

Institutionalized Alliance and the Formation of Japan's Postwar Foreign and Security Policy: U.S. Influence and Japanese Choices

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Abstract. Following the end of World War II, Japan's foreign and security policy underwent a profound transformation, moving away from the prewar model of military expansion and toward a national strategy centered on pacifism, economic development, and reliance on the United States for security. In this process, the United States shaped Japan's postwar foreign and security structure through occupation reforms, the institutionalization of Article 9 of the Constitution, the security treaty system, the maintenance of U.S. forces, and the Okinawa arrangements. However, attributing this transformation primarily to external shaping by the U.S. fails to capture the full complexity of Japan's policy evolution. Japan was not merely a passive recipient of external arrangements; rather, it used the security guarantees provided by the United States within existing institutional constraints to limit its military burden and allocate resources toward economic development. Simultaneously, domestic factors such as pacifist norms, socio-political opposition, and a sense of sovereignty shaped the trajectory of post-war security policy and influenced the specific forms of U.S.-Japan security cooperation. Consequently, this paper examines the mechanisms through which U.S. influence, exercised through institutionalized alliance mechanisms, affected Japan's foreign and security policies between 1945 and 1972. This study demonstrates that Japan's postwar foreign and security policies were not simply shaped by the United States alone, but emerged from the interaction between U.S. strategic influence, Japanese policy choices, and domestic political norms. Although the United States provided the institutional security framework, Japan accepted, adapted, and reshaped this framework through domestic political and policy processes.

Keywords: Post-war Japanese diplomacy, U.S.-Japan alliance, Yoshida Doctrine, Pacifism, Institutionalized security mechanism

1. Introduction

Following Japan's defeat in 1945, the US-led Allied occupation system drove significant adjustments to Japan's political system and national development trajectory. The course of military expansion, which had intensified during the latter part of the prewar era, shifted in the postwar period toward a development model characterized primarily by pacifism, economic growth, and limited

militarization. Concurrently, a U.S.-Japan security cooperation mechanism emerged within the postwar security architecture and became a cornerstone of Japan's foreign and security policies. Against this backdrop, the period from 1945 to 1972 was a crucial stage in the formation of Japan's postwar foreign and security policies. It included major historical developments like the U.S. occupation, the restoration of Japanese sovereignty, the signing of the 1951 U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, the 1960 revision of the treaty, the emergence of the "Yoshida Doctrine," and the reversion of Okinawa in 1972. The interplay between these institutional changes and political processes transformed the US-Japan relationship from one of occupation-era administration to one of institutionalized security cooperation. Existing scholarship has analyzed the US role in Japan's post-war reconstruction from various perspectives. For instance, Dower examined the impact of US policies on Japan's political structure and social transformation through the lens of occupation governance, while Cha explored how the US shaped the regional security order and influenced the strategic choices of its allies via the bilateral alliance system [1, 2]. Beyond the impact of US institutions, Chai emphasized the institutionalization of the Yoshida Doctrine, whereas Katzenstein highlighted the significant role of domestic norms in shaping Japan's security policy [3, 4]. Consequently, this article examines how the United States influenced Japan's foreign and security policies through institutionalized alliance mechanisms between 1945 and 1972, while also exploring how Japanese policy choices, domestic political norms, and social factors shaped this development. Thus, it aims to analyze the interaction between U.S. strategic arrangements and Japan's autonomous adjustments, thereby explaining the foundations of the postwar U.S.-Japan alliance structure and the factors that contributed to its long-term continuity.

2. Institutional embedding of occupation reforms and the alliance system

2.1. Reconstruction of the post-war order and establishment of the security framework

Following Japan's defeat in 1945, the United States led Japan's political reforms, military restrictions, and constitutional drafting, while overseeing the restructuring of Japan's postwar institutions. Dower notes that the occupation not only altered Japan's political system but also shaped its understanding of war, the state, and democracy [1]. Notably, Article 9 of the Constitution established the principles of renouncing war and limiting military forces; this imposed legal constraints on Japan's military capabilities and transformed the institutional foundations of its national security policy. However, Article 9 did not fully address Japan's security requirements. With the end of the occupation and the restoration of sovereignty, Japan needed new institutional arrangements that could maintain military constraints while providing external security guarantees. The 1951 U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, concluded alongside the restoration of sovereignty, established mechanisms for U.S. troop stationing and security guarantees, thus enabling Japan to maintain military constraints while the United States assumed primary responsibility for defense. Following the end of the occupation, U.S. influence over Japan's security affairs shifted from the direct control exercised during the occupation era to a sustained presence embedded in treaty and alliance institutions. Ikenberry's analysis of the postwar order suggests that powerful states can transform influence into stable political orders through institutional arrangements [5]. Cha further observes that the bilateral alliance system established by the United States in Asia not only provided security guarantees but also shaped the scope of strategic choices available to its allies [2]. Within this institutional framework, the U.S.-Japan alliance linked U.S. security commitments with Japan's military constraints and became the foundation of Japan's postwar foreign and security policy.

2.2. Domestic political constraints and the limits of external influence

While the United States established the fundamental direction of Japan's postwar security policy through its alliance system, this influence did not translate directly into policy outcomes; rather, it required adjustment through Japan's domestic political processes. The 1960 Security Treaty protests (Anpo protests) demonstrated this limitation. When the Japanese government attempted to revise the security treaty, public opposition reflected concerns that the revision would increase Japan's reliance on U.S. strategic interests and raise questions about national sovereignty. Kapur notes that the protests were not merely directed at the treaty revision itself but reflected broader debates in postwar Japan concerning democracy, sovereignty, and the nation's future direction [6]. Though the government maintained the alliance, adjustments to security policy had to remain within limits acceptable to the domestic political landscape. This constraint is also evident in the issue of military bases. Okinawa bore the burden of U.S. bases for an extended period after the war; while its reversion to Japan in 1972 restored Japanese administrative authority, U.S. military facilities remained in place. Sarantakes points out that the reversion of Okinawa involved reconciling Japan's claims to sovereignty with U.S. military requirements [7]. Local opposition arising from the burden of these bases demonstrates that, although alliance arrangements may remain stable at the national level, their implementation is shaped by local social and political pressures. While the U.S. could influence the overall direction of Japan's security policy, it could not fully determine how these policies were adjusted in practice. Japan continued to define the boundaries of alliance operations via its domestic political processes.

3. Formation and structural consolidation of the alliance system

3.1. The Yoshida doctrine and the choice of security policy

While the U.S. exerted significant influence on Japan's security policy, Japan's acceptance of military constraints and reliance on the U.S. for security in the postwar era also reflected its own strategic choices. The "Yoshida Doctrine," spearheaded by Shigeru Yoshida, was anchored in U.S. security guarantees and prioritized economic development within the framework of national policy. By curtailing military expenditure, the Japanese government was able to concentrate resources on economic recovery and gradually institutionalize this arrangement as a long-term policy direction.

This strategic choice was subsequently embedded in Japan's political institutions. Chai argues that the Yoshida Doctrine was not simply a temporary response to the immediate postwar environment; rather, it was consolidated through later political developments and became a central component of Japan's security policy [3]. In this process, reliance on the U. S. for security, limited militarization, and economic prioritization formed a mutually reinforcing policy framework. Japan did not passively accept a security framework imposed by the U.S.; instead, it leveraged the alliance arrangement to advance its own developmental goals. From a security strategy perspective, Japan's reliance on the United States reflected a trade-off between security needs and the allocation of national resources. States adjust their security strategies according to international conditions and their own capabilities [8]. Studies of Japan's security policy suggest that reliance on the United States was shaped by both normative factors, including pacifism and domestic constraints, and pragmatic considerations such as limiting defense expenditures and avoiding the costs of militarization [9]. However, Japan did not completely abandon policy autonomy; instead, it continued to balance security requirements with opportunities for independent action within the alliance framework [10].

3.2. Institutional lock-in and the stabilization of the alliance structure

The long-term continuity of the U.S.-Japan alliance stems from path dependence created by early institutional choices, rather than merely being the result of U.S. power superiority. Thelen's research on historical institutionalism suggests that early institutional arrangements shape later policy trajectories and increase the costs of institutional change [11]. In postwar Japan, the decision to rely on U.S. security guarantees while maintaining limited domestic military capabilities created a lasting relationship between limited militarization and reliance on the United States for security.

This dependency was subsequently reinforced through alliance mechanisms and the base system. Although the 1951 U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and its 1960 revision modified the distribution of responsibilities, they did not fundamentally change the existing division of labor, in which the United States provided security guarantees while Japan offered access to military bases. Consequently, the U.S. was able to maintain a regional military presence, while Japan participated in the alliance's operations through the granting of base access and political cooperation. Calder's research on U.S. overseas bases notes that bases serve not only military deployment needs but also act as crucial institutional conditions for sustaining the alliance [12]. The base system in Okinawa illustrates the continuity of this division of labor. Okinawa remained under U.S. administration for an extended period after the war; although Japan regained administrative authority after the 1972 reversion, U.S. military bases continued to operate on the islands. Sarantakes argues that Okinawa's reversion reflected an effort to reconcile Japan's claims to sovereignty with U.S. military requirements [7]. This arrangement shows that the postwar security division of labor did not disappear with the restoration of sovereignty but continued to operate within the institutional structure of the alliance.

4. Normative factors and the persistence of institutions

4.1. Construction of national identity and the process of norm internalization

The continuity of Japan's post-war security policy stems not only from the U.S.-Japan alliance system but also from the gradual integration of these institutional arrangements into Japan's self-conception regarding its security role. Concepts such as pacifism and a limited military role were not merely policy arrangements; rather, they became normative constraints formed through Japan's postwar political development. Constructivist theory argues that state behavior is influenced not only by material conditions but also by identities and norms, with a state's self-perception shaping its policy choices [13].

In particular, Article 9 of the Constitution has not only constrained the development of Japan's military capabilities but shaped its postwar understanding of the appropriate role of military power. Japan's security policy has long been influenced by domestic normative and institutional conditions [4]. Even as Japan established the Self-Defense Forces and expanded its defense capabilities, the government has consistently emphasized the defensive nature of these forces to avoid breaching the boundaries of the military role established in the post-war era. Furthermore, anti-militarism restricted the extent of public acceptance for broader military expansion [14]. However, such constraints do not mean that security policy remained unchanged. Following the Cold War, Japan gradually adjusted its defense policy, yet these changes remained shaped by established national identity and institutional legacies. Although Japan's security policy has exhibited a trend toward "normalization," this process has not departed from the normative framework established in the

post-war period [15]. At the same time, public attitudes toward security issues shift depending on the specific topic at hand, rather than remaining fixed on a singular pacifist stance [16].

4.2. Structural manifestations of institutional continuity and policy constraints

The postwar alliance between Japan and the U.S. developed into an asymmetrical but institutionalized structure shaped by Japan's foreign and security policy choices. The U.S. held a dominant position within the alliance by virtue of its military capabilities and strategic resources, maintaining influence over Japan's security environment via security commitments, a network of bases, and institutional arrangements. For its part, Japan accepted the security guarantees provided by the U.S. while shaping the alliance's practical operation through domestic institutional and policy processes. Therefore, the U.S.-Japan alliance should not be understood as a relationship of unilateral control, but rather as an institutionalized form of interdependence within an asymmetrical power structure.

The stability of this structure stems from the enduring integration of institutional arrangements and behavioral patterns. Ikenberry and Kupchan argue that hegemonic orders are sustained not only by material power, but also by institutional arrangements and processes of normative socialization [17]. In the context of U.S.-Japan relations, American influence was institutionalized through alliance mechanisms, gradually giving rise to a stable pattern of security-related division of labor. However, this institutionalization did not eliminate the scope for Japanese policy adjustments. Hoshiro points out that the "Yoshida Doctrine" was not a strategy fixed at the outset of the post-war era, but rather a policy framework continuously constructed and adjusted through subsequent political processes [18]. Thus, the continuity of the U.S.-Japan alliance does not stem from Japan passively upholding existing arrangements; rather, it arises from the institutional adaptation achieved by both parties within this asymmetrical relationship.

5. Conclusion

This article examines how U.S. influence shaped Japan's foreign and security policies through an institutionalized alliance between 1945 and 1972, and how Japan developed a security dependence on the United States during this process. The study demonstrates that postwar Japanese security policy was not the result of unilateral shaping by the U.S.; rather, it was an institutional arrangement that reflected the interaction between U.S. security guarantees, Japanese strategic choices, and domestic political norms. While the U.S. established the external conditions for Japan's low militarization and dependence on the U.S. through occupation reforms, the alliance system, and security mechanisms, Japan used this framework to reduce defense burdens and prioritize economic development. At the same time, pacifist norms, sociopolitical pressures, and a sense of sovereignty constrained the scope of U.S. influence, allowing Japan to retain room for policy adjustment within the alliance framework. Consequently, the durability of the U.S.-Japan alliance stemmed not from unilateral control but from institutionalized interaction within an asymmetric relationship: the U.S. maintained the security framework, while Japan continuously adjusted the boundaries of its own policies as it accepted and utilized that framework. This perspective illustrates that the formation of postwar Japanese foreign and security policy reflected both U.S. hegemonic influence and the shaping role of Japan's domestic politics and strategic choices on the external structure.

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