for deliberation, norm-making, and legitimacy. This statement is followed by Biba (2026) who analyses how minilateral cooperation was more inclined to polarise the regional security architecture and make it less balanced because they "tend to reinforce characteristics inherent in the pre-existing bilateral US hub-and-spokes layer of the regional security architecture, which is built on collective security, deterrence, and non-inclusiveness" (Biba, 2026, p. 23-25). A possible solution, exposed by Allès and Fournol (2023) is to link minilateral institutions to the "lasting multilateral arrangements" to ensure a perfect combination of regional security cooperation and durable effects and legitimacy (Allès and Fournol, 2023, p. 18). This statement clearly illustrates that Japan's attitude aligns with this advice on multilateralism and minilateralism. The country is joining minilateral agreements and institutions to ensure its security while linking it to the multilateral ones it has already formed. We can also add that Quad has begun to show signs of decay since Trump's return to office. India was supposed to host a summit of the minilateral organisation in 2025, but it was cancelled due to Trump's reluctance to participate and tensions between the United States and India over tariffs and oil (Shoebridge, 2025). It is not new that the United States under Trump has avoided multilateral gatherings, but the failure to reschedule the summit and the actual tensions among members show that if this neglect of the Quad continues, the organisation is likely to be "extinct" in the future (Grossman, 2026). Despite this, Quad representatives met in New Delhi on 26 May 2026 to "resuscitate partnership" and to discuss critical minerals, maritime security (especially in the Strait of Hormuz), and energy security, indicating that even if the institution is in decline, its ministerial dimension remains in place (Johnson, 2026).

4. Internal constraints

This final section addresses the internal tensions and potential crises that could limit Japan's liberal stance. Internal decisions and factors are indeed important when studying a state's foreign policy, as they shape it (Mintz and DeRouen, 2012, p. 134). We will see that Tōkyō's preferences sometimes contradict its liberal approach, creating confusion and, at times, incoherence between its preferences and its actions. This section will be divided into three sub-parts to examine how domestic constraints affect Japan's promotion of liberal values and whether they lead Japan to adopt a more pragmatic approach. We will again use realism and liberalism to address the full panel of the question; however, we will use the states' preferences developed by Moravcsik (1997) for the liberal part.

Internal political and ideological tensions

We already mentioned that Japan is currently led by Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae following Ishiba Shigeru's resignation (Khalil and Tan, 2025). Both are from LDP, a political party considered right-leaning and conservative (Biscontini, 2024). Most of the Japanese prime ministers since Yoshida were from this party. The LDP aims to revise the Japanese Constitution instituted during the American occupation and to strengthen the country's military capabilities. The foreign policy of the prime ministers from this party was, most of the time, to reinforce the Japan-US alliance while opposing Russia, North Korea and sometimes China (Biscontini, 2024). This introduction on this political part aims to understand how the inside of the part influences Japan's foreign policy.

Since Prime Minister Takaichi's debut, the LDP's foreign policy announcement has been to accelerate measures implemented by Abe during his second and third mandates, notably by spending 2% of the country's GDP on security by the end of 2025 (Smith, 2025). However, some changes are expected in the future due to the LDP's pivotal shift

in Japan's foreign policy and its internal issues. In fact, it has been many years since the LDP began facing internal divisions that affect the country's foreign policy. The LDP is not a united party whose members agreed on every subject, but rather is divided into multiple sections that hold differing views on Japan's position in East Asia, and the situation is not better now as Takaichi became Prime Minister in a context of the rejection of the coalition with the Kōmeitō 公明党 party³⁴ (Yeung and Montgomery, 2025). Another element is that the LDP is losing a majority of the younger voters due to the past decisions and the younger generations wanting the other internal issues to be resolved first, meaning that the LDP had to shape the country's foreign policy to please both the opposition parties and the population (Govella, 2025; Takao, 2026).

To add to this, the current LDP's direction regarding Japan's foreign policy seems to differ from Abe's, who sought to prepare Japan for a "threatening environment" without forgetting liberal values, as seen in the proclamation of the FOIP's strategy and the creation of the ARF. Even though it declared its intention to follow Abe's decisions, Tōkyō's current internal policies, such as the rejection of Kōmeitō, the reinterpretation or revision of the Japanese Constitution or the willingness to rearm the military, lead us to think that the government is trying to become more assertive and conservative (Smith, 2025). It is worth noting that these tensions appear to have weakened since the snap legislative election of 10 February 2026, in which the LDP won an historical victory, securing more than two-thirds of the seats. This victory could lead Takaichi to pursue an Article 9 revision (Le Monde, 2026).

³⁴ As in Belgium, the Japanese political parties most of the time need to form coalitions with other smaller parties in order to attain the parliamentary majority and put in place the government.

Because of these positions, resulting from an international competition notably via China's rise, liberal values like pacifism are challenged by internal security decisions. Looking at Moravcsik's (1997) development on state preferences, we can understand that Japan's current foreign policy is the consequence of multiple competing preferences, which lead to a difference between the liberal identity the country tried to follow for decades and its strategic decisions taken by the self-attributed necessity for security (Moravcsik, 1997, p. 542).

Article 9 debate

Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution is one of the most debated aspects of domestic policy. When the Constitution was adopted in 1947, Article 9 prohibited Japan from rearming and from using war to resolve international disputes (Delamotte, 2010, p. 2). But we already highlighted how this article was reinterpreted multiple times by some Japanese Prime Ministers, such as Yoshida and Abe, to ensure national security in a context where such security was not really guaranteed.

This Constitution and Article 9 were respected for decades to ensure Japan the promulging of this image of a "pacifist and peaceful nation". However, Abe and Takaichi's ambitions to revise Article 9 to allow Japan to use military force without restrictions directly confront the pacifist, peaceful-nation ideal enshrined in this Article (Hornung, 2021, p. 27-29; Gangal and Latham, 2026). Because of this confrontation, there has been a debate about this article since 1955. Indeed, even though some Japanese prime ministers have sought to revise this article to make Japan a more important player on the international stage, every time a proposal is made, the Japanese people have shown themselves to be opposed to it, as was the case in 2015 during Abe's tenure as prime minister. Another protest emerged against Takaichi on 19 April 2026 because her election, based on the supermajority, could allow her to revise Article 9 (Courrier international, 2026). The international powers were also mixed about

Japan's intent to revise Article 9: we already mentioned in Chapter I that the US and South Korea approved a reinterpretation of Article 9 while demanding no SDF intervention inside their territory, while China pointed out what it called a "brutal violation" of the Japanese constitution and "doubts" about Japan's willingness to respect this "peaceful development" (East Asia Forum, 2014, p. 1). The multiple reinterpretations by Yoshida or Abe (which led to the creation and reinforcement of the Japanese Self-Defence Forces) and now the possibility for Takaichi to revise it, create an opposition between liberal identity and realist national-security achievement goals. Analysed through the liberal scope, we underlined that this constitution and Article 9 were a mix of an institutionalisation of Tōkyō domestic and foreign policies and as an element of soft power to reassure regional and other international powers that Japan was willing to become a pacifist and peaceful nation, far from its imperialist days (Nau, 2019, p. 52; Akimoto, 2013). This statement was also shared by General MacArthur, who supervised and signed the document, even calling it the "most liberal one in the world" (Pyle, 2018, p. 73). Nevertheless, the international context of potential threats driven by China's expansion and ballistic missile launches from Russia and North Korea leads some prime ministers to adopt a realist approach to ensure their sovereignty and survival by seeking to revise Article 9 (Nau, 2019, p. 43). If we once more apply Moravcsik's concept of state preferences, the debate over Article 9 also reflects competing, divergent interests. Because of this debate, the article has, until now, never been revised but has been reinterpreted, showing that Tōkyō is always negotiating between its liberal promotion and its security imperatives (Moravcsik, 1997, p. 542).

Economic and demographic limits

Japan's economic and demographic challenges also affect the country's foreign policy. Japan has the highest public debt in the world, at more than 230% of its GDP in 2026, amounting to 1342 000 billion

yen, which is more than 8 400 billion dollars and almost 7 500 billion euros (Country economy, 2024; Trading Economics, 2026). Regarding the demographic challenges, the country's population has been rapidly ageing for decades, while the birth rate is declining, which will have a negative impact on the economy (Carmel, 2001, p. 749-750). Because of these economic and demographic constraints, Tōkyō is joining multilateral and minilateral agreements while pursuing economic diplomacy, thereby making the country dependent on institutions and exports, as commercial liberalism explains (Acharya, 2022, p. 65). However, this dependency also seems to leave the country unable to respond to regional threats such as North Korea or China, which could probably explain why Japan is investing 2% of its GDP in its military capabilities and defence, and why the government is willing to revise Article 9 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2026). Moravcsik's (1997) domestic economic preferences could be used here to understand how demography and economic constraints shape Japan's foreign policy. Tōkyō is pursuing a liberal engagement to address its debt situation and its need for access to a stable market. At the same time, this debt situation and these demographic issues demonstrate that Japan cannot guarantee its economic security solely through institutions and agreements (Moravcsik, 1997, p. 542). This observation shows some limits of commercial liberalism that we exposed extensively throughout this thesis. Even though the institutions are pushing to cooperate, some of their internal issues have caused the country to seek more realistic alternatives.

All the domestic issues we saw in this part explain why Japan is sometimes constrained in promoting liberal values. The LDP's case helped us understand that internal divisions can, at times, directly affect foreign policy. The Article 9 debate shows that Japan is unable to fully apply its liberal values, as it is divided between those who want to revise Article 9 and those who prefer to maintain the "pacifist" image Japan has built over the years. Finally, we saw how Japan's demographic and economic issues illustrated a certain form of failure in relation to

commercial liberalism. To link this to our pragmatic liberal view, even if geopolitical constraints that contribute to internal ones may lead Japan to adopt a realist view, liberal values are not rejected. Liberal values and instruments, such as institutions and economic frameworks, remain crucial elements in Japan's foreign policy, but their application is adapted to ensure national security.

5. Chapter conclusion

This chapter sought to understand whether Japan could maintain a coherent liberal multilateralism rooted in norms and institutions, or adopt a more pragmatic liberal approach, selecting certain norms under internal and external pressure. We showed that Japan's liberal foreign policy was indeed influenced by external, internal and institutional tensions and pressures that limited its liberal attitude.

The geopolitical tensions with regional states like China, North Korea, and Russia demonstrated that realist approaches are more prominent in Japan, as liberal approaches, such as institutions or economic interdependence, are limited in preventing the escalation of tensions. However, we also saw that Japan is willing to pursue dialogue with these countries and to apply these liberal approaches.

At the same time, the Japan-US relationship is also a challenge for Tōkyō, as it places it in a dilemma and in fear that its American ally may abandon it, which could leave it vulnerable to China. This dilemma is relevant in the real world due to China's rise and the American direction under Trump 2.0, which pushes Japan to adopt a hedging strategy by forming alliances with other states while competing with the United States. This strategy shows that Japan is neither fully realist nor fully liberal, as it navigates between realist imperatives and liberal commitments without abandoning one of them.

Institutional constraints also follow this logic. At the same time, as we saw in Chapter II, multilateral organisations such as the ARF or the EAS are insufficient to ensure Japan's security or prevent the escalation of international tensions, even though they serve as forums for dialogue. The recent development of minilateralism and Japan's contribution to these initiatives indicate that Japan is also adopting a more pragmatic approach to its foreign policy: Tokyo is simultaneously ensuring its protection through partnerships such as the Quad or its trilateral alliance with the United States and the ROK, and strengthening its military capabilities, whilst continuing to promote these platforms as means of cooperation and dialogue.

Finally, we discussed the implications of the country's internal issues. The political divisions within the LDP, particularly regarding a possible revision of Article 9, as well as the country's demographic and economic problems, illustrate a paradox. Japan is "constrained" from joining international institutions to compensate for its internal weaknesses, thereby making it dependent on them and preventing it from fully ensuring its own security, as we established earlier. Conversely, any attempt to increase its military capabilities on its own, such as through a now-possible revision of Article 9, would be in direct contradiction of the liberal values and the image that Japan has sought to promote for decades.

All these factors, therefore, show that the notion of Berger's (2007) pragmatic liberalism is increasingly being challenged and tested. Security and defence insurance have become more important than before, notably with Takaichi's acquisition of a supermajority, but liberal instruments remain significant, showing that Japan is not becoming a full realist state. Whether this position will hold under Takaichi is an open question that will need to be observed in the future.

Conclusion

This thesis explored how Japan promotes liberal values in the Indo-Pacific and how this approach has evolved over time. This inquiry also helped us understand how these changes might position Japan as a key player in maintaining a liberal order in the region, especially amid geopolitical and internal tensions. We formulated two main hypotheses. First, we argued that Japan is promoting liberal values while navigating geopolitical and internal tensions by adopting a mix of liberal and realist approaches, notably by using soft power, seeking to rearm itself, and reinforcing its alliance with the United States and other states. The second hypothesis we had was that Japan is adapting to the growing tensions and rivalries between China and the United States in a context of a dilemma over its security alliance with the United States, which could have led Japan to seek to have a more prominent role in the Indo-Pacific region to ensure security in the event of an open conflict between Beijing and Washington. Our findings confirmed some aspects of these hypotheses, but the reality remains complex and nuanced.

In Chapter I, we examined Japan's foreign policy from the post-American occupation period to the present under Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi. This historical overview showed that Japan's foreign policy has evolved. From a mainly liberal actor, Japan had to adapt its posture in the face of geopolitical and internal challenges, an adaptation that contains elements of both liberalism and realism. We could then foresee that, even if Japan remains a liberal actor that employs liberal means, certain of its objectives are motivated by realist approaches. Japan could then be seen as selecting certain elements of the realist approach while maintaining its liberal stance, aligning with Berger's (2007) notion of a "pragmatic liberal attitude".

Chapter II aimed to explore Japan's ways of promoting liberal values in the Indo-Pacific, whether through institutions such as ASEAN

or ARF, economic agreements such as APEC, or frameworks such as FOIP. We saw that Japan's attitude towards institutions and its ambitions for its frameworks were, for the most part, driven by liberal motives. However, we also noted that Japan's motives were sometimes driven by realist considerations and, at times, pushed towards them by the failure of the institutions, notably their failure to prevent the rise of tensions between Beijing and Tōkyō. Again, Japan is adapting its attitude by employing liberal means to achieve objectives sometimes driven by realist ambitions

Finally, throughout Chapter III, we explore the various tensions, whether external or internal, that limit Japan's promotion of liberal values and shape the country's foreign policy in realist terms. The regional geopolitical tensions, the dilemma over the US alliance, the crisis of multilateralism, the rise of minilateralism, and the internal constraints illustrate how Japan is struggling to maintain its liberal attitude while avoiding a break with its image as a peaceful, pacifist state.

These results show that Japan is promoting liberal values in the Indo-Pacific through institutions, economic agreements, and frameworks, and is sometimes adopting a regional leadership approach. However, sometimes, the country uses a more pragmatic approach to adapt to various external and internal tensions. Thus, Japan's role has gradually become that of a regional leader, while still not resorting to assertive means to achieve it and privileging an indirect approach.

These results raise questions, however. Can Japan still be considered a liberal actor, or is it beginning to change its ways? And what does this mean for the future of the liberal order in the Indo-Pacific region? Japan's position as a liberal actor has been consistently challenged by geopolitical tensions and the country's internal evolution. Across our chapters, the conclusion is that Japan remains a liberal actor, but not in the fully theoretical, *stricto sensu* definition of the term. To

ensure its stability and security and to satisfy its ambitions, Tōkyō has always followed a more pragmatic liberal approach. Sometimes, Japan uses liberal instruments to achieve objectives that realists might explain, without abandoning the normative framework. This pragmatic approach, however, seems more aligned with realism under Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae's mandate than under her predecessors'. The deterioration of relations with China or the revision of Article 9's ambition shows that, even as Japan continues to espouse liberal values, its security constraints could, in the future, transform the country into a more realist example. Therefore, does this mean that Japan became, is becoming, or will become a realist state? Regarding both past and present, we argue that Japan has not become and is not becoming a realist state. If we look at institutions, most of the time, realist states, like the United States, with the TPP, use institutions temporarily to achieve their national ambitions and withdraw from them either when those ambitions are achieved or when the institutions cannot bring them to fruition. Japan, on the contrary, continues to participate as an important liberal promoter and actor in these institutions, even when they do not satisfy Tōkyō, like the ARF or the CPTPP.

It is difficult to predict the direction of Japan's foreign policy towards institutions or major states in the future, as it depends on the personality of the future prime minister and the external and internal environment. However, we can be assured that Japan is likely to continue to use liberal means to achieve its ambitions, as the country seems to believe in the rule-based international order and its attachment to its global image of pacifism. As Berger (2007) concluded, it is probable that Japan will adapt to all the security and defence issues it faces, but it may always do so in a way "consonant with its essentially liberal instinct" (Berger, 2007, p. 279).

Appendix

	Original Japanese version	Official/personal translation
Article 9 of the Japanese constitution	九条 日本国民は、正義と秩序を基調とする国際平和を誠実に希求し、国権の発動たる戦争と、武力による威嚇又は武力の行使は、国際紛争を解決する手段としては、永久にこれを放棄する。② 前項の目的を達するため、陸海空軍その他の戦力は、これを保持しない。国の交戦権は、これを認めない。 ➡ E-Gov 法令検索, 2023	Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. To accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized. ➡ Official English translation (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2023)
Excerpt from Prime Minister Yoshida's speech at the House of the Representatives of the 26 January 1950	戦争放棄の趣意に徹することは、決して自衛権を放棄するというものを意味するものではありません。わが国家の政策が民主主義、平和主	The proclamation of renunciation of war certainly does not mean the abandonment of the right to self-defence. Our national policy will be dedicated to democracy and pacifism, and the resolve of the people to act forever in accordance with this principle will ensure our trust with democratic, peace-loving peoples: this

	義に徹底し、終始この趣旨を厳守して行動せんとする国民の決意が、平和を愛好する民主主義国家の信頼を確保するに おきましては、この相互の信頼こそ、わが国を守る安全保障であるのであります。 ➔ 国会会議録 検索システム, 1950	mutual trust will guarantee our security and defend our country. ➔ English translation derived from the French one suggested by Delamotte (2010)
First rule of the usage of the SDF during Abe Shinzō mandates between 2012-2020	わが国に対する武力攻撃が発生したこと、またはわが国と密接な関係にある他国に対する武力攻撃が発生し、これによりわが国の存立が脅かされ、国民の生命、自由および幸福追求の権利が根底から覆される明白な危険があること ➔ Ministry of Defence, 2025	When an armed attack against Japan has occurred, or when an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan occurs and as a result threatens Japan's survival and poses a clear danger to fundamentally overturn people's right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness ➔ Translation by Hornung (2021)
Abe Shinzō's speech in which he declared what should be the Japan's role of in the future Indo-	いまやアジア・太平洋地域、インド・太平洋地域は、ますますもって豊かに	Firstly, when the Asia-Pacific or the Indo-Pacific region becomes more and more prosperous, Japan must remain a leading promoter of rules. By rules,

Pacific region, 20 February 2013	なりつつあります。そこにおける日本とは、ルールのプロモーターとして主導的な地位にあらねばなりません。ここです。ここで言いますルールとは、貿易、投資、知的財産権、労働や環境を律するルールのことです。 第二に、日本はこれからも、誰しもすべてを益すべく十分に開かれた海洋公共財など、グローバルコモンズの守護者であり続けねばなりません。 ➔ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023	I mean those for trade, investment, intellectual property, labor, environment and the like. Secondly, Japan must continue to be a guardian of the global commons, like the maritime commons, open enough to benefit everyone ➔ Official translation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan website.
Ishiba Shigeru speech on the 29 November 2024 when he mentioned the United States as the “cornerstone” of Japan’s foreign policy	アメリカ合衆国のバイデン大統領とは、今後も、揺るぎない日米同盟を更に発展させていくことで一致しました。 合衆国では、来年1月には第2期トランプ政権が発足します。	We agreed with US President Biden that we will continue to further develop the unshakeable/unwavering Japan–US alliance. The second term of the Trump administration will begin next January. The Japan–US security framework is the cornerstone of our country’s foreign and security policy. However, at the same time, the United

	日米安保体制は、我が国の外交・安全保障政策の基軸です。しかし、同時に、合衆国も、在日米軍施設・区域の存在から、戦略上大きな利益を得ています。 ➔ Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2024	States also derives significant strategic benefits from the presence of US military facilities and areas in Japan. ➔ Personal translation
Abe's Shinzo's speech at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI) in 2016 in which he talks about Japan's ambitions toward Indo-Pacific	日本は、太平洋とインド洋、アジアとアフリカの交わりを、力や威圧と無縁で、自由と、法の支配、市場経済を重んじる場として育て、豊かにする責任をにないます ➔ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2016.	Japan bears the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making it prosperous. ➔ Official translation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan website.
Takaichi Sanae declaration during the National Diet of the 7th of November 2025 about the employment of the SDF in case China would militarily attack Taiwan	先ほど有事という言葉がございました。それはいろいろな形がありましょう。例えば、台湾を完全に中国、北京政府の支配下に置くようなことのためにどうい	We mentioned the word "emergency" earlier. Such situation can take various forms. For example, what could be the methods employed to bring Tawain under the control/ domination of China and the Beijing government? it could simply be a blockade of sea lanes, or it could be the use of force, disinformation and cyber propaganda. There

	手段を使うか。それは単なるシーレーンの封鎖であるかもしれないし、武力行使であるかもしれないし、それから偽情報、サイバープロパガンダであるかもしれないし、それはいろいろなケースが考えられると思いますよ。だけれども、それが戦艦を使って、そして武力の行使も伴うものであれば、これはどう考えても存立危機事態になり得るケースであると私は考えます。 → Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2025	are many possible scenarios. However, if it involves the use of warships and military force, I believe that this would undoubtedly be a situation that threatens our very existence. → Personal translation
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Abstract

Since the end of WWII, Japan has been considered a peaceful and pacifist state, qualities that stem from the country's promotion of liberal values. However, given its history, Tōkyō has faced internal and geopolitical tensions that have challenged its liberal stance and led it to adopt certain realist positions. As a result, many are concerned about a return to a militarised Japan, despite its continued promotion of liberal values. This thesis focuses on these points to understand how Japan promotes liberal values in the Indo-Pacific region and how these values have evolved over time. This question is further refined to examine how this evolution may position Japan as a key factor in maintaining a liberal order in the Indo-Pacific amid geopolitical and internal tensions. With a focus on the history of Japan's foreign policy, Tōkyō's relationships with institutions, the means it uses to promote liberal values, and the internal and external tensions, we argue that Japan is still following a "pragmatic liberal" approach, but that this concept is being challenged by the current Japanese Prime Minister and the world we are evolving in.

Key Words

Indo-Pacific – Japan – liberalism – foreign policy – geopolitics

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