

# Research on China-Japan Bilateral Relations——A Stable and Fragile Bilateral Relationship

Wentao Huang\*

Department of Information Engineering, Guangzhou Vocational University of Science and Technology, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510000, China

\*Corresponding author: hzf@gkd.edu.cn

**Abstract.** After the end of World War II, since the surrender of the Japanese militarist Empire, Japan had political reform with the help of the United States. It was the beginning of Japan's diplomatic normalization after the end of militaristic diplomacy. Since the new century, from the "Follow America and give priority to economic development" to the "New capitalism and realism diplomacy in the new era" foreign policy with domestic and foreign coordination, Japan's diplomatic strategy towards China has handled resoundingly on the delicate relationship of competition between China and the United States. Japan has a lot of deep cooperation with the United States, Japan maintains a relatively harmonious relationship at the same time. This paper focuses on the important strategic changes in Japanese diplomacy from the beginning of the 21st century to the present and the leading ideas and lines of Japanese diplomacy in different periods. According to Japan's various strategic changes, domestic and foreign factors have proved that Sino-Japanese relations are both stable and fragile.

**Keywords:** Economics, policy, cooperation, alliances, conflict, strategy.

## 1. Introduction

With the gradual deepening of the exchanges between China and Japan, the research on Sino-Japanese relations has also developed. However, due to the constant changes in the situation and ideological differences between China and Japan, there are different differences in the relations between the two countries, leading to a lot of contradictions in the rhetoric of the two countries, which is not conducive to the stability, prosperity and development of the situation in East Asia. This paper analyzes the stable and fragile bilateral relations between China and Japan in terms of both political and economic aspects. Nowadays, the tension between Japan and China is gradually easing and developing towards a friendly relationship. However, the relationship between Japan and China is not always like this. The relationship between Japan and China is up and down from time to time, so it is very important to study the relationship between China and Japan. Thus, there are some clues for understanding Sino-Japanese relations or resolving Sino-Japanese conflicts.

## 2. Theoretical Analysis of Japan's Policy Shift Towards China

After the war, Japan's diplomacy was generally limited to the Japan-US alliance framework or the relationship of its own choice with the United States as the axis. But in order to safeguard its national interests, Japan will also respond to changes in the international situation and its status as a great power. For this reason, Japan will propose and choose slightly different diplomatic principles and policies within a certain range. For example, after Japan joined the United Nations in 1956, the Foreign Ministry put forward the so-called "three pillars" of Japan's diplomacy in its Diplomatic Blue Book published the following year, namely, "coordination with Western countries", "an Asian nation" and "the United Nations Center". However, for a long time, for Japan's diplomacy, the most important is the United States, that is, "the United States as the center", even when considering the development of relations with other countries, it is based on the United States to make decisions. Specifically, in the nearly 70 years since the restoration of Japan's independence in 1952, Japanese diplomacy has generally gone through three stages, each with its characteristics. That is, from 1952 to the early 1970s, characterized by "following the United States diplomacy"; From the early 1970s to the early

1980s, it was characterized by "all-round independent diplomacy"; Since the 1980s, it has been characterized by "political power diplomacy" [1]. Since the introduction of China's reform and opening-up policy in 1979, the value and complexity of Sino-Japanese economic relations have grown exponentially. However, while economic ties have grown, security ties have deteriorated amid some ideologically contradictory rhetoric from Tokyo and Beijing. The simultaneous existence of these two trends poses a challenge to the theory of international relations. The theory of economic interdependence predicts that the development of economic relations will reduce the role of security relations in bilateral relations. In contrast, neorealist theory holds that, given the importance of national security, a sense of threat will cool economic relations [2].

Since the 21st century, there have been obvious bilateral benefits in China-Japanese economic relations. However, economic interdependence does not seem to translate into security considerations, especially in Japan in recent years, where close military cooperation between the United States and its Allies demonstrates that economic ties cannot diminish Japan's importance in security planning. That said, it is also true that perceptions of threats seem to have little impact on bilateral economic interdependence. Therefore, Sino-Japanese relations are best described in terms of interdependence and neorealist theory complementing each other.

### **3. Bilateral Relations Between China and Japan**

#### **3.1. Political Aspect**

The political strategies adopted by Japan will vary according to the international environment in different times and the political views of the domestic Prime Minister's cabinet, and will have great differences in two different periods. These policy variables will then affect the political relations between Japan and China. Although Japan has been following the United States since the end of World War II, it attaches great importance to economic construction as well as political construction. Even though the relationship between China and the United States is constantly changing, Japan will still maintain its independent relationship with China to a certain extent, among which the economy is an important link between China and Japan.

##### **3.1.1 Stable aspect**

Although there were many frictions and contradictions between China and Japan in the 19th and early 20th centuries and during World War II, which brought the relations between the two countries to the extreme, there were still times when the relations between the two countries were good, especially after the end of World War II, Japan successively guaranteed its national security through economic development and political close relations with the United States. Then, to solve state-to-state disputes through an independent foreign policy focusing on peace and cooperation with Asian countries, supporting the establishment of equal and mutually beneficial relations with neighboring countries, respecting the role of international law and international organizations, so as to promote regional stability and prosperity, all these measures have laid a good foundation for the friendly relations between China and Japan. Since 1954, the Japanese government has implemented a policy centered on people's lives, carried out political reforms, normalized parliamentary activities, built a clean government, built a welfare state, and established world peace. Gradually normalized diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and other Eastern European socialist countries, and signed the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration. Against this backdrop, Japan has also begun to focus on improving relations with China and expressed support for private trade activities between the two countries. In 1972, after nearly two decades of fragility, Sino-Japanese relations began to stabilize: Japan promoted rapid economic growth through domestic industrial and social adjustment, adjusting land development and internal affairs. With its developed economy, Japan adopted an active foreign policy with the world, especially focusing on diplomacy of the third-world countries. Specific policies such as the "New Middle East Policy", the "Five Principles of Southeast Asian Diplomacy", the "pro-African diplomacy" and the "Diplomatic Direction toward Latin America" have been promulgated

successively, vigorously demonstrating the posture of leaning toward the Third World. The prime minister of Japan visited the United States, Europe and the Soviet Union successively, "setting up the framework of multilateral diplomacy". In the same year, the Middle East policy was adjusted to support Arab countries in the Arab-Israeli conflict. In 1974, it was proposed that in order to adapt to the multi-polar international situation, the content of multilateral diplomacy should be enriched and Japan's diplomacy should be extended to the whole world. Its main approach is to put forward the "broad, deep and distant" activity policy, emphasizing the need to judge the situation and formulate countermeasures from a long-term perspective. In this context, Japan gradually improved its relations with China and the head of the Chinese government signed the Sino-Japanese Joint Statement in Beijing, which declared the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries and proposed that "the People's Republic of China is the sole legal government of China" and "Taiwan is an inalienable territory of China", calling for the resumption of diplomatic relations between Japan and China. In foreign relations, the United States, China and the Soviet Union should attach equal importance to the three sides and maintain good-neighborly friendship. After 1980, Japanese Prime ministers visited China many times and had more contacts with Chinese leaders. Japan began to attach importance to historical records in textbooks and was very happy to celebrate Sino-Japanese friendship activities, and agreed and supported China's "one country, two systems system".

### 3.1.2 Vulnerable aspect

But from 1957 to 1972, Japan began to reshuffle its cabinet. In politics, Japan established a new system, strengthened political rule, changed Japan's semi-independence and semi-occupation status under the general policy coordinated by Japan and the United States, accelerated the pace of Japan's military expansion, amended the Constitution with the *fait accompli*, and attempted to achieve the purpose of amending the Constitution by interpreting the Constitution. Japan has changed its attitude towards China and adopted a hostile attitude, which has damaged the communication channel between China and Japan, cut off personnel exchanges between the two countries and brought trade to a standstill. Japan also obstructed China's Taiwan issue, established diplomatic relations with Taiwan, signed the Japan-Taiwan treaty, and attracted Southeast Asian countries to take public opinion attacks against China. Sino-Japanese relations have regressed to the early post-World War II state, making the hard-won stability of Sino-Japanese relations very fragile.

After the normalization of diplomatic relations between China and Japan in 1972, in 1976, due to the influence of the past history, the Japanese Prime Minister's Cabinet began to take measures that are not conducive to the friendship between China and Japan, and cooperated with the United States to hinder China's restoration of its lawful seat in the United Nations, but also because of the historical trend and the trend of The Times. After 1976, Japan used and re-used the "pro-China" lawmakers for diplomatic work, concluded the Treaty of Peace and Friendship with China in 1978, and facilitated the first visit by a Chinese head of state to Japan and an audience with the Emperor. Since then, Japan-China relations have entered a new stage. But it is also not difficult to see that Japan's subsequent attempts to improve relations with China were purposeful, and such relations were fragile.

## 3.2. Economic Aspect

After the war, Japan rebuilt its economy with rapid growth and later became a highly developed country, surpassing West Germany to become the second-largest economic power in the world after the United States. The developed Japanese economy and Japan complement each other, and Japan's extensive economic cooperation with the world has a profound impact on Japan's politics and diplomacy, and is also a powerful weapon of Japan's diplomacy.

### 3.2.1 Stable aspect

In the 1970s, Japan officially provided economic assistance to China, which was conducive to China's economic construction. The loans continued for nearly 30 years, accompanied by the process of reform and opening up. The further stability and development of China in the course of reform and opening up and the further strengthening of Japan-China friendly cooperative relations are of great

significance to the stability and development of the Asia-Pacific region and the world at large. Therefore, in the 27 years since 1979, the Japanese government has continuously implemented economic assistance to China. The total amount is about 3.4 trillion yen (about 180 billion yuan in 2004). The main funding for Japanese aid comes from taxes paid by Japanese citizens. The scope of assistance includes the construction of China's economic infrastructure such as railways, roads, ports and airports, as well as a wide range of areas such as rural development, environmental protection and improvement of medical standards. China and Japan have launched assistance projects for trade in services across China. These measures have contributed to China's economic and social development and the improvement of people's living standards. There are frequent exchanges of talents and technologies between the two countries. China and Japan enjoy deep cultural and people-to-people exchanges. The two countries exchange student visits. Japan's industrial, animation and other cultural industries are highly developed, and Japanese products enjoy a worldwide reputation. At the same time, Japanese cultural products are also loved by people all over the world, and so is China. After Japan's economic assistance to China for a period of time, except for some periods of extreme tension between China and Japan and the impact of the general environment, Japan's imports to China increased instead of decreasing. Japan exports a wide range of goods to China, such as industrial robots, semiconductor manufacturing equipment and production line automation equipment, such machinery and equipment account for the largest proportion of Japan's exports to China. Japan's world-famous automobile companies such as Toyota, Honda and Nissan have exported a large number of automobiles and auto parts to China and set up factories in China, which are welcomed by domestic car buyers. Japan not only has extensive capital investment cooperation in China and has established a large number of cooperative factories with China, but China also hopes to seek Chinese enterprises to invest in the Japanese market. With the development of China's economy and science and technology, China's exports and investment to Japan are gradually developing in a high-end direction, which will intensify the capital competition between China and Japan. This underscores the economic stability of the bilateral relationship.

### 3.2.2 Vulnerable aspect

Due to the very big dispute between the Japanese government and China over the territorial islands, Sino-Japanese relations were extremely tense for a period of time, which caused serious damage to the image of Japan in the Chinese market, resulting in the spontaneous choice of Chinese people to boycott Japanese products, which significantly affected Japan's exports to China. According to the statistics of the Japan External Trade Organization, due to China's economic slowdown and the deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations and other reasons, Japan's total exports to China in 2012 amounted to 144,709.4 million US dollars, a decrease of 10.4% from 2011, which is the first time in three years that Japan's exports to China declined, among which the exports of automobiles and construction machinery fell the most [3]. Sino-Japanese relations have been damaged to a large extent by political and diplomatic reasons. Later, until July 23, 2023, Sino-Japanese relations were once again tense, and Japan also adopted relevant sanctions against China, such as Japan's restrictions on the export of cutting-edge semiconductor manufacturing equipment officially took effect, causing major hidden dangers to the development of China's semiconductor industry. Even if China and Japan have maintained stable economic relations for a long time, they will also become fragile due to political conflicts.

## 4. Overall Foreign Policy and Implications

Japan has contributed to the world economically, politically, socially and culturally, and has formed a multilateral and open market, enabling Japan's development to be embedded in the prosperity of the world. Strengthen solidarity with the free world based on Japan-US friendship. Japan stressed the need for close cooperation with the United States to ensure the security and prosperity of Japan, the security of the Asia-Pacific region, and the resolution of problems worldwide. Easing the economic relations between Japan and the United States, which were increasingly tense at the time,

was a top priority for Japan's foreign policy. Japan attaches great importance to its Asian policy and strengthens its relations with countries in the Asia-Pacific region. In particular, it takes strengthening its relations with neighboring countries such as South Korea, China and ASEAN as its main task, and actively carries out economic cooperation. The relations between Japan and China have the characteristics of adapting to changes in the situation. As Zhao Quansheng mentioned in the *Mainstream Thinking of Japanese Diplomacy - The Middle Way with a Tendency*: Japan's three major foreign policy choices in its modern history of more than 100 years are not only relevant to its own development, but also have a significant impact on the peace and development of Asia and even the world [4]. These policy choices are closely related to the evolution of mainstream thinking in Japanese diplomacy. The key to understanding the development direction of Japanese diplomacy is to grasp the mainstream thinking of its political and diplomatic circles. The so-called "mainstream thinking" refers to a certain degree of consensus on foreign policy reached by the political and economic academia and the bureaucratic system of Japan through a long period of ideological stimulation. This consensus reflects the views of the relative majority and the relative majority is constantly changing. Japan's policy choices are not always antagonistic - for example, it can be a military and political power as well as an economic power [4]. Both Japan and China are willing to coexist peacefully with each other, but the relationship between Japan and China will take different attitudes due to changes in the international situation, resulting in both stable and fragile bilateral relations.

## **5. Political Strategy (Neorealism)**

### **5.1. 2006-2007 & 2012-2020**

Since 2006, the Japanese Prime Minister's Cabinet, in order to achieve the goal of "getting rid of the post-war system" and "political power", has carried out the cabinet's "values diplomacy", which reflects the diplomatic approach under the new realism theory. Japan's "values diplomacy" is different from that of Europe and the United States. It adopts different political strategies according to different diplomatic objects, with the aim of realizing Japan's national interests on this basis. Abe proposed "active pacifism" and committed to strategic diplomacy. Examining the security documents released by the Japanese government in recent years, the words "uncertainty", "threat" and "challenge" can be found everywhere. There is a logic in Japanese policy circles that in order to cope with the challenges brought by changes in the internal and external strategic environment, it is necessary to accelerate the transformation of national diplomacy and security strategy [5]. For example, the diplomacy between Japan and Western countries is dominated by values and ideology, and through this, Japan can expand its influence in Western countries. In strengthening security cooperation with the United States, India, Australia and other countries, the diplomatic focus will be on "strategic relations" under the construction of a "diamond strategy"; For countries with different "values", it adopts flexible interests orientation, such as flexible diplomacy with Russia: on the one hand, it seeks to solve the dispute over the four northern islands and sign a peace treaty, and on the other hand, it promotes cooperation in energy, economy, security and other fields, while taking into account the check of Russia by the United States. The ongoing "Abe Line" is, to a certain extent, Japan's strategic attempt in the new era. This systematic policy "experiment" covering politics, economy, diplomacy, military, society and even national consciousness has obvious aggressiveness and greater uncertainty compared with the "Yoshida Doctrine" advocating "low posture" in the outside world. While the durability of the "Abe line" remains to be tested, its internal and external impact will undoubtedly be enormous. The strategic goal of the "Abe Line" is to safeguard and expand national interests, and the means to achieve this goal is to mobilize all the forces at the disposal of the country and its Allies. [5] Under such a diplomatic line, the bilateral relations between China and Japan can be said to be stable and fragile. Japan always regards the United States as an ally and China as an opponent. While valuing the Japan-US alliance, Japan adopts a tough attitude toward China. The development and changes of China-Japan relations have had a great impact on the political stability of East Asia, but they still

have a relatively stable state of development, which largely depends on the long-term existence of bilateral economic and trade relations. Japan is China's fifth-largest trading partner, third-largest trading destination, second-largest export destination and second-largest import source. China is Japan's largest trading partner, export target and import source. Japan and China have cooperation in many aspects, including Japanese investment and financial cooperation, free aid, cultural and scientific exchanges and cooperation, and even brief military cooperation. At that time, Japan had a two-sided and contradictory attitude toward China. Japan not only hoped to seize the new opportunity of China's economic rise and rapid development to seek common development and seek common ground while reserving differences; At the same time, because of the increasing political influence of China in the world, Japan took alert against China, hoping to fight with China for the political right to speak in Asia, reflecting the limitations of Japan's "value diplomacy" at that time.

## 5.2. 2021 to Present

The concept of "realist diplomacy for a new era," as proposed by the Japanese Prime Minister in the section on foreign affairs and security, should not be ignored. The attitude of valuing "realism" in the implementation of foreign policy is not limited to the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), but has existed since the Democratic Party's regime. The first pillar of realist diplomacy in the New era is the emphasis on universal values and principles such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. To reiterate what the author has argued so far, realism in international politics holds that policy is carried out not by values but by the balance of power. Given the use of the term realism in diplomacy, despite the name of the New era, one cannot but be surprised at the claim that it ignores the general conceptual usage of international politics. The same example can be seen in the "positive peace" of the prime Minister's diplomacy in the past. The roots of the problem run deep. It also reflects the fact that there has been little progress in academic and field communication.

The meeting with the president of the United States is an extension of Japan-U.S. relations. Strengthening the relationship with the then Prime Minister of Australia was a step taken in the context of the high priority given to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). On promoting a "free and open Indo-Pacific", it is also an extension of the previous Prime Minister's line). With regard to QUAD cooperation on safety and security, the framework for advancing vaccine cooperation was proposed in this policy address. Strengthen cooperation with ASEAN and Europe, implement the TPP, and realize "DEFT" [6].

After a period of values diplomacy, Japan has ushered in a new era of diplomacy. At that time, the Japanese Prime Minister's cabinet was a "moderate dove" within the LDP, and although it inherited the ruling line of the past era of value diplomacy to a certain extent, the stable bilateral relations between China and Japan have improved under the current cabinet. Holding high the banner of "realism diplomacy for a new era," Japan is striving to promote its unique foreign security policy. Under the influence of changes in Japan's security environment and the power structure within the LDP, Japan has also made frequent moves in the field of security, such as strengthening the Japan-U.S. alliance and promoting economic security. It remains to be seen whether Japan, which took advantage of the G7 Hiroshima summit to complete policy coordination with its major Western partners, will shift its diplomatic focus to China in order to build a "constructive and stable Japan-China relationship." Under the 100-year change, the world is faced with many uncertain factors, and the future of the world is increasingly uncertain, so it is increasingly important to enhance risk management and control [7].

## 6. Economic and Trade Strategy (Economic Interdependence Theory)

Japan's trade policy has undergone some important changes in the past few decades, which reflect the Japanese government's response to the international economic environment and its consideration of domestic economic development. While tensions between Japan and China over national security

have been rising, bilateral trade between the two countries does not appear to have been particularly affected. There seems to be some conflict with the neorealist theory.

Between 2012 and 2020, Japan worked to strengthen economic ties between Japan and the United States, pushing forward negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, and trying to achieve a free trade agreement. By promoting relations with Southeast Asian countries through economic aid and investment, this policy aims to further deepen Japan's economic ties with Southeast Asia. However, the Japanese government has taken a relatively conservative stance when it comes to trade policy with China. Similarly, from 2021 to the present, the Japanese government is committed to maintaining and strengthening economic relations with the United States and attaches importance to Japan-US trade and investment cooperation. Japan will continue to promote the implementation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement and engage in dialogue and consultation with the United States on some trade issues. The Japanese government continues to strengthen economic ties with Southeast Asian countries and promote trade and investment cooperation. The prime minister of Japan continued his efforts to improve economic relations with China and promote the growth of bilateral trade and investment. This series of policies reflects the Japanese government's sensitivity to the global economic environment and its determination to maintain and deepen global economic relations.

Although Japan has been trying to maintain a huge economic and trade volume with the United States after the war, this trade volume is being surpassed by China. The trade issue between Japan and China and the issue of homeland security cooperation between Japan and the United States are the issues that Japan has been concerned about in recent years. China's importance among a range of Japan's trading partners has increased since the 1960s, when the same China did a lot of trade with Japan in the free world after its fall out with the Soviet Union (after the US President's visit to China). Although trade volumes look stable for both sides, trade dependence is moving in very different directions.

The imbalance between Japan and China in their trade status is reflected in the national security level that Japan is not willing to have direct friction with China like other Allies while deepening cooperation with the United States. On the other hand, China hopes to put pressure on Western countries such as Japan through its trade status, hoping to replace Japan in gaining the leading position in East Asia.

## 7. Conclusion

Since the 21st century, China has gradually realized the transformation of industrialization and is no longer completely dependent on Japan for importing high-tech products and electronic products, but Japan is still highly dependent on China for importing raw materials and semi-industrial products. The volume of imports and exports on both sides seems to be rising steadily. Compared with other regional conflicts, the military behavior of both sides has been restrained, but the fragility of this stability cannot be ignored.

From the perspective of the new realism theory, China and Japan have had irreconcilable disputes on the issue of homeland security since the new century, and the trade volume between the two sides has not been greatly affected, but the economic interdependence between Japan and China is declining at a high speed. From the perspective of the theory of economic interdependence, China's dependence on Japan is declining, while Japan is in reverse. As a result, since the beginning of the 21st century, China has begun to assert its territorial sovereignty, which it had previously allowed to do, with a strong attitude, while Japan has been weaker. The contradictions and frictions between the two sides have also increased significantly compared to the last century.

It is this stability and fragility that underlies the increasingly complex bilateral relationship between China and Japan in the 21st century.

## References

- [1] Liang Yunxiang. Japan-us Alliance Diplomacy in Japanese Diplomacy [J]. Japanese Literary Theory, 2021, (02):86-97+202-203.
- [2] Eldridge, A. e Limits of Interdependence: Cooperation and Conflict in Sino-Japanese Relations. New Voices, 2014, 6, 51.
- [3] ZHANG Yaohua. Japanese Diplomacy in Abe 2.0 Era.China International Studies,2013, (03):102-119+3.
- [4] Zhao Quansheng. The Mainstream Thinking of Japanese Diplomacy: The Middle Way with a Tendency [J]. Japan Journal, 2009, (01):16-27.
- [5] Zhang Yong. The Choice of Japanese Diplomacy: Concept, Agenda and Direction [J]. Journal of Foreign Affairs University, China,2016,33(06):45-83.
- [6] Mikami Takyo, "Analysis of Policy Policy Speeches for 2012 and 2022", Buddhist Law, No. 45, No. 1, September 30, 2022.
- [7] Yi Jiyuan Dun, Wang Yaozhen. Shore field cabinet's foreign relations in Japanese security policy [J]. Journal of Northeast Asia, 2023, (04):3-21+146.