

Foreign Policy of Japan under Shinzo Abe: A Conceptual Framework

By Raj Kumar Kothari & Budh Bahadur Lama[±]*

This article examines the transformation of Japan's foreign and security policy under Shinzo Abe through the theoretical lens of neo-realism. It asks three interrelated questions: what factors compelled Abe to revisit Japan's defence and security framework, what outcomes emerged from his foreign policy initiatives, and to what extent his leadership constituted a major transformation in Japan's post-war foreign policy orientation. The study argues that Abe's strategic transformation was driven primarily by structural changes in the regional distribution of power, particularly the rise of China, North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities, and increasing geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific. Within this changing environment, Abe accelerated and institutionalised Japan's strategic adjustment through the establishment of the National Security Council, adoption of the National Security Strategy, reinterpretation of collective self-defence, defence modernisation, and strengthened alliance cooperation. His promotion of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision and revitalisation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue further expanded Japan's regional partnerships and diplomatic influence. The article finds that Abe's contribution lay less in initiating these changes than in consolidating and embedding them within Japan's foreign and security policy framework. While neo-realism effectively explains the structural pressures shaping Japan's strategic behaviour, the analysis also demonstrates the importance of political leadership in translating systemic pressures into concrete policy outcomes. The article concludes that Abe significantly reshaped Japan's strategic identity and strengthened its role as a proactive middle power and important architect of the emerging Indo-Pacific order.

Keywords: *Shinzo Abe, Japanese foreign policy, neo-realism, free and open Indo-Pacific, Indo-Pacific regionalism*

Introduction

Shinzo Abe occupies a unique position in contemporary Japanese political history. On 24 August 2020, he became the longest-serving Prime Minister of Japan since the establishment of the modern cabinet system (Liff & Lipsy 2022, pp. 1–2). His leadership, spanning from 2006-2007 and again from 2012-2020, represented an unprecedented period of political stability and policy continuity under the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). During an era marked by rapid geopolitical transformations, shifting power balances, and growing security uncertainties in the Asia-Pacific region, Abe emerged as a leader determined to redefine Japan's role in international affairs. Although his administration is often associated with ambitious economic reforms

*Professor, Diamond Harbour Women's University West Bengal, India.

[±]Assistant Professor, Sikkim (Central) University, India.

popularly known as “Abenomics,” his most enduring legacy lies in the sphere of foreign and security policy (Hughes 2021, pp. 3–5). Through a series of institutional reforms, diplomatic initiatives, and strategic partnerships, Abe sought to transform Japan from a passive participant in international politics into a proactive and influential actor capable of shaping regional and global developments.

The significance of Abe’s foreign policy agenda can only be understood within the broader historical context of post-war Japan. Since the end of the Second World War, Japanese foreign policy had largely been guided by a security framework rooted in pacifism, economic reconstruction, and dependence on the United States for national defence (Pyle 2018, pp. 15–18). The adoption of the Constitution of Japan in 1947, particularly Article 9, imposed significant restrictions on the country’s military capabilities and renounced war as a sovereign right (The Constitution of Japan 1947). Consequently, Japan pursued a foreign policy strategy that prioritised economic growth while relying on the United States-Japan alliance as the cornerstone of national security (Samuels 2007, pp. 29–31). This arrangement enabled Japan to emerge as an economic powerhouse but simultaneously constrained its ability to play a more assertive role in regional and global security affairs.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the strategic environment surrounding Japan had undergone profound changes. The rapid rise of China as an economic and military power fundamentally altered the balance of power in East Asia (Mearsheimer 2014, pp. 360–365). Beijing’s growing maritime presence and increasing assertiveness in the East and South China Seas generated concerns among neighbouring states, including Japan (Smith 2019, pp. 112–115). Simultaneously, North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme and repeated ballistic missile tests posed direct security challenges to Japanese territory and regional stability (Hughes 2021, pp. 87–90). These developments raised serious questions regarding the adequacy of Japan’s traditional security framework and the continued relevance of the post-war constraints that had shaped its foreign policy for decades.

It was within this changing geopolitical context that Abe sought to reposition Japan as a more active and responsible stakeholder in international affairs. Unlike many of his predecessors who remained largely committed to the existing post-war framework, Abe advocated a strategic vision that emphasised national resilience, diplomatic activism, and enhanced security capabilities (Liff & Lipsky 2022, pp. 145–148). His leadership represented what many observers described as a restoration of Japanese confidence, self-esteem, and strategic autonomy (Pyle 2018, pp. 278–280). Abe believed that Japan’s status as the world’s third-largest economy should be matched by greater diplomatic influence and a stronger role in maintaining regional and global order.

According to Liff and Lipsky (2022, pp. 150–152), Abe consistently promoted a foreign policy agenda that was both bold and transformative. Shortly after returning to power in 2012, he famously declared that “Japan is back,” signalling his determination to restore the country’s international influence and strategic relevance (Abe, 2013, para. 1). Under his leadership, Japan adopted a more proactive diplomatic posture, expanded its security partnerships, and played an increasingly prominent role in multilateral forums. Abe also championed the concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP), which sought to promote freedom of navigation, respect for

international law, maritime security, and regional connectivity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [MOFA] 2017, para. 3). This vision subsequently became one of the defining strategic frameworks of the contemporary Indo-Pacific region.

Abe's foreign policy was characterised not only by ambitious diplomatic initiatives but also by substantial institutional and legal reforms. His administration established Japan's National Security Council, introduced the country's first National Security Strategy, strengthened defence capabilities, and reinterpreted constitutional restrictions to allow for the exercise of collective self-defence under specific circumstances (Government of Japan 2013, pp. 1–4). These measures reflected a significant departure from Japan's traditional security posture and demonstrated a willingness to adapt national policy to emerging geopolitical realities. Furthermore, Abe actively strengthened strategic partnerships with countries such as the United States, India, and Australia while supporting the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), thereby contributing to the formation of a broader regional security architecture (Smith 2019, pp. 201–205). Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate that Abe's foreign policy was not limited to strengthening Japan's individual security capabilities; rather, it sought to reshape Japan's position within the evolving regional order by combining domestic security reforms with alliance-building, minilateral cooperation, and a broader Indo-Pacific strategy.

The transformation of Japan's foreign policy under Abe can be effectively analysed through the theoretical lens of neo-realism. Neo-realist scholars argue that state behaviour is shaped primarily by the structure of the international system and the distribution of power among states (Waltz 1979, pp. 88–93). In an anarchic international environment, states seek to maximise security and respond to perceived threats through balancing strategies, alliance formation, and military preparedness. Japan's strategic adjustments during Abe's tenure can therefore be understood as a response to changing regional power dynamics and emerging security challenges (Mearsheimer 2014, pp. 368–372). Building on this perspective, this article makes three principal contributions to the existing literature. First, it brings together Abe's institutional reforms, defence policies, alliance strengthening, FOIP, and the Quad within the neo-realist framework of Japan's strategic transformation. Second, it demonstrates how Abe's initiatives extended Japan's traditional Pacific strategy beyond the US–Japan bilateral framework to a wider network of strategic partnerships and Indo-Pacific cooperation. Third, it distinguishes between the structural pressures that encouraged Japan's strategic adjustment and Abe's leadership in accelerating and consolidating that process. The article therefore argues that Abe's contributions are not simply confined to domestic policy reforms, but to linking Japan's domestic security transformation with a broader security agenda of reshaping the regional order.

Against this backdrop, the present article seeks to analyse the political and security implications of the fundamental shift in Japan's foreign policy during Shinzo Abe's tenure within a neo-realist framework. The study explores the domestic and international factors that encouraged Abe to revisit Japan's defence and security policies, assesses the outcomes of his major foreign policy initiatives, and evaluates the extent to which his tenure represents a decisive turning point in the trajectory of post-war Japanese foreign policy. Specifically, the article addresses three key questions:

- (a) What factors compelled Abe to revisit Japan's defence and security policy framework?
- (b) What outcomes emerged from the new foreign policy initiatives undertaken during his tenure?
- (c) To what extent does Abe's leadership constitute a major transformation in Japan's post-war foreign policy orientation?

By addressing these questions, the article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of Japan's evolving strategic identity and its growing role in shaping the contemporary Indo-Pacific order.

Shinzo Abe's Vision of a New Japan

The foreign policy transformation that occurred during Shinzo Abe's tenure cannot be fully understood without examining his broader vision for Japan's national future and its changing position within the regional order of the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific. Long before he became the longest-serving Prime Minister in Japanese history, Abe articulated a comprehensive ideological and political agenda aimed at revitalising Japan's domestic institutions, strengthening national identity, and enhancing the country's international standing. His vision was shaped by conservative political thought, concerns about Japan's declining global influence, and a belief that the post-war order had imposed unnecessary constraints on the country's strategic potential (Edstrom 2007, pp. 7–8). Consequently, Abe sought not merely to introduce policy reforms but to redefine Japan's national purpose in the twenty-first century.

However, Abe's ambitions were also shaped by Japan's distinctive position as a major economic power and middle power whose regional influence remained closely connected to its alliance with the United States. Japan's post-war international role was therefore characterised by a dual strategic orientation: reliance on the US security alliance for national defence while simultaneously seeking greater diplomatic and economic influence across the Pacific. Within this regional setting, Abe sought to expand Japan's role from that of a largely economically oriented US ally to a more proactive middle power capable of contributing to regional order and security. His approach did not imply abandoning the US–Japan alliance; rather, the alliance remained the central pillar of Japan's security strategy while providing the foundation for broader regional partnerships. Abe consequently promoted closer relations with India, Australia, and Southeast Asian states and advanced regional frameworks that connected the Pacific and Indian Ocean spaces. His advocacy of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" reflected this broader conception of regionalism, linking maritime security, connectivity, freedom of navigation, and a rules-based international order.

This regional perspective is crucial for understanding Abe's foreign policy because his objective was not simply to enhance Japan's autonomous capabilities but to strengthen its capacity to shape the regional balance through alliances, partnerships, and multilateral and minilateral institutions. In this sense, Abe's foreign policy represented an attempt to reconcile Japan's middle-power identity

with its status as a key US ally in the Pacific. Consequently, Abe sought not merely to introduce domestic and security reforms but to redefine Japan's national purpose as an active contributor to the evolving regional order in the twenty-first century.

Abe's vision became particularly evident during his campaign for the presidency of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 2006. According to Edstrom (2007), Abe presented a broad roadmap for Japan's future development, identifying four major national goals that would guide his political agenda (Edstrom 2007, pp. 8–9). These goals reflected a combination of cultural conservatism, economic modernisation, political reform, and international activism. Together, they formed the foundation of what can be described as Abe's project of national renewal.

The first goal was the creation of a country that values culture, tradition, history, and nature. Abe argued that post-war Japan had gradually lost confidence in its cultural heritage and historical identity. He maintained that a strong sense of national consciousness was essential for social cohesion and international respect. In his view, Japan's traditions, historical experiences, and cultural values should be regarded as sources of national strength rather than obstacles to modernisation (Edstrom 2007, p. 8). This emphasis on cultural continuity reflected his broader commitment to restoring national pride and cultivating a stronger sense of collective identity among Japanese citizens.

The second goal focused on building a country based on freedom and discipline. Abe maintained that democratic freedoms must be accompanied by social responsibility and civic duty. While supporting market-oriented reforms and individual liberties, he also stressed the importance of discipline, public order, and national responsibility. According to Edstrom (2007), Abe viewed freedom and discipline as complementary principles necessary for sustaining both economic prosperity and social stability. This notion became an important component of his governance philosophy and informed many of his domestic policy initiatives.

The third goal envisioned Japan as a country driven by innovation. Abe recognised that Japan's future prosperity depended on its ability to adapt to global economic transformations and technological advancements. During the early twenty-first century, Japan faced numerous challenges, including economic stagnation, demographic decline, and increasing international competition. Abe therefore emphasised innovation, scientific advancement, and technological development as essential instruments for national revitalisation (Edstrom 2007, p. 9). By encouraging creativity, entrepreneurship, and research, he sought to position Japan as a leading knowledge-based economy capable of competing effectively in an increasingly globalised world.

The fourth and perhaps most significant goal from a foreign policy perspective was the aspiration to transform Japan into a country capable of exercising leadership in international affairs. Abe believed that Japan's economic power should be accompanied by greater diplomatic influence and strategic responsibility. He was critical of what he perceived as Japan's excessive dependence on the United States and its reluctance to assume a more active role in addressing regional and global challenges. Accordingly, he advocated a foreign policy that would enable Japan to contribute more effectively to international peace, security, and economic cooperation (Edstrom 2007, p. 9). This vision represented a significant departure from the

cautious and reactive diplomatic posture that had characterised much of Japan's post-war foreign policy.

To realise these broad national objectives, Abe proposed six key policy priorities that together constituted a practical roadmap for national transformation. The first priority was the establishment of strong political leadership. Abe argued that effective governance required decisive leadership capable of overcoming bureaucratic inertia and implementing long-term strategic objectives. Strengthening executive authority therefore became an important aspect of his political agenda (Edstrom 2007, p. 9).

The second priority involved promoting an open and competitive economy. Abe recognised that economic vitality was essential for sustaining Japan's national power and international influence. Consequently, he supported policies aimed at enhancing economic competitiveness, encouraging investment, and expanding Japan's engagement with global markets (Edstrom 2007, p. 9).

The third priority focused on creating a safe and secure society. This objective encompassed both domestic and external dimensions of security. Abe argued that the government had a fundamental responsibility to protect citizens from emerging threats, including terrorism, regional instability, and military challenges posed by neighbouring states. This emphasis on security later became a defining feature of his foreign and defence policies (Edstrom 2007, p. 9).

The fourth priority was the pursuit of assertive diplomacy. Unlike the relatively restrained diplomatic approaches adopted by many previous Japanese leaders, Abe advocated a more proactive foreign policy capable of advancing Japan's interests and values on the global stage. He sought to deepen strategic partnerships with democratic nations while strengthening Japan's role in international institutions and regional security frameworks (Edstrom 2007, p. 9).

The fifth priority emphasised political responsibility and accountability. Abe believed that political parties and elected representatives should play a more active role in governance and policy implementation. This objective reflected his broader commitment to enhancing political effectiveness and strengthening democratic institutions (Edstrom 2007, p. 9).

Finally, Abe called for moving beyond the constraints of the post-war regime. This objective represented one of the most controversial aspects of his political vision. Abe argued that many of Japan's post-war institutions and policies were products of a unique historical context that no longer reflected contemporary realities. In particular, he questioned whether constitutional restrictions and existing security arrangements remained adequate in light of evolving geopolitical challenges. His efforts to reinterpret aspects of Japan's security policy and expand the role of the Self-Defence Forces were closely linked to this broader objective (Edstrom 2007, pp. 9–10).

Central to Abe's vision was the conviction that Japan should become a more confident, proactive, and influential actor in international affairs. He believed that economic strength alone was insufficient to secure Japan's long-term interests and that greater diplomatic activism, strategic capability, and political leadership were necessary for maintaining national security and international relevance (Edstrom, 2007, p. 10). This vision ultimately laid the intellectual and ideological foundation for the far-reaching foreign and security policy reforms that characterised his tenure

as Prime Minister. Through his emphasis on national renewal, strategic autonomy, and international engagement, Abe sought to redefine Japan's role in the emerging geopolitical landscape of the twenty-first century.

Japan's Post-War Foreign Policy Framework

An understanding of Shinzo Abe's foreign and security policy reforms requires a careful examination of the foundations of Japan's post-war foreign policy framework. The strategic transformation initiated by Abe did not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it represented a significant departure from principles that had guided Japanese diplomacy and security policy since the end of the Second World War. For more than six decades, Japan's foreign policy was shaped by a unique combination of constitutional pacifism, reliance on the United States for security, and a strong emphasis on economic development. This framework enabled Japan to achieve remarkable economic success while maintaining a relatively limited role in international security affairs. However, changing geopolitical realities in the twenty-first century gradually exposed the limitations of this approach and created conditions for strategic reassessment.

The origins of Japan's post-war foreign policy can be traced to the country's defeat in World War II and the subsequent occupation by Allied forces under the leadership of the United States. Following Japan's surrender in 1945, the country underwent a comprehensive process of political, economic, and institutional reconstruction. One of the most significant outcomes of this process was the adoption of a new constitution in 1947, which fundamentally altered Japan's approach to national security and international relations (Pyle 2018, p. 18). The constitution was designed to prevent the re-emergence of militarism and establish Japan as a peaceful democratic state committed to international cooperation.

A central feature of the post-war settlement was the establishment of a security arrangement that rested on three interrelated principles. First, Japan would rely on the United States as the primary guarantor of its national security. Second, Japan would maintain only minimal military capabilities and avoid becoming a major military power. Third, the country would concentrate its resources on economic reconstruction and development rather than defence expenditure. According to Edstrom (2007), these principles emerged through negotiations between Japan and the United States during the late 1940s and early 1950s and subsequently became the foundation of Japan's post-war foreign policy orientation (Edstrom 2007, pp. 14–15).

The first principle that is reliance on the United States for national security became institutionalised through the US-Japan Security Treaty of 1951 and its revised version in 1960. Under this arrangement, the United States committed itself to defending Japan against external aggression while maintaining military bases on Japanese territory (Samuels 2007, p. 31). This alliance provided Japan with a security umbrella that enabled it to avoid extensive military spending while benefiting from American strategic protection. Consequently, the alliance became the cornerstone of Japan's foreign and security policy throughout the Cold War and beyond.

The second principle involved maintaining minimal military capabilities. This aspect of Japan's post-war framework was closely linked to Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, often referred to as the "Peace Clause." Article 9 states that the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and reject the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes (The Constitution of Japan 1947). Furthermore, the article declared that land, sea, and air forces would not be maintained. Although the subsequent creation of the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) in 1954 introduced some flexibility in the interpretation of Article 9, the constitutional commitment to pacifism remained a defining characteristic of Japanese foreign policy (Hughes 2021, pp. 21–24).

The third principle emphasised economic growth and development. By reducing defence expenditures and relying on the United States for security, Japan was able to allocate substantial resources to industrialisation, technological innovation, and economic modernisation. This strategy proved remarkably successful. During the post-war decades, Japan experienced rapid economic growth and emerged as one of the world's leading industrial and technological powers (Pyle 2018, pp. 89–94). The prioritisation of economic development over military expansion became a central feature of what later came to be known as the "Yoshida Doctrine," named after Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida, who played a pivotal role in shaping Japan's post-war strategic orientation.

The Yoshida Doctrine profoundly influenced Japan's international behaviour. Rather than seeking influence through military power, Japan pursued economic diplomacy, trade expansion, development assistance, and multilateral cooperation. Its foreign policy was characterised by caution, restraint, and a preference for non-military contributions to international affairs (Samuels 2007, pp. 34–38). This approach enabled Japan to cultivate an international image as a peaceful and responsible economic power while avoiding many of the security burdens associated with great-power competition.

Despite its successes, however, the post-war framework was not without limitations. Critics argued that excessive dependence on the United States constrained Japan's strategic autonomy and limited its ability to respond independently to emerging security challenges. Furthermore, constitutional restrictions on military activity often complicated Japan's participation in international peacekeeping operations and collective security arrangements (Hughes 2021, pp. 45–48). As Japan's economic influence expanded, questions increasingly emerged regarding whether the country's diplomatic and security role adequately reflected its status as a major global power.

The end of the Cold War further intensified debates concerning Japan's foreign policy orientation. New security challenges, including regional conflicts, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and maritime disputes, exposed shortcomings in existing security arrangements. The rise of China as a regional power and the growing threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes generated concerns regarding the adequacy of Japan's traditional security posture (Smith 2019, p. 115). These developments prompted policymakers and strategic thinkers to reconsider the assumptions underlying Japan's post-war foreign policy.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, many observers believed that the strategic environment surrounding Japan had changed so fundamentally that the post-

war framework required significant adaptation. It was within this context that Shinzo Abe emerged as a leading advocate of reform. He argued that while the post-war framework had served Japan well during earlier decades, evolving geopolitical realities demanded a more proactive, flexible, and strategically autonomous foreign policy. Abe's subsequent reforms in defence, security, and diplomacy can therefore be understood as efforts to address the limitations of the traditional framework while preserving its most valuable elements, particularly the alliance with the United States.

In this sense, Japan's post-war foreign policy framework served both as the foundation upon which modern Japanese diplomacy was built and as the principal target of Abe's reform agenda. Understanding its origins, achievements, and limitations is therefore essential for analysing the profound transformation that occurred in Japanese foreign and security policy during Abe's tenure.

Geopolitical Shifts and Emerging Security Challenges

The strategic environment confronting Japan in the early twenty-first century differed significantly from the relatively stable circumstances that characterised much of the post-war era. For decades, Japan's security policy had been based upon the assumptions of American strategic predominance in the Asia-Pacific region, limited external military threats, and the effectiveness of the post-war security framework. However, as Hughes (2021) observes, Japan's security environment gradually became "increasingly severe" as the country confronted a combination of conventional, nuclear, maritime, and territorial challenges (Hughes 2021, pp. 80–82).

The emergence of new geopolitical realities fundamentally altered the regional balance of power and challenged many of the assumptions that had guided Japanese foreign and security policy since 1945. The rise of China, North Korea's advancing nuclear capabilities, evolving patterns of great-power competition, and increasing uncertainty regarding the regional security order collectively compelled Japanese policymakers to reassess the country's strategic posture. Taken together, these developments did not simply create new threats; they altered the strategic context within which Japan had traditionally balanced economic interdependence, constitutional pacifism, and dependence on the United States. These developments ultimately provided the context within which Shinzo Abe pursued far-reaching reforms in foreign and security policy.

Among the various challenges confronting Japan, the rise of China represented the most significant and enduring strategic concern. Since the initiation of economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, China had experienced unprecedented economic growth, transforming itself into the world's second-largest economy. Economic expansion was accompanied by substantial military modernisation and increasing investments in advanced defence capabilities. According to Mearsheimer (2014), the rise of a major power inevitably alters existing regional balances and generates strategic anxieties among neighbouring states (Mearsheimer 2014, p. 365). From this perspective, China's rise represented more than a bilateral challenge to Japan; it constituted a structural transformation of the East Asian balance of power. In East Asia,

China's growing economic and military capabilities increasingly challenged the regional order that had long been dominated by the United States and its allies.

For Japan, China's growing influence was particularly concerning because of its geographical proximity and its expanding military presence in surrounding maritime areas. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) significantly increased its operational capabilities, while Beijing adopted a more assertive posture in territorial disputes throughout the East and South China Seas. One of the most contentious issues concerned the Senkaku Islands, known in China as the Diaoyu Islands, which are administered by Japan but claimed by China. Repeated incursions by Chinese coast guard and maritime vessels into waters surrounding the islands heightened tensions and raised concerns regarding the possibility of military confrontation (Smith 2019, p. 113).

The significance of the dispute extended beyond the territorial question itself. As Smith (2019) suggests, the Senkaku issue became closely connected to Japan's wider concern that China was attempting to alter the regional status quo and expand its strategic influence (Smith 2019, pp. 112–115).

The historical significance of this development lies in the fact that Japan's post-war security system had been constructed during a period when the United States enjoyed overwhelming strategic predominance in the region. China's emergence as a peer competitor therefore challenged an important assumption underlying Japan's post-war strategic posture. Rather than facing an environment in which the US alliance could largely compensate for Japan's military limitations, Japanese policymakers increasingly confronted a regional order in which the distribution of power was becoming more contested.

The territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands became symbolic of broader concerns regarding China's strategic ambitions. Japanese policymakers increasingly viewed Beijing's actions as attempts to alter the regional status quo and expand Chinese influence through coercive means. From a neo-realist perspective, these developments reflected a classic shift in the regional balance of power, where the rise of a new power generated insecurity among established actors. Consequently, concerns regarding China's military modernisation and maritime activities became central factors influencing Japan's evolving security strategy during Abe's tenure (Mearsheimer 2014, pp. 367–372).

In addition to China's rise, North Korea emerged as a direct and immediate security threat to Japan. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Pyongyang accelerated its efforts to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities. These developments culminated in a series of nuclear tests and missile launches that significantly heightened tensions in Northeast Asia. Several North Korean missiles either flew over Japanese territory or landed within Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), creating widespread concern among policymakers and the broader public (Hughes 2021, pp. 87–90). North Korea therefore transformed the perception of security threats from an abstract regional concern into a more immediate vulnerability for the Japanese state.

North Korea's advancing military capabilities exposed important vulnerabilities within Japan's existing security framework. While the US-Japan alliance remained a critical pillar of national defence, questions emerged regarding whether traditional security arrangements were sufficient to address new forms of strategic threats. The possibility of nuclear coercion, missile attacks, and regional instability prompted

calls for enhanced defence preparedness and more effective crisis-response mechanisms. As a result, North Korea's actions strengthened domestic support for security reforms and contributed to growing recognition that Japan needed to assume greater responsibility for its own defence.

Beyond the challenges posed by China and North Korea, broader transformations in the international system also influenced Japanese strategic thinking. The post-Cold War optimism that had characterised the 1990s gradually gave way to renewed geopolitical competition among major powers. The emergence of multipolarity, the diffusion of military technologies, and increasing competition over maritime spaces created a more uncertain and contested regional environment (Waltz 1979, pp. 118–122). In this context, Japanese policymakers increasingly recognised that economic power alone was insufficient to safeguard national interests.

These developments encouraged a reassessment of long-standing assumptions regarding national security. For decades, Japan's constitutional pacifism and limited military role had been regarded as appropriate responses to the post-war environment. However, the growing complexity of regional security challenges led many policymakers to question whether these constraints remained compatible with contemporary realities. Critics argued that Article 9 of the Constitution, while symbolically important, limited Japan's ability to contribute effectively to collective security arrangements and respond flexibly to emerging threats (Samuels 2007, pp. 146–150).

The debate over Article 9 became particularly significant during Abe's tenure. Supporters of reform contended that constitutional restrictions reflected historical circumstances that no longer existed and that Japan required greater strategic flexibility in an increasingly competitive regional environment. Opponents, however, feared that revising long-standing security principles could undermine Japan's pacifist identity and increase regional tensions. Nevertheless, the growing perception of external threats contributed to a gradual shift in public and political attitudes regarding defence and security policy.

It was within this evolving strategic environment that Shinzo Abe articulated the need for a more proactive and comprehensive approach to national security. Abe argued that Japan could no longer afford to remain a passive observer of regional developments and that the country must actively shape the security environment in which it operated. He believed that the challenges posed by China's rise, North Korea's military provocations, and broader geopolitical transformations required a reassessment of existing policies and institutions (Liff & Lipsy 2022, p. 148).

Abe therefore promoted a vision of Japan as a "Proactive Contributor to Peace," emphasising greater international engagement, enhanced defence capabilities, and stronger cooperation with like-minded democratic partners. His strategic thinking reflected the belief that national security could no longer be guaranteed solely through economic strength or dependence on the United States. Instead, Japan needed to develop its own institutional capacities while simultaneously strengthening alliances and strategic partnerships throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

The changing regional balance of power thus served as the principal catalyst for Japan's foreign and security policy transformation. The rise of China, North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and the broader evolution of the international system

collectively exposed the limitations of the traditional post-war framework. These challenges encouraged Japanese leaders to reconsider established assumptions regarding security and sovereignty and created the conditions necessary for Abe's ambitious reform agenda. Consequently, understanding these geopolitical shifts is essential for explaining the emergence of Japan's more assertive and proactive foreign policy during the Abe era.

Revised National Security Policy under Abe

One of the most significant aspects of Shinzo Abe's political legacy was the comprehensive transformation of Japan's national security architecture. While previous governments had gradually adapted Japan's security policies to changing international conditions, Abe pursued reforms with unprecedented determination and strategic coherence. His administration sought to overcome institutional limitations, strengthen national defence capabilities, and enhance Japan's ability to respond to increasingly complex security challenges. These reforms reflected Abe's conviction that the post-war security framework required substantial revision to address the realities of the twenty-first-century geopolitical environment. According to Liff (2018), Abe's security initiatives represented the most ambitious effort to reshape Japan's defence and strategic posture since the end of World War II (Liff 2018, pp. 5–7).

The reforms undertaken during Abe's tenure were motivated by concerns regarding China's military rise, North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes, emerging non-traditional security threats, and uncertainties surrounding the future of the regional security order. Through institutional innovation, legal reinterpretation, military modernisation, and enhanced alliance cooperation, Abe sought to create a more proactive and resilient security framework capable of safeguarding Japan's national interests. These initiatives collectively reflected the principle of "Proactive Contribution to Peace," which became a defining feature of Japan's security policy under his leadership (Government of Japan 2013).

Establishment of the National Security Council

One of Abe's earliest and most consequential reforms was the establishment of the National Security Council (NSC) in 2013. Prior to its creation, Japan's national security decision-making process was often criticised for being fragmented, bureaucratically cumbersome, and lacking effective coordination among relevant ministries and agencies (Liff 2018, pp. 8-10). Security decisions frequently involved lengthy consultations among multiple institutions, limiting the government's capacity to respond rapidly to crises.

The establishment of the NSC sought to address these shortcomings by centralising strategic decision-making within the executive branch. Modelled in part on the United States National Security Council, the Japanese NSC brought together key policymakers, including the Prime Minister, Chief Cabinet Secretary, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Minister of Defence. This institutional arrangement enhanced coordination

among government agencies and strengthened the Prime Minister's ability to direct national security policy.

The creation of the NSC represented a significant shift in Japan's governance structure. It enabled more coherent strategic planning, facilitated information sharing, and improved crisis management capabilities. Importantly, it also reflected Abe's broader objective of strengthening political leadership and reducing bureaucratic obstacles to effective policy implementation (Samuels 2007, pp. 189–192).

National Security Strategy

A second major reform was the adoption of Japan's first comprehensive National Security Strategy (NSS) in December 2013. Prior to this development, Japan lacked a unified strategic document that articulated national security priorities and long-term objectives. Security policies were often formulated through separate defence guidelines and policy statements without an overarching strategic framework.

The National Security Strategy filled this gap by providing a comprehensive assessment of the security environment and establishing a coherent framework for future policy development (Government of Japan 2013, pp. 1–5). The document identified major challenges confronting Japan, including the shifting global balance of power, China's military modernisation, North Korea's nuclear ambitions, maritime disputes, terrorism, cyber threats, and threats to the international rules-based order.

A central concept of the NSS was the idea of Japan as a "Proactive Contributor to Peace." This doctrine emphasised Japan's responsibility to contribute more actively to regional and global security while remaining committed to peaceful principles. Rather than abandoning pacifism, Abe sought to reinterpret it in a manner that would permit greater international engagement and security cooperation.

The NSS also highlighted the importance of strengthening the US-Japan alliance, deepening partnerships with democratic states, and promoting a rules-based international order. By articulating these priorities within a formal strategic document, Abe institutionalised a long-term security vision that continues to influence Japanese policy today (Liff & Lipsky 2022, pp. 170–173).

Collective Self-Defence

Perhaps the most controversial reform undertaken during Abe's tenure concerned the reinterpretation of constitutional restrictions relating to collective self-defence. Since the adoption of Article 9 of the Constitution, successive Japanese governments had maintained that Japan possessed the inherent right of collective self-defence under international law but could not exercise that right because of constitutional constraints.

Abe challenged this long-standing interpretation. He argued that evolving security threats required Japan to cooperate more closely with allies and partners in order to ensure national security. In July 2014, his government approved a reinterpretation of Article 9 permitting the limited exercise of collective self-defence under specific circumstances (Hughes 2021, pp. 118–123).

Under the revised interpretation, Japan could use force when three conditions were met: first, when an armed attack against Japan or a closely related country threatened Japan's survival; second, when no other means existed to protect the Japanese people; and third, when the use of force was limited to the minimum necessary extent. These principles were subsequently incorporated into the 2015 security legislation.

Supporters argued that the reform enhanced deterrence, strengthened alliance cooperation, and improved Japan's ability to respond to regional crises. Critics, however, contended that the reinterpretation undermined constitutional pacifism and circumvented formal constitutional amendment procedures. Despite intense political debate, the reform marked a historic shift in Japan's post-war security policy and significantly expanded the operational scope of the Self-Defence Forces.

Strengthening Defence Capabilities

Alongside institutional and legal reforms, Abe's administration undertook substantial efforts to strengthen Japan's defence capabilities. Recognising the growing complexity of regional security challenges, the government increased defence expenditures and invested in military modernisation programmes.

Particular emphasis was placed on enhancing maritime and air defence capabilities in response to increasing Chinese activities in the East China Sea. Japan expanded surveillance operations, improved intelligence-gathering systems, and strengthened its capacity to defend remote islands (Smith 2019, pp. 198–203).

New military equipment and capabilities were introduced or strengthened during Abe's tenure, including F-35A stealth fighter aircraft, Aegis-equipped destroyers, Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) missile-defence systems, and enhanced maritime surveillance and reconnaissance assets. Japan's *National Defense Program Guidelines* identified the need to strengthen "information gathering, warning and surveillance" and ballistic-missile defence capabilities (Government of Japan 2013, pp. 5–6). The acquisition of F-35A fighters and the enhancement of Aegis and PAC-3 systems were particularly significant because they strengthened Japan's air superiority, missile defence, and maritime surveillance capabilities. These measures reflected Abe's broader objective of developing a more credible and flexible defence posture in response to China's military modernisation and North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes.

The government also prioritised emerging security domains such as cyberspace and outer space. Dedicated cyber defence units were established, and greater resources were allocated to protecting critical infrastructure against cyber threats. Similarly, space-based technologies were increasingly integrated into defence planning and intelligence operations.

These measures reflected a broader recognition that national security in the twenty-first century extended beyond traditional military threats. By investing in advanced capabilities and emerging technologies, Abe sought to ensure that Japan remained capable of addressing both conventional and non-conventional security challenges (Hughes 2021, pp. 126–130).

Institutional Reforms

In addition to the establishment of the NSC and adoption of the NSS, Abe introduced several institutional reforms designed to improve the efficiency and responsiveness of national security decision-making. These reforms sought to overcome the fragmentation that had historically characterised Japan's security governance system.

One important initiative involved strengthening coordination between the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, intelligence agencies, and the Prime Minister's Office. Enhanced inter-agency cooperation improved information sharing and reduced delays in policy implementation. Decision-making processes were streamlined to facilitate more rapid responses to emerging crises and unexpected security developments (Liff 2018, pp. 10–12).

The government also revised defence planning procedures and improved mechanisms for alliance coordination with the United States. Updated defence cooperation guidelines enhanced interoperability between Japanese and American forces and facilitated joint responses to regional contingencies. These reforms reinforced the alliance while simultaneously enabling Japan to assume a more active role in shared security responsibilities.

Collectively, these institutional innovations strengthened the strategic coherence of Japan's national security apparatus and improved its capacity to address complex challenges in an increasingly uncertain regional environment.

In brief, Abe's reforms fundamentally transformed Japan's national security architecture. Through the establishment of the NSC, adoption of the NSS, reinterpretation of collective self-defence, strengthening of defence capabilities, and implementation of wide-ranging institutional reforms, Abe reshaped Japan's approach to security and defence. While maintaining the alliance with the United States and preserving key elements of Japan's post-war identity, these initiatives expanded the country's strategic options and enhanced its ability to respond to contemporary security challenges. Consequently, the reforms undertaken during Abe's tenure represent the most significant transformation of Japanese security policy since the end of World War II and constitute a central pillar of his broader foreign policy legacy.

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision and Strategic Partnerships

One of the most influential and enduring aspects of Shinzo Abe's foreign policy was the formulation and promotion of the concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP). While Abe's domestic security reforms transformed Japan's strategic capabilities, the FOIP vision represented the external dimension of his broader foreign policy agenda. It provided a comprehensive geopolitical framework through which Japan sought to address changing regional power dynamics, strengthen cooperation with like-minded countries, and preserve a rules-based international order. Over time, the FOIP concept evolved into one of the most influential strategic ideas shaping contemporary Indo-Pacific geopolitics and significantly enhanced Japan's diplomatic profile on the global stage.

The intellectual origins of FOIP can be traced to Abe's earlier strategic thinking regarding the growing interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In his 2007 address to the Indian Parliament entitled "Confluence of the Two Seas," Abe argued that the Pacific and Indian Oceans constituted a single strategic space linked by commerce, security, and shared political values (Abe 2007). This vision reflected his recognition that geopolitical developments in East Asia, South Asia, and the broader maritime region were becoming increasingly interconnected. Rather than viewing Asia through narrow regional divisions, Abe proposed a wider strategic perspective centred on maritime cooperation and democratic partnerships.

The FOIP vision was formally articulated during Abe's second tenure as Prime Minister and became a central pillar of Japanese foreign policy. At its core, FOIP sought to promote an international order based upon five key principles: freedom of navigation, respect for the rule of law, maritime security, regional connectivity, and open trade (Government of Japan 2017). These principles reflected Japan's commitment to preserving stability, transparency, and openness in an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment.

Freedom of navigation occupied a particularly important place within the FOIP framework. As a trading nation heavily dependent on maritime commerce, Japan regarded secure sea lanes as essential to its economic prosperity and national security. Consequently, FOIP emphasised the importance of ensuring unrestricted access to international waters and preventing attempts by any state to alter maritime boundaries through coercion or force. This principle acquired particular significance in the context of growing tensions in the East and South China Seas.

Closely related to freedom of navigation was the emphasis on the rule of law. Abe consistently argued that international disputes should be resolved through legal mechanisms and adherence to established international norms rather than through unilateral actions or military coercion. By promoting a rules-based order, Japan sought to strengthen international institutions and discourage behaviour that could undermine regional stability (Liff & Lipsky 2022, pp. 180–183).

Maritime security constituted another important pillar of FOIP. Given the increasing strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region and the growing presence of naval forces, Abe viewed maritime security as essential for maintaining regional peace and economic prosperity. Japan therefore expanded maritime cooperation with partner countries, enhanced capacity-building programmes, and supported initiatives aimed at improving maritime domain awareness throughout the region (Smith 2019, pp. 210–214).

Regional connectivity and open trade formed the economic foundations of FOIP. Abe believed that economic integration, infrastructure development, and trade cooperation could contribute significantly to regional stability. Consequently, Japan actively promoted high-quality infrastructure projects, economic partnerships, and free trade agreements designed to strengthen regional connectivity while providing alternatives to competing geopolitical initiatives. This approach reflected Abe's broader belief that economic diplomacy and strategic engagement should reinforce one another.

Abe viewed the Indo-Pacific as the primary arena of twenty-first-century geopolitics. The region contained some of the world's most dynamic economies, critical

maritime routes, and emerging centres of political influence. At the same time, it was increasingly characterised by strategic competition, particularly as China's economic and military capabilities expanded. Abe therefore sought to strengthen cooperation among democratic and like-minded states that shared common interests in preserving regional stability and an open international order (Miller 2021, pp. 97–100).

A central component of this strategy involved deepening Japan's alliance with the United States. While Abe sought to enhance Japan's strategic autonomy, he regarded the US–Japan alliance as the cornerstone of regional security. Throughout his tenure, he worked closely with successive American administrations to strengthen defence cooperation, improve alliance coordination, and promote shared strategic objectives. The alliance remained the foundation upon which broader Indo-Pacific partnerships were constructed (Liff & Lipsky 2022, pp. 175–178).

Abe also attached particular importance to strengthening relations with India. He viewed India as a crucial partner in maintaining regional stability and promoting democratic values. Under his leadership, Japan and India expanded cooperation in areas including infrastructure development, maritime security, defence exchanges, and economic investment. The relationship evolved into a Special Strategic and Global Partnership, reflecting the growing convergence of interests between the two countries (Pant & Joshi 2017, pp. 42–45).

Similarly, Australia emerged as one of Japan's closest strategic partners during Abe's tenure. Shared concerns regarding regional security, commitment to democratic governance, and support for a rules-based order encouraged closer cooperation between the two countries. Defence collaboration, intelligence sharing, and joint military exercises increased substantially, contributing to the development of a robust strategic partnership (Medcalf 2020, pp. 146–149).

Beyond the Indo-Pacific region, Abe also sought to strengthen relations with European partners. Japan expanded security dialogues and strategic cooperation with countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, while simultaneously deepening engagement with the European Union. These partnerships reflected Abe's recognition that maintaining a rules-based international order required cooperation among democratic states across different regions.

Perhaps the most visible manifestation of Abe's strategic vision was the revival of the Quad, comprising Japan, the United States, India, and Australia. Originally proposed during Abe's first term in office, the Quad was revitalised in 2017 amid growing concerns regarding regional security and the future balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Although the Quad was not established as a formal military alliance, it provided a platform for strategic consultation, security cooperation, and coordination among four major democratic powers (Miller 2021, pp. 102–105).

From a neo-realist perspective, the Quad can be interpreted as a form of external balancing designed to maintain a favourable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. By fostering cooperation among like-minded states, Japan sought to contribute to regional stability while discouraging unilateral attempts to alter the existing order. The Quad also reflected Abe's belief that collective action among democratic partners was essential for addressing emerging security challenges.

In other words, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision represented one of Shinzo Abe's most important contributions to contemporary international relations.

Through its emphasis on freedom of navigation, the rule of law, maritime security, regional connectivity, and open trade, FOIP provided a comprehensive strategic framework for responding to evolving geopolitical realities. By strengthening partnerships with the United States, India, Australia, and European countries while revitalising the Quad, Abe positioned Japan as a central architect of the emerging Indo-Pacific order. Consequently, FOIP not only transformed Japan's foreign policy orientation but also established a lasting strategic legacy that continues to shape regional geopolitics in the twenty-first century.

Outcomes and Implications of Abe's Foreign Policy Initiatives

The foreign policy initiatives pursued by Shinzo Abe during his tenure produced significant and lasting consequences for Japan's strategic orientation, diplomatic engagement, and international standing. Through a combination of institutional reforms, security policy adjustments, alliance strengthening, and proactive diplomacy, Abe fundamentally reshaped Japan's role in regional and global affairs. Although debates continue regarding the extent and permanence of these changes, there is broad scholarly consensus that Abe's leadership marked one of the most transformative periods in Japan's post-war foreign policy evolution. The outcomes of these initiatives can be observed in several interconnected dimensions.

First, Japan emerged as a more proactive participant in regional security affairs. For much of the post-war era, Japan maintained a cautious security posture characterised by constitutional constraints, limited military responsibilities, and heavy reliance on the United States. Under Abe, however, Japan adopted a more active role in addressing regional security challenges. The establishment of the National Security Council, the adoption of the National Security Strategy, and the reinterpretation of collective self-defence collectively enhanced Japan's capacity to contribute to regional stability and security cooperation (Liff 2018, pp. 55–58). The country increasingly participated in joint military exercises, maritime security initiatives, peacekeeping operations, and strategic dialogues with partner nations. Consequently, Japan transitioned from being primarily a security consumer to becoming a more significant contributor to regional security governance.

Second, Abe's foreign policy considerably expanded Japan's diplomatic influence through strategic partnerships and multilateral engagement. Recognising the growing complexity of regional geopolitics, Abe actively cultivated relations with countries that shared Japan's commitment to democratic governance, the rule of law, and a rules-based international order. Strategic partnerships with India, Australia, Southeast Asian countries, and European powers strengthened Japan's diplomatic reach and enhanced its ability to shape regional developments (Smith 2019, pp. 214–217). Abe also demonstrated strong commitment to multilateral institutions and forums, viewing them as important mechanisms for promoting cooperation and stability. Through active diplomacy, Japan assumed a more visible leadership role in regional and international affairs, thereby increasing its influence beyond the traditional confines of East Asia.

A third major outcome was the strengthening and modernisation of the United States-Japan alliance. Although the alliance had remained the cornerstone of Japan's security policy since the early post-war period, Abe sought to adapt it to emerging security realities. Defence cooperation guidelines were revised, interoperability between military forces was enhanced, and mechanisms for strategic coordination were strengthened (Hughes 2021, pp. 130–134). The reinterpretation of collective self-defence further enabled Japan to cooperate more effectively with the United States in addressing shared security challenges. As a result, the alliance evolved from a predominantly asymmetric security arrangement into a more flexible and integrated partnership capable of responding to a wider range of regional contingencies. This strengthened alliance not only enhanced deterrence but also reinforced Japan's strategic importance within the broader Indo-Pacific region.

Fourth, Abe's reforms provided Japan with greater flexibility in responding to international crises and emerging security threats. Prior to these reforms, constitutional and institutional constraints often limited Japan's ability to react swiftly and effectively to rapidly changing security situations. The establishment of the National Security Council improved policy coordination, while revised legal frameworks expanded the operational scope of the Self-Defence Forces. These changes enhanced the government's capacity to address challenges ranging from military contingencies and maritime disputes to humanitarian crises and non-traditional security threats such as cyberattacks and terrorism (Government of Japan 2013). By increasing strategic flexibility, Abe's reforms enabled Japan to adapt more effectively to an increasingly uncertain and complex international environment.

A fifth and perhaps most enduring outcome was the emergence of the FOIP vision as a widely recognised strategic framework. Initially promoted by Abe as a Japanese foreign policy initiative, FOIP gradually gained acceptance among numerous countries and international organisations. The concept's emphasis on freedom of navigation, respect for international law, maritime security, regional connectivity, and open trade resonated with states concerned about preserving a stable and rules-based regional order (Medcalf 2020, pp. 162–165). Over time, the FOIP framework was incorporated into the strategic discourse of countries including the United States, Australia, India, and several European nations (Government of Japan, 2017). The widespread adoption of this concept significantly enhanced Japan's intellectual and diplomatic influence in shaping contemporary Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Diplomatically, Abe's advocacy of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and his efforts to revitalise the Quad contributed to Japan's emergence as an important actor in Indo-Pacific regionalism.

Beyond these specific outcomes, Abe's foreign policy initiatives also contributed to a broader transformation of Japan's international identity. Traditionally viewed as an economic power with limited strategic influence, Japan increasingly came to be regarded as an important security actor and diplomatic leader. The combination of proactive diplomacy, enhanced security capabilities, and strategic partnerships elevated Japan's profile in global affairs and reinforced its reputation as a defender of the rules-based international order (Liff & Lipsy 2022, pp. 188–190).

To sum up, the outcomes of Abe's foreign policy initiatives extended far beyond immediate policy adjustments. They reshaped Japan's strategic posture, expanded its

diplomatic influence, strengthened key alliances, improved crisis-response capabilities, and introduced a geopolitical vision that continues to influence regional politics. Collectively, these developments enhanced Japan's international standing and reinforced its role as a major actor in the Indo-Pacific region. Consequently, Abe's foreign policy legacy remains a defining feature of contemporary Japanese statecraft and continues to shape the country's engagement with an evolving international order. The 2013 National Security Strategy marked an important institutional shift by declaring that Japan would make a "Proactive Contribution to Peace," while identifying China's increasingly assertive activities and North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes as major security concerns (Government of Japan 2013, pp. 1–3).

Critical Assessment of Abe's Legacy

This article asked to what extent Shinzo Abe transformed Japan's post-war foreign and security policy and whether neo-realism adequately explains this transformation. The findings suggest that Abe did not initiate Japan's strategic shift from the post-war security posture, but significantly accelerated, consolidated, and institutionalised an evolution already driven by changes in the regional distribution of power. China's rise and North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes created structural pressures, while Abe translated these pressures into institutional and strategic reforms. As Abe himself stated, "it is no longer possible for any one country...to safeguard its own peace and security acting entirely by itself" (Abe 2013). His National Security Strategy, reinterpretation of collective self-defence, stronger US alliance, FOIP, and regional partnerships therefore represented an effort to make Japan a more proactive regional actor. Abe explicitly envisioned Japan as a "Proactive Contributor to Peace" (Abe 2013). His legacy consequently confirms neo-realism's emphasis on structural pressures while demonstrating that political leadership mediates how states respond to systemic change (Hughes 2015).

The transformation of Japan's foreign and security policy under Shinzo Abe has generated extensive scholarly debate. While many observers regard Abe as the architect of a new Japanese strategic posture, others caution against attributing all policy changes exclusively to his leadership. Critics argue that several reforms associated with the Abe era were rooted in longer-term trends that predated his administration. The gradual expansion of the Self-Defence Forces' role, growing concerns regarding China's rise, debates over constitutional reinterpretation, and efforts to strengthen alliance cooperation had already emerged under previous governments (Samuels 2007, Hughes 2021). Consequently, some scholars contend that the trajectory of Japanese foreign policy reform reflected broader structural forces rather than the actions of a single political leader.

From this perspective, the changing regional security environment would likely have compelled any Japanese government to reconsider traditional security assumptions. The rise of China, North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes, increasing maritime competition, and uncertainties surrounding the regional balance of power created pressures that demanded policy adaptation. Neo-realist scholars, in particular, emphasise that states respond to systemic constraints and security threats

regardless of the preferences of individual leaders (Waltz 1979). Therefore, some argue that many of the reforms implemented during Abe's tenure represented logical responses to evolving geopolitical realities rather than uniquely personal initiatives.

Nevertheless, focusing exclusively on structural factors risks underestimating Abe's political significance. While external pressures created opportunities for reform, it was Abe's leadership that translated these pressures into concrete policy outcomes. His longevity in office provided an unusual degree of political stability, enabling him to pursue long-term strategic objectives that had eluded many of his predecessors. Moreover, Abe demonstrated considerable political skill in building consensus within the Liberal Democratic Party, managing bureaucratic resistance, and securing public support for controversial security reforms (Liff & Lipsky 2022).

Abe's contribution therefore lies not merely in initiating change but in consolidating and institutionalising it. Through the establishment of the National Security Council, adoption of the National Security Strategy, reinterpretation of collective self-defence, and promotion of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, he embedded strategic reforms within Japan's policy framework. As a result, many of these initiatives have continued beyond his tenure and remain central to Japan's contemporary foreign and security policy. His legacy thus reflects both the influence of structural geopolitical forces and the decisive role of political leadership in shaping national strategy. AUKUS, announced in 2021 after Abe's tenure, also broadly reflected the strategic environment he had anticipated, particularly the growing importance of advanced defence cooperation among US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. Abe welcomed the strengthening of cooperation among like-minded states as essential to maintaining a free and open regional order (Abe 2021).

Otto Federico von Feigenblatt has conducted a very interesting study on the foreign policy of Japan, where he applies the theory of harmony through holistic engagement. He highlights the limitations of realist or liberal frameworks and focuses on the importance of emic model based on data collected from Greater East Asian region. In brief, the author opines that the Model of Harmony through Holistic Engagement is the most suitable approach in interpreting the changing dynamics of Japan's foreign policy during Abe's tenure (Feigenblatt 2016, pp. 17–26).

Conclusion

Shinzo Abe fundamentally transformed Japan's foreign and security policy and left an enduring imprint on the country's strategic trajectory. Through a combination of institutional reforms, enhanced defence capabilities, strategic partnerships, and proactive diplomacy, he moved Japan beyond many of the limitations associated with its traditional post-war foreign policy framework. His administration sought to adapt Japan's security posture to an increasingly complex and competitive regional environment marked by the rise of China, North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and shifting balances of power in the Indo-Pacific. The findings largely confirm earlier scholarship that Abe accelerated Japan's strategic shift, but qualify the claim that he fundamentally transformed Japanese foreign policy, since several reforms predated his tenure and reflected broader structural changes. The paper contributes by linking

Abe's domestic security reforms with Japan's alliance strategy, strategic partnerships, and Indo-Pacific regionalism, thereby locating his policies within wider regional power shifts.

Viewed through a neo-realist perspective, Abe's policies represented rational responses to changing geopolitical realities. The establishment of the National Security Council, adoption of the National Security Strategy, reinterpretation of collective self-defence, and strengthening of strategic partnerships reflected efforts to enhance Japan's capacity to safeguard its national interests and contribute to regional stability. Equally significant was his promotion of the FOIP vision and his role in revitalising the Quad, both of which elevated Japan's diplomatic influence and strategic relevance.

Although some elements of these reforms originated before his administration, Abe's leadership was decisive in implementing, consolidating, and institutionalising them. His ability to translate structural pressures into coherent policy initiatives distinguishes his tenure from that of many predecessors. Consequently, the legacy of Abe's foreign policy continues to shape Japan's strategic outlook and remains essential for understanding contemporary Indo-Pacific geopolitics and the evolving role of Japan in international affairs.

References

- Abe S (2007) 'Confluence of the two seas': Speech by H.E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, at the Parliament of the Republic of India. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.
- Abe S (2013) *Japan is back*. Project Syndicate. <https://www.project-syndicate.org>.
- Edstrom B (2007) *Japan's foreign policy and Abe Shinzo: Strategic leadership and national renewal*. Institute for Security and Development Policy. <https://isdpr.eu/publication/japans-foreign-policy-and-abe-shinzo/>.
- Government of Japan (2013) *National security strategy*. Cabinet Secretariat. <https://www.cas.go.jp>
- Government of Japan (2017) *Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.
- Hughes CW (2015) *Japan's foreign and security policy under the 'Abe Doctrine': New dynamism or new dead end?* Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hughes CW (2021) *Japan as a global military power: New capabilities, alliance integration, bilateralism-plus*. Cambridge University Press.
- Liff AP (2018) Japan's security policy in the Abe era: Radical transformation or evolutionary shift? *Texas National Security Review* 1(3): 46–63.
- Liff AP, Lipsy PY (2022) *Shinzo Abe and the transformation of Japanese politics*. Columbia University Press.
- Mearsheimer JJ (2014) *The tragedy of great power politics*. Updated Edition. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Medcalf R (2020) *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China won't map the future*. Manchester University Press.
- Miller JB (2021) *The Quad and the future of the Indo-Pacific*. Strategic Studies Institute.
- Pant HV, Joshi Y (2017) *The US pivot and Indian foreign policy: Asia's evolving balance of power*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pyle KB (2018) *Japan rising: The resurgence of Japanese power and purpose*. PublicAffairs.
- Samuels RJ (2007) *Securing Japan: Tokyo's grand strategy and the future of East Asia*. Cornell University Press.

- Smith SA (2019) *Japan rearmed: The politics of military power*. Harvard University Press.
- The Constitution of Japan (1947) *Prime Minister's Office of Japan*. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html.
- Von Feigenblatt OF (2016) The Empire of Japan's Foreign Policy. *Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia* 15(1): 17–26.
- Waltz KN (1979) *Theory of international politics*. Addison-Wesley.

