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Greatness Reimagined. Japan's Global Leadership Ambitions under the Abe Doctrine

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Relaciones internacionales de Japón. La grandeza reinventada. Las ambiciones de liderazgo global de Japón bajo la Doctrina Abe.

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Abstract

This study examines how proactivity in Japanese foreign policy can be analyzed and to what extent such proactivity was reflected in Japan's international behavior during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration. It does so in the context of shifting power balances, intensified geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific, and the wider debate over whether Japan should still be understood as a "reactive state."

Building on the literature on the reactive state thesis, the Yoshida Doctrine, and the foreign policy changes associated with the Abe Doctrine, the study develops a set of analytical indicators of proactivity. These indicators are then applied to selected areas of Japan's foreign policy through a mixed empirical approach combining quantitative and qualitative evidence. More specifically, the analysis focuses on defense expenditure, external strategic-economic engagement, trade and economic engagement, and policy initiative in selected diplomatic cases.

By grounding the analysis in defined criteria, the study seeks to provide a systematic understanding of Japan's foreign policy behavior and its evolving role in the regional and international order.

The findings suggest that Japanese foreign policy under Abe became more proactive, but not in a uniform or fully transformative way. The strongest evidence of proactivity appears in Japan's role in selected diplomatic cases, such as the sustaining of the CPTPP and in its leadership during the 2019 G20 Osaka Summit. By contrast, quantitative indicators point more towards continuity with selective reinforcement. Overall, the study concludes that the Abe administration expanded Japan's room for initiative, but it did so within enduring structural, institutional, and alliance-related constraints.

Aquest estudi examina com es pot analitzar la proactivitat en la política exterior japonesa i fins a quin punt aquesta proactivitat es va reflectir en el comportament internacional del Japó durant l'administració del primer ministre Shinzo Abe. Ho fa en el context dels canvis en els equilibris de poder, la intensificació de les tensions geopolítiques a l'Indopacífic i el debat més ampli sobre si el Japó encara s'ha d'entendre com un "Estat reactiu".

A partir de la literatura sobre la tesi de l'Estat reactiu, la Doctrina Yoshida i els canvis en política exterior associats amb la Doctrina Abe, l'estudi desenvolupa un conjunt d'indicadors analítics de proactivitat. Aquests indicadors s'apliquen posteriorment a àrees seleccionades de la política exterior japonesa mitjançant un enfocament empíric mixt que combina evidència quantitativa i qualitativa. Més concretament, l'anàlisi se centra en la despesa en defensa, la implicació estratègica-econòmica exterior, la participació comercial i econòmica, i la iniciativa política en casos diplomàtics seleccionats.

En fonamentar l'anàlisi en criteris definits, l'estudi busca oferir una comprensió sistemàtica del comportament de la política exterior japonesa i de l'evolució del seu paper en l'ordre regional i internacional.

Els resultats suggereixen que la política exterior japonesa sota Abe es va tornar més proactiva, però no d'una manera uniforme ni plenament transformadora. L'evidència més clara de proactivitat apareix en el paper del Japó en casos diplomàtics seleccionats, com ara el manteniment del CPTPP i el seu lideratge durant la Cimera G20 d'Osaka de 2019. En canvi, els indicadors quantitatius apunten més aviat cap a una continuïtat amb un reforç selectiu. En conjunt, l'estudi conclou que l'administració Abe va ampliar el marge d'iniciativa del Japó, però ho va fer dins de constriccions estructurals, institucionals i relacionades amb aliances que continuaven vigents.

Este estudio examina cómo puede analizarse la proactividad en la política exterior japonesa y hasta qué punto dicha proactividad se reflejó en el comportamiento internacional de Japón durante la administración del primer ministro Shinzo Abe. Lo hace en el contexto de los cambios en los equilibrios de poder, la intensificación de las tensiones geopolíticas en el Indo-Pacífico y el debate más amplio sobre si Japón aún debe entenderse como un "Estado reactivo".

A partir de la literatura sobre la tesis del Estado reactivo, la Doctrina Yoshida y los cambios en política exterior asociados con la Doctrina Abe, el estudio desarrolla un conjunto de indicadores analíticos de proactividad. Estos indicadores se aplican posteriormente a áreas seleccionadas de la política exterior japonesa mediante un enfoque empírico mixto que combina evidencia cuantitativa y cualitativa. Más concretamente, el análisis se centra en el gasto en defensa, la implicación estratégico-económica exterior, la participación comercial y económica, y la iniciativa política en casos diplomáticos seleccionados.

Al fundamentar el análisis en criterios definidos, el estudio busca ofrecer una comprensión sistemática del comportamiento de la política exterior japonesa y de la evolución de su papel en el orden regional e internacional.

Los resultados sugieren que la política exterior japonesa bajo Abe se volvió más proactiva, pero no de una manera uniforme ni plenamente transformadora. La evidencia más sólida de proactividad aparece en el papel de Japón en casos diplomáticos seleccionados, como el mantenimiento del CPTPP y su liderazgo durante la Cumbre del G20 de Osaka de 2019. En cambio, los indicadores cuantitativos apuntan más bien hacia una continuidad con un refuerzo selectivo. En conjunto, el estudio concluye que la administración Abe amplió el margen de iniciativa de Japón, pero lo hizo dentro de limitaciones estructurales, institucionales y relacionadas con alianzas que seguían vigentes.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the international system has changed profoundly, driven by the shift in power balances, intensified geopolitical tensions, and a significant increase in uncertainty surrounding the continuity of the liberal international order. These dynamics have been particularly evident in the Indo-Pacific, a region that has emerged as the center of strategic rivalry between global powers. The escalation of this rivalry is characterized by unilateralism, trade disputes, and a retreat from multilateral governance, which has placed increasing pressure on regional actors to reassess their roles and foreign policy orientations (Liff, 2018; Dobson, 2017, pp.200-203). Within this context, Japan constitutes a particularly relevant case.

Despite its considerable economic power and worldwide importance, Japan has long been characterized in the academic literature as a state reluctant to exercise political and strategic leadership. This perceived discrepancy gave rise to the concept of Japan as a "reactive state", widely articulated by Kent E. Calder (1988). From this perspective, Japan's foreign policies and strategies are largely shaped in response to external pressure rather than autonomous initiatives (Pempel, 1977, p.724), resulting in low risk and a lack of agenda-setting capacity. This interpretation has been emphasized by the role of domestic political structures and post-war strategic choices in constraining Japan's foreign policy autonomy (Yasutomo, 1995, p.34).

The reactive state model is closely associated with the Yoshida Doctrine, a policy strategy adopted by Japan under Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida between 1948 and 1954. This strategy prioritized economic recovery, minimal defense commitments, and reliance on the United States to guarantee the country's security. While highly effective in enabling Japan's rapid economic recovery, it also fostered a cautious and non-interventionist foreign policy (Yasutomo, 1995). As a result, Japan was globally perceived as an actor that adapted to international demands, particularly those coming from Washington, rather than one that took the initiative to shape the regional or international order (Calder, 1988, p.523).

However, the adequacy of the reactive state approach has increasingly been questioned. A growing body of research suggests that Japan's behavior as a foreign policy actor has not been uniform across time or issue areas. Hirata (1998, pp.6-8) has demonstrated that Japan has alternated between reactive and proactive patterns depending

on the intensity of external pressure. Such findings challenge the notion that reactivity is a fixed characteristic and instead point to the need for a more precise understanding of how proactive behavior can be identified and analyzed.

Within this debate, the return of Shinzo Abe to office in 2012 appeared to mark a potential inflection point in Japan's foreign and security policy trajectory. During what can be referred to as the "Abe Doctrine", the new administration outlined an ambitious foreign policy agenda with an emphasis on the idea of a "Proactive Contribution to Peace" (積極的平和主義). This approach aimed to increase the country's engagement in international security issues, diplomacy, and global governance while maintaining existing alliance structures, particularly the U.S.-Japan alliance (Hughes, 2015, p.29). In an effort to put that policy forward, the Abe administration implemented a series of institutional and policy reforms, including the reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution (Hughes, 2015, pp.47-49), the consolidation of executive authority in security decision-making, and the expansion of international security cooperation (Liff, 2018, pp.14-16).

Regionally, China's increasing economic influence and rising military capabilities challenged long-standing dynamics of power in East Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific, generating new security concerns and diplomatic challenges (Liff, 2018, pp.26-27). This context both constrained and encouraged greater diplomatic engagement from Japan's foreign policy. Within this setting, Japan assumed a more visible leadership role in several regional and global governance issues (Dobson, 2017, pp.206-210). More specifically, Japan played a central role in advancing the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), demonstrating its capacity for diplomatic initiatives and agenda-setting in global economic governance (Solís, 2017, pp.15-17). In parallel, the Abe administration promoted the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision as strategic, aimed at upholding principles of openness, the rule of law, and freedom of navigation. Japan's hosting of the 2019 G20 Osaka Summit further reinforced its image as a stabilizing actor committed to multilateral cooperation.

These developments have generated debate over whether the Abe administration fundamentally transformed Japan's foreign policy identity. While some scholars interpret Abe's reforms as evidence of a shift toward proactivity, others emphasize continuity and the persistence of structural constraints. In this context, the question is not only whether change has occurred, but how proactivity can be conceptualized and examined in a consistent manner. This study addresses this issue by developing analytically grounded

dimensions of proactivity and applying them to key areas of Japan's foreign policy. In doing so, it seeks to provide a more systematic understanding of Japan's international behavior and its evolving role within the contemporary international order.

2. Research Objectives and Research Question

The main objective of this study is to develop a clearer and more systematic way of analyzing proactivity in Japanese foreign policy, with particular attention to the period associated with the Abe Doctrine.

To achieve this, the research seeks to move beyond general or purely descriptive uses of the concept of proactivity by identifying a set of analytical indicators grounded in existing literature. These indicators are meant to capture observable aspects of foreign policy behavior, such as initiative, engagement, and the ability to shape agendas.

At the same time, this study does not aim to provide a definitive way of measuring proactivity. Instead, it proposes a simplified approach that can help organize and interpret foreign policy behavior in a clearer and more consistent way. More specifically, the study has three main objectives.

First, it examines the reactive state framework and how it has been used to explain Japanese foreign policy, paying attention to both its strengths and limitations.

Second, it develops a set of analytically grounded indicators of proactivity with the aim of making the concept easier to apply in practical and empirical terms.

Third, it applies these indicators to selected domains and cases of Japan's foreign policy, using empirical evidence on defense expenditure, official development assistance, trade and economic engagement, and policy initiative in selected diplomatic cases to assess how far Japan's behavior during the Abe administration reflects the proposed indicators.

Research question: How can proactivity in Japanese foreign policy be analyzed through a set of indicators, and to what extent are these reflected in Japan's behavior during the Abe administration?

3. Methodology

This study adopts a structured analytical approach that combines conceptual development with empirical analysis, in line with its objective of examining proactivity in Japanese foreign policy through a set of analytical indicators.

The research follows a two-step strategy. First, the theoretical framework is used to identify and develop a set of indicators of proactivity based on existing literature. These indicators provide the foundation for the analysis and guide both the selection of cases and the interpretation of empirical evidence.

Second, the study applies these indicators to selected domains of Japan's foreign policy during the Abe administration. More specifically, the analysis focuses on four areas: defense expenditure, external strategic-economic engagement through official development assistance, trade and economic engagement, and policy initiative in selected diplomatic cases.

Empirical analysis combines quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative component is based on publicly available datasets and focuses on identifying long-term trends through comparisons between the pre-Abe period (2000-2011) and the Abe administration (2012-2020). In particular, the study examines changes in defense expenditure, official development assistance, and trade and economic engagement. The quantitative data were processed and analyzed in Python, mainly through descriptive trend analysis, period comparison, and graphical representation. The cleaned datasets, Python scripts, and graph outputs have been archived in a public Zenodo repository for reproducibility purposes, with the following **DOI:**

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Alongside this, the study also incorporates a qualitative component to examine aspects of proactivity that cannot be correctly captured through numerical trends. This part of the analysis focuses on selected diplomatic cases, especially Japan's role in sustaining the CPTPP after the withdrawal of the United States and its leadership during the 2019 G20 Osaka Summit.

Taken together, this mixed analytical strategy makes it possible to examine proactivity not as a single measurable variable, but as a multidimensional pattern of foreign policy behavior. At the same time, the study recognizes that the proposed indicators do not provide a definitive measurement of proactivity. Rather, they offer a

simplified and systematic framework through which foreign policy behavior can be organized, interpreted, and assessed.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Explaining Japanese Foreign Policy: Structure, Agency and Constraint

Japanese foreign policy studies have long been characterized by an apparent paradox. Despite Japan's considerable economic power and diplomatic presence, its international behavior has often appeared cautious and restrained when compared to other major economies (Calder, 1988, pp.517-519). This discrepancy between capabilities and observable behavior has led scholars of International Relations to focus less on Japan's capabilities and more on factors that have shaped and constrained its external conduct. As a result, much of the literature has approached Japanese foreign policy through the combined lenses of external pressure and normative context.

From this perspective, Japan's external behavior cannot be reduced to the outcome of rational cost-benefit decisions. Rather, it must be understood within a broader context of post-war arrangements that have shaped both the range of policy options and the preferences of decision-makers themselves. Japan's post-war integration into the U.S. led international order created a security environment in which strategic autonomy was limited (Hook et al., 2012, pp.28-31). The delegation of security responsibilities to its alliance partner reduced the incentives for an independent military or political leadership. This setting did not eliminate agency, but it conditioned how and where it could be exercised. As a result, Japanese foreign policy often tends to adjust to external pressures rather than proactive agenda-setting (Calder, 1988, pp.526-528).

Domestic political dynamics further reinforced this pattern. The dispersion of authority across bureaucratic institutions, combined with the prominence of consensus-based decision-making, contributed to a preference for stability and non-interventionism. Foreign policy change, when it occurred, tended to be carefully calibrated and implemented at a slow rate, reflecting a political culture that privileged risk avoidance over strategic experimentation (Pempel, 1977, pp.731-733).

Another important layer of constraint is Japan's post-war identity shaped by defeat, occupation, and the constitutional renunciation of war, producing a strong commitment to pacifism and multilateralism. Over time, these norms have become embedded not only in legal frameworks, but also in the public discourse and expectations regarding Japan's appropriate international role. Consequently, foreign policy behavior has been influenced by questions of identity and strategic necessity. It is within this analytical context that the concept of Japan as a reactive state emerged.

Taken together, these factors suggest that Japanese foreign policy should be understood as the product of constrained agency. Japan possesses significant diplomatic capacity, but its ability to translate these resources into leadership has been mediated by structural and institutional limitations. However, this theory does not deny the possibility of change, and raises critical questions about when, how, and under what circumstances this change might occur.

4.2 The Reactive State Thesis

The reactive state thesis functions as an analytical framework for explaining patterns of foreign policy behavior in which a state's initiative is largely shaped by the external environment rather than domestic strategic planning. Developed most clearly by Calder (1988), the model directs attention away from state preferences or domestic ambition and towards how foreign policy change is produced. The thesis focuses on the conditions that activate policy responses and the origin of policy initiatives.

Within this model, foreign policy changes are understood as a conditional outcome. Rather than being a result of anticipatory planning, policy initiatives tend to arise once external expectations become explicit and difficult to ignore, specifically those articulated by key allies or important international institutions (Calder, 1988, pp.524-526). Consequently, foreign policy behavior is shaped less by independent agenda-setting than by a response to external demands.

This dynamic is reinforced by domestic decision-making structures that discourage proactive engagement (Calder, 1988, p. 528). The dispersion of authority across different bureaucratic institutions, combined with decision-making based on coordination and consensus, raises the political and administrative costs of initiating policy change. As Pempel (1977, pp.731-734) notes, such institutional structures favor

continuous adjustment and delay, making foreign policy response more likely to follow international developments rather than preceding them.

The reactive state thesis also generates expectations regarding the uneven nature of foreign policy change. Responses are more likely to happen in issue areas where external pressure is clearly articulated and sustained. Conversely, policy continuity is expected where such pressure is limited or ambiguous (Calder, 1988, pp.526-528). This logic explains why apparent activism in one area does not necessarily translate into broader foreign policy transformations.

Importantly, the reactive state thesis does not treat reactive behavior as fixed or as an unchanging feature of foreign policy. Instead, it provides a reference pattern against which moments of apparent change can be evaluated. Episodes of increased diplomatic activism or institutional reform do not contradict the model. Rather, they invite closer examination of the origin of policy initiatives, their timing, and the extent to which they reflect independent agenda-setting.

At the same time, the explanatory scope of the reactive state thesis does have limitations. Its strong focus on external pressure and reactive adjustment makes it less suitable for analyzing more complex patterns of behavior, particularly in contexts where foreign policy initiatives coexist with continuity and constraints. For this reason, it is necessary to look beyond this framework to better understand more complex patterns of foreign policy behavior.

4.3 The Yoshida Doctrine and Post-war Strategy

The Yoshida Doctrine provides the historical and strategic background that helps explain the emergence of reactive patterns in Japanese foreign policy after the Second World War. The term is associated with Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, who led Japan during the early post-war period, and refers to a set of policy priorities that shaped Japan's international orientation for decades (Soeya, 2008, p. 1). Rather than being a formally announced doctrine, it is understood as a pragmatic response to the difficult political, economic, and security conditions Japan faced after 1945 (Hoshiro, 2022, p. 105).

Most scholars identify three core elements of the Yoshida Doctrine. First, Japan relied on the security alliance with the United States to ensure its national defense, which allowed the country to avoid rebuilding large domestic military institutions. Second,

Japan accepted strong limitations on its use of military force, in line with Article 9 of the postwar Constitution. Third, economic recovery and growth were prioritized as the main national objectives, with the belief that economic strength would restore Japan's international position (Hoshiro, 2022, pp. 105-107).

This strategic approach proved successful in supporting Japan's rapid economic growth and reintegration into the international system. By depending on the U.S. for security matters, Japanese policymakers were able to direct all resources toward industrial development while avoiding the political and economic costs associated with military expansion. As Calder (1988, pp. 526-528) observes, this framework also reduced the need for Japan to develop an independent and proactive foreign policy posture.

However, over time, the Yoshida Doctrine had consequences for how Japanese foreign policy was conducted. Long-term dependence on the alliance system with the U.S. weakened incentives for independent planning and international engagement, reinforcing cautious approaches (Soeya, 2008). Thus, decision-making practices increasingly lead to gradual adjustment and stability, rather than bold or high-risk initiatives, a tendency that aligns with the domestic constraints highlighted by the reactive state framework (Pempel, 1977, pp. 730-733).

Recent academic work also focuses on questioning whether the Yoshida Doctrine should be understood as a doctrine in a strict sense. Hoshiro (2022, p.106) argues that the concept was developed after the fact by scholars attempting to explain continuity in Japan's post-war foreign policy. However, even if it was not a consciously designed strategy, the Yoshida Doctrine remains a useful analytical concept for describing the long-standing emphasis on alliance dependence, economic priorities, and military restraint in Japanese policymaking.

In addition to shaping institutions and policy choices, the Yoshida Doctrine influenced Japan's broader foreign policy identity. Norms related to pacifism, international cooperation, and economic diplomacy became deeply rooted in the country's political discourse and public expectations. These norms contributed to the view that restraint and cooperation, rather than leadership or unilateral action, were the most appropriate forms of international engagement for Japan (Hook et al., 2012, pp. 28-30).

The Yoshida Doctrine therefore represents more than a historical background condition. It formed the environment in which reactive behavior became the norm. By prioritizing economic objectives and relying on external security support, it helped

normalize a foreign policy style based on adaptation rather than initiative. Understanding the Yoshida Doctrine is essential for analyzing later claims of change in Japanese foreign policy. Any argument that Japan moved toward a more proactive or leadership-oriented role must be assessed in relation to this post-war background, which continued to shape policy choices and expectations long after the immediate post-war period.

4.4 Revising Reactivity: Variation across Time and Issue Areas

The reactive state thesis offers a baseline for understanding patterns in Japanese foreign policy-making processes, particularly in situations where international expectations are defined and difficult to ignore. In many cases, Japan has appeared to respond cautiously when facing pressure from key external actors, specifically the United States (Calder, 1988, p.521). However, one of the most consistent criticisms in the literature is that "reactivity" is not a stationary label that explains Japanese foreign policy in its entirety. Instead, rather than following a single, stable mode of behavior, Japan's foreign policy has shown significant variation depending on context (Hirata, 1998, p.1-2). Scholars point out that levels of external pressure differ over time, that policy areas involve different costs and sensitivities, and that domestic actors do not always interpret or respond to international demands in the same way. As a result, patterns of foreign policy behavior cannot be considered identical across time and issue areas.

From this perspective, reactivity should be understood as a changing outcome rather than a permanent national characteristic. Hirata's analysis is especially clear on this point: Japanese diplomacy is described as shifting between reactive and proactive depending on the intensity of foreign pressure or *gaiatsu* (外圧) (Hirata, 1998, pp.6-7). This approach shifts the analytical focus away from static labels and toward identifying the specific conditions under which Japan adjusts its behavior.

This revision has important implications for the study of foreign policy change. Instead of asking whether Japan has simply remained reactive or become proactive, it is essential to examine when reactive responses are maintained, when proactive initiatives emerge, and how these shifts differ across issue areas. By addressing these matters, the reactive state framework can be used as a reference point while allowing for variation and selective forms of agency.

4.4.1 Reactivity is conditional, not constant

A key limitation of the reactive state argument is the assumption that Japan continuously faces a steady flow of U.S. pressure. Hirata directly challenges this, noting that reactivist arguments often imply a constant flood of *gaiatsu* and an automatic adjustment to the United States' demands, but stresses that the United States does not necessarily make demands on Japan in all cases (Hirata, 1998, p.7). In other words, the external environment does not always exert consistent pressure, variation in the intensity and articulation of foreign expectations plays a key role in shaping Japan's behavior.

This point matters because it opens analytical space for proactive behavior. If foreign pressure is not constant, then periods of lower pressure create room for initiative, especially in policy areas where Japan has strong economic leverage, institutional experience, or a clear interest in shaping rules (Hirata, 1998, pp.7-8). Thus, proactivity is not defined as aggressive behavior. Rather, it refers to cases where Japan advances its own agenda, interests, and policy objectives, and where policies are not based solely on the expectations of foreign countries nor in response to direct foreign pressure (Hirata, 1998, p.8).

4.4.2 Issue area variation and selective responsiveness

One of the most significant contributions of later studies is the demonstration that Japanese foreign policy behavior varies substantially across issue areas. Calder's original formulation treats reactivity primarily as a general feature of foreign economic policymaking, stating that "the state fails to undertake major independent foreign economic policy initiatives when it has the power and national incentives to do so" and that "it responds to outside pressures for change, albeit erratically, unsystematically, and often incompletely" (Calder, 1988, pp. 519-520). However, more recent research has shown that the outcomes of foreign pressure vary depending on whether the issue concerns security, trade, or regional diplomacy, among other issue areas.

Hirata's analysis of Japan-Vietnam relations provides a clear illustration of issue-area variation. In the 1970s, when U.S. influence in Indochina declined following the Nixon Doctrine and the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, Japan actively pursued diplomatic normalization and economic engagement with Hanoi. One of the main

objectives was to help the reconstruction of its war-damaged economy, promoting the incorporation of Indochina into the market of capitalist economies, along with keeping regional stability and peace (Hirata, 1998, pp.12-14). In this phase, Japan was not responding to explicit U.S. demands but advancing its own political and economic objectives. By contrast, following Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia in 1978-1979 and the intensification of U.S.-Soviet rivalry, Japan aligned its policies with U.S. preferences, including the suspension of aid (Hirata, 1998, pp. 19-23).

This alternation demonstrates what can be described as selective responsiveness. Japan does not respond in the same way across all policy areas but instead modifies its behavior according to the strategic importance of the issue and the extent to which it is connected to core alliance interests, especially those of the United States. For instance, when an issue becomes directly tied to U.S.-Japan relations or to wider Cold War alignments, reactive tendencies tend to become stronger. When this connection is limited or unclear, Japan has more space to act in a proactive way.

Miyaoka's analysis of foreign pressure further supports this conditional interpretation. Rather than treating *gaiatsu* as automatically producing change, it is emphasized that foreign pressure interacts with domestic political actors and policy processes (Miyaoka, 1997, pp.4-7). Policy change does not occur simply because pressure exists, but because domestic actors reassess costs and interests within the existing institutional framework.

Taken together, these studies suggest that Japanese foreign policy cannot be understood as uniformly reactive. Instead, responsiveness differs across issue areas, depending on key ally interests, such as the U.S., the degree of articulated pressure, and the interaction between foreign expectations and domestic political structures.

This revised understanding of reactivity also raises a broader analytical question: if Japanese foreign policy can combine both reactive and proactive elements depending on the context, it becomes necessary to define more clearly how proactivity itself can be identified and analyzed.

4.5 The Abe Doctrine

4.5.1 Conceptualizing the Abe Doctrine

"The Abe Doctrine" is not a formal concept or term used in policy discourse in Japan, but rather a theoretical construct developed in academia to identify the core elements of change in foreign and security policies pursued during the second tenure of Prime Minister Abe (2012-2020) (Hughes, 2015, p.2). Contrary to the Yoshida Doctrine, which was later developed as a theoretical construct to frame the foreign policy pursued in the aftermath of World War II in Japan (Hoshiro, 2022, p.106), the Abe Doctrine refers to a more deliberate and articulated attempt to redefine Japan's role in international society (Hughes, 2015, p.6). At its core, the Abe Doctrine refers to the concept of "Proactive Contribution to Peace" (積極的平和主義, *sekkyokuteki heiwa-shugi*), which was first presented in speeches delivered by Prime Minister Abe and later included in the National Security Strategy adopted in 2013 (Hughes, 2015, pp. 29-30).

On a conceptual level, the Abe Doctrine sought to re-interpret Japan's post-war pacifism in a manner that suggested its contribution to international peace was not only a function of its restraint but also its active engagement in security cooperation and rulemaking. Notably, the Abe Doctrine did not seek to openly reject the constitutional framework of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution. Instead, it sought to reinterpret the Japanese Constitution, rather than revise it (Hughes, 2015, pp. 29-30, 47-49).

Therefore, the Abe Doctrine can be understood as a move to redefine the limits of international engagement. This is because, unlike the Yoshida administration, which focused on economic development and relied on U.S. protection, the Abe Doctrine focused on the role of Japan in international security, with a greater ability to influence its own region (Liff, 2018, pp.13-16). This included expanding cooperation with partners such as Australia and India (Liff, 2018, pp.26-27), the alliance with the U.S., and international agreements like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (Vidal, 2022, pp.15-18).

However, the issue of continuity with the past strategies must also be considered. Indeed, as Hook et al. (2012, pp. 28-31) underline, the foreign policy identity of Japan in the post-war period has always rested on the alliance and the cooperation in a multilateral format within the U.S.-led order. The Abe Doctrine has never pursued the aim of strategic

autonomy; it has pursued the aim of increasing Japan's influence while maintaining the U.S.-Japan alliance as the basis of its security policy.

From the perspective of the reactive state thesis, this raises a crucial analytical question. Calder (1988, pp. 519-520, 524-526) characterizes Japan as a reactive state, which means that it tends to react to the pressure from outside instead of pursuing its own agenda. The Abe Doctrine seems to contradict this thesis, however, the empirical character of this contradiction must be evaluated.

4.5.2 Ideational Foundations

Beyond its institutional and policy components, the Abe Doctrine is also grounded in a distinct worldview regarding Japan's international role. Policy thinking is shaped by the belief that Japan faces an altered regional and global security environment that requires a more assertive and engaged response (Hughes, 2015, pp.8-10). In particular, the rise of China's military capabilities and its assertive behavior in the East China Sea contributed to a reassessment of Japan's security posture (Liff, 2018, pp.26-27).

Within this context, the principle of "Proactive Contribution to Peace" emerged as the normative foundation of Abe's strategy. Incorporated into the 2013 NSS, the principle presented Japan as a state committed to making "proactive contributions" to international peace in cooperation with partners and allies (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2013; Hughes, 2015, pp.29-30). At the same time, Abe's approach could be understood as "proactive pacifism", meaning that Japan would uphold its pacifism commitments while justifying the exercise of both individual and collective self-defense (Akimoto, 2022, pp. 327-329).

At the same time, rather than framing Japan's activism purely in realist terms, the Abe administration encapsulated security concerns within a broader narrative of responsibility and international contribution. In government discourse, Proactive Contribution to Peace was explicitly linked to maintaining the rule of law, universal values of freedom, democracy, and respect for basic human rights (Government of Japan, 2014). In this way, security reforms were presented not as a militarization, but as a responsible contribution to maintaining a rule-based order.

4.5.3 Institutional Transformation and Executive Centralization

It is important to assess the institutional dimension of the Abe Doctrine, not only its ideology and rhetoric. One of the main arguments of the reactive state thesis is that Japan's fragmented decision-making structure and bureaucracy increase the political costs of initiative and favor reactive responses to external pressure (Calder, 1988, pp. 528-530; Pempel, 1977, pp.731-733). In this respect, the Abe Doctrine aimed not only at transforming the international discourse on Japan but also at transforming the very mechanisms of Japanese foreign and security policymaking.

A major reform was the establishment of the National Security Council (NSC) in 2013. The NSC was partly based on its counterparts in the U.S. and UK and was intended to be a new control tower (*shireito*) facilitating quicker and more efficient responses to external and security-related emergent threats (Hughes, 2015, pp.29-30). Prior to this reform, cabinet ministers and parliamentary vice-ministers often held office for only short periods of time, while career bureaucrats exercised long-term influence over policy direction (Pempel, 1977, pp.731-732). The creation of the NSC in 2013, therefore, attempted to strengthen the coordinating capacity of the Prime Minister's Office in the field of national security.

At the same time, Japan adopted its first National Security Strategy (NSS) in December 2013. The NSS established a comprehensive framework regarding Japan's security objectives, risk perceptions, and strategic alliances (Hughes, 2015, pp.29-30). Most importantly, the NSS incorporated the previously mentioned "Proactive Contribution to Peace" (積極的平和主義) as the guiding concept of Japan's security policy. To summarize, the NSS formalized strategic security planning in a way that had previously been underdeveloped in Japan's post-war policymaking.

Perhaps the most controversial reform was the 2014 reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Constitution to allow for the limited exercise of collective self-defense. Rather than pursuing a formal constitutional revision, which would have required a national referendum, the Abe administration opted for a reinterpretation through Cabinet decision (Hughes, 2015, p.49). Hughes explains that this move drew on the 1959 *Sunagawa* Supreme Court ruling, which acknowledged Japan's right of self-defense and left key security matters to political authorities (Hughes, 2015, p.44). The reconvened Advisory

Panel further argued that the changing security environment required collective responses beyond individual self-defense, citing scenarios such as defending U.S. vessels or intercepting ballistic missiles (Hughes, 2015, pp.46-47).

Together, these reforms demonstrate a clear attempt to improve coordination in security policymaking. Hughes notes that Abe linked reinterpretation with legislative change to ensure "seamless responses" to emerging threats (Hughes, 2015, p.49). In contrast to the patterns described by Pempel, where strong bureaucratic continuity and short ministerial terms in office limited policy redirection (Pempel, 1977, pp.731-732).

However, these reforms did not remove structural limits. Reinterpretation faced strong political and legal criticism, resulting in Abe's office ultimately adopting only a limited acceptance of collective self-defense rather than a full exercise of the right, which would have exceeded the purport of the Constitution (Hughes, 2015, p.49). Proposed safeguards, including legislative constraints and Diet approval, were meant to act as brakes (*hadome*) on expansion (Hughes, 2015, p.46). From the perspective of the reactive state thesis, this suggests modification rather than elimination or constraint: institutional tools expanded, but constitutional, political, and alliance-related limits remained.

4.6 Conceptualizing Proactivity in Japanese Foreign Policy

The discussion on Japanese foreign policy has long been dominated by the concepts of reactivity, passivity, and external pressure. However, once the idea of Japan as a uniformly reactive state is questioned, a new analytical problem emerges: how should proactivity actually be understood? The literature frequently refers to Japan as more active or more visible internationally, particularly under the Abe administration, yet these terms are not always accompanied by a clear conceptual definition.

This problem is not unique to the debate of proactivity. As Chang (2014, pp. 63-65) argues in his reassessment of the reactive state thesis, one of the main limitations in the literature lies in the absence of a common conceptual framework. Different studies emphasize different aspects of behavior, but they do not necessarily share the same understanding of the concepts they employ. For this reason, debates over whether Japan is reactive or not can become contradictory, as the concept itself is not always clearly defined. Chang (2014, pp.66-67) further notes that without an operational definition, a

concept remains difficult to measure, making it unclear what type of empirical evidence would support or challenge it. Although this argument is developed in relation to reactivity, the same issue applies to the concept of proactivity.

The ambiguity is particularly evident in the literature on the Abe administration. Several authors describe Japan's foreign policy during this period as more proactive, often referring to stronger leadership, increased diplomatic engagement, and a more strategic vision. Dobson (2017, pp. 199-204), for instance, argues that Japan adopted a more strategic and coherent approach to global governance, while also becoming more visible in international leadership settings such as the G7 and G20. These developments have contributed to the perception of Japan as a more active international actor.

However, increased activity does not necessarily imply unconstrained proactivity. In the security domain, although Japan expanded its capabilities and international cooperation, these developments remained embedded within the framework of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Hughes (2015, pp.47-49) highlights that key reforms introduced under Abe were aimed at strengthening Japan's role within the alliance rather than achieving full strategic autonomy. A similar pattern can be observed in the economic domain, where Japan demonstrated initiative in leading the CPTPP after the U.S. withdrawal, but still operates within broader structural and economic interdependencies (Vidal, 2022, pp.16-18). These examples suggest that initiative and constraint can coexist.

For this reason, equating proactivity with a higher level of activity can be misleading. Rather than focusing only on the intensity of engagement, it is necessary to consider the origin and nature of policy behavior. In this study, proactivity is conceptualized as the capacity to initiate policy, shape agendas, and pursue objectives that are not solely driven by immediate external pressure, even when operating within existing constraints. On this basis, the following sections introduce a set of indicators designed to capture different dimensions of proactivity in practice.

5. Research Hypotheses

Building on the development of analytical indicators of proactivity, this study formulates the following hypotheses to guide the empirical analysis.

Rather than seeking to determine whether Japan has definitively shifted from a reactive to a proactive foreign policy pattern, these hypotheses focus on identifying patterns of behavior that are consistent with the proposed indicators and examining how they are supported by empirical evidence.

H1: *Japan's foreign policy under the Abe administration shows observable patterns consistent with the proposed indicators of proactivity.*

H2: *The presence of these indicators is not uniform across all policy areas but varies depending on the strategic context and the type of engagement.*

H3: *While elements of proactivity can be identified, they coexist with structural and institutional constraints that limit their scope and consistency.*

6. Indicators of proactivity

Building on the conceptual discussion above, this study proposes a set of indicators of proactivity designed to be analyzed empirically through accessible online data. Rather than relying on broad or purely interpretative definitions, these indicators focus on observable patterns of behavior that can be measured across time and compared between the pre-Abe period and the Abe administration. In this sense, proactivity is approached not as an abstract quality, but as a set of external behaviors that may reflect a more active and initiative-driven foreign policy.

The first proxy indicator for proactive behavior is **defense expenditure**. In this study, defense expenditure is used as an indirect indicator of Japan's willingness to invest in a more active security posture, rather than as direct evidence of proactivity. A sustained increase in military spending may suggest a stronger commitment to security capabilities, especially when it goes beyond mere continuation. However, changes in defense

expenditure may also reflect external threats or institutional continuity, among others, and therefore must be interpreted with caution. This indicator can be measured through annual defense expenditure in absolute terms, as a percentage of GDP, and through rates of change over time. Publicly available sources such as SIPRI, the World Bank, and Japanese government reports make it possible to compare trends before and during the Abe administration.

The second indicator is **external strategic-economic engagement.** A more proactive foreign policy may also be reflected in Japan's use of external economic instruments to reinforce its international presence. This can be analyzed through official development assistance and related forms of strategic support, particularly in Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Publicly available data from sources such as the OECD, JICA, and MOFA make it possible to trace whether Japan increased its outward economic commitments during the Abe years.

The third indicator is **trade and economic engagement**. In the economic domain, proactive behavior can be analyzed through Japan's trade relations and broader economic interaction with key partners. This includes changes in bilateral trade volumes, trade shares, and patterns of economic dependence or diversification, especially in relation to the United States and China. This indicator can be measured using publicly available trade databases such as IMF Direction of Trade Statistics, UN Comtrade, and World Bank data. Rather than assuming trade itself to be equal to proactivity, the analysis focuses on whether Japan's economic behavior reflects a more active positioning within the regional and international order.

The fourth indicator is **policy initiative in selected cases.** Since not all dimensions of proactivity can be reduced to quantitative trends, the study also considers a limited number of selected cases in which Japan appears to have acted with clear initiative. These cases are not intended to replace quantitative analysis, but to complement it by examining whether Japan assumed a visible leading role in specific moments of foreign policy. In this study, particular attention is given to cases such as the CPTPP and the 2019 G20 Osaka Summit, which can be analyzed through official records, institutional documents, and secondary literature.

Taken together, these indicators provide a framework for analyzing proactivity through observable and measurable behavior. Although none of them alone can definitively prove the existence of a proactive foreign policy, their combined use allows

for a more systematic assessment of whether Japan's international behavior became more active, outward-looking, and strategically engaged during the Abe administration.

Operational Table for the Empirical Analysis of Proactivity

Indicator	What it measures	Variables / empirical evidence	Main sources	Type of analysis	Expected relevance to proactivity
Defense expenditure	Degree of commitment to a more active security posture	Annual military expenditure; military expenditure as % of GDP; annual growth rate; comparison between pre-Abe (2000-2011) and Abe period (2012-2020)	SIPRI Military Expenditure Database; World Bank	Time-series analysis; line graphs; comparison of averages and growth rates across periods	Sustained increases in expenditure may serve as a proxy for a stronger willingness to invest in security capabilities and a more active security posture, although they do not constitute direct evidence of proactivity on their own.
External strategic-economic engagement	Use of economic instruments to reinforce Japan's external presence.	Total official development assistance (ODA); ODA to Asia and the Indo-Pacific, where available; outward strategic support and cooperation.	OECD; MOFA	Time-series analysis; comparison of averages; descriptive assessment of regional distribution	An increase in ODA or a stronger strategic orientation of external economic support may suggest a more engaged foreign policy

Trade and economic engagement	Japan's economic positioning and external engagement	Bilateral trade shares export/import trends; diversification or concentration patterns	World Bank; World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS)	Time-series analysis; comparative graphs; trade share calculations	Changes in trade patterns may reflect an effort to position Japan within the regional and international economic order
Policy initiative in selected cases	Japan's visible leadership and initiative in specific foreign policy moments	Official role in sustaining or leading key initiatives; evidence of leadership in CPTPP and the 2019 G20 Osaka Summit	MOFA; G20 official documents; CPTPP official records; Japanese Diplomatic Bluebooks	Qualitative case analysis; short chronological reconstruction; document-based interpretation	Clear initiative in selected cases may provide direct evidence of policy leadership and agenda-setting capacity.

7. Empirical Analysis

7.1 Defense Expenditure

The first proxy indicator used to assess proactivity in Japanese foreign policy is defense expenditure. In this study, this indicator refers to Japan's level of military spending and its evolution over time, measured both as a percentage of GDP and in monetary terms. Defense expenditure is relevant because it can serve as an indirect indicator of Japan's willingness to invest in a more active security posture. However, it does not demonstrate proactivity by itself. Changes in defense spending may also respond to external threats, allied expectations, or institutional continuity. For this reason, the indicator is interpreted with caution and used as a proxy rather than as direct evidence of foreign policy proactivity.

This indicator is particularly important in the Japanese case, since its national defense policies have traditionally been constrained by the conditions of post-war Japan, its constitution, and its reliance on the U.S.-Japan alliance. In this context, even modest increases in military budgets can be analytically significant. However, as noted above, these changes should not be interpreted automatically as evidence of proactivity, since

they may also reflect institutional stability, external threats, or responses to allied expectations. The World Bank datasets used in this section, together with the data extraction process and graph production, are described in Appendices A and B.

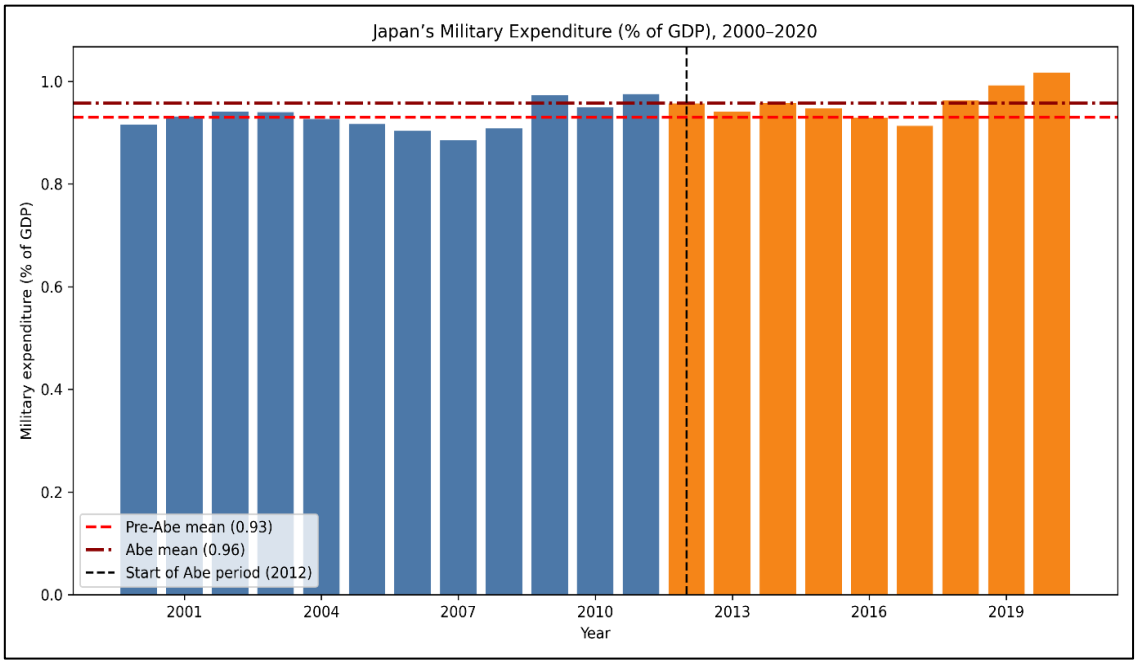

Fig 1. Japan's Military Expenditure (% of GDP), 2000-2020
Source: Own elaboration based on World Bank data, *Military expenditure (% of GDP)* (indicator code: MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS), processed in Python. Data correspond to Japan, 2000–2020.

Figure 1 displays Japan's military expenditure as a proportion of GDP from 2000 to 2020, distinguishing between the periods before and during the Abe administration. The most striking characteristic of the graph, at first glance, is the degree of stability within the time-series data. As opposed to other examples of military expansion where expenditures increase exponentially, Japan kept its military expenditure relatively constant at about 1 per cent of GDP. Nevertheless, some variations can be observed within the graph. Before Abe's leadership, the ratio moved around the lower 0.9 mark, dipping marginally in the middle years of the decade before moving upwards towards the latter end of the period. Under Abe's leadership, the ratio was largely stable in the early half of the period but increased significantly in the later years, exceeding previous highs and culminating in its highest value in 2020.

The average values shown in **Figure 1** indicate that the Abe period had a marginally greater mean value for military spending as a proportion of GDP than the pre-Abe period. However, the discrepancy is moderate rather than pronounced. It can be concluded, therefore, that the Abe administration did not produce any radical change in the overall scale of defense spending relative to GDP. Nevertheless, there is clearly a trend towards a modest increase, particularly towards the end of the era. From an analytical perspective, this supports an interpretation of continuity with gradual reinforcement. While the Japanese government did not deviate from its historical policy of fiscal prudence, it showed a slight inclination to increase funding for the defense sector.

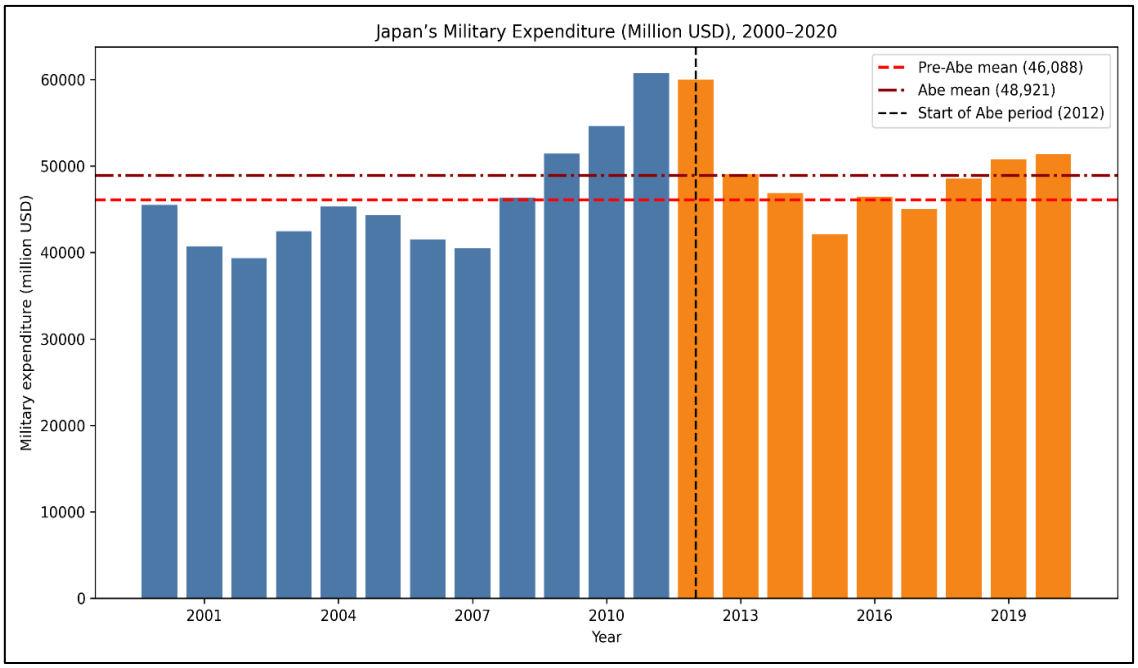

Fig 2. Japan's Military Expenditure (Million USD), 2000-2020
Source: Own elaboration based on World Bank data, *Military expenditure (current USD)* (indicator code: MS.MIL.XPND.CD), processed in Python and expressed in million USD. Data correspond to Japan, 2000–2020.

Figure 2 supports this observation through the representation of Japan's military expenditure in million USD. Since these figures are expressed in current USD, they should be interpreted with caution, as exchange-rate movements and inflation may affect the apparent evolution of spending values. When expressed in monetary terms, the pattern appears more pronounced than in the previous figure. After experiencing a reduction at the start of the 2000s, spending started increasing gradually towards the last pre-Abe era years and reached a maximum point right before 2012. However, during the Abe era, there was an initial decrease after reaching the maximum, but then spending rebounded

and increased again in the latter period. At the end of the series, military expenditure is above most of the pre-2012 spending figures.

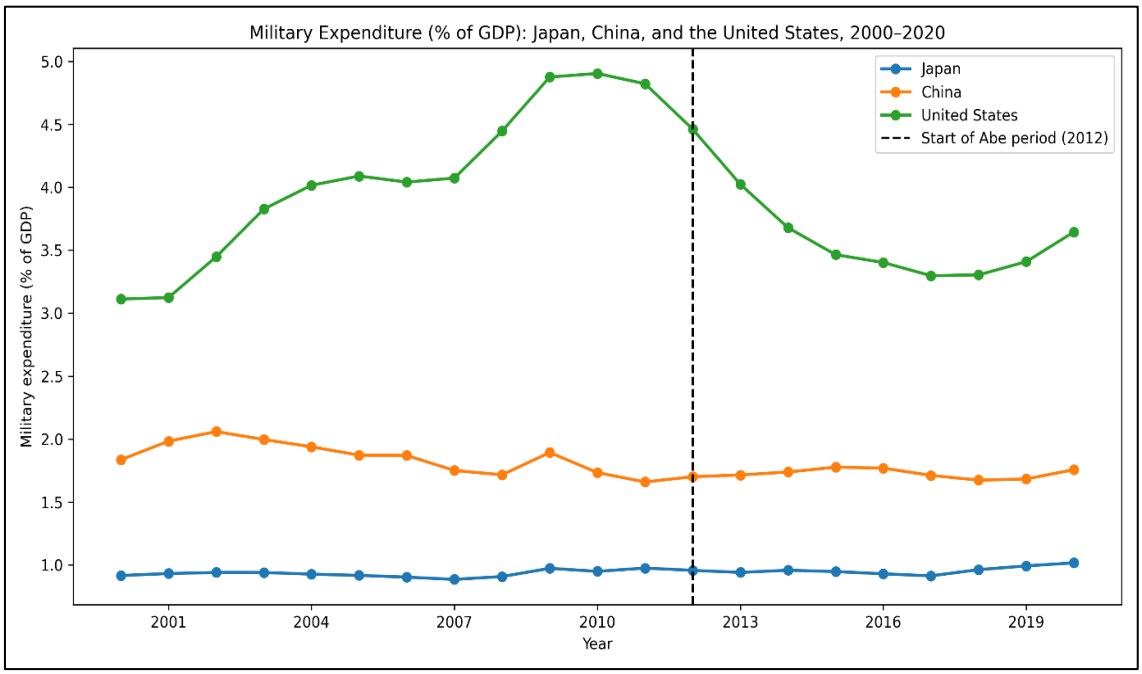

Fig 3. Military Expenditure (% of GDP): Japan, China, and the United States, 2000-2020
Source: Own elaboration based on World Bank data, *Military expenditure (% of GDP)* (indicator code: MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS), processed in Python. Data correspond to Japan, China, and the United States, 2000–2020.

The comparison in **Figure 3** considers Japan relative to China and the U.S. based on military spending as a percentage of their respective GDPs. The significance of this comparison lies in the fact that the security policies of Japan should be considered within a wider international context than just its own. As can be seen from the figure, Japan remained significantly below not only China but especially the U.S. during the entire period. Military spending by China varied between 1.7 and 2.0 per cent, much higher than that by Japan. The U.S. had higher military spending than either Japan or China, exceeding 5 per cent prior to 2012 and falling sharply afterwards.

There are two main reasons why this perspective is analytically significant. First, this perspective makes clear that any perceived growth in the country's expenditure needs to be understood in light of the relatively small scale of the increase observed. Indeed, despite Abe's policies, Japan was still one of the lower spenders compared to other major countries within its strategic environment. But secondly, it also sheds light on the reason why some kind of strengthening might have been viewed as necessary by the Abe administration. The distance that Japan found itself from China and the U.S. means that

Japan's defense policy had to take place amid structural dependence and asymmetry within the region.

Overall, the findings presented above give qualified support for defense expenditure as a proxy indicator of proactivity. While the data does not demonstrate a sharp divide between the pre-Abe and the Abe periods, since Japan's military budget remained relatively restrained compared to historical standards or those of other countries, it does show a modest increase in the defense burden, a cautious recovery in its military expenditures expressed in monetary terms in the later Abe era, and continued investment in defense resources amid new challenges in the regional context. From the perspective of this study, these changes can be interpreted as signs of an incremental process of security reinforcement rather than radical transformation. Further information on the reproducibility of this section analysis is included in Appendix C.

7.2 External Strategic-Economic Engagement

The second indicator used to examine proactivity in Japanese foreign policy is external strategic-economic engagement. Specifically, this indicator involves Japan's application of economic tools to maintain and strengthen its presence internationally, specifically in terms of its official development assistance (ODA). This is especially relevant in the Japanese case, since post-war Japanese foreign policy has often projected influence through economic rather than military means.

This is where ODA proves especially useful, since it shows that there has been an actual commitment to external affairs on a continuous basis through tangible measurements. Aid can be attributed to a continuation of policies, an institutional habit, or a prior diplomatic commitment, and hence represents some manifestation of initiative. This section seeks to investigate whether the magnitude, distribution, and concentration of Japanese ODA match an outward-oriented foreign policy. The focus is concentrated on three aspects: the evolution of total ODA, the distribution of Japanese aid among selected Asian recipients, and the broader regional pattern of net ODA allocation. The

OECD datasets used in this section, together with the data preparation process, are described in Appendices D and E.

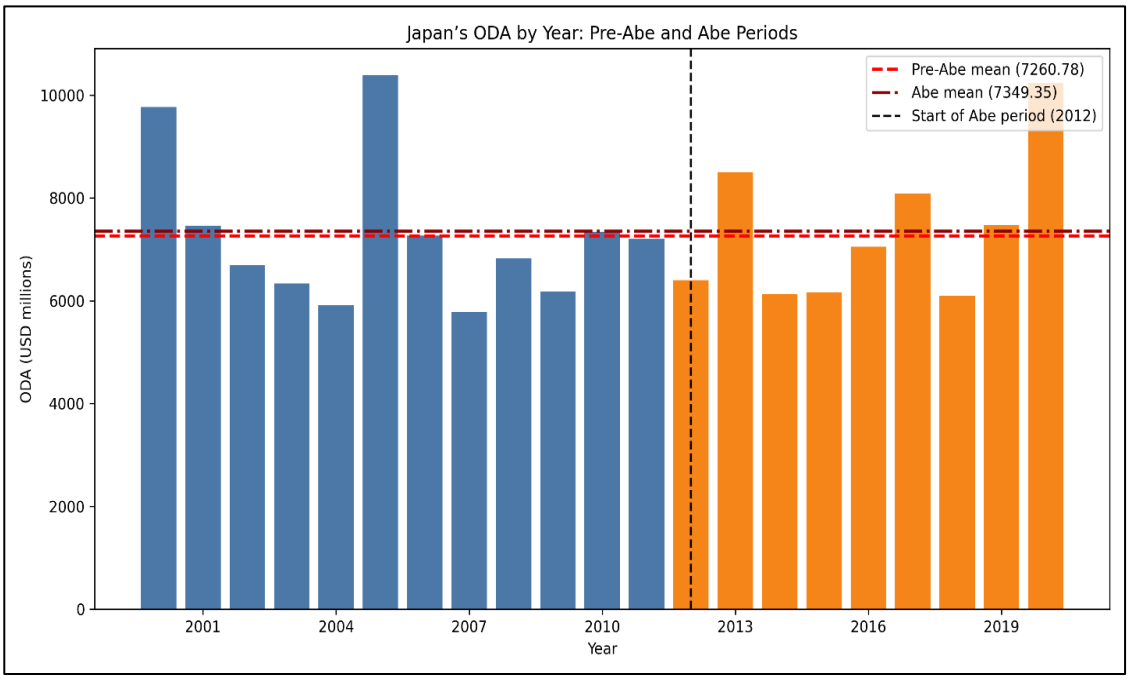

Fig 4. Japan's ODA by Year: Pre-Abe and Abe Periods
Source: Own elaboration based on OECD DAC1, *Flows by provider (ODA+OOF+Private)* (Table1_Data.csv), cleaned and processed in Python. Data correspond to Japan's annual ODA, 2000–2020, in current USD millions.

Figure 4 illustrates Japan's total ODA by year from 2000 to 2020, distinguishing between the pre-Abe and Abe periods. Since these ODA figures are expressed in current USD, they should be interpreted with caution, as exchange-rate movements and inflation may affect the apparent evolution of aid values. At the aggregate level, the data does not show a linear increase over time. Instead, Japanese ODA fluctuated considerably in both periods, with visible peaks and declines. In the pre-Abe years, ODA began at a fairly high level, declined in the early 2000s, and then rose sharply in 2005 before falling again. During the Abe period, a similarly uneven pattern can be observed: ODA was at a moderate level in 2012, increased in 2013, declined again in 2014 and 2015, and then recovered in the later years of the period, reaching one of the highest values in 2020. The mean values represented in the figure indicate that the Abe period recorded a slightly higher average level of ODA than the pre-Abe period. However, the differences between both means are small. This suggests that the Abe administration did not produce a dramatic quantitative expansion of Japanese aid but rather maintained a substantial level of outward economic engagement over time. In this sense, the evidence points more to continuity with moderate reinforcement than to a major break.

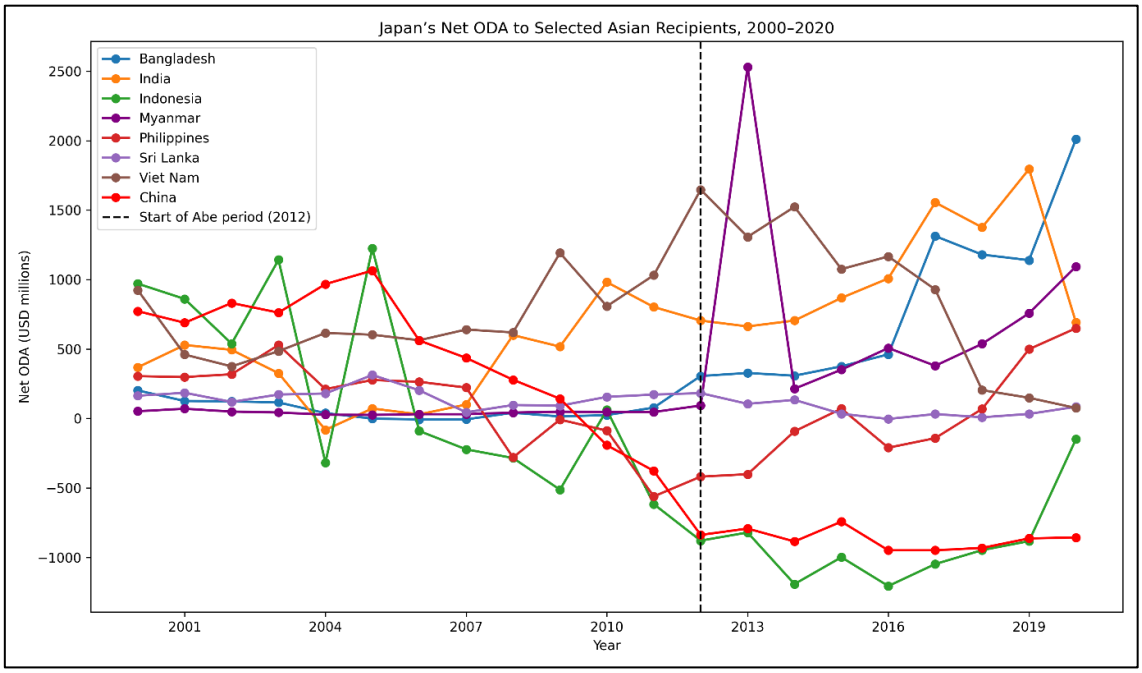

Fig 5. Japan's Net ODA to Selected Asian Recipients, 2000-2020
Source: Own elaboration based on OECD DAC2A, *Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions* (Table2a_Data.csv), cleaned and processed in Python. Data correspond to Japan's net ODA to selected Asian recipients, 2000–2020, in current USD millions.

A more interesting pattern appears when the analysis changes from total ODA to the recipient level. **Figure 5** shows Japan's net ODA to selected Asian recipients between 2000 and 2020, including Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and China (including the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Macau). This graph is important because it allows for an assessment of the regional concentration of Japanese aid in strategically relevant countries. Several patterns stand out. First, Vietnam and India emerge as two of the most important recipients across much of the period. Vietnam records especially high levels in the late 2000s and early Abe years, while India becomes increasingly significant in the later Abe period. Bangladesh also becomes more prominent over time, particularly in the final years, when it reaches one of the highest values among the selected recipients. These cases suggest that Japanese aid remained strongly oriented toward a group of economically and strategically relevant partners in Asia.

At the same time, the figure also shows that Japanese aid engagement in Asia was not uniform. Myanmar shows strong volatility, with a pronounced spike in the Abe period, indicating concentrated episodes of high engagement rather than stable continuity. Indonesia, by contrast, records several negative net ODA values, especially from the late

2000s onward, which suggests that repayments and other financial adjustments occurred. The Philippines and Sri Lanka show more moderate and uneven values. This unevenness is analytically important because it shows that Japan's strategic-economic engagement was selective rather than homogeneous. In other words, Japan did not distribute aid evenly across all Asian partners but concentrated assistance in specific countries that appear more closely aligned with its broader regional priorities.

The growing relevance of India is especially consistent with the wider strategic logic of the Abe period. Japan and India deepened their Special Strategic and Global Partnership, and in 2015, under *Japan and India Vision 2025*, both governments explicitly linked bilateral cooperation to peace, prosperity, and the maintenance of a rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific. This strategic logic was later reflected in frameworks such as the Japan-India Act East Forum, which supported the development of India's Northeastern Region and improved connectivity between South Asia and Southeast Asia (MOFA, 2015). Seen from this perspective, India's increasing importance in Japanese ODA is not simply an economic trend but part of a wider pattern in which development assistance supported Japan's attempt to strengthen ties with a major democratic partner.

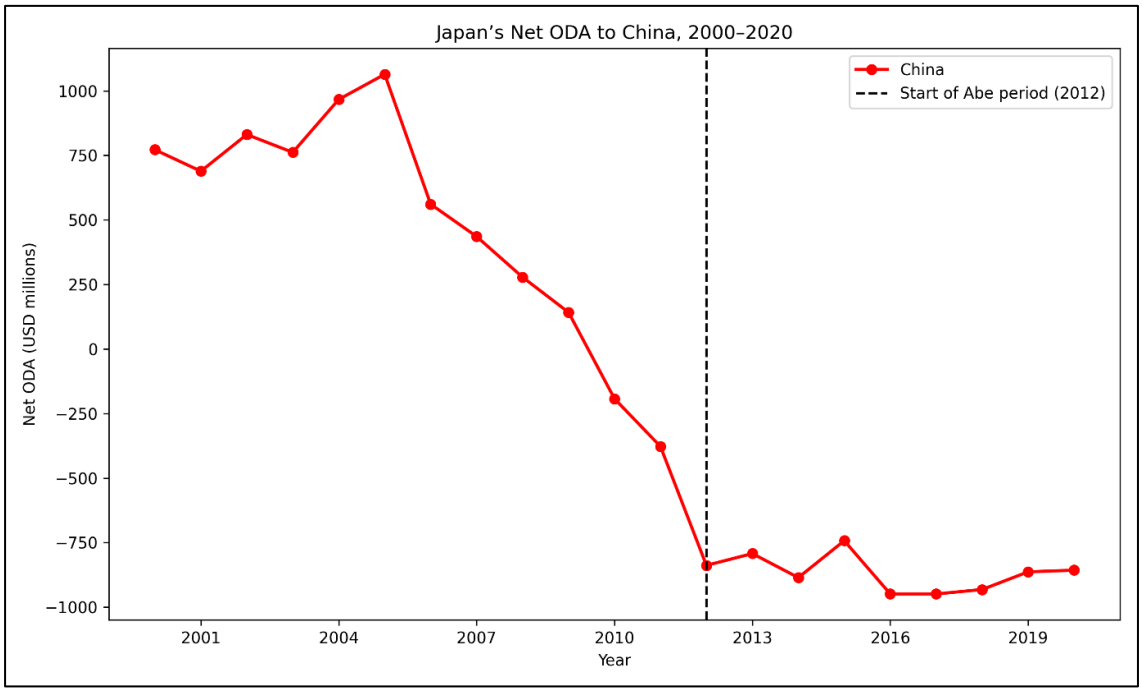

Fig 6. Japan's Net ODA to China, 2000-2020
Source: Own elaboration based on OECD DAC2A, *Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions* (Table2a_Data.csv), cleaned and processed in Python. Data correspond to Japan's net ODA to China, 2000–2020, in current USD millions.

Among the selected cases, China deserves particular attention, not only because of its economic weight in Asia, but also because of its central place in Japan's strategic environment during the Abe years. **Figure 6** isolates Japan's net ODA to China and shows a markedly different trajectory from that of other major Asian recipients. In the early 2000s, China still received relatively high positive net ODA from Japan, reaching its peak around the mid-2000s. However, the trend then reversed progressively, turning negative before the start of the Abe period and remaining clearly below zero throughout the Abe years. This means that China was not a growing recipient of Japanese aid under Abe. On the contrary, the Chinese case reflects a long-term disengagement in development assistance terms.

This pattern is significant because it suggests that Japan's regional economic engagement was not broad or indiscriminate, but increasingly selective. Whereas countries such as Vietnam, India, and Bangladesh became more prominent recipients of Japanese aid, China moved in the opposite direction. This contrast is consistent with the broader strategic context of the Abe administration. During this period, Japan continued to treat the U.S.-Japan alliance as the "linchpin" of its foreign and security policy, while the rise of China increasingly shaped Tokyo's regional calculations (MOFA, 2017, pp.97-100). As Schoff (2017, pp.145-146, 153-154) notes, Trump's "America First" rhetoric revived doubts about the value of alliances in the United States, which was particularly problematic for Japan given the asymmetric nature of the alliance and its dependence on U.S. security guarantees. In this context of uncertainty, and against the background of China's growing strategic weight, the reduction of ODA to China can be read as part of a wider reorientation in which Japan concentrated its strategic-economic engagement on partners more closely aligned.

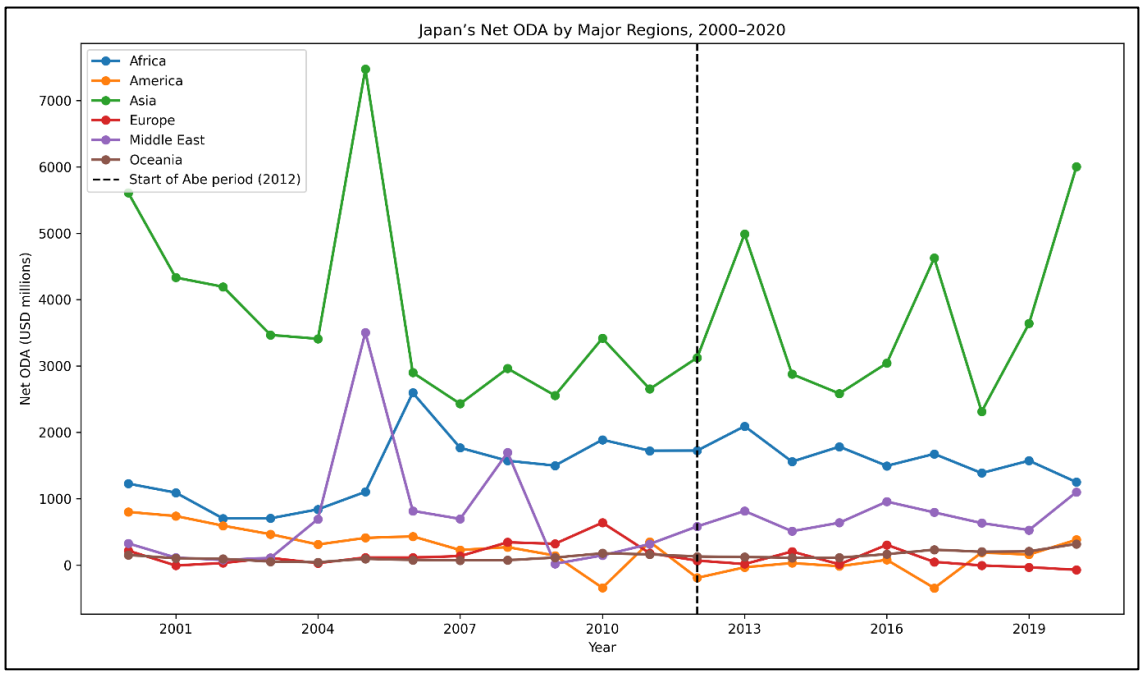

Fig 7. Japan's Net ODA by Major Regions, 2000-2020
Source: Own elaboration based on OECD DAC2A, *Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions* (Table2a_Data.csv), cleaned and processed in Python. Data correspond to Japan's net ODA by major world regions, 2000–2020, in current USD millions.

Figure 7 places this recipient-level evidence into a wider comparative framework by showing Japan's net ODA by major world regions. The most striking result is the persistent predominance of Asia. Across the entire period, Asia remains by far the main destination of Japanese net ODA, consistently above Africa, the Middle East, America,

Europe, and Oceania. Although annual values fluctuate, the overall pattern is clear: Japanese aid retained a strong regional concentration in Asia both before and during the Abe administration. Africa appears as the second most significant region, but at a much lower level than Asia. The Middle East displays some notable spikes, especially in the mid-2000s and later in the period, while America, Europe, and Oceania remain comparatively limited.

Taken together, the evidence provides moderate but meaningful support for the indicator of external strategic-economic engagement. The data do not point to a dramatic quantitative expansion of Japanese ODA under Abe, since overall aid levels remained relatively stable and the difference between the pre-Abe and Abe averages is limited. However, the geographical and recipient-level patterns are more revealing. Japan's aid remained strongly concentrated in Asia and was distributed selectively toward countries such as Vietnam, India, and Bangladesh, while China followed a clearly declining trajectory. This suggests that Japan's external economic engagement during the Abe administration was not simply a matter of continuity but reflected a more focused and strategically differentiated use of economic instruments. In this sense, the indicator supports the broader argument of the study in a qualified way: Japanese foreign policy under Abe appears proactive not because it radically increased aid volumes, but because it maintained and directed economic engagement in ways consistent with a more active regional role. Further information on reproducibility is included in Appendix F.

7.3 Trade and Economic Engagement

The third indicator used in the measurement of Japanese foreign policy proactivity is trade and economic engagement. Within this study, economic proactivity is understood as how Japan positions itself economically in relation to its external trading relationships and, more concretely, the degree to which Japan's trade behavior suggests that Japan engages actively in sustaining, adapting, or broadening its position within the global economic system. Trade is particularly important to the Japanese case because for decades, Japan's ability to project its power externally has relied not just on the use of traditional means such as diplomacy and military strength but also on its ability to engage in sustained economic relations with key partners.

The analysis concentrates specifically on a set of significant partners which are particularly important in terms of understanding Japan's economy: China, the U.S., India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Australia, the Philippines, the U.K., Germany, and France. Additionally, a comparison based on grouping will help differentiate between the China bloc, the U.S., the selected Indo-Pacific partners, and the selected European partners. The idea is not only to establish which of the partnerships are most economically important, but also to see if there was any change in those economic ties during the Abe period. The WITS datasets used in this section, together with the procedures of file conversion, data preparation, and graph construction are described in Appendices G, H and I.

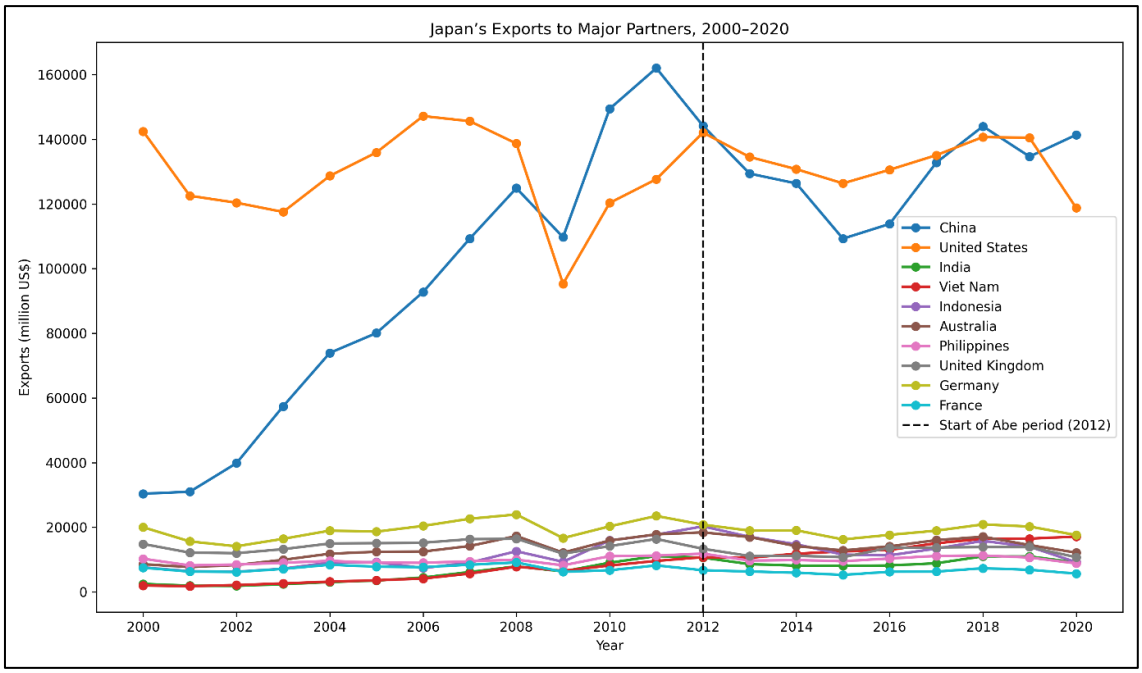

Fig 8. Japan's Exports to Major Partners, 2000–2020
Source: Own elaboration based on *WITS bilateral trade value data for Japan* (WITS_Japan_Export_US_Thousands.csv), cleaned and processed in Python. Data correspond to Japan's exports to major partners, 2000–2020, converted from current US$ thousands into million US$.

The graph in **Figure 8** demonstrates the exports of Japan to its main partners from 2000 to 2020. Since these trade figures are expressed in current USD, they should be interpreted with caution, as exchange-rate movements and inflation may affect the apparent evolution of trade values. There are two evident primary trends. Firstly, the role played by China and the U.S. is prominent, both countries have been consistently ahead of the other chosen countries in terms of the value of their exports. Secondly, there is variation in the relative weight of exports to each country. In the early 2000s, the U.S. was the dominant destination for Japanese products. However, the importance of China

grew rapidly, and from the mid-2000s onwards, the significance of Chinese trade exceeded that of American trade. Throughout the Abe period, exports to both China and the U.S. were high and constant despite some fluctuations. This suggests that while trade relations under the Abe administration did not mean the substitution of one trading partner by the other, both partners continued to be key players in Japanese international trade.

Other partners from Asia and the Indo-Pacific region gained considerable prominence during the period. The volume of exports to Vietnam increased significantly, becoming noticeably more important towards the end of the period, whereas India, Indonesia, Australia, and the Philippines also maintained their notable presence. In comparison, the European countries included in the selection, while still active participants in the trade network, played relatively smaller roles. Among them, Germany emerged as a noteworthy example, yet the U.K. and France lagged far behind.

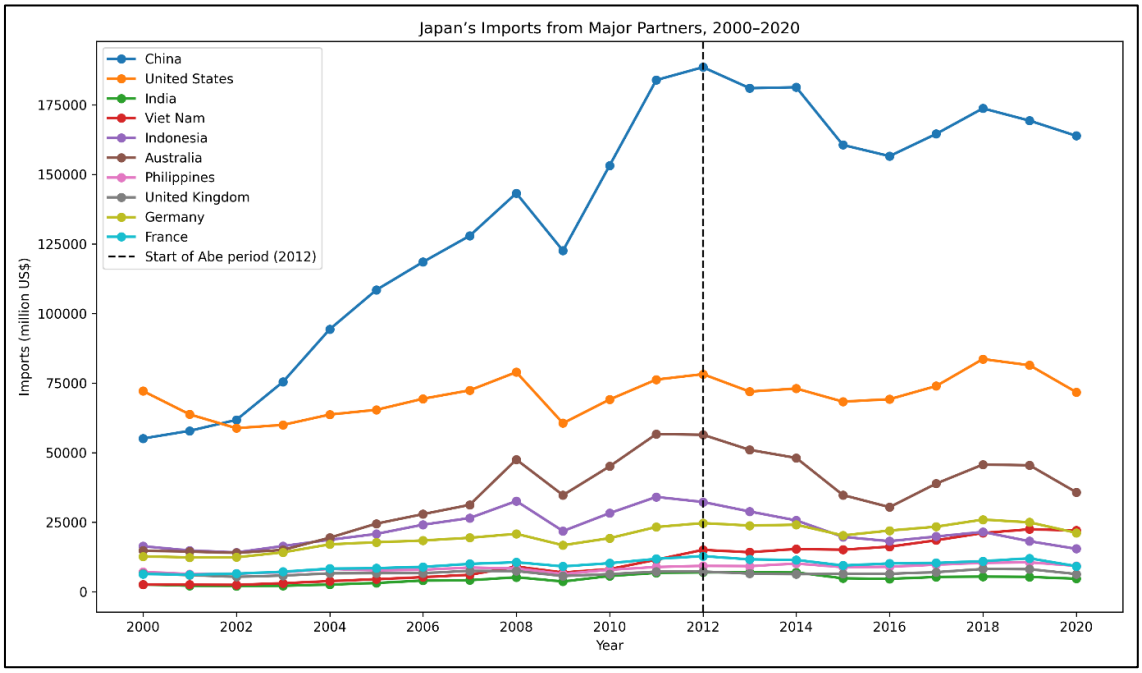

Fig 9. Japan's Imports from Major Partners, 2000–2020
Source: Own elaboration based on *WITS bilateral trade value data for Japan* (WITS_Japan_Import_US_Thousands.csv), cleaned and processed in Python. Data correspond to Japan's imports from major partners, 2000–2020, converted from current US$ thousands into million US$.

Figure 9 represents Japan's imports from the same set of major countries. In this case, the domination of China becomes even more prominent. Imports from China rose significantly throughout the 2000s and stayed well ahead of any other country's imports during the time of Abe as Prime Minister. The United States became the second-most important country in terms of imports, though far behind China. Australia, Indonesia, and Germany were also seen as important sources of imports, although again not nearly at the

Chinese levels. It is significant to note that in addition to exporting strategies, Japan's economic engagement was determined by the growing reliance on imports from Asia, particularly from China.

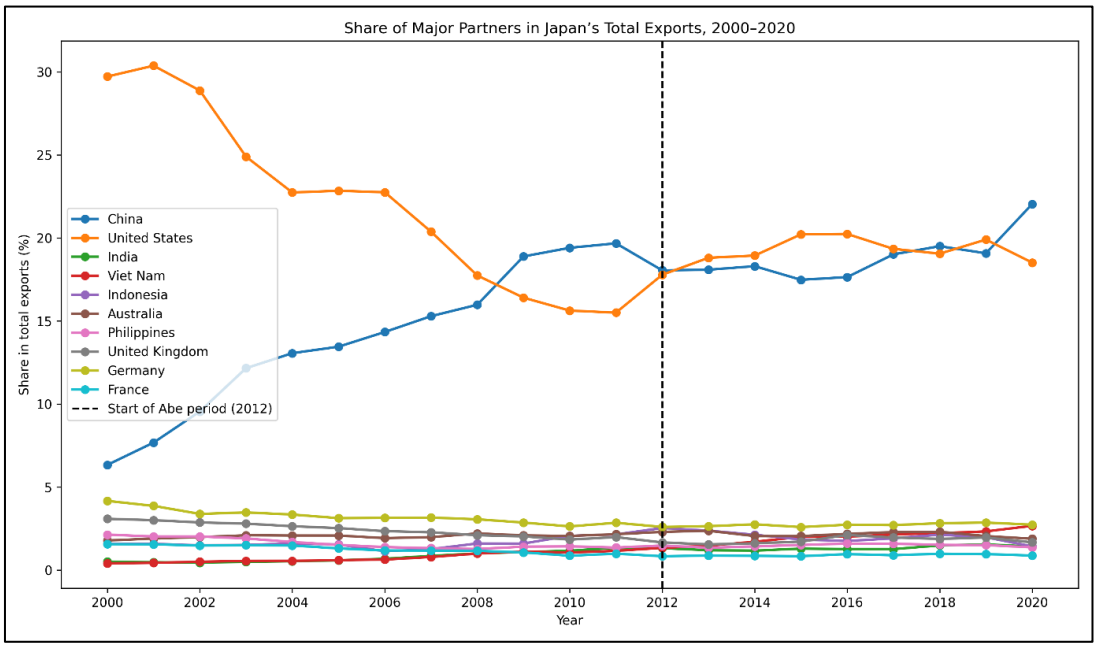

Fig 10. Share of Major Partners in Japan's Total Exports, 2000–2020
Source: Own elaboration based on *WITS bilateral trade value data for Japan* (WITS_Japan_Export_US_Thousands.csv), cleaned and processed in Python. Data correspond to the share of major partners in Japan's total exports, 2000–2020, calculated as partner exports divided by Japan's total exports to the world.

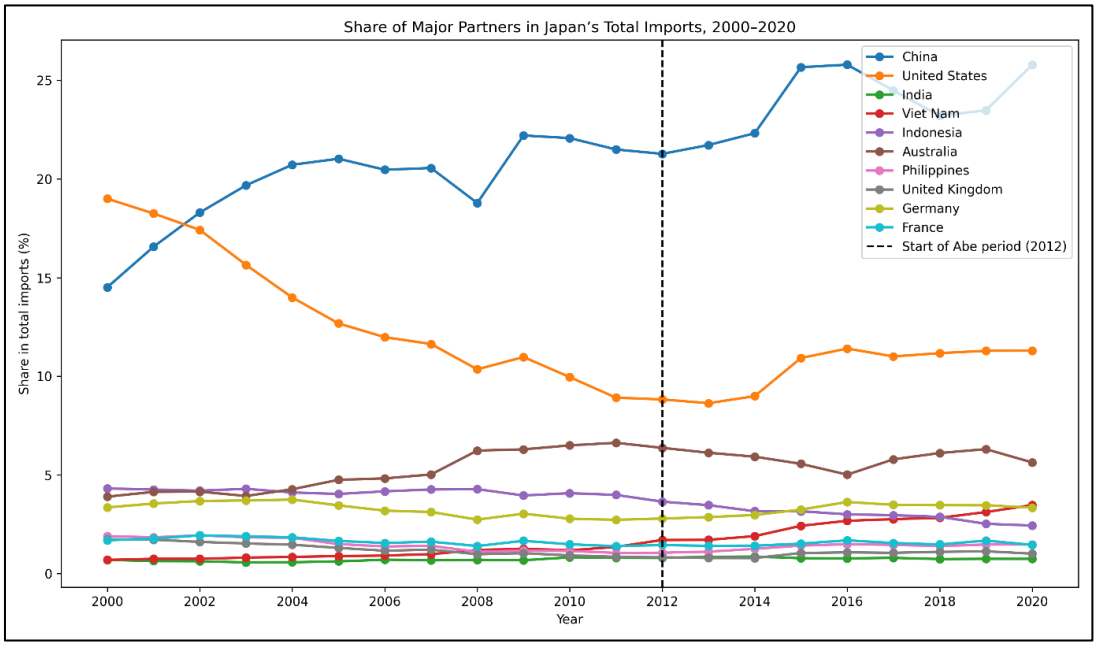

Fig 11. Share of Major Partners in Japan's Total Imports, 2000–2020
Source: Own elaboration based on *WITS bilateral trade value data for Japan* (WITS_Japan_Import_US_Thousands.csv), cleaned and processed in Python. Data correspond to the share of major partners in Japan's total imports, 2000–2020, calculated as partner imports divided by Japan's total imports.

This is evident in **Figures 10 and 11**, which show the importance of each of the two countries in the total Japanese exports and imports. In terms of exports, whereas the United States had initially accounted for a larger share compared to China, this pattern changed over time. There was a steady rise in China's share in the years prior to the Abe administration, continuing over the following years. Meanwhile, the share of exports to the United States fell compared to earlier times before eventually stabilizing. This indicates that the structure of Japan's exports has become less dominant in favor of the United States and more focused on East Asia. In the case of imports, the shift is even more striking. There is a marked rise in China's share, and it consistently exceeds that of the United States throughout the Abe period, confirming the great importance of China in Japan's import framework.

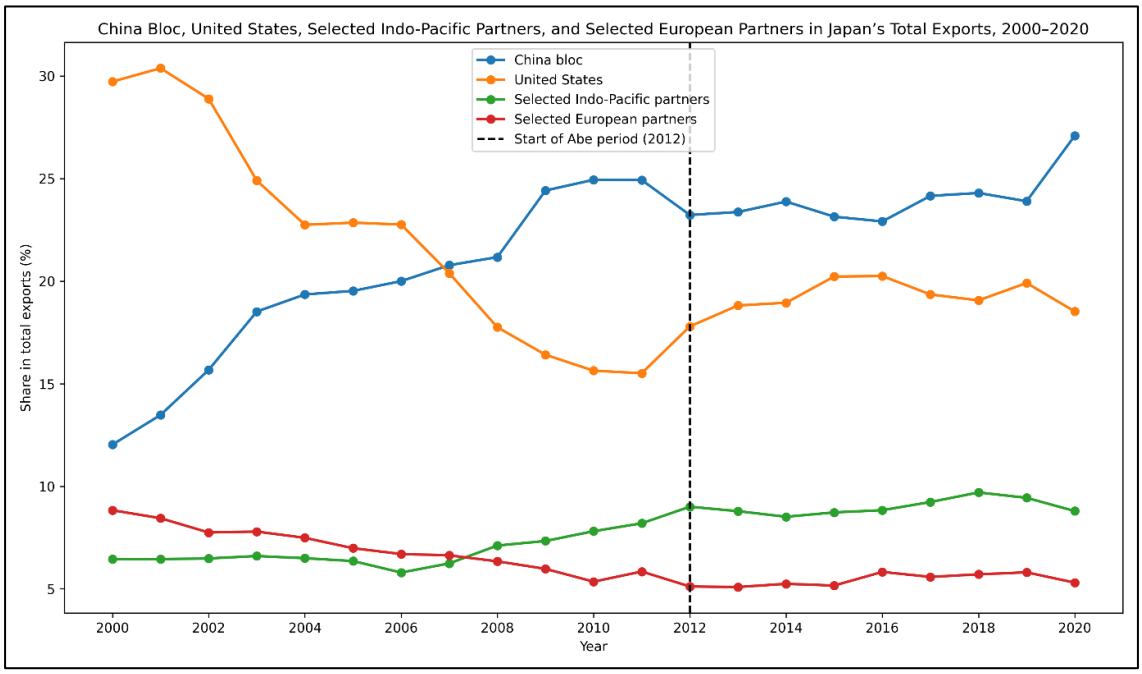

Fig 12. China Bloc, United States, Selected Indo-Pacific Partners, and Selected European Partners in Japan's Total Exports, 2000–2020
Source: Own elaboration based on *WITS bilateral trade value data for Japan* (WITS_Japan_Export_US_Thousands.csv), cleaned and processed in Python. Data correspond to grouped shares in Japan's total exports, 2000–2020.

Figures 12 and 13 offer a comparative perspective that puts these relationships into four larger groups: the China bloc (China, Hong Kong SAR, and Macao SAR), the United States, Indo-Pacific partners, and European partners. Such comparisons become particularly relevant for judging proactivity since they go beyond the bilateralism of Japan's economic relations and provide an indication of how its overall economic orientation changed over time. On the export side, while the China bloc becomes

increasingly prominent and surpasses the United States during the period preceding the Abe administration, its relevance continues to grow strongly after taking office. Similarly, the proportion of Indo-Pacific partners also grows slightly over time.

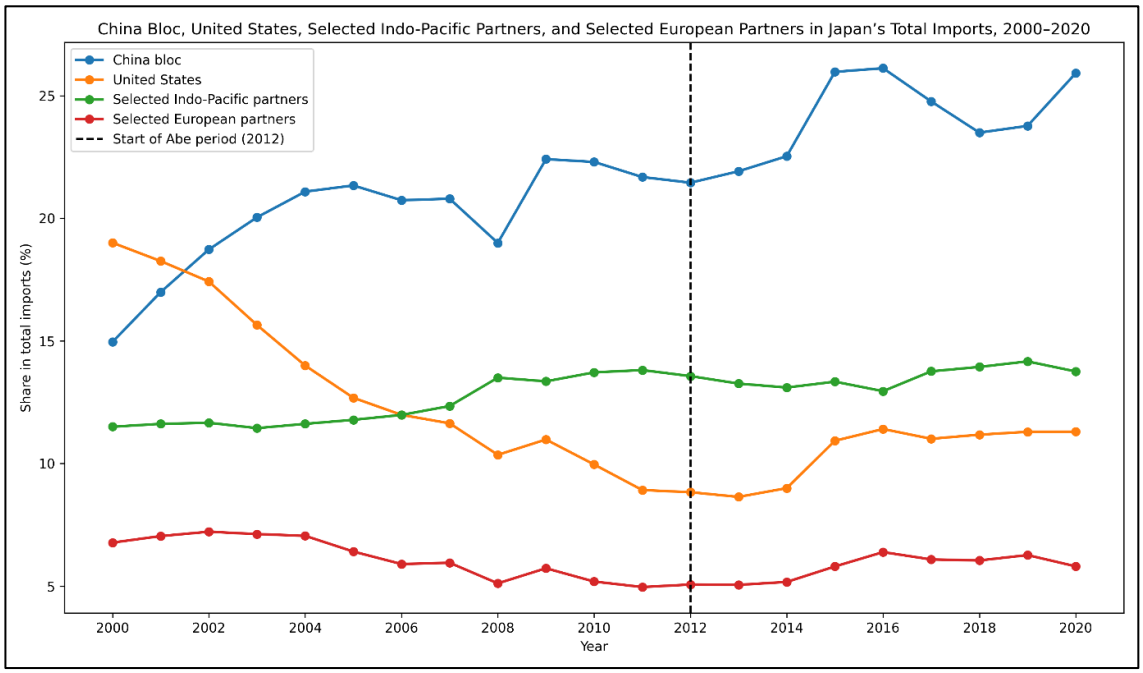

Fig 13. China Bloc, United States, Selected Indo-Pacific Partners, and Selected European Partners in Japan's Total Imports, 2000–2020
Source: Own elaboration based on *WITS bilateral trade value data for Japan* (WITS_Japan_Import_US_Thousands.csv), cleaned and processed in Python. Data correspond to grouped shares in Japan's total imports, 2000–2020.

Figure 13 demonstrates that the China bloc emerges as the most important group in terms of Japanese imports and continues to be significantly ahead of the United States for the entire Abe period. Some Indo-Pacific countries are also significantly present, sometimes even exceeding that of the United States, whereas the European region appears smaller. Altogether, these groupings indicate that the Abe-led trade and economic policy of Japan was marked by pronounced regionalism in Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region, rather than by balanced growth in all regions of the world. This does not imply that Europe or the United States became insignificant; it merely indicates that the most prominent changes were happening in Japan's immediate economic surroundings.

Overall, the evidence provides meaningful support for the indicator of trade and economic engagement. First, it seems clear that the Abe era did not bring about any revolutionary change in Japan's trade structure. China and the U.S. continued to occupy the two main positions as Japan's economic poles, while most other trade trends were

already well-established before 2012. Second, the evidence also shows that Japan engaged in consistent and differentiated external economic activity, which is characteristic of a proactive stance towards foreign policy. Notably, Japan maintained a close relationship with the US, stayed highly integrated into Chinese markets, and simultaneously increased its trade connections with other Indo-Pacific countries such as India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Australia, and the Philippines. In short, it may be said that Japan's foreign policy was indeed proactive to the extent that it was conducted through a consistently differentiated and strategically structured pattern of international economic activity. Further information on reproducibility is provided in Appendix J.

7.4 Policy Initiative in Selected Cases

The fourth indicator used to assess proactivity in Japanese foreign policy is policy initiative in selected cases. Unlike the previous indicators, this indicator is not concerned with numerical trends, but with visible cases in which there is evidence of leadership, negotiation, and institutional outcomes in international politics. The policy initiative measure in this study refers to the ability of Japanese diplomacy to not only participate in existing frameworks, but also to coordinate, sustain, and redirect them in a way that it demonstrates setting and shaping of rules. The case selection and method of analysis used in this section are described in Appendix K.

This indicator is particularly important because it reflects a more proactive approach compared to other indicators like expenditures or trade. Where other approaches could still be seen as continuity or adaptation, diplomatic initiative can show whether Japan actively sought to influence the trajectory of regional or global governance. For this reason, the following section will be focused on Japan's efforts in maintaining the CPTPP in the context of U.S. withdrawal and Japan's leadership at the 2019 G20 Osaka Summit.

An examination of the Diplomatic Bluebooks indicates that while the Abe period strategy did not emerge from nothing, it has a strong background, it implied a considerable shift in focus. In the pre-Abe period, Japanese government documents already discussed foreign relations in terms of free trade, economic partnership, and cooperation, but the tone remained relatively cautious and functional. In the Diplomatic Bluebook 2008, there is mention of the development of economic rules that would help

facilitate economic growth and cooperation within Asia (MOFA, 2008, pp. 11-12). The Diplomatic Bluebook 2008 also mentions that reinforcing the multilateral free-trading system and promoting EPAs and FTAs were essential parts of Japan's economic diplomacy (MOFA, 2008, pp. 26-27). Similarly, the Diplomatic Bluebook 2011 discusses how Japan had been engaging in "strategic economic diplomacy," yet on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, it describes Japan only as being involved in gathering information and holding consultations in accordance with their comprehensive economic partnership policy (MOFA, 2011, p. 24). It appears, therefore, that prior to Abe, Japan already actively engaged in economic diplomacy, although not in quite the same way that it would during the Abe era.

The shift becomes particularly evident in the early Abe administrations. In its Diplomatic Bluebook 2013, Japan already recognizes economic diplomacy as an important area of its foreign relations and connects it with the revitalization of the Japanese economy (MOFA, 2013, pp. 7-8). In its Diplomatic Bluebook 2014, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs goes further and describes economic diplomacy as one of its diplomatic strategies and emphasizes the need for Japan to strategically promote high-level economic partnerships such as the TPP, RCEP, Japan–China–ROK FTA, and Japan–EU EPA (MOFA, 2014, pp. 7-8). In the Diplomatic Bluebook 2015, Japan recognizes that it aims at preserving and enhancing the post-war international free trade system through agreements like the TPP, RCEP, and the Japan-EU EPA (MOFA, 2015, pp. 232-233). Finally, in its Diplomatic Bluebook 2017, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs presents economic diplomacy as one of the main pillars of Japan's foreign policy and specifically mentions trade rulemaking to maintain a free and open international economic order (MOFA, 2017, pp. 287, 291-295). In other words, the official discourse evolved from pre-Abe participation in economic frameworks toward a more strategic conception of economic statecraft and rulemaking under Abe.

The CPTPP example is a clear illustration of the change. The economic, monetary, fiscal policies, and structural reforms were the most crucial elements in the Abe Doctrine as tools of Japan's influence on the international scene, linked to the promise of future prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region and the revival of the Japanese economy (Vidal, 2022, pp. 15-16). In this regard, it is particularly notable how Japan responded to the withdrawal of the United States from the TPP in 2017. Instead of allowing the agreement to collapse, Japan took the initiative to preserve and adapt the agreement, helping to organize the remaining participants and advance negotiations that led to the conclusion

of the CPTPP in 2018 (Vidal, 2022, pp. 16-18; Liu, 2025, pp. 46-48). This is analytically important because it suggests that Japanese foreign economic policy can be seen not only because of *gaiatsu* or American influence but also as an independent initiative in accordance with Japan's own interests.

According to Vidal (2022, pp. 15-18), the Japanese involvement in the CPTPP goes beyond being a response to the withdrawal of the United States, on the contrary, it can be considered a successful example of domestic political coordination, where Abe managed to unite ministries and party members in support of Japan's new economic and diplomatic agenda. Similarly, Liu (2025, pp. 46-48) believes that since the TPP had become a crucial element of Abe's policy, Japan was willing to assume an active leadership role, aimed at maintaining the agreement despite the absence of the United States. This conclusion is further supported by the Diplomatic Bluebook 2017, which states that the preservation of international economic order through trade agreements and free trade was among the foreign policy priorities of the country, while, according to the document, it was essential for the development of Japan to strengthen the rule of law not just economically but also for the security of the Asia-Pacific region (MOFA, 2017, p. 291).

A similar pattern can be observed regarding Japan's involvement within the existing international organizations. One important element of Abe's foreign policy was not only the search for greater strategic autonomy and the development of alternative approaches, but also the strengthening of existing international institutions as mechanisms for upholding a rules-based order. These two trends could be observed both in global and regional terms. On the global scale, one should refer to Japan hosting the 2019 G20 Osaka Summit. As noted in the Diplomatic Bluebook 2020, this summit served as an occasion to demonstrate Japan's ability to play a coordinating role against the backdrop of mounting tensions in international politics and global economy (MOFA, 2020, pp. 4-5, 279-280). The Diplomatic Bluebook 2019 highlighted Japan's efforts to defend the rule-based international order in a context of rising protectionism (MOFA, 2019, Preface). In this connection, Japan's involvement in the 2019 G20 Osaka Summit should not be interpreted merely as chairing but rather as demonstrating visible leadership in an existing multilateral organization.

The Osaka Summit is relevant to this study because it provides an example of an initiative different from the CPTPP case. Unlike in the case of the CPTPP, where the initiative was aimed toward sustaining and restoring an established framework in the

wake of a systemic shock, the case of the G20 shows Japan's capacity to mobilize and coordinate efforts within an international organization. The summit's outcome and the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' narrative on it indicate the achievement of success in terms of promoting free trade, WTO reforms, Data Free Flow with Trust, Osaka Track, and G20 Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment. According to the Diplomatic Bluebook 2020, Japan was successful in exercising leadership in coordinating discussions and generating outcomes against challenging international circumstances (MOFA, 2020, pp. 4-5, 279-280).

Institutional activism was also observable in Japan's diplomatic approach at the regional level, particularly within ASEAN-focused frameworks. According to the Diplomatic Bluebook 2019, Japan considered it highly important to cooperate in Asia through means such as ASEAN+3, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and Japan-ASEAN Summit Meetings while retaining the Japan-U.S. Alliance as the basis of Japan's foreign policy (MOFA, 2019, pp. 79-81). Instead of trying to sidestep the existence of ASEAN-focused institutions, Japan aimed at reinforcing them. Similarly, the same Bluebook mentions Japanese assistance for ASEAN integration by means of the "ASEAN Community Vision 2025" plan and outlines Japan's commitment to cooperation on four partnership fronts: partners for peace and stability, partners for prosperity, partners for quality of life, and heart-to-heart partners (MOFA, 2019, pp. 80-81). This suggests that institutional activism under Abe was oriented towards reinforcing existing regional structures rather than replacing them.

At the same time, Japan's engagement on an institutional level was part of a wider normative approach. This is clearly articulated in The Diplomatic Bluebook 2019, where Japan identifies its regional diplomacy with the promotion of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" region, freedom of navigation, and dispute resolution based on international law, including UNCLOS, regarding the South China Sea disputes (MOFA, 2019, pp. 79-82).

Taken together, these cases show evidence of strategic activism. The Bluebooks before Abe suggest that elements of economic diplomacy and multilateral activity were already an important part of Japan's approach before 2012. Nevertheless, in the period of Abe's administration, the focus on these elements became clearer and even more deliberate. In the example of the CPTPP, Japan managed to preserve and modify a high-standard regional trade agreement despite U.S. withdrawal from it. In the case of the G20 held in Osaka, and in general when dealing with institutions based around ASEAN cooperation, Japan was able to make use of multilateral institutions for coordinating

outcomes and advocating new governance policies. This does not imply that Japan was free of all structural constraints. On the contrary, most of these instances of activism remained confined by the restrictions of alliance politics and Japan's established multilateralism. However, in terms of the reactive state theory, it is precisely this ability to act that indicates a clearer capacity for initiative than the thesis would normally suggest. In this sense, the indicator strongly supports the broader findings of the study: Japanese foreign policy in the Abe era appears to be proactive not only because it adapted to international change, but because in selected cases it displayed a visible approach to leadership, institutional coordination, and agenda-setting capacity.

8. Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to analyze Japanese foreign policy proactivity through a set of indicators, and to what extent Japanese proactivity was reflected in the country's behavior during the era of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. It was also aimed at addressing one of the most important questions that arise in relation to Japanese foreign policy: Is Japan still considered a reactive state, or do changes brought by the Abe period need a more complex interpretation? Contrary to the idea of proactivity as a simple, easily comprehensible term, this study puts forward an analytic framework for measuring Japanese proactivity based on four indicators: defense expenditure, external strategic-economic engagement, trade and economic engagement, and policy initiative in selected cases. In doing so, this research made it possible to assess Japanese foreign policy not through a single variable, but through a more holistic picture and patterns of observable behavior.

The results obtained through the analysis conducted in this study present evidence in favor of the hypothesis that Japanese foreign policy during the Abe administration was proactive rather than reactive. The research, however, does not present any strong indication to suggest a revolution in Japanese foreign policy and thus no radical shift from its past. Rather, a selective approach characterized by some sort of proactivity is what appears. Thus, contrary to what some may think, Japanese foreign policy during Abe's time was not about completely shifting to proactive approaches from reactive. It involved extending the room for proactivity considering some limitations associated with the country's reliance on the alliance system, the constitution, internal political structures, amongst others.

The first indicator, defense expenditure, did not offer particularly strong evidence in favor of the general argument. It demonstrated that Japan was rather prudent in military matters throughout the entire period, being characterized by restrained spending of defense when compared to other states, especially when measured as percentage of GDP. At the same time, Japan did not hold a prominent position among the major players like the United States or China. However, there were certain signs of reinforcement observed in this context. First, military expenditure experienced slight growth when calculated as the share of GDP, saw a recovery in terms of monetary value in the late years of Abe's tenure, and achieved record-high levels towards the end of the period. Overall, this does not indicate drastic militarization or fundamental identity transformation, but continuity with gradual reinforcement, which is significant in view of the discussed pattern of proactivity in Japan's foreign policy.

External strategic-economic engagement, which was the second indicator, provided partial support to the findings of the study. On a macro level, there was no substantial rise in the volume of Japanese ODA spending throughout the Abe period. The difference between the two means of pre-Abe and Abe periods appeared to be quite small. Nevertheless, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of a more specific analysis based on recipient countries and regions. Japan maintained its high engagement in economic assistance in Asia. Countries like India, Vietnam, and Bangladesh gained prominence, while China demonstrated the exact opposite pattern and reflected a long-term disengagement in ODA terms. Such trends suggest that the Japanese strategy of external economic engagement became more selective. Therefore, proactivity in this indicator does not necessarily mean a universal increase in development assistance spending by Japan, but rather a more focused use.

Thirdly, trade and economic interaction provided further support for the interpretation above. According to the trade data, the Abe government did not make any radical changes to the nature of Japan's international economic relations. Both China and the US were the two main economic poles for the country, and some of the general trends in the trade sector seen under Abe had started before 2012. Nevertheless, it could also be stated that there was a distinct differentiation between Japan's economic interaction with different countries during the Abe administration. Japan was heavily integrated both into the US and Chinese markets, while also developing significant ties with other important Indo-Pacific partners, such as India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Australia, and the Philippines. Thus, according to the grouped trade statistics, the importance of Asia, as well as the

Indo-Pacific region, was steadily increasing compared to Europe. In this context, the most valid conclusion based on this indicator would be that Abe did not cause any radical change in Japan's foreign economic policy but helped it become more strategically structured.

The fourth indicator, policy initiative in selected cases, offered the strongest support to refute the reactive state thesis. In contrast to other indicators discussed above, this dimension allowed us to detect more obvious cases of initiative, coordination and agenda setting. As the case studies of official documents and specific events suggest, the Abe administration possessed greater potential for initiative than one would expect according to the theory of the reactive state. The Japanese involvement in sustaining and shaping the CPTPP following the US exit from the trade agreement stands out because it shows that the Japanese government had not only adapted to an external shock but managed to sustain an important regional agreement and participate in its continuity. Similarly, Japan's role in organizing the 2019 G20 Summit held in Osaka exemplified yet another form of initiative: the ability to coordinate and mobilize outcomes within the existing multilateral framework. As the findings from the analysis of ASEAN-centric diplomacy further confirmed, Japan under Abe pursued a proactive strategy through strengthening existing institutions instead of undermining them. Overall, this indicator provides the clearest evidence of proactive behavior, although this proactivity remained institutionally embedded and constrained.

The results of this study indicate that the greatest support can be given to the second hypothesis, where the indicators of proactivity are not equally represented within various policy domains, but rather depend on context and type of involvement. Indeed, such distribution appears to be among the main findings from the research. There is limited evidence of proactivity in terms of defense spending, selective signs of it in ODA and trade policies, and much clearer evidence in case studies of diplomatic initiative and institution building. The third hypothesis can be regarded as supported as well, as there are clear indications that proactive behavior takes place in the presence of certain structural and institutional constraints, such as dependence on allies, constitutional restrictions, and long-term tradition of post-war foreign policy continuity. On the other hand, the first hypothesis should be considered partially confirmed, as Japanese foreign policy under Abe demonstrates signs of proactivity but not in a fully consolidated proactive turn.

Here lies the value of the analysis for both the specific research question and the broader debate on proactivity in international politics. The concept of proactivity may be broken down into a series of indicators, which reveal meaningful signs of Japanese initiatives in foreign policy during the Abe years. However, the indicators provide an unequal and limited account. Therefore, it cannot be argued that under the Abe administration Japan ceased to be reactive at all or experienced a drastic change of course from reactivity to a fully proactive power. Instead, it could be argued that there was a strategic selection of certain areas of foreign policy where Japanese initiatives were extended in the context of the existing postwar order. The reactive state model continues to have relevance as a point of departure, yet it is insufficient as a comprehensive explanation of Japan's foreign policy under Abe.

Finally, this study raises several questions for further research. One possible area of study would be to investigate whether the proactive pattern of Japanese diplomacy identified in this paper is consistent with the political discourse of Abe's administration, in other words, whether Japan's diplomatic behavior in this period corresponded entirely with the rhetoric and ambitions voiced by Prime Minister Abe in his speeches. It may also be interesting to see whether these tendencies remained in place during Abe's successors or were unique to Abe himself and to his own political environment. All of this leads to a more general question which is still highly relevant for research into Japanese foreign policy: Was the Abe period the beginning of a long-term transformation in Japan's international role, or only a temporary expansion of initiative within enduring international constraints?

Appendices

Appendix A. Data Sources for Defense Expenditure

The analysis of defense expenditure is based on publicly available World Bank data. Two datasets were used in this section, both downloaded in CSV format from the World Bank database.

The first dataset corresponds to the indicator Military expenditure (% of GDP), identified by the code "MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS". This dataset was used as the main source for analyzing the relative weight of Japanese military expenditure over time and for comparing Japan with China and the United States. The second dataset corresponds to the indicator Military expenditure (current USD), identified by the code "MS.MIL.XPND.CD". This dataset was used to examine Japanese military expenditure in monetary terms.

These datasets were downloaded as CSV files and used directly for the purposes of the study. In contrast to the ODA indicator, no additional cleaned CSV files were created for this section. Instead, the original World Bank files were processed directly through a Python script to extract the relevant data. The analysis also relies on secondary literature for contextual interpretation, especially in relation to the strategic environment of the Abe administration and the comparative significance of Japanese defense spending in relation to China and the United States.

Appendix B. Data Preparation for Defense Expenditure

The empirical analysis of defense expenditure was based on the direct processing of the original World Bank CSV files. The raw files were not reorganized into separate analytical datasets. Instead, relevant data was extracted directly in Python for graph production.

The data preparation process involved several steps. First, the World Bank files were read while skipping the metadata rows included at the beginning of the CSV format. Second, the analysis selected the row corresponding to Japan and restricted the observations to the period 2000–2020. Third, the annual values were converted from wide format to long format. For the comparative graph, the same procedure was applied to

China and the United States, using the dataset on military expenditure as a percentage of GDP.

Graph production was carried out in Python through the script "military_graphs.py". The graphs were saved separately and later inserted into the study.

Appendix C. Reproducibility for Defense Expenditure

To reproduce the graphs, a user must place the original World Bank CSV files in the root folder of the project and run the following command:

```bash
python code/military_graphs.py
```

The script reads the original World Bank files, extracts the data for Japan, and, where necessary, also extracts the data for China and the United States. It then generates the graphs and saves them automatically in the project's /graphs folder.

The files used in this part of the study will be included in the final online repository together with the relevant code and graph outputs. The material associated with this section is intended to make the analytical process transparent and reproducible.

Appendix D. Data Sources for External Strategic-Economic Engagement

The analysis of external strategic-economic engagement is based primarily on OECD development assistance data, which were downloaded from the OECD Data Explorer and later cleaned and reorganized for the purposes of the study.

Two OECD datasets were used. The first is DAC1: Flows by provider (ODA+OOF+Private), downloaded as "Table1_Data.csv". This dataset provides aggregate annual data on official development assistance and related financial flows by donor countries. The second is DAC2A: Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions, downloaded as "Table2a_Data.csv". This dataset provides recipient-level and regional information on ODA disbursements and was used to analyze the geographical distribution of Japanese aid.

The study also relies on official policy documents and secondary literature for contextual interpretation. These include, among others, Japanese Diplomatic Bluebooks, official Ministry of Foreign Affairs material, and academic sources used to situate the empirical trends within the broader strategic logic of the Abe administration.

Appendix E. Data Preparation for External Strategic-Economic Engagement

The raw source files were not used directly in the figures or in the final written analysis. Instead, they were filtered and transformed into smaller analytical datasets designed specifically for the study.

The data preparation process involved several steps: first, the original OECD datasets were downloaded and saved with their original file names. Second, the dataset was filtered to Japan as donor and restricted to the period 2000–2020. Third, the relevant amount type was kept in USD millions. Fourth, the recipient-level dataset was further filtered to retain "ODA: Total Net", which was considered the clearest category for the geographical analysis.

A methodological clarification is necessary regarding the construction of Figure 4. The raw file used for the annual ODA series was "Table1_Data.csv", downloaded from the OECD DAC1 dataset *Flows by provider (ODA+OOF+Private)*. Since this source contains several categories of financial flows and not only official development assistance, the Python cleaning script applied an additional filter before constructing the final analysis. The dataset was restricted to Japan as donor, the period 2000-2021, and current prices in USD millions, and then filtered to retain only the category "I.A. Bilateral Official Development Assistance by types of aid (1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10)" under "Aid Type", together with "Net Disbursements" under "Fund flows". Therefore, the series used in Figure 4 does not represent all flows included in the original DAC1 file, but only Japan's bilateral ODA net disbursements.

From this process, several cleaned CSV files were created through a cleansing Python script, "clean_oda_data.py":

- "japan_oda_total_2000_2020.csv", containing total annual ODA
- "japan_oda_total_summary.csv", containing summary statistics by period
- "japan_oda_geographical_total_net_2000_2020.csv", containing recipient level net ODA

- “japan_selected_asian_recipients.csv”, containing the selected Asian cases used in the section.

Additional intermediate files were also generated, such as “japan_oda_geographical_2000_2020.csv”, and “japan_top15_oda_recipients_2000_2020.csv”, even though they were not central to the final process.

Graph production was also carried out in Python. Once the cleaned datasets had been created, a second script, named “oda_graphs.py” was used to generate the four figures used in the section on external strategic-economic engagement. These graphs were saved separately and inserted into the study.

Appendix F. Reproducibility for External Strategic-Economic Engagement

Both scripts were designed to be executed from the main project folder. To reproduce the outputs, a user would need to place the original OECD files in the root folder of the project and then run the following commands:

``` bash
python code/clean_oda_data.py
python code/oda_graphs.py
```

The cleaned datasets, Python scripts, and final graphs used in the empirical analysis will be deposited in an online repository upon completion of the dissertation. The repository will contain the cleaned analytical datasets, the scripts used for data preparation and graph production, and the figures included in the chapter. The original OECD raw datasets are not included in the repository, as they are publicly available from the OECD Data Explorer and can be downloaded separately.

Appendix G. Data Sources for Trade and Economic Engagement

The analysis of trade and economic engagement is based on trade data obtained from the World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) database. WITS was selected because it provides comparable trade data by reporting country, partner country, trade flow, and year,

which makes it possible to examine both the evolution of Japan's trade with individual partners and the relative weight of those partners in Japan's overall trade profile.

For this indicator, two main WITS datasets were used: one for Japanese exports by partner and one for Japanese imports by partner. These files contain trade values expressed in current US$ thousands and include annual observations for a wide range of partner economies. The original files used for the analysis were downloaded from WITS and correspond to Japan as the reporting economy.

The original files employed in the final analysis were:

"WITS_Japan_Export_US_Thousands.csv"
"WITS_Japan_Import_US_Thousands.csv"

Earlier in the preparation process, additional WITS files containing partner shares in total products were also downloaded. These files were:

"WITS_Japan_Export_Shares.csv"
"WITS_Japan_Import_Shares.csv"

These share files were initially considered for the graphical analysis. However, they were not used in the final version of the indicator because the final graphs required the construction of grouped partner categories, especially the China bloc, and this was more accurately achieved by calculating partner shares directly from the bilateral trade value files contained in the two first files.

Appendix H. Data preparation and File processing for Trade and Economic Engagement

The raw trade data were not used directly in their downloaded form. A sequence of preparation steps was necessary to transform the original WITS material into a suitable format.

First, the relevant WITS tables were downloaded for Japan as reporter country. The initial files were originally available in spreadsheet format. To avoid compatibility problems in Python, the files were converted into CSV format. This conversion was

carried out manually by opening the downloaded files in spreadsheet software and saving them as CSV files. The resulting CSV files were stored in the main project directory.

Second, the file names were simplified to make the Python workflow more stable and reproducible. The final file names used by the script were:

"WITS_Japan_Export_US_Thousands.csv"
"WITS_Japan_Import_US_Thousands.csv"

Third, the CSV files required specific handling because, once exported from spreadsheet software, they used a specific format: semicolons (;) as separators and commas (,) as decimal marks. The Python script was therefore written to read the files explicitly under those conditions.

Fourth, after the files were loaded into Python, the column names were cleaned to remove extra spaces. The script then filtered the data to keep only Japan as the reporting country.

Fifth, partner names were standardized. This was particularly important because the same broader geographical area could appear under different labels. In the final version of the analysis, the following categories were treated separately:

China; China, Hong Kong SAR; China, Macao SAR; United States; India; Vietnam; Indonesia; Australia; Philippines; United Kingdom; Germany; France; World.

Sixth, the trade values originally expressed in current US$ thousands were converted into million US$, making the final figures easier to understand.

Appendix I. Construction of graphs for Trade and Economic Engagement

The figures in the trade and economic engagement section were generated through the Python script "trade_graphs.py". This script was stored in the /code folder of the project and executed from the main project directory.

First, it creates graphs of absolute bilateral trade values. These figures show Japan's exports to and imports from major partners between 2000 and 2020. Since the values are converted into million US$, the resulting graphs are easier to read than the original series expressed in current US$ thousands.

Second, it creates graphs of partner shares in Japan's total exports and imports. These shares were not taken directly from the previously downloaded WITS share files

in the final analytical version. Instead, they were recalculated from the bilateral value files using the following formula:

$$partner\ share\ = \frac{trade\ with\ partner}{Japan\ total\ trade\ with\ world} \times 100$$

The use of the World row in the WITS value files is therefore essential, since it serves as the denominator for the share calculations.

A methodological adjustment was made during the preparation of this indicator. At an earlier stage, the analysis considered working directly with the WITS partner share files. However, once the analytical design was expanded beyond a simple China–United States comparison and began to include grouped categories such as the China bloc and the selected Indo-Pacific partners, it became more appropriate to calculate the shares directly from the trade value files.

Appendix J. Reproducibility for Trade and Economic Engagement

The trade and economic engagement indicator was designed to be reproducible from the processed CSV files stored in the project folder. To reproduce the figures, the following files must be placed in the main project directory:

“WITS_Japan_Export_US_Thousands.csv”
“WITS_Japan_Import_US_Thousands.csv”

The script used for the analysis is stored in: “code/trade_graphs.py”

The graphs can then be reproduced by running the following command from the main project folder:

```bash
python code/trade_graphs.py
```

The output graphs are automatically saved in the /graphs folder, while the summary table is saved in the /data_clean folder.

The final repository therefore includes the processed trade files, the Python script used for data preparation and graph production, and the resulting graphical outputs used in the study.

Appendix K. Case selection and Method of Analysis for Policy Initiative in Selected Cases

The analysis of policy initiative in selected cases is based on official Japanese government documents, official multilateral records, and selected secondary literature.

The main sources used in this section are the Diplomatic Bluebooks published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA), especially the editions corresponding to 2008, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2020. These documents were used to trace changes in official Japanese diplomatic discourse over time, with particular attention to economic diplomacy, trade rulemaking, multilateral engagement, and leadership within international institutions. These primary sources were complemented by selected secondary literature used for contextual interpretation, especially works by Vidal, Liu, Schoff, Hughes, and Tsuruoka.

This indicator was examined through qualitative case analysis rather than statistical measurement. The objective was to identify moments in which Japan appeared to exercise visible initiative, shape negotiations, or coordinate international outcomes in a way that could be interpreted as evidence of proactivity.

First, a short chronological reconstruction was carried out through the reading of pre-Abe and Abe-era Diplomatic Bluebooks. This made it possible to compare official discourse before and during the Abe administration. Second, two selected cases were chosen for closer interpretation: Japan's role in sustaining the CPTPP after the withdrawal of the United States and Japan's leadership during the 2019 G20 Osaka Summit. In addition to these two core cases, the section also considered Japan's engagement with ASEAN-centered regional mechanisms as supporting evidence of a broader pattern of multilateral activism.

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