

Japan's Coast Guard Capacity Building under Abe Shinzō: Between Power, Money and Norms

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Abstract

For Japan's former prime minister Abe Shinzō, security cooperation with Southeast Asia was central to preventing the South China Sea from turning into a “Lake Beijing” – completely under Chinese control. This paper explains why Abe's security engagement in the region focused mainly on providing Capacity Building Assistance (CBA) to Southeast Asian coast guards agencies to counter China's maritime assertiveness. Answers are provided by looking at not only international but also domestic factors. Based on key variables of post–Cold War Japan's foreign policy, namely the US–Japan alliance, the dominance of economic tools, and normative and institutional constraints on the use of force, the analysis concludes that CBA was an ideal response to the complex demands and restrictions of Japan's security policy. In particular, the economic benefits of providing CBA are an important finding of the analysis and one that has not yet received much scholarly focus.

Keywords: Japan, China, security policy, Abe Shinzo, Coast Guard Capacity Building, Free and Open Indo-Pacific, maritime security, South China Sea

Introduction

After a short stint as a Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) prime minister in 2006, Abe Shinzō returned to office in 2012. What distinguished him from most other prime ministers in Japan was a strong emphasis on the country's foreign and security policy. China's growing military power became a major concern for Abe next to the growing threat of North Korea and Russia, not merely because

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of the country's claim to the Senkaku islands in the East China Sea. China's increasingly assertive maritime claims in the South China Sea were also perceived as a threat to Japan's national security. As Abe put it, "the South China Sea seems set to become a 'Lake Beijing' [...] a sea deep enough for the People's Liberation Army's Navy to base their nuclear-powered attack submarines, capable of launching missiles with nuclear warheads", adding that "[s]oon, the PLA Navy's newly built aircraft carrier will be a common sight – more than sufficient to scare China's neighbors" (Abe 2012).

Given Abe's ideologically hawkish security stance, there were great expectations that he would introduce ground-breaking security policies to prevent the South China Sea from becoming a "Lake Beijing". Upon assuming office, he made no secret of the fact that he wanted Japan to take a more proactive approach regarding security issues, to ensure Japan's survival in a turbulent world. Abe also wanted to increase the Self-Defense Force (SDF) capabilities restricted by Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, a pacifist document imposed by the United States after World War II. He promised to "take back Japan" and free the country from the constraints of the postwar regime (Abe 2013: 254). This ambition was also clearly displayed in his election campaign, when he often used the slogans "*Sengo rejimu karano dakkyaku*" ("Leave behind the postwar regime!") and "*Nippon wo torimodosu*" ("Take back Japan!"); Liff / Lipsky 2022: 123–24).

However, in practice, Abe avoided direct intervention of the SDF in the South China Sea. He focused mainly on providing Capacity Building Assistance (CBA) to Southeast Asian coast guards agencies, which included providing equipment and training, to protect a "maritime order governed by law and rules and not by coercion", as stated in the country's first National Security Strategy published in December 2013 (Government of Japan 2013b: 29). The CBA to regional coast guards became a key pillar of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision announced by Abe in 2016 (MoFA 2023). Recipients of coast guard CBA included the Philippine Coast Guard, Vietnam Coast Guard, Indonesia's Maritime Security Agency (Badan Keamanan Laut or BAKAMLA) and the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (Tarriela 2019: 5).

Despite Abe's proclaimed ambitions to introduce revolutionary changes in Japan's security approach, the CBA to the regional coast guards mainly relied on existing frameworks (Midford 2015: 544–47, Liff 2015, Smith 2019). The provision of coast guard vessels as part of CBA was certainly controversial, as they are defined as "military vessels" by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) under its Export Control Trade Ordinance because they are bullet-proofed (METI 2005). Although Abe attracted the most attention, it is noteworthy that he was not the first prime minister to introduce policies that allowed the export of coast guard vessels. In 2006, Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō provided three patrol vessels to Indonesia by creating an individual

exception to the Three Principles on Arms Export, which has essentially banned the export of all weapons since 1967 (MoFA 2006). Later, in 2011, Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko from the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) further weakened the Three Principles on Arms Exports by introducing general exceptions, thus allowing the unbureaucratic provision of patrol vessels as part of CBA. Although Abe made further steps to formalise the provision of arms, his main contribution was the expansion of the export of patrol vessels, leading to the term “patrol boat diplomacy” (Yamamoto 2016: 83–84).

Even with the strong focus on CBA, Japan's increasing military cooperation with Southeast Asia should not be disregarded. Abe initiated important steps to build a concerted whole-of-government effort to address China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, as stated in 2016 in the “Vientiane Vision” that set the guiding principle for Japan's defence cooperation with ASEAN (MoD 2016). Despite important steps taken in military cooperation with Southeast Asia on maritime issues, it is important to highlight that the focus has been primarily on constabulary, not deterrence, capabilities. Rather than serving a military function, the policy primarily demonstrates presence and political will (Bradford 2021: 92–96).

This paper focuses on Japan's security cooperation with Southeast Asia and addresses why the CBA to regional coast guards, particularly through hardware, became one of the prime minister's principal tools for engaging in the South China Sea. Which factors prevented Abe from adopting a stronger focus on military engagement in the South China Sea? The continuing restriction to nonmilitary means is puzzling, as the international constraints on Japan's security engagement have continuously decreased since the end of the Cold War. The United States, in particular, has welcomed a stronger security engagement.

Three perspectives on coast guard CBA

The existing literature on coast guard CBA can be categorised into three groups. The first group looks at the CBA from a historical angle and understands Japan's engagement from a path-dependent perspective. John Bradford, the leading scholar in this group, sees an incremental step up in Japan's engagement in maritime security in Southeast Asia over the past 50 years (Bradford 2021). The second group follows the realist line of argumentation and sees the CBA as a natural reaction to protect freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, which is perceived as threatened by China's increasingly assertive maritime claims (Drifte 2016, Ordaniel 2015). Here, a special focus is placed on non-traditional security threats and the so-called grey-zone strategies (actions below the threshold of armed conflict) utilised by China (Tarriela 2019). The third group highlights the centrality of antimilitarist norms in Japan's security policy

and looks at how coast guards bypass and soften existing institutional constraints (Black 2014 and 2016, Leheny 2006: 165, Samuels 2008).

While many dimensions of CBA have been addressed individually by existing scholarship, there is a lack of a holistic approach that combines them. Moreover, the economic dimension of Japan's regional coast guard CBA has been almost completely neglected. The lack of focus on the economic dimension is surprising, as Japan has been well known to pursue a strong mercantilist foreign policy. Scholars such as Yoshimatsu Hidetaka have highlighted the fact that the CBA has been a tool that indirectly assisted Japan's economy by forging closer links to littoral states in Southeast Asia (Yoshimatsu 2017b: 307). However, the benefits are not only indirect. As this paper will show, the CBA, through its hardware, also brought direct economic benefits to Japan. This view brings greater attention to the economic motivation to engage in regional security affairs in Asia – a reality that scholars often ignore despite its significance. The economic factor deserves stronger consideration when analysing security policies, not only in the Japanese case. As Giulio Pugliese has shown, economic factors were also an important motivation for the EU to increase its maritime security engagement in Asia (Pugliese 2023).

In order to explore Abe's focus on CBA in depth, this paper analyses security, economic and normative aspects. While many scholars adopt a strict distinction between the international and domestic level (Waltz 1996), international and domestic variables are strongly interrelated. As Kitaoka Shinichi observes in his book *The Political History of Modern Japan: Foreign Relations and Domestic Politics* (2018):

Today, no country can make important decisions exclusively on its own. No country can separate its domestic affairs from foreign affairs when considering matters, and, similarly, no country can make decisions about other countries without considering their internal dynamics. Modern nations not only exercise a lot of influence on other countries but are also affected by them as well. (Kitaoka 2018: xvii)

The relationship between the international and the domestic is particularly strong in the case of Japan, as the country is highly dependent on external trade and resources (Shinichi 2018: xviii). The structural reality that prevents absolute autonomy is one of the main reasons that Japan did not follow the realist trajectory of becoming a major military power despite advancing to become one of the leading world economies. Most scholars working on Japan's foreign policy are aware of this fact and consequently rarely restrict their explanation of the country's behaviour to the international level, as suggested by the realist school. Domestic and ideational factors in Japan's foreign policy, promoted by liberalism and constructivism, have been considered equally important variables (Hook et al. 2012, Mochizuki 1995, Sato / Hirata 2008, Yoshimatsu 2020).

For its leading analytical framework, this paper will apply the variables summarised by Michal Green, in his book *Japan's Reluctant Realism*, to Japan's provision of CBA to its neighbours' coast guards: 1) the US-Japan alliance, 2) the supremacy of economic tools for power and influence, and 3) the role of normative and institutional constraints on the use of force (Green 2001: 4–5). The following analysis is structured along these three dimensions.

US-Japan Alliance

Abe's foreign and security policy cannot be understood without considering the US-Japan Alliance. Since its establishment in 1951, the alliance with the United States has been important for Japan's defence and stability in the region, particularly as the island nation is highly dependent on the import of natural resources and trade (Green 2001: 277–78). As elaborated below, there have been no significant alternatives to the alliance in Japan's security thinking due to geographic, institutional and normative constraints. In essence, for Japan, the alliance with the US has been as important as NATO is for Europe (Okimoto 1998: 3).

The principal question for Japan regarding the alliance has been how much military engagement is necessary for Japan without jeopardizing the protection from the US. During the Cold War, the US was willing to protect Japan under its nuclear umbrella and provided military stability in the region without asking much in return. One reason for this was the strategically important location of Japan, which helped the United States to keep the Soviet Union in check. The second reason was that the US deemed its presence in Japan necessary to prevent a potential resurgence of militarisation in the country (Cha 2010: 159). The latter argument was still used in 1990 by US Marine General Henry Stackpole, who argued that US troops in Japan serve as a “cap in the bottle” (Hiatt 1990).

Japan was happy to restrict its military power and to serve the US as a “large” and “unsinkable” aircraft carrier, as described by former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, from which the superpower could project deterrence but also operate militarily across Asia (Pyle 1987: 266). The strong presence of the US military allowed Japan to focus almost exclusively on its economic growth. In that regard, it should be added that Japan's active expansion of economic relations with Southeast Asia using Official Development Assistance (ODA), which Japan immensely profited from, was not seen as a contradiction but as complementary to US interests. The US understood the economic growth promoted by Japan in many Asian countries to be an important aspect of the region's stability, as it prevented the expansion of communism (Araki 2007: 21).

Nevertheless, Japan's great dependence on the United States for security was not free of concern. From the perspective of the alliance, Japan has been constantly reconsidering its level of security engagement vis-à-vis the fear of abandonment and entrapment. The fear of abandonment is related to the view that the US might end the alliance if Japan does not commit sufficiently to it. The fear of entrapment is related to the risk of being dragged involuntarily into a conflict (Cha 2000: 265). Therefore, Japan's level of commitment to the alliance results from a constant recalibration of the commitment based on changing external and internal factors (Lind 2004: 115).

For Japan, the end of the Cold War posed a major challenge for its management of the alliance as the security environment became increasingly complex, while the United States showed less willingness to address global security issues alone. The decreasing US commitment in Asia resulted in Japan's view that it needed to increase its burden-sharing within the alliance (Okimoto 1998: 32–33). Japan has never been completely passive regarding security issues. Since 1968, it has utilised ODA and funds from private shipping organisations to conduct hydrographic surveys, develop human resources and improve the communication systems and navigation infrastructure (e.g., lighthouses, buoys) in the region (Bradford 2021: 10–12, MoFA 2007, Storey 2013: 139). Yet, the view grew that such measures were no longer sufficient.

Japan's primary focus on nonmilitary security issues, often through financial means, led to a growing number of critics in the US to accuse the country of conducting chequebook diplomacy and to demand a more direct security engagement. Such pressure was unmistakably felt during the Gulf War in the early 1990s, as Japan failed to assist the US with personnel or provisions in the liberation of Kuwait. Japan did, however, provide some 13 billion USD in financial support for the operation – yet from the Japanese point of view, neither the US nor Kuwait appreciated this contribution. This experience is often described as a great “humiliation” or “shock”, leading to a fundamental reconsideration of its security posture (Kawashima 2003: 34, Kitaoka 2019: 8).

The US wish and Japan's ambition to show more engagement in promoting regional security was expressed in the 1995 Security Strategy for the East Asia–Pacific Region (US Department of Defense 1995) and again in the Japan–US Defense Cooperation Guidelines (MoD 1997). Japan's willingness to increase its engagement within the alliance framework had grown steadily since the 2000s, when China invested in efforts to become a “maritime great power”, showing increasing confidence in asserting its maritime claims in the East and South China Sea (CFR 2021). In 2010 at the latest, there was substantial agreement among policymakers in Japan that China's growing military power posed a threat to their country's territorial integrity and to the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, the body of water through which virtually all of Japan's energy resources pass (Koga 2018: 17–18). There has been no indication that

China is willing to solve maritime disputes there peacefully, as agreed in 2002 in the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea after six years of negotiation (ASEAN 2002).

At the same time, the United States has become more invested in aligning the Japanese interest with its own strategy to ensure peace and stability in the region. Perhaps the period of most significant concern began in 2009 when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) came to power, with Hatoyama Yukio as prime minister. After almost half a century of uninterrupted rule by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Hatoyama attempted to pursue a different policy line. His Asia-centred approach sought to distance itself from the US and to improve relations with China (Government of Japan 2009). US President Barack Obama showed great concern for this new approach. In his memoir published after his presidency, Obama described Hatoyama as awkward and his policies as “aimless” and “sclerotic” (Obama 2020: 477). Following the difficulties with the Hatoyama Administration, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Joseph Nye published a report in 2012 on the status of the alliance, reflecting the dominant question in Washington: “Does Japan desire to continue to be a tier-one nation, or is she content to drift into tier-two status?” (Armitage / Nye 2012: 1).

After the resignation of Hatoyama, the subsequent prime ministers aimed to not leave any doubt about the alliance's centrality for Japan and the region. His successor Kan Naoto, made this very clear in a speech early in his term when he stated: “I regard the Japan-US alliance as a relationship that not only holds great significance for, and has contributed to, both Japan and the United States, but also serves as an element of stability for the Asia-Pacific region as well, thereby being highly evaluated as ‘public goods’” (Government of Japan 2011a). An even greater commitment to the US-Japan Alliance was displayed by Abe upon his return to office in 2012, despite his initial intent to end Japan's one-sided dependence on the US as a “client state” (Hashimoto 2016). Kan, Noda and Abe were committed to actively supporting Obama's “Pivot to Asia” strategy, which aimed to increase US military presence in the region in order to, among other objectives, promote the “freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, [and] respect for international law in the South China Sea” (U.S. Department of State 2010).

The 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines drafted under Kan ensured that Japan would work jointly with the United States to address Chinese maritime activities in the region, which were described as a “concern for the regional and global community” (Government of Japan 2010: 4). In the context of these guidelines, providing CBA to the regional coast guards was identified as a way to support US efforts in the South China Sea (Yamamoto 2016: 83). Noda seamlessly continued Kan's intent to strengthen Japan's CBA and facilitated

its implementation by introducing general exceptions to the Three Principles of Arms Exports. Adding general exceptions facilitated the export of coast guard vessels, which had previously required a case-by-case assessment.

Facilitating arms exports allowed Abe to use CBA as an important tool to promote regional security. It was very much in line with the policy advocated in the 2012 Armitage-Nye report, which urged Japan to work more actively with regional partners to promote a “peaceful and lawful maritime environment, to ensure unhindered sea-based trade and to promote overall economic and security well-being” (Armitage / Nye 2012: 11). The provision of patrol vessels, particularly to the Philippines and Vietnam, complemented Japan’s US alliance strengthening efforts, as confirmed in 2012 in the Security Consultative Committee with Washington (Yoshimatsu 2017b: 307). Japan’s CBA to regional coast guards were not compromises but very efficient tools that addressed China’s “grey zone activities”, defined as “neither pure peacetime nor war contingencies over territory, sovereignty and maritime economic interests” (MoD 2013: 2). It is characterised by the use of nonmilitary forces with included coast guards, maritime militia and civilian fishing boats to advance and enforce maritime claims (Dupont / Baker 2014, Erickson / Kennedy 2015, Greenert 2021, Morris 2017).

Due to the importance of coast guards in addressing grey zone situations, the United States highly appreciated Abe’s intention to expand CBA upon his return to office in 2012. Japan’s CBA was evaluated as essential to the region’s peace and stability, as highlighted in the Security Consultative Committee, a body that discusses issues related to the US–Japan Alliance (U.S. Department of State 2013). For the US, it was helpful that Japan acted as a mediator and succeeded in involving Southeast Asia in a broader strategy to challenge Chinese maritime claims. Japan’s image as a peaceful country played a central role in its success (de Castro 2013: 164–65). It was not only the provision of hardware but also the financing structure provided by Japan that gained US attention. Admiral Karl Schultz from the US Coast Guard acknowledged the significance of this by noting that “the biggest constraint for [Southeast Asian countries] is the money. They just don’t have the money to buy a lot of new vessels” (Lamothe 2019).

By supporting regional coast guards with exercises, hardware, formation of maritime surveillance centres, and patrol agreements, Japan showed a strong commitment to the US-Japan Alliance (Cave 2023). Japan’s engagement not only reassured the existing ties with the US, but it also served as an important force multiplier of the alliance (Bradford 2022). The greater engagement within the alliance also allowed Japan to shape the regional security strategy of the US engagement in the region, helping to reduce the risk of a military conflict. Japan has been careful not to unnecessarily militarise the conflict in the South China Sea as this could further increase China’s assertiveness in the region (Koga

2018: 17). In that regard, coast guards play an important role. According to former and current JICA president Tanaka Akihiko, using navies to address grey zone activities poses a substantial risk of unintended military confrontation.¹ The risk of escalation was obvious in 2012, when the Philippines sent its most modern navy ship, BRP Gregorio del Pilar, to the Scarborough Shoal to apprehend Chinese fishing vessels and arrest their crew. This apparently disproportional reaction almost escalated into a military conflict between the Philippines and China (Tarriela 2017). Although China certainly does not support Japan's regional security engagement, Beijing's moderate public criticism could be interpreted as a tacit acknowledgement that the CBA to regional coast guards is key to preventing unintended military escalations. Thus, from the perspective of the US-Japan Alliance, the CBA to the regional coast guards presented an optimal contribution to the alliance for Abe.

Supremacy of economic tools for power and influence

Japan is a country with virtually no natural resources, making its economic vulnerability its primary security concern (Katzenstein 1996: 113–14). How to deal with this fact has been a question discussed continuously and widely among Japanese intellectuals, government officials and politicians. The majority of decision-makers in postwar Japan have been in favour of pursuing a pragmatic mercantilistic foreign policy. A prominent advocate of this line was former METI bureaucrat Amaya Naohiro. In his seminal article '*Chōnin koku: nihon' tedai no kurigoto*' ("The Complaints of a Clerk in Japan: The Merchant Nation"), Amaya argued that it is most beneficial for Japan to be a "merchant nation" as it is the merchant and not the samurai that holds the real power (Amaya 1980: 368). Amaya was aware that such a position was not necessarily popular and would attract criticism, particularly from Japan's closest partner, the US. However, for a resource-poor country to become a "Samurai Nation" would only be possible at the expense of the Japanese quality of life. Consequently, Amaya suggested using Japan's wealth whenever necessary to deflect criticism (Amaya 1980: 389–90).

Following Amaya's rationality, Japan strongly focused on a foreign policy that prioritised its economy while relying on the alliance with the United States for military security. The relationship with Southeast Asia was particularly important for this. Already in 1953, shortly after the war, Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru stated that Japan "[...] desires to extend every possible cooperation for the prosperity of the countries of Southeast Asia in the form of capital, tech-

1 Interview with Akihiko Tanaka, JICA President from 2012 to 2015 and again since 2022. Interviewed by the author on 16 March 2016 at Tokyo University Hongo Campus, Tokyo.

nique, service or otherwise, in order to thus further the relations of reciprocal benefit and common prosperity” (as cited in Tarling 2010: 110).

Yoshida’s plan to extend and deepen its relations with Southeast Asia through financial means marked the birth of Japan’s ODA, which became one of the country’s most important foreign policy tools. In the 1950s, Japan used ODA to re-establish friendly relations with its neighbouring countries that had suffered greatly under its imperialism. Instead of providing reparations, Japan provided technical assistance and goods. Providing ODA instead of reparations was not only more financially feasible, but it also helped Japanese industry to recover after the war. From 1960 to 1970, Japan used ODA to expand its economic infrastructure to facilitate Japanese companies’ entrance into foreign markets. From the 1980s onwards, ODA also became an important tool for demonstrating its commitment to international burden sharing. As observed by David Arase in his book *Buying Power* (1995), ODA developed into a multi-purpose foreign tool through which Japan was able to assert its authority and gain influence in the global arena while profiting economically. Given its importance as a diplomatic and economic tool, it is no surprise that Japan rarely emphasises the philanthropic aspect of ODA, unlike many other OECD countries (Araki 2007: 18–23).

Prime Minister Abe’s initial foreign policy agenda sharply contrasted with Japan’s traditional mercantilist foreign policy line at the time of his first appointment as a prime minister in 2006. During his first term, he strongly focused on Japan’s pacifist constitution to strengthen Japan’s military capabilities. His intentions were clearly expressed in his book *Utsukushī kuni e* (“*A Beautiful Country*”), published in the same year he became prime minister (Abe 2006). In the book, Abe explains that he aimed to restore Japan’s national pride that was lost after the war and to elevate the country’s position as an international political player, in line with its economic power.

Despite public opposition, Abe introduced policies to strengthen patriotism in schools, elevated the status of Japan’s Defence Agency to a Ministry, and took steps for a referendum on revising the constitution. His obsession with security policies and patriotism, exacerbated by political scandals, led to a substantial defeat for his party in the Upper House Election on 29 July 2007 (Onishi 2007). With the DPJ forming a majority in the Upper House, the Diet became “twisted” (*nejire kokkai*), which resulted in a political deadlock for the prime minister. Though he stated health reasons for resigning as prime minister on 12 September 2007 after only one year in office, it is questionable whether he would have lasted much longer as a prime minister due to his unpopularity.

Following the wide criticism of his overemphasis on security policies, Abe was advised by his closest political allies, such as Asō Tarō, to moderate his attitude and make the economy a top priority when returning to office in 2012

(Pugliese / Insisa 2016: 93–94). In one of his first press conferences in 2012, Abe stated: “I once fell to rock bottom and was hit with a storm of criticism. Now, I want to prove it’s possible to start over again” (Tabuchi 2012). He promised to make a greater effort to overcome the economic stagnation that had lasted since the bubble economy burst in the early 1990s. He explained in an interview:

After resigning, for six years I travelled across the nation simply to listen. Everywhere, I heard people suffering from having lost jobs due to lingering deflation and currency appreciation. Some had no hope for the future. So it followed naturally that my second administration should prioritise getting rid of deflation and turning around the Japanese economy. (Tepperman 2013)

The public expectation that greater efforts should be taken to improve the economic situation was also unmistakably expressed in a 2013 Nikkei poll. 32 per cent considered the economy to be the most pressing issue, followed by social security (23 per cent). Only 5 per cent said the government should prioritise foreign policy and society (Nikkei Shimbun 2013).

With the promise to stimulate economic growth, Abe included many METI bureaucrats in his administration. Abe’s cabinet, often referred to as the “METI Cabinet”, included, among others, Hasegawa Eiichi, a retired METI bureaucrat, who was his adviser for policy planning; Imai Takaya, his principal secretary; and Saiki Kōzō, the “writing bureaucrat” responsible for Abe’s reassurances that policies would primarily serve the economy of the country (Harris 2020: 191). In 2010, METI was pushing the government to increase public financing to support the export of economic infrastructure that was facing harsh international competition (Hayashi 2010). METI’s demand to strengthen Japan’s traditional mercantilist foreign policy line was already noted in a 2010 report titled *Hirakareta kokueki zōshin no tameni* (“Enhancing Enlightened National Interest”) that discussed the future of ODA, which was led by DPJ Foreign Minister Okada Katsuya (MoFA 2010: 8). However, it was only after Abe’s return in 2012 that METI’s ideas to make infrastructure export a top priority in Japan’s foreign policy were implemented. This became an important pillar of “Abenomics”, which aimed to revive the Japanese economy primarily through an expansive monetary policy. It was a clear return to Japan’s traditional mercantilist policy line (Yamamoto 2021: 229–31).

Strongly influenced by METI, Abe endorsed the Infrastructure System Export Strategy in 2013, which planned to increase infrastructure exports to 30 trillion yen between 2013 and 2020 through the use of public investments, which included ODA. The goal was to link Japan’s domestic business interest with the overseas need for infrastructure investments, particularly in Southeast Asia (Government of Japan 2013a). Not only did Abe make strong use of ODA loans, but he also even re-introduced the practice of tying loans to domestic services and products, for which the OECD strongly criticised Japan in the past.

The long-term and high concessional scheme was called Special Terms for Economic Partnership (STEP) (MoFA 2016). STEP, which Keidanren, an organisation that represents Japanese business, greatly supported, allowed for the promotion of specific domestic sectors in a very targeted manner (Keidanren 2007). In 2015, Japan provided 831 billion yen for STEP, a remarkable increase from 2014, when Japan only spent 90 billion yen. Abe, in particular, utilised STEP to finance large and profitable civil infrastructure projects. These included, for example, railway projects such as the North-South Commuter Railway in Manila, for which costs amounted to 241 billion yen (USD 1.99 billion). It is not an exaggeration to state that Abe's infrastructure export strategy became the most important national economic strategy to promote Japanese industry (Endo / Murashkin 2023: 129–30).

Abe invested great efforts to link security with economic interests. Even the Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology introduced by Abe in 2014 had a mercantilist dimension. It permitted arms exports to Southeast Asia under specific circumstances and allowed joint development with the United States and Western European countries, potentially bringing profitable revenues for Japanese arms producers (Sasaki 2023). The duality of security and economic interests is also clearly visible in Abe's most prominent regional security vision, the concept of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific. This promised not only the extension of security cooperation to promote a rules-based international order but also the promotion of economic infrastructure (Yamamoto 2020). Japan's approach was very much in line with the interests of Southeast Asian countries. In recent decades, ASEAN states have also been demonstrating greater trust in Japan, welcoming its involvement in the region's political and security affairs (Singh 2002). However, they expect a balanced approach that would focus not only on security and military initiatives but also on economic aspects (Limaye / Kikuchi 2016: 10).

Taking control and "securitising" ODA through a revision of its charter was an equally important move of Abe to link security with economic interests (Yamamoto 2016). The new charter stated that Japan would support activities, particularly in Southeast Asia, that promote the rule of law (MoFA 2015a: 8). At the same time, the charter acknowledged that the relationship with emerging economies is "the key to its [Japan's] own sustainable prosperity" (MoFA 2015a: 2). As Kitaoka Shin'ichi, who was president of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) from 2015 to 2022, emphasised, ODA should not only serve diplomatic goals but also needs to benefit the Japanese economy and businesses while not posing an excessive burden on the financial capacity of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (Kitaoka 2019: 12).

One of the reasons why ODA was such an attractive tool for Abe was that it allowed him to pursue security goals without placing extra pressure on the defence budget. During his initial administration, security concerns conflicted

Table 1: Provision of Maritime Safety Equipment to the Philippine and Vietnamese Coast Guards

Country	JICA projects		Amount	Fiscal year
Philippines	Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project for the Philippine Coast Guard <i>completed</i>	ten 44-meter multi-role response vessels	<i>STEP loan</i> 18,732 billion yen (USD 168.2 million)	2013
	Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project for the Philippine Coast Guard <i>Phase II</i>	two 94-meter offshore patrol vessels	<i>STEP loan</i> 16,455 billion yen (USD 147.8 million)	2016
	Economic and Social Development Programme	thirteen 7- to 15-meter high-speed boats, eleven radar stations	<i>grant</i> USD 5.4 million	2016
Vietnam	Non-Project Grant Aid	six used vessels and equipment related to maritime safety	<i>grant</i> USD 4.5 million	2014
	Economic and Social Development Programme	one used vessel and equipment related to maritime safety	<i>grant</i> USD 1.8 million	2016
	Maritime Safety Capability Improvement	six patrol vessels for the Vietnam Coast Guard	<i>STEP loan</i> 36,626 billion yen (USD 345.6 million)	2017

Source: Compiled by the author, based on data taken from Tarriela 2019: 6 and JICA 2023

with economic interests. However, after his return to office, both aspects became complementary, as argued by Yoshimatsu Hidetaka (Yoshimatsu 2017a).

The growing number of patrol vessels in Japan's CBA under Abe is a prime example of how economic and security aspects were linked through ODA. The Abe Administration primarily used STEP to finance the 18 larger expensive patrol vessels for the Philippine Coast Guard and Vietnam Coast Guard, worth 71.813 billion yen (USD 661.6 million). Only a tiny fraction of the vessels were donated. The donated vessels were worth USD 11.7 million and were primarily small or refurbished vessels without great economic value (see Table 1).

By utilising STEP funds for regional CBA projects, Abe not only increased security cooperation with Southeast Asia but also benefited Japan's shipbuilding companies, which focused on producing public service vessels such as coast guard, firefighting and public transportation vessels. The public-backed financing

greatly supported large public shipbuilders such as Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, Mitsui Engineering and Shipbuilding, and Kawasaki Heavy Industries, which were struggling to compete with companies based in South Korea and China (OECD 2016: 13). Interestingly, the largest share of overseas orders of the 38 ships between 2013 and 2019, worth 95.7 billion yen (about USD 900 million), were coast guard vessels financed through ODA (Okada 2020). Needless to say, many other smaller companies that were closely tied to the shipbuilding companies, such as the steel processing business, profited from the surge of public vessel orders as well (Atkinson 2020).

In its first “Action Plan for Overseas Infrastructure Expansion” (*Infura kaigai tenkai ni tsuite no kōdō keikaku*) published in 2016, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) acknowledged the importance of Abe’s infrastructure export strategy for providing access and valuable experience in dealing with foreign markets. In the past, the public shipbuilding industry produced mainly for domestic clients, and the public support was crucial to compete with other shipbuilding companies, mainly from South Korea and China, backed by their respective governments. For MLIT, the inclusion of Japan’s shipbuilding industry and other infrastructure sectors in ODA projects is vital, as their survival depends on the ability to meet the demands of Southeast Asian and Pacific Island countries (MLIT 2016: 34–35). This view was re-emphasised by an MLIT official in 2020, who stated that “the Japanese government would like to play a leading role in this public-private initiative and pave the way to reaching deals responsive to the voices from Southeast Asia and Pacific Island countries that seek Japan’s cooperation” (Okada 2020).

The potential profit has never been limited to shipbuilding. Since 2016, Japan has aimed to promote “quality infrastructure investment” to distinguish itself from other regional infrastructure providers, mainly China. Japan suggested that its infrastructure has advantages over other providers due to greater transparency, openness, economic efficiency – given life-cycle cost – and debt sustainability (MoFA 2016). The modern coast guard vessels were an important way to demonstrate the reliability of Japanese technology, thereby functioning as a catalyst to promote other types of high-quality infrastructure related to the maritime domain and beyond. An example that can be directly linked to the CBA for coast guards is the request in 2023 to Japan from the Philippines to build a base for the Philippine Coast Guard in Subic that could host the larger multi-role response vessels. At the time of the writing of this paper, JICA was examining the feasibility of the project (Asido 2023).

Under Abe, there was a push to increase the sale of military equipment overseas. However, compared to the public service vessels, the military sector has so far been even less competitive. Japanese arms production has traditionally been a small “side business” for large manufacturing companies, primarily focusing on the civil sector (Katzenstein 1996: 110). Furthermore, in contrast to the

CBA to the regional coast guards, the companies are greatly insecure about the exact legal aspects of arms exports, which are strictly screened by METI (Harper 2021). Following Abe's Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology, exports are 1) permitted, if they contribute to peace promotion and international cooperation, 2) prohibited, if they violate obligations under treaties and other international agreements or United Nations Security Council resolutions, 3) permitted, if appropriate control regarding extra-purpose use or transfer to third parties exists (MoFA 2014). The first and third principles, in particular, leave room for interpretation and pose a great risk of failing the METI's screening process, which limits the involvement of the private sector in the military sector.

Generally, it can be concluded that Abe did not completely give up on his idea to strengthen Japan's security posture. However, he ensured that the practical implementation of security cooperation would not put too much strain on Japan's economy. Military expenditure under Abe only slightly surpassed the one per cent ceiling of GDP, a self-imposed restriction of Japan's defence budget introduced in 1976 by Prime Minister Miki Takeo (Liang / Tian 2023).

Normative and institutional constraints on the use of force

The antimilitarist norm is a powerful variable influencing Japan's foreign policy behaviour (Berger 1993, Katzenstein 1996). Having suffered tremendous destruction and loss after World War II, Japan vowed never again to follow the same path. Antimilitarism in Japan has been protected through normative and institutional constraints since the country's unconditional surrender in 1945. At the core of Japan's antimilitarism stands the Constitution's Article 9, which states that the country will "forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes". Policymakers have introduced many additional self-imposed restrictions to prevent a remilitarisation of the country, including the Three Principles of Arms Exports and the defence spending limit of one per cent of GDP.

The public and the opposition parties have been important guardians of antimilitarist principles. As the principal opposition party since 1996, the role of the DPJ was particularly influential. The DPJ stood for a strict interpretation of Article 9 and promoted a primarily UN-centred security architecture, as key party members Ozawa Ichirō and Yokomichi Takahiro affirmed in 2003 (Harris 2009). Following this principle, the DPJ, which gained the majority in the Upper House, refused to support the LDP's passage of the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law in 2007, as it lacked a UN mandate (Government of Japan 2007).

However, the strict antimilitarist stance of the DPJ softened when it began to consider stronger bilateral maritime security cooperation with Southeast

Asian countries. Following the 2010 ramming of a Japanese Coast Guard vessel by a Chinese fishing boat in disputed waters in the East China Sea little doubt remained within the DPJ that China was progressively using force to challenge the rule-based order (Midford 2015: 537). After intensive security dialogue with the Philippines and Vietnam, DPJ Defence Minister Kitazawa Toshimi critically reflected on the country's position, stating that "Japan has been insensitive to the security needs of its regional neighbours" and that it must become more active in order to "increase their peace of mind" (Fackler 2012). The security advisor to the Noda Administration, Nagashima Akihisa, explained that the realities of the increasing security challenges in the region had forced the DPJ to give up its formerly "unrealistically idealistic" position.²

While the DPJ set out to adapt the regional policies to the new challenges, it is important to highlight that the party aimed to maintain antimilitarist principles to the greatest extent possible. Upholding the nonaggressive principle stipulated by Article 9 was based not only on the party's beliefs. Most of the public opposed the use of military force beyond strict self-defence, rejecting any projection of offensive power or consideration of nuclear weapons (Liff 2015: 95–96, Midford 2011). Consequently, using the SDF to protect any country directly other than Japan has never been an acceptable option, not even in the case of Taiwan. An opinion poll conducted by the daily newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* in May 2023, amid increasing tensions with China, revealed that 56 per cent of the participants were against a direct involvement of the SDF even though a Taiwan crisis would have far-reaching consequences for Japan (Teramoto 2023).

The rejection of the use of military force other than for self-defence does not imply that the public generally opposes broader security policy initiatives. For example, a Kyodo news poll conducted in 2015 showed that the majority of the public (52.7 per cent) supported the so-called Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea that challenges China's maritime claims in the region, as opposed to 39.9 per cent of the respondents who did not (Mainichi Shinbum 2015). According to international relations scholar Izumikawa Yasuhiro, the public is willing to support security policies if they are understood as defensive and if such support does not pose the risk of being dragged into a conflict (Izumikawa 2010: 132). This public mindset explains why the CBA's for Southeast Asian coast guards have not met public resistance in Japan.

As previously mentioned, Noda introduced a ground-breaking change that facilitated the export of arms by adding permanent exceptions to the Three Principles of Arms Exports. At the same time, clear limitations were included to prevent Japan from becoming involved in international conflicts. The export of arms was only permitted in cases that contributed to peace and international

2 Interview with Nagashima Akihisa, former DPJ Vice Minister of Defence and the National Security Advisor to the Noda administration. Interviewed by the author on 6 March 2015 at the House of Representatives' office, Tokyo.

cooperation, including “international peace cooperation, international disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, responses to international terrorism and piracy, as well as in the joint development programme between Japan and the United States on ballistic missile defence” (Government of Japan 2011b: 1). The export of arms was explicitly forbidden if it actively contributed to a conflict.

Although Noda changed a principle that had remained overall intact since 1967, the public did not show any notable opposition, even when he expressed his intention to allow Japan to exercise the right of collective self-defence (Rinehart 2013: 2). This can be explained by the fact that the public perceived the DPJ's motives as genuine and not driven by a nationalistic agenda (Izumikawa 2010: 131). The public suspicion that Abe had mainly been pursuing a personal nationalist agenda had been great and was also expressed by former secretary-general of the LDP Ozawa Ichirō, who, in the early 1990s, prominently advocated for Japan to become more autonomous militarily, or, in his words, a “normal” country (Ozawa 1993). Despite agreeing with many of his policies, Ozawa was deeply critical of Abe's motivations: “Mr. Abe's concept is for Japan to have a sort of pre-war-style, great power military and economy – a kind of pre-war revival” (Sieg 2014).

Interestingly, it was Kōmeitō, the LDP junior coalition partner, who was the most critical voice of Noda's easing of Japan's de facto ban on arms exports, calling the move “folly” and “inexcusable” (Kōmeitō 2012). Along with the sceptical public, Kōmeitō acted as an important “break” on Abe's attempt to loosen existing restrictions on the use of force when he returned to power in 2012 (Liff 2015: 92). The constraints on the use of force set by Kōmeitō and the public were arguably greater than those imposed by Article 9.

Those constraints continued to be influential during the Abe Administration and were visible in his most contested security policy – the exercise of the right to collective self-defence. Although the new right was heavily criticised, the use of force was strictly limited to the minimum necessary and only allowed if Japan's security was under a direct threat with no other means of defence available (Green / Hornung 2014). The newly introduced right to exercise the right to collective self-defence certainly excluded the SDF from offering any Southeast Asian country direct military protection.

CBA was certainly a more feasible way for Abe to contribute to regional security. Abe introduced the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology in 2014, replacing the long-standing Three Principles on Arms Exports. Also, with regard to arms exports, it was more of a political than constitutional decision to restrict the new regulation. In terms of content, little was added to the exceptions that Noda had introduced. As in the previous regulations, the export of arms was permitted only if it actively contributed to peace or to Japan's security and excluded any parties involved in a conflict (MoFA 2014). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was very insistent that the export

of arms had the primary function of promoting peace. Following an editorial in *Japan Times* titled “Aid that Could Foment Conflict”, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially published a response on its homepage stating that the article “unfairly misrepresented” the actual policies (MoFA 2015b).

Practically speaking, the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology was foremost a legal streamlining that facilitated burdensome case-by-case export licensing (Sasaki 2023). Even though it facilitated the export of military equipment such as radar and patrol aircraft with important warning and surveillance functions (see Teo 2021), there was general agreement that it did not allow the export of “ready-to-use” lethal equipment. This fact was evident in 2020 when Abe’s successor, Suga Yoshihide, discussed the provision of Japanese Mogami-class frigates to Indonesia with Indonesian President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo on the same legal basis. According to an official, such an export was hard to implement under the three principles and only indirectly possible under the purpose of joint ship development with a foreign country (Japan Times 2020).

From the perspective of the existing normative and institutional constraints on the use of force, the CBA of the regional coastguards was the ideal instrument for Abe to pursue active involvement in the South China Sea. While the public was open to accepting CBA, they would not have supported any active involvement in a potential conflict. Equally important was the fact that the provision of coast guard vessels was possible without any significant legal changes.

Conclusion

Despite Abe’s initial ambition to free the country from the constraining postwar regime and increase autonomy through a more capable SDF, his contribution to regional security focused mainly on providing capacity building assistance to Southeast Asian coast guard agencies. The reason for the strong use of CBA can be well explained by considering 1) the US-Japan Alliance, 2) the supremacy of economic tools for power and influence, and 3) the role of normative and institutional constraints, central variables defining Japan’s postwar foreign policy. The analysis of this paper reveals that although qualitative changes can be observed in the effect of all three variables, their explanatory value remains unquestioned.

The CBA to regional coast guards has been an important contribution to the US-Japan Alliance, helping to address Japan’s fear of abandonment or entrapment. In essence, the provision of CBA to the coast guards helps to keep the US engaged in the region and reduces the risk of a serious conflict by demilitarising the maritime disputes in the region.

Abe increased the provision of coast guard vessels as part of the CBA, not only for security but also for economic benefits. The use of ODA for the CBA supports the domestic shipbuilding industry by providing export orders and helping it enhance competitiveness to meet the increasing demands of Southeast Asian and Pacific Island countries.

At the same time, Abe also adhered to Japan's long-lasting antimilitarist principles, adopted after World War II, by refraining from direct military involvement in maritime disputes in the South China Sea. The coast guard and military cooperation continued to grow under his term, but focusing mainly on increasing defensive capabilities. Although Abe introduced the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology, which generally allowed the export of arms, the export of "ready-to-use" lethal equipment remains unacceptable due to the existing antimilitarist norms.

Abe's extension of the CBA to Southeast Asian coast guard agencies to counter China's maritime assertiveness in the SCS does not prove a drastic security policy change but rather a continuation of existing initiatives that carefully consider power, money and norms. As Adam P. Liff argued: "The decades-old core of Japanese security policy is still largely intact" (Liff 2015: 95). It remains to be seen to what extent those variables will be affected in the wake of the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, which caused a shift in global security thinking. The event undoubtedly catalysed more drastic changes in Japan's security policy (O'Shea / Maslow 2024). Prime Minister Kishida Fumio announced security policies that included, among other things, the doubling of defence spending and increased military assistance.

Under Kishida, Japan introduced Overseas Security Assistance (OSA) to facilitate the transfer of weapons. However, its 2023 budget worth ¥2 billion, which focuses mainly on increasing warning and surveillance capabilities, is minimal compared to the ¥34 trillion worth of economic infrastructure systems which Japan aims to export between 2020 and 2025 (Yamamoto 2023). The OSA budget will most likely remain limited if it is not properly linked with the country's economic interest.

Although a more detailed analysis will be necessary to grasp the full impact of these policies, this paper's findings suggest that the role of the US-Japan Alliance, the supremacy of economic tools, and the normative and institutional constraints on using force will strongly influence the allocation of OSA.

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