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An Evaluation of Japan's Security Policies from A Neoclassical Realism Perspective

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Abstract

The 21st century marks a shift in global economic and political power from the West to the Far East. In this context, the political and economic relations between the United States, the current holder of economic and political power, and regional states seeking potential power such as China, Japan, and South Korea, are examined from various perspectives. The aim of this study is to analyze, from a neoclassical realist perspective, the political and security relations of Japan, a regional and global partner of the globally hegemonic United States, with both the US and other countries in the region. The main finding of this article is that, from a neoclassical realist point of view, Japan's understanding of security has initiated a transformation process that will trigger political and military tensions in the region.

Key Words: USA, Japan, China, Neoclassical Realism

JEL Codes: F50, F51, F52

1. Introduction

This study employs a neoclassical realist perspective to explain developments in Japanese security policy, particularly since the early 2000s. It analyzes how internal and external factors influence the political and security dimensions of Japan's bilateral relations with specific regional neighbors and global partners. In a period of increasing strategic competition between China and the US on the global stage, the study examines power relations between Japan and other East Asian states, particularly relations between China and Japan, at both the systemic and state levels.

In this context, the study is structured as follows: The second section presents neoclassical realism, along with its theoretical claims, arguments, and conceptualizations. The third section examines Japan's security policies from World War II to the first quarter of the 21st century, considering both the international system and Japan's domestic political factors. The conclusion discusses the developments, limitations, strengths and weaknesses, and potential global and regional impacts of Japan's foreign security policy.

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2. Methodology

This study utilized qualitative research methods, specifically literature review and content analysis. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to support the information obtained. Sources were identified through keyword-based searches using terms such as "neoclassical realism," "Japan," "China," "USA,". Data were obtained from secondary sources such as books, reports, and articles.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Neoclassical Realism and Its Basic Arguments

In 1998, Gideon Rose argued that realism needed to be re-evaluated in a new context. Rose constructed his arguments by drawing on neorealism's system-oriented approaches and classical realism's assumptions that explain foreign policy within the context of the individual-state relationship. He termed his new approach "neoclassical realism." (Ford & Arthur,2009:8-9).

A comparison between neoclassical realism and neorealism reveals the following picture: According to this view, examining states' responses to international systemic events is only possible by introducing certain mediating variables. The organizational structures of states and the ways in which political leaders perceive issues are examples of this (Beqa,2017:324).

From this perspective, another point that Rose strongly emphasizes is that the material power capacity of states is vitally important for their foreign policy outcomes (Kozub-Karkut,2019:206).

According to neoclassical realists, the influence of power capacities on foreign policy is reflected through mediating variables. Among a number of real-world factors acting as mediating variables are some internal variables such as state capacity, interest groups, political leadership, local institutions, and political culture (Götz,2021: 1).

Neoclassical realists focus on a wide range of these internal factors. Therefore, disagreements have arisen among neoclassical realists regarding which internal factor is more important. The key point here is how political leaders, who prioritize maintaining their political positions, can leverage their relationship with the public to achieve their desired policies (Sørensen,2013:368).

Neoclassical realism has also made certain assumptions about the issue of balancing international relations. Accordingly, political perceptions arising from domestic state processes, rather than factors stemming from the international system itself, are a triggering element on balancing strategies (Ito,2023:4).

Neoclassical realism has imposed a number of tasks on foreign policy practitioners. These can be ranked in order of importance as follows: First, ensuring the continuity of the state apparatus. The secondary issue is maintaining the current position of power. Finally, there is the identification and monitoring of certain socio-economic objectives, which can be considered secondary issues compared to the first two topics (Fiammenghi vd.,2018:198).

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Neoclassical realist theories, a continuation of the realist tradition, offer a research framework for foreign policy and encompasses many foreign policy theories (He, 2017: 137). From this perspective, neoclassical realist theories are referred to as foreign policy theories, the scope of their explanatory power is extremely broad. This is because the variables they use to identify regional and global power shifts are mutually influential at both levels (Lobell,2009:43).

Given that the idea that states face systemic constraints is viewed with skepticism (Vasileiadis, 2025:658), it has been argued that while systemic constraints limit the foreign policy behavior of states, the responses of states with different capacities and powers to systemic pressures will also differ (Więcławski, 2017:201), and that external/systemic constraints do not automatically direct states towards specific policy choices. However, it has been argued that states generally respond in ways determined by both internal and external assessments of policy elites who are often forced to reach a consensus within a decentralized and competitive political process (Lai, 2013:6). At this point, neoclassical realists emphasize the importance of how the international system is perceived by statesmen or other political elites (Omar, 2013:2). This is because the correct assessment of systemic constraints, which may appear in a specific or ambiguous way and may be understood correctly or incorrectly, and their transformation into foreign policy outcomes, is a process that requires careful consideration due to the consequences it will lead to (Meibauer, 2020:8).

However, the policy choices of foreign policy makers are influenced by their international or domestic political orientations, and therefore leaders have conflicting interests. These domestic coalitions include state and private actors, as well as national interest groups, and their allegiances depend on whether their motivations are inward-looking and national or outward-looking and international. For example, globalists whose interests are shaped internationally act in conjunction with their foreign partners. This, in turn, necessitates that globalists abide by international law. On the other hand, economic nationalists are domestically focused groups. They prefer to limit international participation by avoiding international obligations and complexities, believing that greater involvement in the international system will weaken the power and position of their members within the domestic market (Lobell,2009: 58-59).

In summary, the prime minister and his ministers emerge as the top-level political decision-making authority in Japan. Policy planning can originate from both the cabinet and the bureaucracy. Therefore, the neoclassical realist narrative helps to identify and define who is important institutionally and when. The second variable relates to the "image of leaders," which is associated with the policy vision of each key actor. In this part of the analysis, strategic culture emerges as an intervening variable. In Japan, a strategic culture manifests itself in various groups: those who accept any situation as normal, those who are pro-American, those who are pro-United Nations, and those who are committed to a peaceful constitution. The final intermediate variable to consider is the relationship between the state and society. On one side of the equation are the decision-makers, while on the other are the public, whose opinion is highly valued, and the opposition parties vying for

political power. It is an undeniable fact that both groups have a positive or negative influence on decision-makers' assessments (Watai,2017:4).

3.2 Global and Regional Relations

With its industry and military power almost completely destroyed during the Second World War and its territory under the de facto occupation of the United States, Japan had no choice but to surrender politically and militarily to the US (Heginbotham & Samuels, 1996:6).

From this point of view, Japan's foreign policy over the past three-quarters of a century since the war can be summarized under three main headings: (1) alliance with the United States, (2) avoidance of conflict, and (3) focus on economic issues. These themes were influential both at the actual foreign policy level and in shaping policy-making institutions. The long-standing alliance with the United States forms the backbone of Japanese foreign policy. Japan's loyalty to its US partner has been clearly demonstrated in various actions that seemed contrary to its national interests. For example, Japan supported the US-led Vietnam War in the 1970s and hesitated to recognize China under international law, awaiting a visit from then-US President Nixon. For Japan, loyalty has often taken precedence over other foreign policy interests of the state (Grimes,2003:359-360).

Although Japan may appear dependent on and weak to the US in the area of security, it is not weak in other forms of power. For example, it has become a regional and global power in many areas such as technology, science, and economics. As early as the 1980s, it surpassed the Soviet Union in these areas and became the most important supporter of global US dominance in East Asia (Koyama & Buzan, 2019:16).

During the Cold War, Japan, along with its ally the United States, viewed the Soviet Union as a threat and sought closer ties with China, which felt the same threat. Of course, this rapprochement did not occur in opposition to its alliance with the US. Simultaneously, a rapprochement between the US and China was also witnessed. Until the 1970s, Japan's relations with China were extremely limited; however, from that point onwards, these relations, particularly in economic, commercial, and political aspects, have steadily increased (Koga, 2016:3).

In this context, Japan normalized diplomatic relations with China by recognizing it in 1972. In 1978, they signed an agreement committing to "promoting lasting peace and friendship." From this point on, Japan and China rapidly became one of each other's largest trading and financial partners. However, this positive transformation has also been accompanied by negative developments. The unresolved maritime jurisdiction and island disputes between China and Japan hold a priority position in this regard (Jerdén & Hagström,2012:216).

Unlike its nuclear-armed neighbors such as North Korea, Russia, and China, Japan has not sought to acquire such weapons and has relied on its alliance with the United States to counterbalance the perceived threat from these countries (Katagiri,2020:6). A careful examination reveals that the scope and scale of these balancing efforts have gradually increased since the Cold War. In this respect, the Japanese government, primarily focused on military modernization, is pursuing

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new security collaborations with other states in addition to its alliance with the US (Singh, 2022:3).

The primary reason behind Japan's efforts to normalize relations with China from the 1970s to the 2000s was the international environment created by the US itself being on this path, and the consensus among Japanese political parties that accompanied this environment (Hughes,2016:14).

By the 1990s, the United States and Japan had renewed their security alliance through various agreements. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the US made arrangements allowing Japan to participate in UN peacekeeping operations with overseas military deployments for the first time in almost half a century (Jerdén & Hagström,2012:236). Then-Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi, participating in U.S. global actions, ensured the deployment of Japanese troops across a wide range of territories, from the Indian Ocean to Iraq. (Atanassova-Cornelis,2011:170).

On the other hand, Japan has not only concluded security agreements with the US but has also developed a different approach, particularly with its Asian neighbors within the ASEAN framework, addressing the concept of security at both humanitarian and economic levels, while also maintaining its traditional understanding of military security. (Atanassova-Cornelis,2011:168).

A careful examination reveals that the domestic context of Japan's foreign policy underwent a significant transformation starting in the 1990s. This included the retirement or death of Liberal Democratic Party cadres due to age limits, the increasing marginalization of the Social Democratic Party of Japan in the political arena, and the emergence of the Democratic Party of Japan as the dominant opposition party towards China (Mochizuki, 2007:767) and the successive rise to power of three conservative and nationalist Japanese prime ministers. Relying on a public opinion increasingly shifting to the right of the political spectrum, decision-makers prioritized strengthening alliances with the United States and increasing Japan's regional power (Atanassova-Cornelis,2011:173).

Between 2001 and 2006, diplomatic relations between China and Japan deteriorated to an unprecedented level. This was largely due to the Japanese Ministry of Education publishing nationalist-themed middle school history textbooks during that period and Prime Minister Koizumi visiting Yasukuni Shrine to honor figures unwelcome by China (Atanassova-Cornelis,2011:174). One of the reasons behind Prime Minister Koizumi's visits is that, following changes within his liberal democratic party, nationalism is being used as a tool to try and secure party legitimacy (Hughes,2016:25).

Relations between the two countries reached an unprecedented peak in the spring of 2005 and again in the fall of 2012, following widespread anti-Japanese demonstrations in various Chinese cities; these demonstrations were met with unusually strong anti-Chinese retaliatory actions from the Japanese public (Lai.2013:1).

Meanwhile, in Japan under Abe's leadership, official defense documents portrayed China as a threat, particularly due to maritime issues. Because of this perceived threat, the Japanese government sought to improve relations with other regional states (Oliveira, 2021:9).

However, The Democratic Party of Japan (DJP), which won the 2009 elections, reversed the political climate. Prioritizing Asian diplomacy, the new administration abandoned the Liberal Democratic Party's pro-American foreign policy and sought to bring Japan closer to China (Atanassova-Cornelis,2011:177).

Shinzo Abe, who came to power for a second time as Prime Minister in 2012, used the power of the media to promote the view of a Chinese threat and steered Japanese public opinion against China. In this way, the Abe administration aimed to silence domestic opposition that could challenge its security policies and strengthen military relations with the US (Pugliese, 2015). The Abe administration, which sought to control the media and bureaucracy within the country and steer foreign and security policies (Pugliese & Patalano, 2020: 7-8), could not ignore the latest military advancements made by China in every field and shaped its policies accordingly (Pugliese, 2017: 5).

In doing so, Japan has taken care to maintain its alliance with the US while simultaneously developing its domestic defense industry, with support from defense industry experts, officials, and politicians in the relevant field, and has also struggled with legal challenges such as Article 9 of the Constitution, which restricts Japan, and political challenges such as domestic opposition to militarization (Watai, 2021).

Since 2010, various issues in areas such as fishing, disputed islands, and maritime and air jurisdiction have led to increasing tension in relations between Japan and China (Zakowski,2023:10; Chiang,2019:6).

Due to tensions with China, Japan has engaged in balancing activities with other US allies and friends, such as India and Australia. In this context, the 2007 security declaration with Australia stands out as it was Japan's first bilateral security agreement with a country other than the US (Gegeshidze, 2024:354; Ford&Arthur, 2009:67).

In 2014, a year perceived as a simultaneous occurrence of China's rise and the decline of the US, the Japanese government made a radical decision. Article 9 of the 1947 constitution, considered peaceful due to its rejection of war and prohibition of military formation, was reinterpreted to legalize the right to collective self-defense. According to this, Japan could provide military assistance to its allies even if the Japanese mainland was not under attack. This was something previous Japanese governments had never wanted or hesitated to act upon (Saltzman, 2015).

On the other hand, while then-US President Obama (2009-2017) announced his support for Japan and South Korea, who aggressively accepted China's declaration of an air defense identification zone in the East China Sea, the subsequent Trump administration's (2017-2019) statements that the US should cover a portion of the military spending necessary for the defense of Japan and South Korea caused relations between the allies to cool (Kim, 2020).

Moreover, the withdrawal of the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, which it was a signatory to along with Japan, in 2017, early in the Trump administration's term, and the reason given by Japanese car manufacturers as an unfair advantage they perceived in the US, came as a shock to Japan, but it also opened up the opportunity for Japan to pursue an independent foreign policy from the US and strengthen its position in Asia (Vidal, 2022: 16-17).

In 2018, when the US administration launched a trade war with China by raising tariffs, China sought closer ties with Japan, a development which Japan did not view negatively. High-level visits were made between the two countries, and during the US-China trade war, Japan continued to make independent moves regarding maritime security and regional cooperation (Masuo, 2019:431).

On the other hand, when we look at the relationship between Japan and South Korea in the region, it is seen that Japan and South Korea are not party to a mutual defense agreement in the field of security. However, due to geographical proximity, their importance in the region, their common alliance with the US, and shared security threats, a model of harmony is observed between Japan and South Korea. While Japan seems to have a greater fear of being trapped in its bilateral relations with the US, South Korea seems to have a greater fear of being abandoned (Cha,2000:270-271).

This is because, during the period of relative economic decline that the US is experiencing, it wants to reduce spending on its military bases spread throughout the world, and this has created concerns among its allies regarding whether it wants to maintain these military bases (Sherrill & Hough, 2015:257).

4. Conclusion

After World War II, the United States' approach to the Asia-Pacific region differed from its approach to Europe. The United States has not created a defense treaty and organization in Asia similar to NATO, which was established in Europe and encompasses many countries. Instead, the U.S. has sought to ensure regional security through bilateral security agreements with individual states in the region (Bluebook,2013:25).

Benefiting from bilateral defense agreements made by the United States after World War II, Japan became the most important ally of the United States in the region. Japan has entrusted its security to the United States, under the military and technological protection of the US. However, at a time when the relative decline of the US on a global scale is being highlighted, Japan is taking relatively isolated political, economic, and military steps in the region, without neglecting to defend the interests of its allies. These initiatives are influenced by factors from the international system as well as internal dynamics. Ultimately, this presents tangible policy outcomes as demonstrated by Japan.

This situation manifests itself in a wide range of ways, from initiatives that will allow Japan to take control of its own future to steps that could fundamentally change the existing order in the region. Through its actions, Japan is moving away from its role as merely a supporter of the US on the ground and is progressing

towards becoming a more assertive and responsible actor. Japan's departure from its post-World War II principle of disarmament, its acquisition of more advanced weapons, and the strengthening of its naval, land, and air forces are increasing the possibility of tension with China, which is becoming increasingly powerful in the region and placing great importance on military modernization. This process, shaped by Japan's internal dynamics such as nationalism and the pressures of the global system such as deepening interdependence, is causing the emergence of different balancing and counterbalancing elements on the world political stage. In this context, it is considered likely that unpredictable consequences will be encountered.

Neoclassical realists assume that the effects of systemic necessities are indirect, complex, and subjective, and that there is no mechanism by which they are directly or perfectly translated into foreign policy behavior. Instead, these factors should be filtered or shaped by specific internal political processes or actors, or by unit-level mediating variables such as the perceptions of state elites/decision-makers, internal political competition, nationalism, and state institutions, because all these factors can lead to differences in the behavior/preferences of states under specific conditions and time periods. (Lai,2013:5).

From this perspective, Japan's efforts to balance both its ally the US and its rival China appear to be shifting from a soft tone to a hard and sharp one. Under changing circumstances such as the rise of China and the relative decline of the US, Japan is processing these external messages through internal processes and moving towards revisionism like its rival China. In a situation where China's rise is balanced by Japan's rise, the likelihood of an international crisis erupting is lower. However, at least from the current perspective, it is difficult to determine what kinds of scenarios might emerge from marginal power shifts in the US, China, or Japan, or from unexpected developments in the global system.

5. Limitations

This study includes only information obtained through literature. There has been no opportunity to interview or speak with politicians, statesmen, or bureaucrats on this subject.

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