

# **United States Pressure and Japan's Contemporary Security Policy: Pushing Against an Open Door?**



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

On 16 December 2022, the Japanese government released several strategic documents outlining Japan's defense policy for the upcoming years: the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy and a Defense Buildup Program (The Asahi Shinbun 2022). Collectively, these documents further transform Japan's constitutionally limited defensive capabilities in light of negative international security developments like the Russian invasion of Ukraine as well as the rising assertiveness of China and North-Korea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022a, 7-10). As Kishida's government aimed to bolster Japan's defensive capabilities, the policy documents introduce significant military reforms, including the doubling of Japan's defense spending to 2 per cent of GDP by 2027 as well as the acquirement of counter-strike capabilities enabling Japan to strike foreign targets for defensive purposes (Singh 2024, 1292-1293).

Being a long proponent of Japan's military growth, the United States quickly endorsed Japan's new security reforms, especially because the documents also include significant increases to Japan-U.S. military cooperation. In July 2023, president Biden even claimed that he had personally convinced Japan to move forward with the new increase of defense spending, crediting these new defense reforms to U.S. pressure (The Japan Times 2024). Tokyo however quickly refuted this comment, stating instead that the decision was made independently by Japan as a response to current security needs and international developments (Kyodo News 2023a). The Biden administration later apologized, and Biden himself clarified that Kishida "didn't need my convincing as much as he'd already decided" (Kyodo News 2023b).

While president Biden has been known to misspeak more often during his time in office, this mishap does reflect larger questions concerning the origin, drivers and implications of Japan's security policy evolution. As Japan retains an antimilitarist constitution that prohibits the use of force and existence of a Japanese military, scholarship has tried to explain how the country has nevertheless acquired significant military capabilities and what this has meant for its post-World War 2 antimilitarist foundations. Within this topic, several authors view Japan's security policy reforms as gradual steps in an evolutionary process of expanding Japan's military capabilities and security stance while remaining true to Japan's anti-militaristic principles (Singh 2024;

Sakaki 2023). In contrast, another group of scholars argue that these reforms increasingly represent large, sudden and rapid transformations of Japan's military capabilities that signify revolutionary shifts or even radical departures from Japan's postwar pacifist and defensive security policy (Hughes 2024; O'Shea and Maslow 2024).

To effectively understand the nature and implications of these reforms, this scholarship has examined the influences and factors that have accelerated Japan's security policy since 1945. Many works have stressed the constant influence and pressure by the U.S., which has used the U.S.-Japan alliance and Japan's dependence on U.S. security guarantees to continuously push for increased Japanese military capabilities since the onset of the Cold War (O'Shea 2014; Arase 2007). Analyses of Japan's increasingly active military growth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have also put increasing focus on regional security developments and domestic political ambitions as the driving forces behind Japan's military reforms. As such, several scholars emphasize the influence of negative developments in Japan's security environment, arguing that Japan's latest security reforms constitute direct responses to growing threats posed by foreign states and international crises (Sigh 2020; Heginbotham and Samuels 2018). Simultaneously, the ambitions and capabilities of Japan's political leaders have also gained attention as a key accelerating factor, positing the reforms as part of political attempts to further develop Japan international actorness (Hosoya 2023; Liff 2023).

However, as a result of the rising emphasis on international threats and the role of Japanese politicians, U.S. influence has become less prominent in academic explanations of Japan's military development in the last decades. While the literature continues to acknowledge the central role of the U.S.-Japan alliance in Japan's security affairs, U.S. pressure has received diminished attention as an accelerating force behind Japan's security reforms. Instead, the heightened focus on the impact of regional security development and domestic political ambitions suggests that U.S. pressure has declined in relevance for understanding Japan's ongoing military development. Through positing external security threats and domestic political ambitions as sufficient motivation for Japan to implement security reforms, the current literature implies that U.S. pressure has increasingly pushed against an open door in recent years.

Even so, this diminished focus on U.S. influence appears contradictory given the renewed salience of Washington's pressure in current international politics. Namely,

periods of heightened international tensions such as the 2014 annexation of Ukraine, 2017 North Korean missile crisis and 2022 war in Ukraine did not only generate direct security concerns among many states including Japan, but also prompted Washington to intensify pressure on its military allies to expand their security capabilities. This is particularly evident when looking at NATO, which has undergone a significant awakening and restructuring in response to Ukraine conflicts amid continuous pressure from Washington for increased allied military capabilities and burden sharing in the alliance (Matlary and Johnson 2024; Desmaele 2024, 27). While burden sharing debates are long-standing, the events in Ukraine have catalyzed renewed and stronger U.S. pressure on such issues, as Washington argues that its allies should pull their weight in countering a deteriorating international security environment (McInnis and Fata 2023, 1-5). Since Trump's second presidency, U.S. pressure intensified even further in light of significant setbacks concerning Washington's support to Ukraine, prompting the European allies to accelerate procurement of autonomous defense capabilities and agree to increase defense spending to 5% of GDP (Reuters 2025; Gray et al. 2025).

While especially notable in NATO's development, this thesis argues that it is also valuable to understand how and to what extent this pressure has influenced Japan's recent security reforms through the U.S.-Japan alliance. Although U.S. influence has been a factor in Japan's military development since 1945, its renewed salience in the past years underscores the continued importance of, and necessity to, continue considering the role of U.S. pressure in Japan's military development. While the literature currently emphasizes international security developments and domestic political ambitions as the accelerating forces behind Japan's reforms, this research contends that the diminished focus on U.S. pressure in recent scholarship limits academic understanding of Japan's security trajectory. Reconsidering the role of U.S. pressure as a causal factor contributes to understanding the balance between internal and external forces that push Japan's accelerating military trajectory, which could prove especially beneficial for scholarship that posits Japan's latest security developments as sudden and revolutionary. In turn, this reconsideration also improves insight into how Japan's military capabilities may develop in the near future, particularly as Japanese officials anticipate larger U.S. pressure on security matters throughout Trump's second presidency (The Asahi Shimbun 2024).

Therefore, this thesis examines the impact of U.S. pressure on Japan's contemporary military development by posing the following question: **“How has United States pressure accelerated Japan's security policy reforms since the 2014 constitutional reinterpretation?”** The main research goal of this work is thus to analyze how and to what extent U.S. pressure has been successful and influential in bringing about desired Japanese security policy reforms in recent years. To achieve this, the research applies a mixed methods approach of process tracing, preference attainment and attributed influence in order to assess the influence of this pressure from different approaches and according to different benchmarks. Furthermore, the analysis is divided into three case studies that each examine the influence of U.S. pressure on different Japanese reforms: the 2014 constitutional reinterpretation, the 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines and the 2022 revised security documents. Coinciding with the 2014 Crimea annexation, the 2018 North Korean missile crisis and the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine, each case thus researches U.S. pressure in different contexts in order to create a holistic analysis of Washington's influence on some of Japan's latest and most impactful military reforms. Such findings, in turn, aim to strengthen the reconsideration of U.S. pressure alongside international developments and political ambitions as part of the larger dynamic shaping Japan's contemporary military development.

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## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Japan's Security Policy.

After World War 2, Japan experienced a complicated and two-sided development of its military capabilities. While occupied by the U.S., the country adopted a pacifist constitution that explicitly forbade Japan to ever have an army or engage in war, effectively making it a demilitarized state committed to the preservation of international peace through non-military means (Hughes 2010a, 22). However, rising Cold War tensions quickly led the U.S. and Japan to reconsider this disarmament, as the U.S. started seeing Japan as a useful ally against communism (Hughes 2010a, 23; Arase

2007, 562). At the same time, the new constitution and vivid memories of World War 2 developed strong domestic antimilitarist values and large public opposition towards expansions of military capabilities within Japan (Berger 1998; Arase 2007, 562). Nonetheless, regional cold war conflicts such as the Korean and Vietnam War, as well as significant U.S. pressure, eventually prompted Japan to allow the right to individual self-defense, sign a U.S.-Japan security treaty and gradually create self-defense forces. (Hughes 2010a, 23-26; Arase 2007, 561-566). Guided by the Yoshida Doctrine, Japan kept its military capabilities to a minimum and reassured neighbors it would not remilitarize, as Japan instead wanted to focus economic growth while depending on the U.S. for security matters (Easley 2017, 69).

Since the end of the Cold War, Japan's military capabilities have however grown beyond this minimalist approach as the country has become increasingly less reluctant to implement significant reforms (Arase 2007, 561). For example, in 2001 Koizumi oversaw the implementation of the Anti-terrorism and Iraq special measures law, which allowed the JSDF to provide non-lethal support in Iraq to the U.S.-led War on Terror (Envall 2017, 21). In 2014 and 2015, Abe implemented several transformative bills on Japanese security, including a constitutional reinterpretation allowing Japan to engage in "limited" collective self-defense, enabling the use of Japan's forces when attacks on Japanese allies threaten Japanese security (Hughes 2017, 93-99). In 2022, Kishida announced three revised security documents, which committed among many points to increase defense spending to 2% of GDP and introduce Japanese counter-strike capabilities (Johnstone 2024, 170-175).

While both the U.S.-Japan alliance as well as Japan's Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) have thus experienced notable growth in recent decades, many scholars nonetheless argue that Japan's security policy development to date can be described as a gradual and incremental process. Reforms such as Abe's constitutional reinterpretation are thus viewed as part of a longer, balanced transformation of Japan's military capabilities that is still constrained by the country's pacifism (Easley 2017, 80-82). Emphasizing the continued presence of anti-militarist and peace-loving norms in Japan, these reforms are described as attempts to increase Japan's ability to contribute to international peace and stability (Singh 2024, 1299-1301). In addition to these ideational restraints, Le also highlighted how material and structural challenges, such as Japan's

demographic issues, inhibit Japan's ability to amass a significant military (2021, 6, 33, 266). In line with these views, the reforms under Kishida have also been characterized as incremental and evolutionary developments which realize long-discussed security and policy ambitions within Japan's LDP dominated politics (Heginbotham, Leiter and Samuels 2023, 53; Sakaki 2023, 1; Liff 2023, 80).

However, other scholars reject this incrementalist perception, arguing instead that Japan's security reforms mark revolutionary, sudden and even radical transformations of Japan's military capabilities and pacifist stance. O'Shea and Maslow posit that Japan's security policy has undergone focused and fundamental changes prompted by specific events like the 1990 Gulf War, 9/11 and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine (2024, 655). Moreover, Hughes argues that Japan's postwar military constraints have essentially eroded as reforms such as the 2022 documents radically move Japan away from its limited and purely defensive approach adopted after World War 2 (2010b, 11-20; 2024, 160-161, 183). To these authors, reforms such as the 2022 security documents therefore represent the latest critical juncture in a revolutionary process that erodes the Yoshida Doctrine, spearheaded by prime ministers such as Abe and Kishida (Teraoka and Sahashi 2024, 537-538; Capistrano and Kurizaki 2016, 78-79).

Although academics remains divided between incremental or revolutionary perspectives towards Japan's contemporary military trajectory, both sides of the debate also provides insight into the driving factors behind Japan military development since its initial postwar disarmament. While incremental authors emphasize the enduring presence of long-term influential factors to posit Japan's reforms as a gradual process, radical authors focus on distinct driving forces at specific points in time which explain how and why Japan underwent such sudden shifts in its security policy. Despite these different approaches, both sides of the debate have placed primary attention on three accelerating forces: international and regional crises affecting Japan, continued U.S. influence through the U.S.-Japan alliance, and domestic political ambitions led by LDP politicians. The upcoming sections outline how each of these topics have been identified as driving factors, and subsequently how current literature has posited international crises and domestic political motives as the primary accelerators of Japan's 21<sup>st</sup> century security reforms.

### **Japan's Security Environment: Rising Threats and International Crises.**

Many scholars emphasize that, at its core, Japan's security reforms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century stem from negative developments in the country's security environment. Primary focus has been put on the rising assertiveness of China and North-Korea within East-Asia, posing threats to Japan's safety and security. Important here is the dynamic that "many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others" (Jervis 1978, 169). Otherwise known as the security dilemma, this phenomenon entails how one state's military advancements can create insecurity among other states, as these advancements weaken their defensive position, leave them unable to counter these new capabilities, or lead them to perceive the advancing state as a greater threat than before. (Glaser 1997, 178). Even when such reforms are framed as defensive, other states might still interpret them as aggressive behavior and therefore respond with their own military enhancements.

Likewise, several authors note how Japan has become increasingly concerned over the rising military activities of states such as China and North-Korea in the past decades. While Japan saw a potential Russian invasion as its main threat during the Cold War, China's growing military capabilities started to be identified as a rising danger in the early 2000's and has since exacerbated further by events like the Senkaku island dispute, frequent incursions of Chinese vessels/ airplanes in Japanese territory as well as China's threats towards Taiwan (Lee 2024, 758-759). Additionally, North Korea's intensified nuclear weapons development, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and increased Russia-China cooperation in Asia have also led Japan to conclude that its security is increasingly threatened (Singh 2024, 1290-1291).

Japan's military reforms after the Cold War have therefore been widely posited as a response to this new security environment. Viewing especially China as the new main threat to its security, Japan has reevaluated its limited Cold War posture, opting instead to expand its military capabilities and become a less passive U.S. ally (Envall 2017, 25-28). Lande notes how Abe's security reforms have indeed been part of Japan's larger strategy towards China, combining these reforms along with reassurance and alliance strategies to manage China's threat to Japan (2018, 186-187). Especially incrementalist authors argue that, as the rise of these regional threats to Japan has been a continual

process since the Cold War, Japan's military reforms should thus be understood as evolutionary adjustments to address Japan's lack in military capabilities opposed to its neighbors (Heginbotham and Samuels 2018, 131-13). Similarly, authors such as Sakaki argue that Kishida's 2022 defense documents, which acknowledge North-Korea, Russia and especially China as primary threats to Japanese security, represent the latest evolutionary step in Japan's sustained adjustments to its new security environment (2023, 1-2; Liff 2023, 80).

Besides regional security developments, scholarship also emphasizes how international crises, even ones not directly threatening Japan, have prompted Japan to increase its military capabilities. For example, Singh has shown how the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf War, 1994 North Korean Nuclear Crisis, 1996 Taiwan Straits Crisis, 1998 Taepodong Crisis and 9/11 attacks formed the basis for many of Japan's military reforms in the post-Cold War era (2020, 10-17). Alongside regional threats, international crises have thus also posed challenges to Japan's security policy and subsequently facilitated Japan's military development (Hughes 2010a, 27-34). These distinct crises are particularly emphasized by revolutionary authors who argue that, instead of evolving gradually, Japan's defense policy has undergone rapid developments and transformative shifts at the hand of specific international crises like the 2022 invasion of Ukraine (O'Shea and Maslow 2024, 655-669). Arase has also shown how, both throughout and after the Cold War, international crises which put Japan under pressure have often led to distinct moments of Japanese military reforms (2007, 563-568).

However, as these authors also argue, most of these crises did not cause security reforms just because they have posed direct threats to Japan's security. Instead, they have often been leveraged by both the United States as well as Japanese politicians in order to advance certain military developments within Japan. While rising threats and crises in Japan's security environment are thus posited as one motivating factor, the literature has also emphasized the role of U.S. influence and domestic political actors in accelerating Japan's military reforms.

### **The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Entrapment or Abandonment?**

Moving beyond the initial focus on regional and international developments, many scholars highlight the central role of the U.S. in Japan's security policy through the U.S.-Japan alliance, positing Japan's security reforms as a result of U.S. influence and Japanese alliance predicaments (Arase 2007; Envall 2017). Central to this focus on U.S. influence is what Snyder has called the "security dilemma in alliance politics" (1984, 494). Unlike the security dilemma mentioned earlier, this concept explains how states within an alliance can either seek more peaceful relationships with rival states at the risk of being abandoned by its ally, or increase support of the alliance at the risk of becoming entrapped in the ally's policies and potential future conflicts (Snyder 1984, 494). Throughout its alliance with the U.S., Japan has therefore balanced its security reforms according to fears of either entrapment or abandonment (Envall 2017, 16).

During the Cold War, Japan generally feared entrapment within U.S. security policy more than abandonment and was subsequently reluctant to adhere to U.S. demands for military reforms or increased aid in regional security efforts (Easley 2017, 68-70). Yet, Arase outlines how despite this reluctance, the U.S. did successfully pressure Japan into military reforms during crises which put Japan under duress, such as the Korean and Vietnam Wars (2007, 561-566). Towards the end of the Cold War, Japan thus possessed restrained but somewhat expanded military capabilities due to persistent U.S. pressure and expectations (Hughes 2010a, 21-27). Nonetheless, as Japan's strategic value to combat the global communist threat decreased, the U.S. could more credibly threaten to abandon the alliance if demands for larger Japanese contributions were not met (Arase 2007, 566). Consequently, U.S. pressure during international crises such as the 1991 Gulf War became more effective in addressing Japan's "checkbook diplomacy", forcing Tokyo to move beyond mere financial aid to global security by improving its international military capabilities (Easley 2017, 70-71).

As such, many authors note that since the Cold War, fear of abandonment often outweighed decreasing fears of entrapment in Japan's military development, especially in light of the rising threats posed by China and North-Korea which increasing domestic support of the alliance (Heginbotham, Leiter and Samuels 2023, 49-50; Envall 2017, 28). Japan's military reforms in recent decades have therefore significantly improved the country's security cooperation with the U.S. (Berkofsky 2018, 179-203). Lee also notes how the U.S.-Japan alliance has grown in size and cohesion through viewing China as a

shared threat, with Japan strengthening its contribution to the alliance in order to avoid abandonment and counter regional security threats (2024, 756-762). Incremental authors in particular have stressed this continued growth of the alliance to posit Japan's reforms as efforts to become a more active and capable U.S. ally (Sakaki 2023, 6-7; Envall 2017, 28-30). Through this perspective, reforms such as the 2022 security documents are characterized as evolutionary adjustments to its burden-sharing and alliance capabilities, opposed to significant breaks from its postwar trajectory or steps towards remilitarization (Johnstone 2024, 179-180; Singh 2024, 1292).

However, many scholars also argue that Japan's attempts to prevent abandonment have simultaneously increased its entrapment within U.S. demands and strategic directions. Hughes has for example argued that the 2014 constitutional reinterpretation has decreases Japan's ability to reject U.S. requests for Japanese military aid in international crises (2017, 117-120). Others note how, despite being hailed as a "trump whisperer", Abe had to make several concessions which prioritized U.S. interest over those of Japan to maintain Trump's favor amid his numerous abandonment threats and America First policy from 2017 to 2021 (O'Shea and Maslow 2021, 206-208; Berkovsky 2018, 180). In this context, Japan has been described as a "client state" that has increasingly appeased U.S. requests due to security dependencies and fears of abandonment, even when doing so directly opposes Japanese national interests (McCormack 2018, 45-46).

Especially revolutionary authors emphasize how this imbalanced relation between both allies in the U.S.-Japan alliance has thus enabled the U.S. to continue steering Japan's security trajectory. O'Shea has outlined how U.S. scholars and officials used discursive power to move Japan's DPJ government away from attempts to "equalize the alliance" and relocate the U.S. base in Futenma by framing these efforts as a crisis for the U.S.-Japan alliance, sparking abandonment fears among the Japanese public (2014, 438-442). Likewise, Bochorodycz notes how the larger U.S.-Japan policy security community, comprising both U.S. and Japanese alliance proponents, has continued to reinforced U.S. influence over Japan defense policy (2024, 853-855). Using Japan's dependence on the U.S. security umbrella, Washington has thus continued to steer Japan's policy away from U.S. disinterests and push Japan towards increased military capabilities in the alliance (Zakowski et al. 2017; 8).

While the above literature continues to emphasize the central role of the U.S. and U.S.-Japan alliance in Japan's security trajectory, U.S. pressure has received less attention as an accelerating force behind Japan's latest military reforms. As this pressure has been a persistent influence since the Cold War, many authors have primarily emphasized other explanations to account for Japan's accelerated military development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While partial credit has been given to the rise of negative developments in Japan's security environment, the growing influence of domestic political ambitions in Japan's military reforms has also received increasing attention. In this context, many authors have highlighted Japan's increasing willingness to implement military reforms in recent years despite U.S. pressure (Arase 2007, 582-583; Envall 2017, 28-30).

### **Political Ambitions: the Influence of The *Kantei*.**

Recent scholarship increasingly highlights the growing influence of Japanese political leaders in accelerating Japan's military development. In particular, authors note that the Prime Minister's Office (*kantei*) has gained significant prominence in Japanese policymaking throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Initial moves towards this prominence occurred in the 1990's, when prime ministers such as Hashimoto sought to address Japan's bureaucratic and slow policymaking amid changing world circumstances (Zakowski et al. 2017, 1-9; Arase 2007, 568-570). Koizumi used and built upon such efforts by expanding the *kantei*'s capabilities to outmaneuver bureaucratic influences on implementing reforms such as the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law, enabling a more responsive foreign security policy (Kersten 2011, 6-16). Further change to the *kantei* occurred through Abe's creation of the new Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs and National Security Council, enabling a top-down leadership approach to Japan's security policy through increased control over Japan's bureaucratic officials and policy decision-making (Patalano 2020, 9-12).

Subsequently, this *kantei*-led policymaking has allowed Japanese prime ministers to increasingly steer Japan's security policy towards personal political aspirations and desired policy reforms. To achieve these preferred policies, authors such as Singh argue that Japanese politicians have frequently utilized regional and

international security crises as “policy windows” to overcome domestic constraints and public opposition (2020, 4). Similar to the U.S., Japanese politicians therefore use external security developments as opportunities to realize desired security policies. (Heginbotham, Leiter and Samuels 2023, 48). In doing so, Japanese politicians and policymakers greatly emphasize the threats posed by such external security crises to posit Japan as ill-equipped to address these dangers and frame subsequent security reforms as necessary and justified reactions (Singh 2020, 12).

Through *kantei*-led policymaking and this strategic use of security crises, many scholars thus argue that Japan’s mayor 21<sup>st</sup> century security reforms have been spearheaded by prime ministers such as Abe and Kishida to achieve desired foreign policies. Especially Abe sought to create a more assertive foreign policy that would put Japan back at the forefront of the international order as a “proactive contributor to peace” (Hosoya 2023, 43). Through reforms like the State Secrets Law, reinterpretation of the Constitution and relaxation of weapons export restrictions, Abe thus aimed to enhance Japan’s international defense capabilities and cooperation, especially with the U.S. (Easley 2017, 74-78). To justifying these reforms, Abe used the rising assertiveness of China and North Korea to argue that Japan needed such cooperative abilities with likeminded states to counter these threats. (O’Shea and Maslow 2024, 658-659).

More recently, Kishida’s security reforms in 2022 have been posited as a continuation of Abe’s efforts, further positioning Japan as a contributor to the U.S.-led international order (Liff 2023, 78-79). Through linking the Ukraine conflict to increased threats of regional tensions, specifically regarding Taiwan, Kishida was able to frame his 2022 security reforms as necessary for safeguarding Japan’s future (O’Shea and Maslow 2024, 662-670). Abe and Kishida’s security reforms have thus increasingly moved Japan towards a more active and assertive role, strengthening Japan’s capacity to contribute to international stability (Hosoya 2023, 40-42). Especially incremental authors move to argue that Japan’s recent security reforms therefore represent evolutionary steps in the sustained pursuit of greater Japanese international actorness by prime ministers since the early 2000’s, merely pushing Japan to engage in “proactive pacifism” (Heginbotham, Leiter and Samuels 2023, 53; Sakaki 2023, 1; Singh 2024, 1288).

By contrast, revolutionary authors argue that the ambitions and security reforms advanced by prime ministers such as Abe and Kishida have increasingly eroded Japan’s

pacifism (Gustafsson, Hagström and Hanssen 2018, 137-138). Opposed to progressing incrementally, O'Shea and Maslow also argue that Japan's military development is characterized by distinct moments of transformative change, as Abe and Kishida have focused their reforms around distinct international/regional crises (2024, 669-670). Abe's reforms, aimed at realizing a stronger security policy, are thus seen as distinct shifts away from the Yoshida Doctrine since they significantly erode Japan's postwar military limitations and restraints (Hughes 2017, 93-99; Capistrano and Kurizaki 2016, 82-83). Stockwin and Ampiah also raise concerns over the democratic implications of rapid defense reforms like the Designated Secrets Law, arguing that Abe and the Liberal Democratic Party have shown increasingly authoritarian and nationalist approaches to reforming Japan's security capabilities (2017, 154, 155).

### **Pushing Against an Open Door?**

In analyzing Japan's more transformative and rapid military development of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the literature has thus increasingly moved away from emphasizing the influence of U.S. pressure, which had especially proven to be an accelerating force behind Japan's military development during the Cold War. To explain Japan's accelerated military trajectory after 1991, scholarship instead highlights the accelerated influence of Japanese politicians in recent years, who push for military reforms through policy windows and expanded *kantei* powers to improve Japan's international actorness. Accordingly, many authors have posited Japan as an increasingly active state that is now more willing to undergo military reforms. (e.g., Arase 2007; Kersten 2011; Hughes 2017; Envall 2017; Easley 2017; Singh 2020). Such conclusions subsequently imply that U.S. pressure has been pushing against an open door in recent years, as external security threats and domestic politicians already sufficiently motivated Japan to implement reforms.

This research however argues that the decreased focus on U.S. pressure limits academic understanding of Japan's recent security trajectory, especially considering the renewed salience of U.S. pressure among other alliance dynamics such as NATO. By neglecting the influence of U.S. pressure, current academic work risks overemphasizing domestic drivers behind Japan's military development in the 21st century without first

concluding whether this pressure has, in fact, diminished in influence. Moreover, even though Japan has become increasingly willing to undergo reforms on its security policy, there is currently limited knowledge on the extent to which these “proactive” Japanese politicians have implemented policy reforms according to U.S. demands in recent years. As such, it is important to improve and renew academic understanding on the extent to which U.S. pressure has accelerated and influenced Japan’s ongoing security reforms.

Through addressing this gap, this research does not aim to dispute Japan being more “active” than before, or posit U.S. pressure as the main driving force behind Japan’s contemporary military development. Rather, it intends to strengthen the already established conclusion that Japan’s military development is influenced and affected by a complex interplay of international and domestic factors (Le 2021, 6; Singh 2020, 4-10). However, the current underemphasis of U.S. pressure, while its influence in other alliance dynamics has regained prominence, limits understanding of the interplay between these forces in Japan’s contemporary military development. This research argues that, while not necessarily in the discursive manner as seen during the Cold war, U.S. pressure has continued to accelerate and shape Japan’s security policy reforms and thus needs renewed attention as a main driving force alongside domestic political motives and external security developments. This thesis thus aims to add to the discussed literature by analyzing how Japan’s mayor military reforms in the past years can be seen as a result of U.S. pressure.

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## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Research Aims and Methods.

In order to address the identified gap in academic knowledge, this thesis poses the following question: **How has United States pressure accelerated Japan’s security policy reforms since the 2014 constitutional reinterpretation?** Posing this question, it specifically examines the dynamics of U.S. pressure as an external force that shapes Japan’s security policy. The primary objective of this thesis is thus to investigate how the U.S., as an external actor, has influenced Japan, the policymaker, to implement security

reforms through the application of pressure. Consequently, this research measures the extent of U.S. influence and the success of U.S. pressure in achieving desired security policies in Japan to examining the potential causality between U.S. pressure and Japanese security reforms.

However, analyzing and measuring the influence of external actors on policy outcomes poses several methodological challenges (Dür 2008, 1-4). Although several methods exist for examining how influential interests groups have been in bringing about a desired policy outcome, each method also faces distinct shortcomings while emphasizing different aspects needed to form complete and valid conclusions. In line with Dür's recommendation, this thesis therefore utilizes a mixed-method approach to analyze influence and draw conclusions from several measurement techniques (2008, 15-20). This mix consists of three well established methods used to research interest group influence: preference attainment, process tracing and attributed influence.

Preference attainment measures to what extent actual policy outcomes resemble the preferences and demands of interests groups (Vannoni 2016, 369). This entails specifying the exact preferences of a certain actor and comparing them to the content of the implemented policy. Arguably, this poses the foremost step in concluding whether an interest group has been potentially influential in the first place. Mapping policy results against the preferences of involved actors thus allows researchers to conclude which actors have been able to attain their goals and exert influence. Nonetheless, this method is primarily aimed at measuring the success of an actor's influence, rather than explaining the actual impact and causality of an actor on the eventual policy (Vannoni 2016, 371). Therefore, even if policy and preferences are highly similar, other methods are needed to determine whether this is actually the result of an interests group's influence opposed to other factors or mere chance.

This is where the widely used method of process tracing proves useful. Aimed at testing and explaining causality between independent and dependent variables, this method traces the sequence of steps and developments necessary for a certain causal mechanism to work (George and Bennett 2005, 6-7). Within measuring interest group influence, this generally entails analyzing how an actor expresses preferences and aims to exert influence, how policymakers respond to this and subsequently how this response is reflected in policy processes and outcomes (Dür 2008, 562). Crucially, this

method not only identifies the presence of all necessary causal steps, but also analyses whether such steps have occurred in chronological order. For example, if policymakers move towards implementing a certain policy long before an interest group started pushing for it, direct causality between interest group influence and the policy outcome might not be present.

Additionally, the method of attributed influence contributes to testing such causality by examining which factors have motivated policymakers towards making certain choices. This method thus aims to uncover what the actual policymakers, or subjects of influence, have deemed influential in their decision making (Dür 2008, 565). While primarily done through interviews and surveys, sources such as public statements, newspapers and bibliographies can also be used to uncover what policymakers have acknowledged and attributed as influential. As such, combining these three methods results in a research approach that addresses the success, causality and acknowledgement of an interest group's influence within a policy process.

### **Case Studies and Analysis Approach.**

In order to provide a holistic answer to the research question and contribute to academic understanding of U.S. influence on Japan's security policy in recent years, this thesis analyses three different case studies that each focus on the potential impact of U.S. pressure on three of Japan's most significant security reforms in the past 12 years: the 2014 constitutional reinterpretation, 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines and the 2022 revised security documents. As these reforms have received significant scholarly attention, including the respective influence of domestic political ambitions, they make relevant examples for examining the impact of U.S. pressure. Each of these reform periods have also occurred during intensified international tensions and crises, often leading to increased levels of U.S. pressure on Japan and its allies in general. Namely, crises such as the 2014 Crimea Annexation, the 2017 North Korean nuclear missile crisis and the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine have coincided with and impacted the reforms covered in the case studies. Additionally, each case study also allows for the examination of U.S. pressure under different administrations, including Obama's 2013-2017 term, Trump's 2017-2021 term and Biden's 2021-2025 term,

creating a holistic overview of U.S. pressure at large. Taken together, each case thus analyses U.S. pressure at times of distinct international crisis which were followed by significant Japanese reforms, in order to uncover how this pressure has shaped these prominent policy developments.

Building on the three methodologies described previously, each case study is approached according to the same analytical framework. Rather than approaching each case through the three methodologies separately, this framework follows the causal chain analyzed through process tracing while incorporating preference attainment and attributed Influence strategies at relevant stages. Within this analysis, steps 1, 3 and 4, primarily relating to the methods of process tracing and preference attainment, should be present in order to potentially consider U.S. pressure as influential. The presence of step 2, primarily relating to the method of attributed influence, would strongly support U.S. influence but does not function as a knockout criteria. Additionally, it is also necessary for the validity of U.S. influence that these steps occur sequentially instead of simultaneously or in a different order. The following section outlines the function, purpose and relevant sources for each step, as well as the methodologies they are part of. After analyzing all three case studies according to this framework, the thesis combines all findings to form a comprehensive answer to the posed research question.

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## **Analytical Framework**

### **1. The U.S. applies pressure on Japan during times of an international crisis.**

*Methods:* Process tracing, preference attainment.

*Sources:* U.S. governmental statements and speeches, policy reports, research papers, strategic documents.

*Description:* Analyzing U.S. influence starts with outlining what the U.S. wants, and how Washington has pressured Japan to act accordingly. Each case study thus starts with outlining the U.S. administration's strategic agenda and its expectations towards Japan in light of this. Important channels of U.S. pressure include official and presidential statements, as well as publications by "scholar-officials" which operate both in academia and the U.S. government (O'Shea 2014, 442-443).

## **2. Japan acknowledges this pressure and refers to U.S. expectations.**

*Methods:* Process tracing, attributed influence.

*Sources:* Japanese official statements, Japanese think tank reports, newspaper articles, scholarly work.

*Description:* The next step analyses to what extent and how U.S. pressure is received and acknowledged within Japan. Through looking at statements from Japanese policymakers such as prime ministers and research publications, this step identifies whether Japan in fact perceives this U.S. pressure as actual pressure, thus positing it as an influential factor. A lack of acknowledgement would weaken the validity of U.S. influence, as other influential factors in Japan's security considerations might have instead been given more attention.

## **3. Policymaking process shift toward U.S. preferences.**

*Methods:* Process Tracing, attributed Influence.

*Sources:* Japanese policy documents, Japanese think tank reports, Japanese newspaper articles, biographies, scholarly work.

*Description:* Building on Japan's perception of U.S. pressure, this third step identifies when and how Japanese policy reforms emerged and developed amid these demands. Within this, it is important to identify whether policy reforms similar to U.S. demands were not already in progress prior to U.S. pressure, and to what extent this pressure has affected or altered the reforms' development. If the trajectory of certain reforms do not fit the sought after causal mechanism, the influence of other influential factors such as domestic political preferences may instead come to light.

## **4. Policy reforms similar to U.S. demands and expectations are implemented.**

*Methods:* Process Tracing, Preference Attainment.

*Sources:* Japanese policy documents, scholarly work, newspaper articles.

*Description:* The final step examines the exact content of the eventually implemented reforms and subsequently identifies to what extent they overlap with U.S. demands and preferences. In addition to the presence of previous causal steps,

strong overlap would validate U.S. pressure as influential and successful in bringing about desired Japanese reforms, while smaller overlap suggests larger impact of other influences or constraints. Finally, if strong overlap occurs while previous steps in the causal chain do not suggest strong U.S. influence, other causal factors also need to be considered.

## Chapter 4: Analysis

### Case 1: The 2014 Constitutional Reinterpretation

#### **Obama's "Pivot to Asia" and Japanese collective self-defense.**

Throughout Washington's alliance with Japan, it has continuously aimed to resolve one specific strategic limitation imposed by Japan's antimilitarist constitution: the disability of the JSDF to aid the U.S. in military conflicts (National Institute for Defense Studies 2015). Especially after the First Gulf War, Washington's frustrations toward Japan's inability to put boots on the ground significantly grew as Japan could not move beyond "checkbook diplomacy" in aiding U.S. efforts. Even after Koizumi's reforms in light of the War on Terror, JSDF forces were still only allowed to give limited non-combat support. For the second Obama administration, resolving this continued constraint became especially salient in light of the administration's "Pivot to Asia". Aimed at reorienting Washington's strategic focus from the Middle East to East Asia and the Pacific, Obama sought to strengthen U.S. military, economic and diplomatic ties with Asian states to counter China's growing influence (Dale and Towell 2013, 1).

After a troublesome period of Japan-U.S. relations under Japan's DPJ government between 2009 and 2012, which rather unsuccessfully sought to gain more independence from Washington, U.S. officials and analysts thus sought to reassert pressure for greater Japanese alliance capabilities (O'Shea 2014, 442-453). One central expression of such pressure included the publication of the third Armitage-Nye rapport in April 2012 (Bochorodycz 2024, 868). Highlighting the recent drift in U.S.-Japan relations, the rapport questions Japan's willingness to remain a "tier-one" nation and therefore contribute to the survivability and effectiveness of the U.S.-Japan alliance

(Armitage and Nye 2012, 1). As such, Japan is primarily advised to strengthen allied interoperability with the U.S. through increasing abilities for “defense with the United States in regional contingencies” and participation in missions beyond Japan’s territory for the defense of Japanese security (Armitage and Nye 2012, 11-13). Specifically, the report states that “prohibition of collective self-defense is an impediment to the alliance.”, which should thus be amended in order to allow full defensive cooperation between JSDF and U.S. military forces (Armitage and Nye 2012, 15).

As Japan’s limitations on collective self-defense has long troubled Washington, other U.S. works reflect similar criticism. Especially during the DPJ’s time in office, U.S. scholar-officials highlighted the operational incapacities of the alliance because of Japan’s inability and unwillingness to assume a greater operational role (Finnegan 2010, 11-15). After the DPJ, such criticisms continued to take hold, as for example Washington’s Congressional Research Service outlined Japan’s continued constitutional restraints on collective self-defense as a primary hurdle to “equalizing” the alliance (Chanlett-Avery, Rinehart 2013). Similarly, other CSIS publications also directly stated that “Japan’s policy to deny the right of collective self-defense presents an obstacle to alliance cooperation because it limits the use of force by the Self Defense Force.” (Sakoda 2013). As China’s rise revitalized strong U.S. presence in Asia, Washington thus required a strengthened U.S.-Japan alliance for which Japan needed to increase its supportive capabilities as an ally.

### **The Return of Abe and new need for Constitutional Reinterpretation.**

The demands and criticisms by the Obama administration and U.S. scholar officials had not gone unnoticed in Japan. On 26 December 2012, Abe Shinzo and the LDP returned to power and immediately set to work on mending Japan’s “adrift” relation with the U.S. in the aftermath of the DPJ, recognizing the necessity of maintaining U.S. support in light of China’s rise (O’Shea and Maslow 2024, 658; Harris 2020). During a February 2012 visit to Washington, Abe held a speech at the CSIS, the bipartisan organization which publishes the high-profile Armitage-Nye rapports. In this speech, he directly expressed his desires to prevent Japan from becoming a “tier two nation” as mentioned in the rapport and instead announce that Japan would invest in strengthening its cooperation

with the U.S. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2013).

Besides Abe's recognition of U.S. concerns, influential Japanese research institutes and newspapers similarly acknowledged and reiterated the U.S.'s argument that constitutional reforms were necessary for strengthening the alliance. While Japanese policy reports advocating for collective self-defense and a reconsideration of the constitution already existed, they increasingly emphasized the necessity of such actions for the sake of maintaining and strengthening the U.S. alliance (National Institute for defense Studies 2015, 45-46). Certain institutes even directly mentioned the central Armitage-Nye report, such as a Japan Institute of International Affairs commentary that argued the report's recommendations "are worth considering" (Kawakami 2012). Newspapers such as the Japan Times also picked up on the renewed urge on Japan to "boost defense role" (The Japan Times 2012).

While Washington's concerns towards the alliance were acknowledged in Japan, the need to appease them received increased attention in light of growing tensions with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and international conflicts such as the 2014 Crimea annexation. Chinese naval incursions into the disputed islands' territorial waters throughout 2012 increased concerns within Japan that Washington would not be fully committed to defending such Japanese territories because of the alliance's framework and continued frustrations towards Japan's limited alliance capabilities (Spitzer 2012). Such concerns further increased during the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, where the absence of U.S. intervention despite Russian transgression of Obama's "red lines" increased Japanese fears of a similarly limited response to possible territorial conflicts with China (Kotani 2014). As such, increased emphasis in Japan was put on the necessity of reassuring Washington that Japan remained a worthy and important ally.

### **Abe's "Proactive Contribution to Peace" and the Constitutional Reinterpretation.**

However, the exact policymaking process behind Japan's 2014 constitutional reinterpretation shows that such initiatives had also been strongly pursued by Abe and the LDP before the above mentioned U.S. pressure and underlying developments. Since its founding in 1955, the LDP has supported a full revision of Japan's constitution in

order to regain Japanese international actorness and “normal” state capabilities (Richter 2016, 1243). As domestic opposition proved too strong in several past revision attempts, Abe instead sought to increase Japan’s international capabilities through other means. During his first term in office in 2007, Abe formed an “Advisory Panel on Reconstruction of the Legal Basis for Security” that was tasked with researching how to allow Japan’s military to react to certain mission scenarios that were not allowed under Japan’s restrictive constitution (Richter 2016, 1244). While disregarded by the DPJ government, Abe reconvened the panel upon his return and their new report in 2014 came to a similar conclusion as in 2007: The constitution should be reinterpreted in light of rising security challenges to allow for collective self-defense (Cabinet Secretariat 2014).

Concurrently, Abe also implemented numerous other reforms aimed at realizing his outlook for Japan, such as creating a National Security Council, introducing a National Security Strategy, easing Japan’s arms export restrictions and passing a new State Secrets Law (Easley 2017, 70-74). Especially the 2013 National Security Strategy, a document outlining Japan’s security approach for the following years, emphasized Abe’s ambition to improve Japan’s international capabilities and strengthen Japan’s “proactive contribution to peace” (Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet 2013, 1-5). Through these many reforms, Abe effectively increased his influence over Japan’s security policy, allowing him to advance his and the LDP’s ambitions while setting the stage for one of his primary goals: a long opposed constitutional reinterpretation.

Nonetheless, in light of continued U.S. pressure and rising alliance uncertainty with regards to territorial disputes, Abe’s reform trajectory also included strong recalibrations towards the U.S.-Japan alliance. On his first day back in office, Abe ordered his minister of defense to prepare for a revision of the U.S.-Japan guidelines, which was soon after officially announced in a 2+2 meeting between the U.S. and Japan in October 2013 (National Institute for Defense Studies 2015, 50). Abe’s National Security Strategy also placed large emphasis on “strengthening the Japan-U.S. Alliance” as one of Japan’s three strategic priorities, reflecting improvements similar to those proposed by the Armitage-Nye rapport (Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet 2013, 20-23). Moreover, the May 2014 report of Abe’s advisory panel justified constitutional reinterpretation to a significant extent because Japan should better aid and defend U.S.

forces “for the maintenance and strengthening of mutual trust between the allies.” (Cabinet Secretariat 2014).

### **Constitutional Reinterpretation and the Revised U.S.-Japan Alliance Guidelines.**

On 1 July 2014, after lengthy consultation between the LDP and coalition partner Komeito, Abe announced the Cabinet’s decision to officially reinterpret Japan’s constitution to allow for collective self-defense under certain conditions (Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet 2014). The implications of this decision were later embodied in the Legislation for Peace and Security, which came into effect in March 2016 and outlined the new possibilities for JSDF deployment outside of Japan’s territory. Most importantly, this legislation allowed the use of force by the JSDF when “an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan occurs and as a result threatens Japan’s survival” if kept to minimum extent necessary while no other means are available (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2016). Additionally, it also expanded JSDF capabilities to partake in international peace operations and logistically support foreign armed forces that combat threats to international security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2016). As such, Japan’s constitutional reinterpretation allowed for the use force in a wider variety of international operations related to the defense of Japanese allies or the preservation of international peace and security.

Beyond strengthening Abe’s “Proactive Contribution to Peace” policy, the new legislation also gave Washington what it had long wanted. Namely, the JSDF was finally allowed to defend U.S. forces and partake in military operations with the U.S. when Japan’s security is being threatened. These new capabilities took concrete form in the Revised Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation implemented in April 2015, which included new roles and mission scenarios for Japan as an ally to Washington (Ministry of Defense 2015). These guidelines introduced strengthened cooperation with U.S. forces in case of an armed attack on an allied state, the use of force by the JSDF in this cooperation when necessary, and increased cooperation in international peace and relief activities (Ministry of Defense 2015, 15-20). Such revisions, among others, mirrored many of the primary recommendations to Japan in the 2012 Armitage-Nye rapport, such as the protection of U.S. assets, cooperation in space and cyberspace

security, increased participation in international operations and stronger defense cooperation with the U.S. (Armitage and Nye 2012, 11-16).

The Obama administration also expressed strong support of Japan's attempts to strengthen their capabilities in the alliance. When the reinterpretation was announced, U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel stated that he welcomed this decision as it would "make the U.S.-Japan alliance even more effective" and complement the still ongoing process of revising the alliance guidelines (U.S. Department of War 2014). During an earlier state visit to Japan in April 2014, Obama similarly expressed his approval of Abe's efforts to strengthen the alliance and "make even greater contributions to peace and security around the world", which he reciprocated finally reassuring Japan that the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands fell under U.S. protection (The White House 2014, Richter 2016, 1247-1251). Nonetheless, disparities between Washington and Tokyo on other matters continued, as Washington remained irritated by Abe's soft response towards Russia in light of the Crimea annexation despite urging Japan to adopt a harsher stance (The Asahi Shimbun 2014).

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## **Case 2: The 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines**

### **Trump's "America First" and The North Korean Missile Crisis.**

Opposed to the relatively uneventful relationship under Obama's second administration, Trump's first presidency would prove to be a more erratic and challenging period for Japan to tackle. In his election campaign, Trump outlined his "America First" foreign policy approach, promising to always "put the interests of the American people and American security above all else" and address policy "weaknesses" unbeneficial to the U.S. (Time 2016). With regards to Washington's allies, such as Japan, Trump set out a clear warning: they should increase their military spending to improve burden sharing, or instead "the U.S. must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves" (Time 2016). As such, Trump regularly went on to posit Japan as a free-rider on U.S. security guarantees while criticizing the U.S.-Japan alliance as a one-sided deal with little benefit for the U.S. (The Japan Times 2016). Since his election campaign, Trump thus personally applied direct pressure on Japan to contribute more to the alliance and act in

accordance to U.S. benefits.

Nonetheless, after his inauguration Trump seemed to ease burden-sharing demands towards Tokyo, especially when he reaffirmed U.S. commitment to defending Japan's security, preserving the U.S.-Japan alliance and protecting the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands (Reuters 2017). Instead, Trump's pressure on Japan increasingly shifted towards other demands related to the North Korean Missile Crisis. Intensifying in early 2017, North Korea engaged several ballistic and nuclear missile tests into and beyond the Sea of Japan, with the partial aim of developing a ballistic missile that would be able to reach the U.S. mainland. Initially, Trump adopted a hardline approach to these efforts, vowing to "unleash fire and fury" on North-Korea if it were to continue its aggressive trajectory (CNN 2017). Within this approach, Trump also pushed for increased Japanese ballistic missile defense capabilities through urging Tokyo to be able to shoot down ballistic missiles traveling over Japan via buying "massive" amounts of U.S. military equipment such as F-35 aircraft or interception missiles (The White House 2017).

Building on Trump's demands and the rising tension with regards to North Korea, The fourth Armitage-Nye report published in October 2018 also provided several new proposals for Japan's future security policy. Similar to Trump's burden-sharing demands, the report argues that in light of the growing security threats posed by China, Russia and North Korea, Japan must increase its defense spending to above 1% of gross domestic product (Armitage and Nye 2018, 4). Additionally, it contends that the alliance in general needs to strengthen deterrence, increase effectiveness of operational cooperation and further pursue joint technological development (Armitage and Nye 2018, 6). However, despite remaining critical of Japanese contributions to the alliance, it also emphasized several limitations from Washington, stating that Trump's erratic America First demands "pose a serious risk to the alliance" (Armitage and Nye 2018, 1).

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### **The "Trump Shocks" and the "Trump Whisperer".**

After the significant reforms that had occurred under Obama, the strong statements and criticisms expressed by Trump caused significant shock and renewed fears of U.S. abandonment within Japan. Initially expecting a victory for Hillary Clinton, the election of Trump and his unfavorable America First policy led to larger doubts within Japanese

media concerning the future of the U.S.-Japan alliance and the strong ties between Washington and Tokyo (Rozman 2016). Labelled as the “Trump Shocks”, concerns towards abandonment on managing the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute and China’s rise grew once more, especially when Trump canceled U.S. participation in the Trans Pacific Partnership trade deal (O’shea and Maslow 2021, 199-200; Rozman 2016). Likewise, Japanese public trust in the alliance also decreased as over half of Japanese citizens had less trust in the U.S. under Trump and over 60% experienced increased concerns over the future of U.S.-Japan relations in July 2017 (Genron NPO 2017).

Similarly, Japanese policy and research institutes also reflect Trump’s questioning of the security alliance and Japan’s contribution to it (Bochorodycz 2024, 870-871). The April 2017 policy proposal by the Mt. Fuji Dialogue Special Task Force, a group of Japanese researchers which collaborated with American research institutes, emphasized the “pressing need to re-examine and/or to reaffirm the value of the Japan-U.S. alliance” in light of the new Trump administration (Mt. Fuji Dialogue 2017, 1). Especially given the continued rise of China and the growing missile threat posed by North Korea, Trump’s outspoken criticisms and America First policy thus heightened the need to reinforce alliance cohesion (Mt. Fuji Dialogue 2017, 2-3). Within this necessity, Japanese policy experts also highlighted the importance of maintaining strong security ties with the U.S. in order to effectively cope with the rising security threats posed by North Korea (The Japan Times 2018). As such, one of Tokyo’s main challenges to properly maintain Japanese security entailed the creation of “a “good” relationship with the “unpredictable” President Donald Trump” (The Japan Times 2018).

Since Trump’s election, Abe and his administration also recognized this importance of creating a strong relationship to keep Japan on his good side. As such, Abe began to invest substantially in creating deep personal ties with Trump while playing in on his preferences and at the same time align the interests of Tokyo and Washington (O’Shea and Maslow 2021, 199-200; Harris 2020, 153-156). Even before Trump was inaugurated, Abe travelled to the U.S. in November 2016 in order to begin building relations with Trump, mitigate his criticism towards the U.S.-Japan alliance and maintain future U.S. participation in the Trans Pacific Partnership (O’Shea and Maslow 2021, 200). Such efforts initially seemed to have some merit when Trump reaffirmed U.S. support to Japan during Abe’s visit to Washington in February 2017. Additionally, Abe

himself stated that a positive relationship with Trump as the U.S. remains essential for Japanese security against China and North-Korea, even if this means ignoring Trump's frequent controversial acts (The Japan Times 2017).

### **Ballistic Missile Defense for Japan.**

Besides Trump's pressure, Tokyo's previous reforms under Abe as well as the continued threats posed by China and North-Korea had already laid the foundation for the upcoming revision of the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) in 2018. Since the beginning of North-Korea's ballistic missile tests in the 1990's, Japan expanded its ballistic missile defense capabilities in tandem with U.S. cooperation, such as the acquirement of U.S. defense systems against ballistic missiles under Koizumi in 2003 (Berkofsky 2018, 195-196). The renewed intensity of North-Korea's missile tests, which saw several ballistic missiles fly directly over Japanese territory, thus again increased motives for Japan to increase its defensive capabilities against missile threats (BBC 2017). Combined with his larger "Proactive Contribution to Peace" ambitions for Japan, which he began realizing with the previously mentioned reforms, Abe could thus benefit from the renewed threat as well as Trump's strong demands to further achieve his and the LDP's policy ambitions (Hornung 2017).

Initial moves towards the new NDPG were made in 2017 as Abe argued that the 2013 NDPG was no longer adequate in light of North-Korea's frequent missile incursions and growing strike capabilities (Harris 2020, 156; The Japan Times 2018). Central considerations for revision included the development of a "Multi-domain defense force" with larger emphasis on cyber and space capabilities, increased ballistic missile defense, potential Japanese counterstrike capabilities and more effective remote island defense (Research Institute for Peace and Security 2018; Tatsumi 2018). These efforts coincided with further commitment to security cooperation with Washington in light of shared perspectives towards managing the threats posed by China and North Korea. As Abe had developed a stable relationship with Trump, they agreed on a "maximum pressure" approach towards North-Korea in order to halt its missile development, and further security cooperation between Tokyo and Washington towards North Korea's actions was announced in the August 2017 2+2 meeting (O'shea

and Malsow 2021, 201; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2017).

To realizing the necessary defensive capabilities while keeping Trump appeased to maintain U.S. support, Tokyo announced several developments in the run up to the new NPDG that were in line with Trump's earlier demands. In December 2017 Abe approved the purchase of two U.S. Aegis Ashore systems, giving Japan some of the most advanced missile interception systems (O'Shea and Maslow 2021, 201). Additionally, Tokyo also stated their intention to acquire other defense materials produced by the U.S., such as additional F-35 fighter craft and Osprey tilt-rotor transportation aircraft on top of those already ordered before Trump's presidency (The Asahi Shimbun 2017). Subsequently, in order to finance such acquisitions, Japan's planned defense budget for fiscal 2018 would also increase to 5.2 trillion yen, reflecting trump's desire for Japan to "buy American" and increase financial contributions to the alliance (The Asahi Shimbun 2017; Berkofsky 2018, 196-197).

### **The National Defense Program Guidelines and Medium-Term Defense Program**

On 18 December 2018, the Abe administration published the new National Defense Program Guidelines and Medium-Term Defense Program, respectively outlining necessary capabilities for the JSDF in light of the new international security environment and the structural plan to acquire such capabilities. Building on the continued threats posed by China and North-Korea's expanded strike capabilities, the new NPDG primarily outlines the creation of a Japanese "Multi-Domain Defense Force" through more space and cyber capabilities (Ministry of Defense 2018a, 4-11). Additionally, the NPDG also outlines several new priorities for the U.S.-Japan alliance in order to strengthen its deterrence capabilities, such as increased cooperation in space and cyber domains, more effective missile defense and greater standardization of defense equipment to U.S. systems (Ministry of Defense 2018a, 13-15). The structural effects of these new priorities were more clearly articulated in the accompanying MTDP, which outlined a significant procurement plan for the acquisition of new military equipment in the next 5 years (Ministry of Defense 2018b, 1).

While primarily aimed at improving Japan's security in the near future, the revised documents also reflect many of the demands made by Trump since his election

campaign. The new MTDP confirmed plans to purchase significant amounts of U.S. military equipment, primarily pertaining to the maintenance of air superiority and stronger air defense. Japan would increase its already existing order of F-35 aircraft by some 100 additional vehicles, including several variants with the ability to be deployed from Japan's reconfigured helicopter carriers (Ministry of Defense 2018b, 10-11). In addition to the previously announced Aegis systems, other advanced U.S. interceptor missiles, such as the PAC-3 MSE, would also be acquired to strengthen Japan's defense against ballistic missiles (Ministry of Defense 2018b, 12-14). Intent to acquisition other advanced U.S. equipment to improve cooperation capabilities within the alliance was also expressed (Ministry of Defense 2018b, 27).

As such, through procuring large amounts of U.S. military equipment, improving missile defense capabilities against North-Korea and thereby increasing defense spending in the upcoming years, many of Trump's general demands were met by Tokyo. Because appeasing Trump was necessary in order to maintain stable U.S.-Japan relations, Abe acted on many of the President's criticisms with the hope that in return Japanese interests would be respected by Trump and his critical stance towards Japan would revert (O'Shea and Maslow 2021, 196). However, such results unfortunately did not fully materialize. Without previously consulting Tokyo, Trump moved towards negotiations with North-Korea over its nuclear missile development in March 2018, stepping away from previous approach of maximum pressure and later declaring the crisis solved, even though North-Korea still posed a big threat to Japan (Harris 2020, 162-163). Direct demands for higher burden-sharing within the alliance also resurfaced in 2019, as Trump wanted Japan to quadruple its financial support to the stationing of U.S. troops in Japan (Seligman and Gramer 2019).

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### **Case 3: The 2022 Revised Security Documents**

#### **Biden's "Alliance Focus" and the Reassurance of Japan.**

Similar to the strong change in Washington's approach to Japan when Trump took over from Obama, the inauguration of the Biden administration in January 2021 again

heralded different behavior by Washington. Reverting from Trump's "America First" approach and his frequent criticisms towards the U.S.'s allies, Biden argued that Washington's most important asset, its vast body of alliances, had seen "neglect and, I would argue, abuse" under the previous administration (The White House 2021). Still viewing China, along with states such as Russia, as the primary threat to the U.S.'s future, he instead signaled that in order to counter the threats posed by these states, Washington should rebuild a united front with allies and strengthen its framework of alliances (The Washington Post 2020). As such, the Biden administration's primary foreign policy goal was to significantly reinvigorate and strengthen Washington's alliances, rebuild trust with its allies and reposition the U.S. as a reliable leader of liberal order (The White House 2021).

Such efforts and ambitions were also reflected within the administration's new stance towards Tokyo, quickly signaling renewed support for the U.S.-Japan alliance while refraining from overtly criticizing Japan's capabilities or contribution as an ally. In his first phone call with then Japanese prime minister Yoshihide Suga, Biden directly reaffirmed U.S. commitment to the defense of Japan through the alliance, specifically including the still disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (The Japan Times 2021). In March 2021, U.S. secretary of State Anthony Blinken also traveled to Tokyo in his larger trip to Asia aimed at reassuring Washington's key allies, emphasizing the threats to regional stability posed by China while emphasizing the need to intensify cooperation on bilateral and multilateral levels (CNN 2021).

Similarly, Washington's scholar officials also iterated relatively positive views on Japan's role in the U.S.-Japan alliance, especially in light of the impactful reforms that had already happened during the previous administrations. In preparation for the upcoming Biden administration, the Centre for Strategic Studies published another Armitage-Nye report in December 2020. At the onset of the report, Armitage and Nye praise Japan to be one of the most steadfast allies of the U.S. that has finally begun "taking an equal, if not leading, role in the alliance" in recent years (2020, 1, 3). As such, and somewhat similar to the previous report published in 2018, they primarily propose essential priorities and improvements for the alliance in general. Recommendations for Japan include the acquirement of counterstrike capabilities and an even larger defense spending to finance its growing capabilities, which should be pursued in tandem and

cooperation with the U.S. (Armitage and Nye 2020, 4). In line with Biden's primary goals, it also strongly advises the alliance to create larger bilateral and multilateral security partnerships and cooperations with likeminded states in Europe and Asia (Armitage and Nye 2020, 6).

### **Intensification of U.S.-Japan Cooperation and Coordination.**

U.S. expectations and demands towards Tokyo were thus significantly eased amid Biden's immediate reassurance of U.S. commitment and desire to rebuild a mutually positive relation with Japan. As such, relations and policy coordination efforts between Tokyo and Washington grew significantly (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022b). Up until the end of 2022, Japan and the U.S. conducted eight summit meetings and 15 foreign ministers' meetings in which efforts to strengthen the alliance and shared approaches towards contingencies such as China, North-Korea and Covid-19 were discussed. As such, the bilateral relations between both countries through the U.S.-Japan alliance had "become stronger than ever" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022b). Even amid the constraints imposed by Covid on travel and the transition of Japan's premiership from Yoshihide Suga to Kishida Fumio in October 2021, cohesion of the alliance continued to strengthen as both parties kept on reaffirming their commitment and faith in the alliance. Similarly, domestic support for the alliance also shifted away from concerns of entrapment, especially after the February 2022 Invasion of Ukraine (Heginbotham, Leiter and Samuels 2023, 49-50).

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### **Kishida's Continuation of Abe's Efforts.**

As cohesion and coordination withing Japan-U.S. relations positively developed without strong demands or a lack of assurances from Washington, Tokyo was able to pursue security policy developments primarily shaped by domestic political ambitions. After the longest premiership in Japanese history, Abe stepped down due to health issues in August 2020 and was replaced by Yoshihide Suga. However, in light of a poor response to the Coronavirus and the subsequent plummeting of Suga's approval ratings amid the largest corona-outbreak in Japan, he announced that he would not run in the

parliamentary elections scheduled for September 2021 after just one year in office (Time 2021). This meant that, in October 2021, Fumio Kishida was appointed as Japan's new prime minister. In order to garner support from influential factions within the LDP, while also having been minister of foreign policy under Abe's leadership from 2012 to 2017, Kishida quickly began to pursue a security agenda in line with Abe's preceding policy efforts (Teraoka and Sahashi 2024, 527-528). In the background, Abe himself also continued to assert influence over Japan's security policy trajectory through frequent consultations with Kishida and proposals provided through the LDP until his assassination in July 2022 (Mulgan 2022, 37).

Through Kishida's ambition to achieve further security policy reforms, many of the large changes eventually announced in Japan's 2022 security documents began surfacing in Japan's policymaking process shortly after his election. While both an increase of Japan's defense budget to 2% of GDP as well as the acquirement of counterstrike capabilities had already been debated in the past, Kishida quickly voiced support for such developments during and after his successful election campaign in 2021 (Teraoka and Sahashi 2024, 530-537). Initially, Kishida had built on the continued frictions with China and the ongoing testing of nuclear missiles by North-Korea to shape and justify the revision of Japan's key strategic documents. However, the February 2022 Invasion of Ukraine proved to become the primary focal point of Kishida's revision initiatives, as both he and his cabinet argued that "Ukraine might represent the East Asia of tomorrow" (Asahi Shimbun 2023). The policymaking process behind the revisions intensified significantly after the invasion, and primary emphasis within policymaking was put on the necessity of sufficient defensive and deterrence capabilities to prevent a similar situation as in Ukraine (O'Shea and Maslow 2024, 664; Asahi Shimbun 2023).

As the U.S.-Japan alliance remained the cornerstone of Japan's security policy and safety guarantees, Kishida also intertwined many of these reform ambitions with strengthening U.S.-Japan alliance cohesion and capabilities. As early as January 2022, Kishida communicated to Biden his intention to revise Japan's National Security Strategy, National Defense Program Guidelines and Mid-Term Defense Program in order to enhance Japan's defensive capabilities and strengthen the alliance's deterrence capabilities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022c). During Biden's May 2022 visit to

Tokyo, Kishida similarly shared his “determination to fundamentally reinforce Japan’s defense capabilities and secure substantial increase of its defense budget needed to effect it” for greater deterrence and response capabilities of the alliance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022d, 4). Nonetheless, several Japanese policymakers involved in the creation of the 2022 security documents have stated that U.S. influence within these reforms was marginal, as Washington primarily played a facilitative and supportive role for realizing Japan’s revised capabilities (Teraoka and Sahashi 2024, 524-525).

### **Japan’s New Security Documents**

On 16 December 2022, Kishida’s government announced and approved a revised National Security Strategy, along with a new National Defense Strategy and Defense Buildup Program which replaced the former National Defense Program Guidelines and Medium-Term Defense Program (Ministry Of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022a; 2022e; 2022f). Combined, these documents comprise a significant overhaul, restructuring and reorientation of Japan’s SDF and general military capabilities. Building on an expansive threat assessment, which directly identifies China, North-Korea and Russia as mayor threats to national and international security, Japan’s new security strategy stipulates the need for increased capabilities to defend against and deter threats (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022a, 1-3, 8-10). One primary move to realize such necessities include the introduction of Japanese counter-strike capabilities, giving Japan the ability to strike foreign bases or targets to neutralize foreign threats (Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022a, 19). In order to finance such acquirements, the documents also announce an increase of Japan’s defense spending to 2% of GDP by 2027 (Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022a, 20). Additionally, Japan’s new security outlook and strategy for the upcoming years also reflect a further strengthening of cooperation with the U.S., as well as the enhancement of Japan’s security cooperation with other states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022e, 18-23).

As these new documents thus outlined several mayor reforms of Japanese military capabilities that would both directly and indirectly strengthen capabilities of the U.S.-Japan alliance, the Biden administration voiced strong support for Tokyo’s moves.

On the same day as the announcement of the new documents, Blinken congratulated Japan on realizing such developments, arguing that, in line with Biden's strategic priorities, they enhanced the alliance's ability to protect and promote peace while also deepening cooperation with other allied states (U.S. Department of State 2022). Throughout the remainder of Biden's presidency, efforts to further cohesion and cooperation within the alliance continued, leading to appeasement for both Washington and Tokyo. For example, Kishida's successor as prime minister, Shigeru Ishiba, also voiced appreciation for the general development of the U.S.-Japan Alliance during the Biden administration, as he hoped to continue this cooperative trend with the upcoming second Trump administration (The Japan News 2025).

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Each case study shows how U.S. pressure has been influential in different forms and under different conditions. Within Japan's 2014 constitutional reinterpretation, U.S. demands for collective self-defense did not play a decisive or discursive role, as the LDP and most notably Abe had been pushing for such initiatives on almost any moment they could. However, Obama's omission of essential security reassurances towards the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands after several troublesome years of U.S.-Japan relations under the DPJ did put a strain on Abe's security policy considerations. Washington had long been critical of Japan's limited capabilities within the alliance, and began to doubt whether Japan would be able to step up to face an increasingly demanding international environment. Especially when tensions with China rose and the Ukraine annexation increased doubts over the U.S.'s commitment to the alliance, Tokyo had to increase its efforts to convince the Obama administration of its worth as an ally. In the end, this led to a constitutional reinterpretation that had long been pursued by Abe, while simultaneously being primarily oriented towards increasing Japan's capabilities to support the U.S. through the alliance.

With regards to the 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines, Trump's direct criticisms and large demands towards Tokyo did seem to influence Tokyo's security policy more directly. Questioning the value of the U.S.-Japan alliance for Washington

recreated strong fears of abandonment within Japan, which were further strengthened by the rising dangers posed by North-Korea and its ballistic missile tests. As such, there was little choice for Abe but to focus significant energy towards keeping Trump appeased in order to mitigate his demands towards Japan. While Abe was able to build a stable relationship, it nonetheless depended on occasional compliance to expectations and demands from Trump. Consequently, the 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines reflected significant investment in U.S. defense equipment, greater capabilities while increasing its spending on defense. Although defense spending and burden-sharing are not necessarily similar, and the procurement of U.S. defense equipment also played into Trump's demands on trade, many of Washington's demands were realized.

Finally, the 2022 revised security documents had again shown a vastly different approach by Washington towards managing the U.S.-Japan alliance and the realization of its strategic priorities. Unlike the Obama and Trump administration, Biden primarily oriented his efforts to strengthen the alliance towards a U.S. recovery of the damage done by Trump's America Policy. As such, Japan was not strongly looked upon by Washington to further strengthen its capabilities as an ally through concrete demands or expectations. Rather, Biden's reassurance and cohesion strategies led to the creation of strong mutual trust in the alliance between Tokyo and Washington. This gave Japan's new government, now led by Kishida but still influenced by Abe's ambitions, to continue its pursuit of a stronger and more capable Japan while being able to rely on its steady cooperation with Washington. Therefore, the alliance saw intensified levels of cooperation and coherence, which led the 2022 revised security documents, primarily accelerated by Kishida's ambitions, to continue this upward trend of the alliance and invest significantly in further U.S.-Japan security cooperation. While in this instance U.S. pressure has seemingly played an insignificant role, Biden's approach towards the U.S.-Japan alliance nonetheless resulted in significant enhancements of Japan's security policy which are favorable for Washington.

Naturally, this thesis did not investigate all aspects of U.S. pressure on Japan's security reforms in recent years, as the dynamic of policy cooperation and means of communication between Tokyo and Washington is far more complex than the visible means considered within each case study. As such, this thesis did not aim to show how

U.S. pressure has wholly shaped Japan's military reforms in the past 12 years, which would benefit from much larger study scales, in depth-analysis of material written in Japanese and direct inquiry among figures involved in U.S.-Japan policymaking. Rather each of the case studies sought to uncover to what extent three of Japan's most significant security reforms have not just been, as the literature currently emphasizes, the result of increased external threats or the political use of such threats to realize long-desired capabilities for Japan, but have simultaneously also been accelerated and influenced by U.S. demands and preferences.

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