



Japan's Foreign Policy Choices Under the Trilateral Game between China, the United States and Japan

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Abstract. In the post-epidemic era, global changes have intensified while global economic growth has slowed. The complex domestic and international environmental changes have inevitably influenced Japan's foreign policy choices. However, they generally still follow the unprincipled tradition of neoconservatism and "Japan First" values diplomacy. The Kishida administration's foreign policy choices are a product of Japan's full pursuit of national interests in the context of a significant restructuring of the international landscape and a reflection of Japan's ambition to pursue "great power status" and play a role in global governance. The reasons for this can be traced back to the turbulent waves of the ever-strengthening Japan-U.S. alliance and are closely related to the complex and turbulent Sino-Japanese relations. In diplomatic practice, Japan can neither abandon the Japan-U.S. alliance nor must improve Sino-Japanese relations. Maintaining a "dynamic balance" between Japan-U.S. relations and China-U.S. relations, looking at the existing problems, going beyond the limits of the values framework, and maintaining regional peace and stability, thus promoting global development, is the test and challenge for the current Kishida administration.

Keywords: U.S.-Japan Relations, Sino-Japanese Relations, Fumio Kishida, Foreign Policy Analysis, Values Diplomacy.

1 Introduction

Japan, the world's third largest economy after the United States and China, has been actively promoting economic globalization in the regional and global spheres, contributing to the achievement of regional peace, stability and prosperity. Meanwhile, China, the United States and Japan are global powers at every level of national power, possessing the most advanced technology and military power in addition to strong economic power. As a result, the trilateral relationship between China, the United States and Japan is widely regarded as one of the most important trilateral relationships in the world^[1].

In general, the core interests of Japan and the United States are largely aligned, but some areas of overlapping interests could lead to conflict. From the U.S. perspective, the core U.S. interest in East Asia is to ensure the region's stability under its leadership. The stability certainly means shared interests. However, the United States wants Japan

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to maintain its leadership position because it has yet to find another stability provider with a strong desire and ability to be trusted^[1]. The U.S. aims to continue to profit from East Asia by circumventing challenges to its regional hegemony and, on that basis, to maintain a state of basic peace, and it would like to see Japan able to play a more international role with greater confidence and independence, but remain under U.S. control in the security arena. Therefore, the U.S. would be happy to see both continued friction and relatively stable engagement in Sino-Japanese relations, which would not only facilitate U.S. meddling and involvement but also not cost it too much^[2].

The relationship between Japan and China is also worth studying. As the two largest economies in Asia, the two countries account for nearly 60% of the region's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020^[3].

In essence, the key to maintaining regional political stability and strengthening economic cooperation is for China and Japan to maintain friendly relations. However, the intertwining of historical frustrations and real national interests has exacerbated various conflicts between China and Japan and has had a tremendous impact on the strategic judgment of both sides. Although both sides have chosen a more restrained approach to foreign policy and have not further exacerbated tensions, the root causes of their conflict, such as historical issues and territorial disputes, remain long-standing. In addition, the rise of China's economy and increasing military power in the current era may lead to changes in the political and economic structure of East Asia, which in the past was overall dependent on Japan's highly sophisticated industrial inputs and U.S. defense^[4]. This means that changes in Sino-Japanese relations have far-reaching implications for the evolution of power structures in the region and even globally.

In addition, it is also essential to first consider the continuing impact on Japan's foreign policy of the long-standing "conservatism" of the Japanese government, as typified by the Abe administration, in advancing its strategic evolution. For decades, the core interest of Japan's foreign policy has been to keep its international ties open, always seeking not to be overtaken, not be isolated, and not be deprived of a voice in the international community. This classical realism has kept Japan focused on national power, and the way to defend Japan's national power is to build more robust security partnerships while favoring a more active foreign policy. This has led Japan to consistently seek closer cooperation with the United States in the area of security, and the Abe administration's "conservative" three reform strategies continue this ideology^[5]. Although this reform process was put on hold by Yukio Hatoyama, who believed that Japan's future lay in Asia, not in the United States, the overall tradition of Japanese foreign policy was based on a "conservative" values-based diplomacy. But in general, Japan's foreign policy tradition is based on a "conservative" values diplomacy, which also profoundly influenced the Kishida government's choice of political behavior.

This paper aims to sort out Japan's foreign policy choices in the context of the U.S.-China game in the post-epidemic era. As the successor of the Abe administration, we can glimpse Japan's traditional diplomatic values from the foreign policy choices of the Kishida administration and speculate whether it will continue the same overall national strategy and, thus, what characteristics it will display. In addition, how to re-examine the relationship with China and handle the development of Sino-Japanese relations is an issue that the Kishida government must face and resolve.

2 Traditions and Characteristics of Japanese Foreign Policy

2.1 Historical and Cultural Factors

In international politics, cultural factors subliminally play a role and exert a unique influence. Cultural background influences the tendency of national foreign policy and the role of cultural factors in influencing national power, which is increasingly prominent in globalization ^[6]. The most important characteristic of Japanese society is "groups". The emphasis on collective consciousness has influenced the style of all human relations in Japanese culture. Externally, this "collectivism" demonstrates high solidarity and unquestionable loyalty to the group. The character developed in the group, which avoids open confrontation and is "peace-oriented," is also reflected in Japan's diplomatic practices to a greater or lesser extent. Although Japan's diplomatic history has a record of explicitly accusing other countries, in most cases, it has been "seeking common ground while reserving differences" and lacking a clear image of national goals and diplomatic strategies, which is why Japanese diplomacy has been called "Aikido diplomacy".

In addition to collectivism, another national characteristic more evident in Japanese diplomacy is the "Machijin Root". Influenced by the townspeople's inherent mercantilism and economic supremacy, the Japanese have developed a pluralistic value system that does not recognize the only correct method of thought, nor does it believe in absolute justice. They do not fight over right and wrong, which is against the principle of "peace is precious". Therefore, they prefer to avoid abstract theories, and what is in the public interest is correct. This "unprincipledness" is expressed in politics, which gives people an impression of uncertainty. For instance, during World War II, Japan vigorously preached "world together," but after its defeat, peace, and democracy became the supreme goal of Japan; after Japan's defeat, the U.S. occupation forces were surprised by the Japanese's quick and positive cooperation, and the Japanese emperor even made a special visit to Marshal MacArthur. This unprincipled one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn often leaves people who do not know Japan at a loss for words. This is also why Japan often focuses only on immediate interests and advocates a sense of a zero-sum game.

2.2 Characteristics of Japanese Diplomacy under the Influence of Contemporary Factors

Culture is a subtle factor that uniquely influences Japanese politics, but it can only be used as a tool to help study or grasp Japanese foreign policy; it is not a decisive factor in international relations. However, it is not a decisive factor in international relations. Still, by examining the cultural factor, we can easily detect the "conservatism" and the values-based diplomacy that has been the basis of Japan's foreign policy from the beginning. The recovery of economic power and the rapid development of Japanese society have inspired a sense of national superiority among the Japanese people and awakened a strong desire for political participation. They began to seek international status, international influence, and international discourse that could match their economic

strength. To sum up, Japan's quest for the status of "political power" and "dominant player" in East Asia determines the inevitability of conservative foreign policy; and the various "norms" under collectivism inevitably influence the future direction of Japan's foreign policy.

Japanese policymakers, however, have formulated a series of neo-conservative foreign strategies under the historical revisionist view of national interests and the sense of a zero-sum game as well as the concept of active pacifism, leading to the development and evolution of the conservatization of Japan's foreign policy. The cognition of policymakers is the ultimate link that influences the country's foreign policy, as they analyze, judge, and predict the domestic and foreign environment to reason out conclusions and serve as the fundamental basis for the formulation of national policy. In recent years, Japan's policy-making elites, both the Koizumi and Abe governments, have not only held right-leaning and conservative ideas in foreign policy but also changed their perceptions of the domestic and foreign environment as the international system has changed and adjusted, leading to the gradual strengthening of Japan's neo-conservative diplomatic line.

Based on the increase in national strength and the reshuffling of global power, the Kishida administration has been guided by the concept of "positive pacifism," adhering to "universal values," pursuing national interests based on strength, and selectively participating in global governance based on national interests as the benchmark for judgment.

3 U.S.-Japan Relations: "Shields" and "Spears" in the Search for Equality

Although Japanese diplomacy was intermittently caught in the dilemma of choosing between "following" the United States and "autonomy" for a relatively short period, "in retrospect, most politicians and bureaucrats who chose 'autonomy' have been rejected. First of all, it is clear that Japan's diplomatic tradition of choosing the United States as its base axis will remain the same and may even be strengthened and deepened. Based on its perception and judgment of the international political reality, Japan has been following the "universal values" led by the United States, which is the fundamental definition of its national values in the post-war period. This is also the basic direction of Japan's foreign policy, which has chosen the Japan-U.S. alliance as its base axis and adhered to the basic line of "leaving Asia and entering the U.S." [7]. Even politicians who choose the "autonomous" route do not fundamentally reject "universal values", but the difference lies in the superficial debate between indirectly defending "universal values" under the premise of "following" the United States, and directly defending "universal values" by way of "autonomous" choice.

The Japan-U.S. alliance remains the backbone of Japan's security strategy. While relying on the Japan-U.S. alliance, Japan also seeks to continuously improve its position and role in the alliance. In practice, the Kishida administration sees the Japan-U.S. alliance as a fundamental force for safeguarding "universal values". It is committed to expanding the military security alliance in a bilateral sense into a global alliance for

maintaining "international order," vowing "to take the lead in elevating the Japan-U.S. alliance, which is the foundation of peace and prosperity in the 'Indo-Pacific' region and the world, to a higher level" [8]. The Japan-Australia "special strategic partnership" is placed second only to the Japan-U.S. alliance in terms of strategy, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), consisting of Japan, the United States, Australia, and India, is an important mechanism for Japan to implement "universal values" in the "Indo-Pacific" region. The QUAD is a significant mechanism for Japan to implement "universal values" in the Indo-Pacific region. As Japan's Prime Minister, Kishida was invited to attend the NATO summit for the first time, which is Japan's positive response to NATO's globalization and Asia-Pacific strategy, as well as a reflection of Japan's leadership role in the international arena. According to a Japanese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Kishida will visit India on March 19. He intends to deliver a policy speech on the "free and open Indo-Pacific" and make a new action plan public. The Chinese side said it is not interested in such action plans that "actually do nothing but create a small circle towards a confrontation between camps" [9].

In contrast, Japan has sought to change the "non-reciprocity" of the Japan-U.S. alliance mechanism by developing a military with "attack capabilities against enemy bases. The alliance between Japan and the U.S. has been unequal from the beginning, so recent Japanese governments, especially the Abe cabinet, have been striving to amend the constitution. Abe even used the term "heartbreaking pain" to describe his regret at not achieving many of his political goals, including amending the "peace constitution" to fundamentally remove the legal restrictions on Japan's military development. Constitutional revision and diplomacy have formed a mutually reinforcing interaction in this process. This is seen as an important opportunity to lift the restrictions that have prevented Japan from using force abroad since World War II, not only to strengthen its military power on both offensive and defensive fronts, but also to reverse the current inequality between the Japan-U.S. alliance. Some scholars have described the U.S.-Japan alliance as "uncomfortable bedfellows", cause the two countries hold opposing positions on whether Japan's current military status should be changed.

On November 10, 2021, the new Japanese Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, announced that he would make amending the Constitution "an important issue for the LDP Prime Minister" [10]. This indicates that the LDP, whose basic policy is to "amend the constitution," will continue to take advantage of its position in power to pursue a conservative and hard-line approach to "constitutional amendment.

4 Sino-Japanese Relations under Kishida: Stability or Provocation?

In contrast to the unusually close Japan-U.S. relationship, Japan's multifaceted cooperation with China has developed steadily for decades. Still, cooperation between the two sides is currently far from deep and prone to fluctuations due to a number of political and historical sensitivities that have never been reconciled. As the second largest economy in the G-7, Japan has much more profound and broader cooperation with other Western countries (especially the U.S.), with which the Japanese government gives

preference in times of national emergency. Another example is that on March 21 this year, Kishida suddenly announced his visit to Ukraine after visiting India. This move was also apparently based on the Kishida government's fear of isolation in the G7, as the Western community's strong support for Ukraine continues.

Due to the traditional "unprincipled" and "home first" principles of Japanese diplomacy, the Japanese government is trying to make Sino-Japanese relations an essential component of its strategic toolbox to achieve the goal of revising the Constitution and strengthening the military. This initial intention of using Sino-Japanese relations as a policy tool determines that Kishida's diplomacy will continue to take self-defined national interests as the primary consideration instead of planning the future development of Sino-Japanese relations in a responsible, comprehensive, and prudent manner from a strategic perspective, which will undoubtedly subjectively build new barriers to the development of Sino-Japanese relations and impact the basic situation of relative stability in bilateral relations.

4.1 Maintaining the Relative Stability of Sino-Japanese Relations to a Certain Extent

Kishida will ensure relative stability in Sino-Japanese relations without safeguarding real economic interests. Objectively speaking, China and Japan, as the second and third largest economies in the world, avoiding mutual economic damage and strengthening cooperation is the win-win approach, which will also contribute to the overall recovery of the regional and world economies in the post-epidemic era. At the level of personal political will, Kishida has released constructive signals.

Although the Kishida administration has created a series of new obstacles and Japan's domestic attitude toward China is still not optimistic, Kishida has made it clear publicly that he will "strive to establish a constructive and stable development of Sino-Japanese relations to meet the requirements of the new era", unlike the hardline tone of the early part of the second Abe administration. China, for its part, has consistently maintained that "maintaining and developing friendly and cooperative relations between China and Japan is in the fundamental interests of the two countries and peoples, and is also conducive to peace, stability, and prosperity in Asia and the world" ^[11].

The year 2022 marks the 50th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between China and Japan, and a consensus has been reached at a high level to promote Sino-Japanese exchanges on this occasion, which is also driving more active discussions and cooperation between the two countries at other levels and in numerous fields. China-Japan economic and trade relations have bucked the trend against the backdrop of a world economy weighed down by the epidemic, demonstrating the strong resilience and rich vitality of economic and trade cooperation. Led by the willingness of science and technology innovation and the corresponding policy support, the two countries have extensive demand for cooperation, strong momentum, and massive space for cooperation in areas such as investment and trade, digital economy, clean and low-carbon, and third-party markets, which will provide an essential guarantee that the Sino-Japanese relationship will not be derailed in the short term.

4.2 Creating New Barriers to De-escalation of Sino-Japanese Relations

In response to the need to maintain a "dynamic balance" in domestic and foreign politics, the Kishida administration's foreign policy has chosen to intensify its provocations against China, creating more and more political obstacles to the smooth development of Sino-Japanese relations. In the 2022 summer Senate elections, the "China issue" will continue to be a powerful tool for conservative parties to gain more votes. This political demand will further damage the public opinion climate of Sino-Japanese relations. Meanwhile, the Kishida administration is actively promoting revising three security documents, discussing the construction of "strike capabilities against enemy bases," politicizing human rights issues, attempting to interfere in China's internal affairs, etc. These policy preferences will drive Japan to continue exaggerating the "China threat theory" at home and abroad, adding to the political load on positive Sino-Japanese relations. These policy preferences will drive Japan to continue to promote the "China threat theory" at home and abroad, adding to the political burden of improving Sino-Japanese relations.

In addition, the Kishida administration has driven the "politicization" and "instrumentalization" of human rights, creating a new political barrier to Sino-Japanese relations. In the bilateral and multilateral spheres, the Kishida administration has actively cooperated with the U.S.-led "politicization of human rights" by smearing China's human rights in its summit meeting with Biden and the Japan-U.S. "2+2" talks. In response, the Chinese Embassy in Japan issued a statement, saying, "Some Japanese politicians have ignored the way countries get along with each other and forcibly put together the so-called resolution, which is a serious political provocation to the Chinese people and seriously undermines the overall situation of Sino-Japanese relations" ^[12].

Japan has shifted from covert black-handedness to overt manipulation of the Taiwan issue, pushing for its complication and internationalization, using it as a pretext to revise the Constitution and strengthen the military and upgrade the Japan-U.S. alliance. In March 2021, the Japan-U.S. "2+2" joint statement emphasized the importance of "Taiwan's peace and security. In March 2021, the Japan-U.S. "2+2" joint statement emphasized "the importance of peace and stability in Taiwan" ^[13]. In June, Kishida placed the Taiwan issue under the political discourse of "rules and order" and declared that "today's Ukraine and China-Japan relations may be tomorrow's East Asia", trying to use the Ukraine crisis for discourse transplantation, subjectively constructing a political space to interfere with the Taiwan issue and importing extraterritorial forces for joint intervention.

The Japanese government's vague and mysterious attitude toward the historical issue has also been a source of discontent for China. On March 16, the Japanese government's defiance of history again caused an uproar in South Korean society during a meeting between Korean and Japanese leaders known as "omelet diplomacy." In response, China's Foreign Ministry said, "Japan should face up to and deeply reflect on history, properly deal with historical issues honestly and responsibly, and develop normal national relations with its Asian neighbors on this basis" ^[14]. This reveals that facing up to the historical issue is the key to the development of normalized relations between China and Japan and is an issue that the Japanese government cannot avoid.

Overall, Japan's continuous "Salami tactics" to advance adventurous policies in a piecemeal manner tentatively risk causing a substantial deterioration in Sino-Japanese relations. While the Abe cabinet improved ties with China and reached out to the Belt and Road in previous years, Japan's intensified security cooperation with Europe and attempts to bring NATO into the Asia-Pacific to balance China has not diminished. The Kishida government's rhetoric has weakened, but its actions have not shown a constructive tendency in the short term, and Japan has yet to be able to face the historical issues. Combined with Japan's domestic political agenda, it is possible to judge that Sino-Japanese relations will continue to be turbulent, and there is even the possibility that they will sink again. The space for diversion and adjustment created by the efforts of the Chinese and Japanese societies during the 2020-2021 epidemic will likely go down the drain.

Nevertheless, the struggle for power and security will always exist between China and Japan, but it will not automatically translate into hostility. For Japan, the security interests of the Sino-Japanese relationship only partially trump the economic interests. The fact that China is Japan's largest trading partner, export market, and source of imports, with bilateral trade set to reach \$317.5 billion in 2020 and even on track to set a record, cannot be ignored.

5 Conclusion

The foreign policy of the Kishida government can be said to be a "hedging" type of thinking. First of all, it goes beyond Sino-Japanese and Sino-Japanese-American relations. Its hedging is not only directed at China and reflected in its policy toward China but is not simply a matter of "choosing sides" between China and the United States. On the contrary, while Japan is actively engaged in the geopolitical game of the great powers, it is also aware of the risk of being "swallowed" by the game, so it is trying harder to go beyond the framework of the Sino-US game and build a more diversified and multidimensional and balanced foreign strategic system.

On the one hand, while continuing to rely on the Japan-U.S. alliance, Japan is striving to strengthen its autonomous defense capabilities and strategic behavior capabilities and is actively developing various forms of coordination and cooperation with multiple countries in the Indo-Pacific region and the Asia-Pacific region and beyond in a variety of political, economic, and security fields. Since the New Guinea epidemic outbreak, Japan has also been actively engaged in "epidemic diplomacy" in Southeast Asia and Europe.

On the other hand, this thinking also carries over to its policy toward China. China and Japan are by no means close partners but are by no means outright hostile competitors either. The two sides are more confrontational than cooperative in different areas, such as between security and economy, and more cooperative than confrontational in some cases. Thus, even as the antagonism of Japan's policy toward China is on the rise in the security sphere, it still insists on maintaining dialogue and contact with China - one of the apparent differences between the Kishida administration and the Kan administration, including the importance it attaches to maintaining a high-level

communication and promoting dialogue in various fields. This indicates that Japan's basic policy orientation is to hang on to both sides of China and the U.S. It cannot do "one side", but only "both sides to occupy".

The Kishida government now faces the dilemma of staying within the Japan-U.S. alliance and having to improve Sino-Japanese relations. Moreover, Japan's development aims to reclaim its position as a big power in the international community and its selective role in global governance. The rise of China is the most destabilizing factor in this trilateral relationship, and Japan is forced to re-examine the direction of its policy toward China and consider a new way out, whether for various factors such as historical and cultural or geographic reasons.

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