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UNIVERSITY OF LAPLAND

“Japanese thinking has changed.”

Japanese media discourse of self and others in the context of Taiwan Strait conflict

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Abstract:

This master's thesis examines how Japanese media discourse socially constructs Japan's national identity in the context of the Taiwan Strait conflict between 2014 and 2022. Using the conceptual lens of identity and role theories, and employing critical discourse analysis, it analyses editorials from four major Japanese newspapers to see how Japan perceives itself and its relevant Others, particularly the United States and China, in the context of the conflict.

Rather than reflecting a fixed national identity and role conception, the findings of this thesis indicate tensions between Japan's post-war pacifist traditions and growing expectations of strategic responsibility. Japan's identity is presented as actively negotiated in response to external pressures, alliance expectations, historical memory, and normative commitments. This thesis thus argues that Japanese media constructs national identity as plural, relational, and contested. Ultimately, it also demonstrates how Japan struggles to act in ways that remain consistent with its identity and role claims under conditions of the changing international order.

Key words: Japan, Taiwan Strait conflict, identity, role, media discourse

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Tiivistelmä:

Tämä pro gradu -tutkielma tarkastelee kuinka Japanin media diskurssi rakentaa sosiaalisesti Japanin kansallista identiteettiä Taiwaninsalmen kriisin kontekstissa vuosina 2014-2022. Identiteetti- ja rooliteorioiden teoreettista viitekehystä hyödyntäen sekä kriittistä diskurssianalyysia soveltaen, tämä tutkimus analysoi neljän suuren japanilaisen sanomalehden pääkirjoituksia selvittääkseen, miten Japani hahmottaa itsensä ja keskeiset muut toimijat, erityisesti Yhdysvallat ja Kiinan, konfliktin kontekstissa.

Tutkielman tulokset osoittavat, että Japanin identiteetti- ja roolikäsitys ei ole pysyvä ja yksiselitteinen, vaan siihen liittyy jännitteitä Japanin toisen maailmansodan jälkeisten pasifististen perinteiden ja kasvavien strategista vastuuta koskevien odotusten välillä. Japanin identiteetti muotoutuu jatkuvasti ulkoisten paineiden, liittolaissuhteiden, sekä sen historiankäsityksen ja arvojen vaikutuksesta. Tutkielma väittää siis, että japanilainen media rakentaa kansallisen identiteetin moninaisena, relationaalisena ja kiistanalaisena. Se myös osoittaa, että Japani kamppailee toimiakseen tavoilla, joka olisi samaan aikaan sekä uskollinen sen omalle identiteetti- ja rooliväittämille, että vastaisi muuttuvan maailman vaatimuksiin.

Avainsanat: Japani, Taiwaninsalmen kriisi, identiteetti, roolit, media diskurssi.

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1. Introduction

The Taiwan Strait conflict is one of the most sensitive and destabilising issues in contemporary East Asian international relations. Rooted in the unresolved legacy of the Chinese Civil War, tensions between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan have persisted for decades with varying degrees of intensity. At the intersection of these historical tensions and competing strategic interests, the question of Taiwan has become a defining source of friction between China and the United States, as the US' political, military, and economic engagement with Taiwan is perceived by China as a challenge to its sovereignty claims. Naturally, due to this much of the existing scholarship on the Cross-Strait issue has focused predominantly on Sino-American perspectives, often framing the conflict as a bilateral or great-power confrontation. However, this focus risks ignoring the equally important perspectives of other key actors, whose identities and geopolitical circumstances make them directly invested in the stability of the region.

Japan is one of these actors. Due to its geographical proximity to Taiwan, its close alliance with the US, and its complex relationship with China, Japan is directly affected by developments in the Taiwan Strait, and any escalation of tensions have profound implications for its security. In recent years, the risk of an armed conflict has heavily increased, which has been reflected in Japan's domestic political discourse, with debates about increasing the defence budget, changes to its defence policies, as well as discussions about contingency planning and evacuation strategies. These debates indicate that Japan is grappling with questions about its own national identity and purpose in a period of shifting global power balances. Japan must negotiate both its self-image as a peaceful, post-war state and its emerging role as a partner in collective security frameworks.

This thesis argues that examining how Japan perceives itself and others in relation to the Taiwan Strait is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of regional dynamics in East Asia. This is done through the conceptual lens of identity and role theories, with identity theory serving as the primary theory, and role theory complementing it by conceptualising the roles that states adopt as behavioural manifestations of identity. Together, this framework provides tools for analysing how Japan's identity and roles are socially constructed through discourse. This thesis will specifically focus on editorials from some of Japan's biggest newspapers,

specifically from the timeframe of 2014-2022, and analyse them by using the method of discourse analysis. This research method allows for a detailed examination of how Japanese media constructs national identity and role perceptions through language, narratives, and representations, shaping how Japan understands itself and others.

Based on the above, the research question this thesis seeks to answer is "How does Japanese media construct national identity in its discourse about Japan's relations with the US and China in the context of the Taiwan Strait conflict?". This thesis thus intends to further contribute to the scholarship on national identity and role conceptions by examining how they are articulated and debated in media discourse, aiming to demonstrate how these approaches can be valuable for understanding regional security issues that are too often analysed primarily through material or strategic lenses. By foregrounding Japanese perspective, this thesis also aims to broaden the analytical focus beyond the dominant US-China framing and highlights Japan as a meaningful actor engaged in an ongoing identity negotiation in the Taiwan Strait context.

2. Contextualisation

In order to understand Japan's contemporary discourse surrounding the Taiwan Strait, it's important to first explain the historical background of the conflict, as well as Japan's post-war developments that have shaped the country's identity. This contextualisation chapter is divided into three subchapters. The first explains the background of the Taiwan Strait conflict, while the second chapter examines the Japan's post-war alliance with the US, as well as the developments in Japan's contemporary defence policy. Lastly, the final subchapter explains the issues that plague the Japan-China relations and how this all ties to the Taiwan Strait conflict.

2.1. The Taiwan question

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, the origins of the Taiwan Strait conflict lie in the Chinese Civil War, which concluded in 1949 with the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the retreat of the Republic of China (ROC) government to Taiwan. This division created an unresolved political situation where both entities claimed to be the only legitimate government of China, resulting in enduring tensions across the Taiwan Strait. (Sheng 2001, 10.) Under the so-called "One China" policy, states are required to recognise either the PRC or the ROC as the legitimate government of China, but not both. This means that countries that establish formal diplomatic relations with the PRC must sever official diplomatic ties with Taiwan (Ibid., 39). Over time, most states have chosen to recognise the PRC, which reflects China's growing political and economic importance and has led to Taiwan's increasing diplomatic isolation. However, despite this lack of formal recognition, many countries maintain extensive unofficial relations with Taiwan through economic, cultural, and representative offices. This diplomatic ambiguity allows for practical cooperation, while formally adhering to the "One China" -framework. (Mochizuki 2022.)

Despite the Cross-Strait situation remaining volatile and occasionally escalating into military clashes (e.g. the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-1996), over time the conflict has evolved into a complex and ambiguous status quo (Collins & Cottey 2012, 154). Central to this has been the involvement of the US. While the US formally recognises the PRC as the sole legal government of China, it doesn't openly recognise Taiwan as part of China and thus continues to maintain unofficial relations with it and has committed itself to supporting Taiwan's self-defence

capabilities through the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 (Sheng 2001, 12, 18). The Taiwan Relations Act does not require the US to defend Taiwan, but instead leaves the possibility to military intervention deliberately vague. (United States Congress 1979.) This so-called strategic ambiguity is intended to deter both a unilateral declaration of independence by Taiwan, and the use of force by China (Liff 2025).

Over the years Taiwan has developed into a self-governing political entity with its own democratic institutions, economy, and increasingly distinct national identity, which have complicated the prospects for political unification (Collins & Cottey 2012, 153-154). Public opinion in Taiwan has increasingly favoured maintaining the status quo or moving toward greater autonomy, while support for unification has declined. (Sheng 2001, 99-101, 144.) These internal developments have been interpreted in China as challenges to its sovereignty claims, contributing to a more assertive posture towards Taiwan. In recent years, military activity around Taiwan has become much more frequent and visible, with China conducting large-scale military exercises and increasing its air and naval operations near it. (Mochizuki 2023.)

Another recent critical factor influencing perceptions of the Taiwan Strait conflict has been the erosion of the "One Country, Two Systems" -framework. Originally proposed by China as a model for peaceful unification with Taiwan, this framework promised a high degree of autonomy for its special administrative regions such as Hong Kong and Macau, while remaining under Chinese sovereignty (Sheng 2001, 17). However, political developments in Hong Kong, particularly the introduction of the National Security Law in 2020 and the subsequent reductions of civil liberties and political freedoms, have significantly undermined the credibility of this model. In Taiwan, these erosions of Hong Kong's self-governance have reinforced scepticism toward China's assurances of autonomy, and further strengthened the resistance to unification. (Chang 2020.) The situation in Hong Kong combined with the increase of military activity in the Taiwan Strait have heightened the international concern, and prompted renewed attention from the US and its regional partners, such as Japan.

2.2. Japan's post-war alliance with the United States

Japan's post-war political and security framework was profoundly shaped by the US. Following Japan's defeat in 1945, the US played a key role in restructuring Japan's political system, which included direct involvement in drafting the Japanese Constitution, reorganising its state

institutions, and promoting democratic governance. The occupation period (1945-1952) established the foundation for Japan's post-war identity as a peaceful state, while simultaneously firmly embedding it within the US-led international order. (Gordon 2020, 250-251.)

Central to this post-war settlement was the adoption of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which reads as follows:

> "Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.
>
> In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized." (Prime Minister's Office of Japan 1946.)

While Article 9's renunciation of war symbolised Japan's break from its militarist past, it also created a heavy structural reliance on the US for security. This dependence was formalised through the US-Japan Security Treaty, which was first signed in 1951 and then later revised in 1960. Under this treaty, the US committed to the defence of Japan, while Japan granted the US the right to maintain military bases on its territory. (Collins & Cottey 2012, 159; Gordon 2020, 250.) The continued presence of these military bases has remained a core feature of the alliance, enabling US military operations in East Asia and serving as a cornerstone of regional security. As a result, Japan's security is therefore closely intertwined with the US strategic interests.

Japan's post-war foreign policy was long guided by the Yoshida Doctrine, which prioritised economic growth and trade while minimising military engagement and spending. By relying on the US security umbrella, Japan was able to focus on domestic development and international economic integration, which reinforced Japan's identity as a civilian and non-militaristic power. (Murata 2023.) However, the shifts in the regional security environment began to place new expectations on Japan's role within the alliance. The end of the Cold War, followed by the rise of China, as well as the increasing instability in East Asia prompted gradual adjustments in Japan-US relations. From the 1990s onwards, Japan expanded its contributions to alliance

cooperation through logistical support, peacekeeping operations, and closer defence coordination with its allies. (Gordon 2020, 331-332.) These developments reflected growing pressure for Japan to assume greater responsibility within its alliances, even as the constitutional constraints continued to limit the scope of its military activities (Murata 2023).

In the 2010s, this security evolution accelerated under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, particularly through the 2014 reinterpretation and subsequent legislations that revised the application of Article 9 to allow for the limited exercise of "collective self-defence" (Gordon 2020, 367-368). These changes enable Japan to provide greater operational support to its allies under certain conditions, marking a significant departure from the long-standing interpretation of constitutional pacifism. This shift unfolded alongside a broader reframing of Japan's alliances through strategic frameworks such as the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), a vision that seeks to promote regional stability by emphasising shared democratic values, freedom of navigation, open trade, and the maintenance of a rule-based international order across the Indo-Pacific region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022). Under the Kishida administration, these developments were further developed with a renewed emphasis on "realism diplomacy", multilateralism, and economic statecraft. Often described as the Kishida Doctrine, this approach to Japan's foreign policy has sought to balance alliance continuity with an expanded security role. (Murata 2023.) Together, these dynamics highlight the effect the Japan-US relationship has had in shaping Japan's contemporary foreign policy.

2.3. Challenges in Japan-China relations

Japan and China moved towards diplomatic normalisation in the post-war period with the Japan-China Joint Communiqué of 1972 marking a significant turning point, as Japan recognised the PRC as the sole legal government of China (Government of Japan & Government of the People's Republic of China 1972). This was followed by the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1978, which aimed to institutionalise peaceful relations and promote diplomatic cooperation between the two states (United Nations Treaty Series 1978). These agreements also laid the groundwork for expanding economic cooperation, and over subsequent decades China became one of Japan's most important trading partners. However, the normalisation of relations hasn't eliminated the underlying historical and territorial disputes. (Gordon 2020, 345.) Instead, these unresolved issues continue to coexist with pragmatic cooperation, creating a

complex and often fragile bilateral relationship that remains central to Japan's foreign policy considerations.

Unlike its alliance with the US, Japan's relationship with China remains heavily influenced by unresolved historical grievances. During the period of Japanese imperial expansion in Asia, Japan committed numerous atrocities in China, including large-scale violence against civilians (Collin & Cottey 2012, 25-26, 158-159; Gordon 2020, 209-2010). These wartime actions and issues related to wartime responsibility remain a persistent source of tension, continuing to influence political and societal perceptions on both sides. One of the most prominent symbolic issues in this context is the Yasukuni Shrine, which is where Japan's war dead, including convicted war criminals, are enshrined. Visits by Japanese political leaders to the shrine are often interpreted in China as acts of historical revisionism and insufficient acknowledgement of past aggression. (Gordon 2020, 308, 348.) These controversies highlight the enduring role of historical memory in shaping bilateral relations and contribute to mutual distrust, particularly during periods of heightened political tension.

In addition to historical memory, territorial disputes continue to shape Japan-China relations. The most prominent of these concerns the Senkaku Islands, also known as the Diaoyu Islands in Chinese. Administered by Japan but claimed by China, this group of uninhabited islands are located in the East China Sea near key maritime routes and close to Taiwan. The dispute has led to repeated diplomatic confrontations and maritime incidents, reinforcing Japanese concerns about China's regional intentions and security posture. (Collins & Cottey 2012, 160.) China's rapid economic growth and military modernisation have further changed the dynamics of the bilateral relationship. From Japan's perspective, China's expanding military capabilities combined with its increasingly assertive behaviour in Japan's regional waters represent a significant challenge to regional stability (Murata 2023). These concerns have become more pronounced as tensions in the Taiwan Strait have intensified, given the geographic and strategic links between Taiwan, Senkaku Islands, and Japan's southwestern islands.

In these contexts, the intensifying rivalry between the US and China has made Taiwan emerge as a focal point of strategic competition. The Taiwan Strait is a key route for global trade and maritime traffic, so any disruption would have far-reaching economic and security consequences. For Japan in particular, its close geographic proximity to Taiwan combined with the central role of the US-Japan alliance in its security policy means that the stability in the

strait is inseparably linked to Japan's own security. (Mochizuki 2022.) As tensions across the strait have increased, Japanese political and media discourse have increasingly framed a potential "Taiwan contingency" as directly relevant to Japan (Liff 2025).

3. Theoretical framework

Regional security developments, particularly China's military modernisation and the intensification of the Taiwan Strait tensions, have challenged Japan's self-image as a state insulated from hard security concerns. The Taiwan conflict has become a particularly salient context in which these identity transformations unfold, as Taiwan occupies a unique position in Japan's regional self-conception. On one hand, Taiwan's democratic system and shared liberal values make it a natural partner in Japan's normative community of "like-minded" states (Osius 2002, 24). On the other, the intensifying confrontation between China and Taiwan exposes the limits of Japan's pacifist self-understanding, as its strategic and moral commitments increasingly collide (Maull 2011, 189). In this sense, the Taiwan question functions as a mirror that reflects Japan's broader struggle to redefine its identity and role under conditions of growing geopolitical uncertainty.

This chapter discusses the theoretical framework which will be used for analysing how Japanese media constructs Japan's national identity and foreign policy role in their discourse. The research question guiding this study requires conceptual tools, that can capture both the meanings states attach to themselves as well as the behavioural expectations they project in international politics both to themselves and others. Identity theory and role theory offer such tools. Both approaches share constructivist foundations, emphasising that the international system is not only a material arena of power distribution, but also a social one constituted by norms, meanings, and intersubjective understandings (Wendt 1992, 397-398). On one hand, identity theory highlights how states define who they are, often in relation to significant Others, and how these self-understandings shape foreign policy (Wendt 1999, 11). Role theory examines how states act according to their conceived "roles" in international politics, and how these are influenced by both internal self-perceptions and external expectations (Breuning 2011, 25). Together they mutually shape each other, with identity providing the foundation to the role conceptions, and roles working as the observable manifestations of these identities through behaviour (Nabers 2011, 82-83).

For Japan, questions of identity and role have long been central. From its postwar pacifist identity and its role as a "peaceful trading state", to its more recent steps towards becoming an international proactive contributor to peace, Japan has continually negotiated its place in the

regional and global order (Berger 1996, 345-447). However, these negotiations are never purely elite-driven, but are rather mediated by public discourse and media representations that both reflect and shape national self-understandings. In the Taiwan Strait context, which is where Japan's relations with the US and China intersect most intensely, media discourse becomes a crucial site for observing how Japan's identity and role are articulated, contested, and redefined.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first reviews the constructivist understanding of identity in international relations, especially through the ideas of Alexander Wendt and his critics. The second examines role theory and its applications, as well as discusses the nexus between identity and roles. The third section highlights the significance of these theories in relations to Japan and the thesis topic.

3.1. Identity

Before going into detail, it is important to address the recurring issue in identity-focused scholarship in international relations, which is the attempt to draw a strict distinction between *state identity* and *national identity*. While state identity is often defined as the self-understanding of the state as an international actor, shaped largely by political elites in response to external structures (see e.g. Wendt 1992), national identity is generally framed to be formed by the imagined community's shared cultural, historical, and societal narratives (see e.g. Hall 1992). In more simple terms, state identity is considered to be the "external" identity, and national identity the "internal" identity. On paper, this separation appears conceptually useful. In practice, however, it is highly problematic.

First, state elites do not construct identity in a vacuum. Their articulations of state identity are inevitably rooted in and constrained by existing national identity narratives. (Wendt 1999, 128-129.) Because nations are formed through the social construction of shared identity, the policies and governance of a state inevitably reflect the values, aspirations, and emotions of its people. Individual use core values, such as liberty, law and order, equality, economic prosperity, and democracy as frameworks to navigate complex political issues and shape their policy preferences to align with the collective will and aspirations of the nation (Anderson & Richards 2018, 290). A government cannot simply invent an entirely new self-conception of the state, if it lacks resonance with how the nation broadly understands itself. Conversely, elites actively shape and reinterpret elements of national identity in order to legitimise their foreign policy

choices. This mutual entanglement blurs the imagined boundary between the "elite-driven" state identity and the "societal" national identity.

Second, both concepts are relational in nature. Whether understood at the state or national level, identity formation relies on recognition from others, both domestically and internationally. Since identity is never fully self-contained, separating "state" from "nation" risks missing how internal and external processes are constantly intertwined. For example, how a state represents itself abroad feeds back into how its citizens imagine the nation, and vice versa (see e.g. Chen, Su & Chen 2019).

Third, insisting on a rigid separation risks actualising the state as a coherent, autonomous actor that is distinct from the nation. In reality, states are not unitary subjects, but rather institutions through which national narratives are projected internationally (Meyer *et al*. 1997, 150). To isolate "state identity" from "national identity" implies that one could exist without the other, but empirically they are inseparably linked. Japan's postwar pacifist identity, for instance, is simultaneously a national narrative of its people renouncing war, as well as a state-level posture of institutionalised pacifism and multilateralism conceptualised, for example, by its constitution.

For these reasons, in this thesis state identity and national identity are treated as overlapping dimensions of the same phenomenon. While it acknowledges that political elites play a privileged role in articulating identity at the international level, their constructions are embedded within broader national narratives that cannot be neatly separated. The analytical distinction is therefore of limited use here, and for the purposes of this study state identity and national identity are used interchangeably.

Identity has become a central category in the field of international relations largely through the constructivist turn of the 1990s, which challenged realist and liberal accounts that treated state interests as given or derived purely from material factors (e.g. Kenneth Waltz). Japan especially has been a key case in this context due to its postwar development noticeably diverging from mainstream expectations of power politics (Berger 1996, 318). Despite its remarkably fast economic development and technological advancement, Japan maintained its pacifist constitution, limited military engagement, and reliance on the US for security. These features challenged the conventional (neo)realist assumptions about how states with material

capabilities behave, and highlighted the need to examine the role of identity, norms, and historical experiences in shaping state behaviour.

One of the trailblazers in identity theory was Alexander Wendt. In his seminal article *Anarchy Is What States Make of It* (1992), Wendt argued that international anarchy is not an objective condition with fixed behavioural implications, but a social structure whose meaning depends on the identities and interests of states. Identities, as defined by Wendt, are relatively stable and relational self-understandings that tell states who they are, what kind of interests they have, and what kinds of actions are appropriate for them to take based on those self-understandings (ibid., 397-398). These identities are not formed in isolation, but through social interaction, meaning a state can identify itself only in relation to others. This also means that identity is therefore always built on the dichotomy of "us" and "them" (Hagström & Hanssen 2016, 270; Margalit & Raz 1990, 445-447; Hall 1996, 15). States with similar identities are more likely to have an amicable relationship, while those with opposing norms, ideals and interests are more likely to see each other as threats. Identity is thus an important part of national security, which cannot be reduced to material forces alone. (Barnett 1996, 408 & 446; Zehfuss 2006, 96.). In diplomacy, the work embassies do to shape and promote a national image serves as a central way for states to project their identity to others. By carefully curating cultural exchanges, public outreach, and communication strategies, embassies represent the interests of their governments, in addition to the values, traditions, and aspirations that define its identity. (Tamaki 2019, 110 & 122.) Identity thus has a level of performativity to it.

Wendt elaborated on his theory in *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999), where he named the four kinds of identities that states can have: personal/corporate, type, role, and collective identity (43). Personal identity is defined as "a site or platform for other identities", which are "constituted by the self-organising, homeostatic structures that make actors distinct identities" (Ibid., 224-225). In other words, personal identity is the personal, individualistic sense of self that is based on relatively static characteristic, such as territory. What matters most here is the *self-understanding*.

Type identity is defined by Wendt as a social category. One actor can have multiple type identities, since they are based on characteristics that have social meaning. These intrinsic characteristics would, however, exist even if others wouldn't recognise them as meaningful. (Wendt 1999, 225-226.) Type identities are therefore simultaneously self-organising, but also

have a social quality to them. Role identity, on the other hand, is not based on intrinsic properties, but exist *only* in relation to others, being dependent on the shared culture and norms. In more simple terms, role identity is the identity defined by others, and it is deeply linked to behaviour. (Ibid., 227). This thesis will expand on roles in the upcoming section about role theory.

Lastly, Wendt defines one more type of identity: collective identity. According to him, collective identity is "a distinct combination of role and type identities, one with the causal power to induce actors to define the welfare of the Other as part of that of the Self, to be 'altruistic'." This identity extends the boundaries of Self to include the Other, allowing a group to work as a team despite not having completely similar characteristics. (Ibid., 229.) In the context of state relations, collective identity is often understood as identification with a regional or international grouping, such as EU, BRICS, or ASEAN.

In his book, Wendt also describes three "cultures of anarchy" that reflect different intersubjective understandings of identity, developing it into a systemic framework. By culture, Wend refers to "socially shared knowledge", which defines how the states define different national interests and behaviours (1999, 140). In a Hobbesian culture, states see one another as enemies, leading to violent conflict. In a Lockean culture, states see each other as rivals who recognise sovereignty, resulting in competition without an outright war. In a Kantian culture, states identify as friends, producing cooperative security communities. (Ibid., 43.) For Wendt, identity is thus constitutive of international order: how states identify themselves and others determines whether anarchy produces conflict, rivalry, or peace. This contribution was groundbreaking because it challenged the determinism of realism, and the narrow institutionalism of liberalism.

However, despite his foundational contributions, Wendt's account of identity has been subject to extensive critique, especially for his somewhat static conception of identity. By treating states as the primary bearers of singular, relatively stable identities, Wendt risks anthropomorphising them as fully coherent actors and overlooks the fact that identities are often fragmented and contested within societies (Zehfuss 2006, 112). In reality, at a state level identity is not a unitary essence, but a field of competing narratives articulated by different domestic actors (Hall 1992, 296-299). Identities emerge from domestic political struggles, institutional legacies, and cultural traditions, which means that any reference to a country's

identity must account for competing narratives that coexist and clash within the society in question. (Copeland 2006, 13; Katzenstein 1996a, 21.) Wendt's framework downplays these internal dynamics and instead privileges the structural conditions of anarchy in the international system.

Furthermore, Wendt's understanding of identity formation has been criticised for being too linear. He doesn't sufficiently examine the complex processes through which identity is constituted and transformed, nor does he adequately distinguish between identity itself and behaviour (Zehfuss 2006, 104). Although Wendt formally separates the two, in practice he often ends up collapsing them together, which is particularly clear in his account of identity change. While Wendt insists that interaction reshapes not only how actors behave, but also who they are, the distinction quickly blurs, since there is no way to access a state's self-conception except by observing its conduct. Behaviour thus becomes the sole evidence of identity, making it difficult to tell whether what has changed is an actor's deeper sense of self, or simply its strategic actions in a particular context. If identity only ever appears in its behavioural manifestations, then calling it "identity" rather than "behaviour" seems largely rhetorical. (Ibid.) This problem seems to stem from Wendt treating roles as direct equivalent to identities, rather than as behavioural scripts attached to them, which means that shifts in conduct are too easily read as shifts in identity (1992, 258-259). Because Wendt collapses the two, any change in role behaviour is read automatically as an identity transformation. As mentioned before, this thesis will further address the distinction and connection between identity and role in the upcoming section about role theory.

When discussing the concept of identity, it's important to not completely neglect the ideas of power and hierarchy. In practice global politics are deeply asymmetrical in structure, but many theoretical models in IR often automatically assume reciprocal recognition among sovereign equals. While this type of insight highlights the constitutive power of mutual recognition, it overlooks how differences in power and status shape which identities are deemed deserving of validation. (Margalit & Raz 1990, 443-447, 461) However, the conventional dichotomy between great powers and small powers no longer captures these dynamics either. Increasing attention has turned to so-called "middle powers", whose influence can't be reduced to raw material capabilities, but is instead linked to their ability to shape norms, build alliances, and project particular identities on the international stage. In this sense, identity is not only something that

states possess, but also a resource that can be strategically mobilised to compensate for material shortcomings. (Jepperson, Wendt & Katzenstein 1996, 34; Holst 1970, 241-242.)

All states share a fundamental need for their identity to be recognised and validated, whether it's through legal sovereignty, inclusion in international institutions, or acknowledgment of cultural and political distinctiveness (Fukuyama 2020, 40; Katzenstein 1996a, 24). There is no state if the other states don't recognise it as such. It can identify itself as a state, but it won't be treated as such by others. The characteristics and conditions needed to be considered a state are defined and agreed upon by the other similar actors that exist in the system. (Wendt 1999, 194.) However, sometimes meeting these conditions isn't enough, and the actor isn't recognised as a state despite meeting the conditions. Reasons for that can vary, but it shows that the system isn't objective, and the recognition is unequally distributed. Stronger states often set the standards for legitimate statehood and normative behaviour, while weaker or marginalised states may find their identities constrained, co-opted, or even denied, for example because of historical or cultural disagreements, or territorial disputes with already existing states. (Margalit & Raz 1990, 457-460.) Taiwan provides a stark example of this. Although it functions as a fully independent polity with its own government, economy, and society, its statehood is only partially recognised internationally due to the political influence of China and the so-called "strategic ambiguity" other states engage in in fear of this influence. Taiwan's identity as a sovereign state being constrained in global institutions and diplomatic forums shows how stronger actors can effectively determine which identities are acknowledged and which are sidelined, and limit the ability those states have in reflecting their identities to others. Similarly, it demonstrates how smaller states may be symbolically recognised in international organisations, but lack real influence in shaping global norms, reflecting a hierarchy of recognition.

While state identities are continuously constructed and reconstructed through interactions with other states, they need to be to stable enough to maintain a particular narrative (Copeland 2006, 12-13; Hall 1992, 277; Giddens 1991, 54). According to Wendt:

> "These narratives are not merely the shared beliefs held by individuals at any given moment (though they depend on those beliefs), but inherently historical phenomena which are kept alive through the generations by an on-going process

> of socialization and ritual enactment. It is in the virtue of such memories that groups acquire continuity and identity through time." (1999, 163.)

Identity is thus a "collective representation", where "the structures of collective knowledge depend on actors believing in *something* that includes them to engage in practices that reproduce those structures" (Ibid., 162). Discourse, media, and culture have important role in the formation of these intersubjective understandings. This is supported by Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of the nation as an "imagined community". For Anderson, nations are not primordial or natural entities, but social constructs produced through shared practices of imagination, facilitated historically by print-capitalism and media circulation (2006, 36). Identity is thus enacted through stories states tell about themselves and others. This is where discourse analysis becomes essential. Media outlets don't merely reflect a pre-existing "national identity", but actively constitute it through unifying representations of cultural, social, and historical commonalities that people internalise and accept as the shared identity (Hall 1992, 297). These unifying factors do not have to be factual, what matters is that the community *feels* it possesses a similar identity. A nation exists only when its members understand themselves through the discursive framework of national identity (Calhoun 1997, 99; Hall 1992, 292). Therefore, in short, what binds members of a nation together is the sense of shared belonging generated through texts, newspapers, and other forms of representation. From this perspective, identity is not an inherent property of the state, but a cultural and discursive project. It is something made and remade through the narratives societies tell about themselves, with no direct face-to-face interaction needed.

Taken together, these ideas and critiques suggest the need for a more flexible and discursively oriented understanding of identity. In this thesis, identity is understood as a socially constructed and discursively articulated self-understanding of self and others. While Wendt's insight that identities shape interests and behaviour remains valuable and offers a useful theoretical foundation, this thesis departs from his tendency to treat state identity as relatively stable and unitary. Instead, identity is treated as multiple, contested, and subject to change over time. This definition is similar to Hall's definition of identity as a "post-modern subject":

> "...conceptualised as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity. Identity becomes a 'moveable feast': formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround

> us. It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent 'self'. Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about." (1992, 277.)

Accordingly, when this thesis refers to for example "Japanese identity", it does not imply a singular or permanent essence of the nation. Rather, it refers to the dynamic and contested processes through which Japan's self-understanding is articulated in discourse, especially through representations of self and others in media. This definition emphasises both the constitutive power of identity and its malleability: national identity matters because it shapes how Japan imagines its place in international politics, but it remains open to reinterpretation across contexts and over time.

In addition, this thesis also uses the concept of collective identity. This is understood as instances where states construct a sense of belonging to a wider community, such as ASEAN or (East) Asia. Here, the focus is not on a fixed regional essence, but on how Japan discursively aligns itself with broader collectives to shape its foreign policy narratives and self-positioning. Collective identity is thus analysed in the same discursive manner as national identity.

These understanding of identity provides the bridge to role theory. If identity is fluid and discursively produced, then so are the roles states come to inhabit in world politics as well. Roles are treated as expectations and practices that emerge from how national self-understandings are narrated and recognised, instead of predetermined mandates of a unitary identity. The next section therefore turns to role theory to examine how identities, once articulated, shape the roles through which states engage in international relations.

3.2. Roles and their relation to identity

Identity and role are deeply intertwined concepts (Wehner & Thies 2014, 412). As mentioned before, Wendt defined role identities as depended on culture and on how the actor relates to others (1999, 227). According to him, role identities don't exist on their own, but require an actor to occupy a position in a social structure and act according to the norms connected to that role. It requires shared expectations with others, which are easier to maintain because many roles are built into institutions and social structures that existed before any particular interaction. This means that when we internalise social knowledge (culture), we act according to the

perimeters of that knowledge. While there is often some room left for interpretation, going beyond the perimeters set by others will cause the actor's role identity to be contested. (Ibid.) Actor can also be imposed a role identity they don't want, if the others interpret their actions to fit the perimeters of that role (Ibid., 228). In addition, an actor can also engage in *altercasting*, which refers to situations where "the relevant others cast a social actor into a role and provide cues to elicit the corresponding appropriate behaviour" (Thies 2009, 8).

In more simple terms, roles can be divided into *social roles* and *counter roles*, the social role being e.g. the leader, which can make others to adapt the counter-role of a follower (Harnisch 2011, 7). Social role requires that the other actors take on counter-roles and thus accept the actor's chosen social role. So while an actor may choose to act within the perimeters of certain role and even self-identify with it, recognition and validation are ultimately granted by others. Therefore, it's important to highlight that similarly to identities, roles are inherently social and meaningful only in relation to others. For example, a state may conceive of itself as a "regional stabiliser", but this claim requires recognition or at least acknowledgment from other actors to be credible.

Wendt defines roles as a form of identity, collapsing behaviour and identity together in such a way that it makes distinction between the two highly challenging in practice (Zehfuss 2006, 104). In order to provide better clarity in analysis, this thesis will opt to a differentiation between the two concepts. While identity refers to the underlying self-understanding of a nation-state, role is the more concrete expression of this identity in terms of expected behaviour. The way identity-claims are translated into practice. Role is thus defined in this thesis as a set of behaviours, responsibilities, and functions shaped by both the self-understanding and the social expectations of others. In more simple terms, they are expectations about appropriate behaviour that a state attaches to itself or has ascribed to it by others (Wehner & Thies 2014, 414). These sets of expectations and behaviours form a categorisable social position (Harnisch 2011, 8). While identity answers the question of "who are we?", roles answer the question of "what are we expected to do, given who we are and how others see us?".

Identities provide the cognitive and normative foundation for role conception (Breuning 2011, 24). The concept of national role conception in international relations was first coined by Kalevi Holsti (1970) to describe ideas held by the policymakers' and other societal actors about the appropriate decisions, commitments, rules, and actions for their state in international politics

(246). Going beyond the usual dichotomy of "enemy" and "friend", Holsti identifies a variety of roles, such as "regional leader", "mediator", "protector", and "ally" (Ibid., 277). Similarly to identities, roles aren't purely internally generated, but continuously socially constructed by other significant actors, and can therefore change over time in response to changing social environment and through role contestations.

One actor can have multiple roles. For example, Holsti identified in his study that in average one state holds around 4.6 roles at a time (1970, 270). What varies is the degrees of assertiveness and specificity, or in other words, how much effort is put into fulfilling the role and how well the role is performed within the socially defined expectations of the role (Thies 2009, 5-6). Different roles can require different levels of involvement, and often the more effort is required, the more tied to the actor's identity the role is (Thies 2009, 7). What also matters is who the actor is interacting with and the context the social interaction is taking place in. Depending on these factors, the actor takes on roles based on the assumptions and values that seem appropriate for the surrounding context. (Harnisch et al. 2011, 1.)

Role theory distinguishes between role *conception*, role *performance*, and role *expectations*. These distinctions are crucial in order to understand state behaviour (Holsti 1970, 238-239). Role conception refers to the actor's own understanding of the responsibilities and functions associated with the social position it thinks it fulfils (Harnisch 2011, 8). It reflects the internal understanding of what the actor sees as its proper functions and duties, shaping the strategies and priorities it seeks to pursue. It represents the internalised interpretation of how the actor ought to behave based on its identity, historical experiences, institutional contexts, normative framework as well as other cultural, ideological, and structural factors that collectively influence how the actor defines its purpose and scope of action. (Holsti 1970, 239; Thies 2009, 9.) While some research treat identity and role conception as the same concepts (see e.g. Breuning 2011, 21-22), this thesis believes that role conception stems from the actor's self-understanding of its identity, role being the set of behaviours the actor *thinks* it should fulfil based on its identity.

Role performance encompasses the behaviours through which the actor *enacts* its role, which is often in IR research limited to foreign policy behaviour (Breuning 2011, 26). It reflects the observable manifestation of role conception in practice, and might vary in alignment depending on external constraints, opportunities, and internal capacities (Holsti 1970, 238). Actor's role

performance can thus often be completely different from its role conception, though such differences often tend to cause internal and external tensions (Harnisch 2011, 9). All in all, role performance is the component that is observable and measurable, since it captures the behavioural translation of identity into action and highlights the distinction between an actor's self-perceived role and its actual conduct.

Role expectations are the anticipations or normative demands that other actors *place upon* the actor, specifying how it is expected to behave within the social system. These expectations provide external benchmarks for evaluating the actor's performance and serve as a mechanism through which social structures influence behaviour. (Thies 2009, 9.) The expectations are often ties to a specific setting, meaning that the expectations of the role might change depending on the setting the role is performed in (Wehner & Thies 2014, 415; Thies 2009, 10-12). Alignment between role performance and external expectations fosters legitimacy and predictability, while mismatches and vagueness of expectations can produce role conflict or strain, potentially undermining the actor's credibility in the eyes of the others and generating friction within the social or political system (Thies 2009, 9-10).

The interplay between role conception, performance, and expectations is central to understanding actor's behaviour. When these three elements are compatible, the actor's self-understanding, actions, and the perceptions of others are mutually reinforcing, facilitating stability and coherence (Breuning 2011, 24). On the other hand, inconsistencies between them can lead to conflicts, misperceptions, or tension, highlighting the importance of examining both internal self-conceptions and external pressures in any theoretical analysis of roles (Harnisch 2011, 8).

For these reasons it helps to discern the process of change, which can happen either by *adaptation*, *learning*, or *socialisation*. Adaptation is defined as "changes to strategies and instruments in performing a role" (Ibid., 10). In the case of adaptation, the change is usually prompted by failure and doesn't include any wider sense of shift or reassessment in the actor's values or goals (Breuning 2011, 30). In learning, however, the change is more transformative in nature, as it includes changing the underlying aspects that form the actor's identity. (Harnisch 2011, 10-11.) In learning, the actor is forced to change their belief system and learn something completely new. This is often what causes resistance and conflict, since it can even force the actor to completely reassess who they are. Socialisation is similar to learning in a sense that

the change is more profound, but what differs is the mechanics the change happens in practice. In learning, the change starts from within, while in socialisation there is often an asymmetry in power, where the more powerful inside group will force the outsider to internalise their set of behaviours (Ibid. 13). As a thematic example, Japan's change after WWII can be classified to have happened through socialisation, since the change was conducted through the US led reforms. This type of all-encompassing, fundamental change in state relations is called *international orientation change*. Other types of change include *adjustment change*, which only requires limited foreign policy change; *program change*, which involves adapting completely new tools and is more profound in nature; as well as *goal change*, which includes changes in the foreign policy objectives. (Breuning 2011, 30.)

Role theory highlights dynamics that identity theory alone cannot fully capture, namely the processes of negotiation, recognition, and contestation that occur between domestic and international actors. A state may claim an identity of a "peace nation", but whether it enacts roles such as "mediator", "bridge-builder", or "security contributor" depends on both domestic debates and external expectations (Breuning 2011, 24). Thus, role theory provides a bridge between the identity and the situational character of foreign policy practice. By framing roles as the behavioural expression of identity, this thesis emphasises that while identity provides the foundational sense of self, roles operationalise that identity in interaction with social and structural contexts. This distinction allows for a more nuanced analysis of actor behaviour, capturing both the internalised self-conception and the externalised enactment of responsibilities within a system (Thies 2009, 3). By combining identity and role theory, this thesis can trace how Japan's underlying identity shapes the roles it finds legitimate, how those roles are debated and contested within Japanese society, and how they are constrained or reshaped by external expectations in the evolving Taiwan conflict.

3.3. Identity and role in the context of thesis

Japan's case offers a particularly rich site for applying the combined framework of identity and role theory, as it encapsulates both the enduring tensions between pacifism and security activism, and the increasing instability of global structures that require continuous renegotiation of national self-understandings. Earlier research has extensively examined Japan's identity as a "peaceful state" through policy papers (see e.g. Berger 1996; Katzenstein 1996b), often framed in contrast to its militarist past and to regional powers such as China.

Scholars such as Akimoto (2013) and Catalinac (2007) have examined how the pacifist identity has guided Japan's cautious approach to international military engagement, for example in its responses to the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. In both cases, Japan's participation was framed not in terms of power projection, but as an extension of its peaceful and cooperative international identity. Catalinac's analysis in particular demonstrates that Japanese policymakers repeatedly justified contributions in terms of identity congruence, maintaining Japan's image as a "peace-loving nation" while gradually expanding its permissible activities abroad.

However, as previous studies have highlighted, this identity has never been fully static. Rather, it has fluctuated between competing narratives of pacifism and regional responsibility, as well as between Asian regionalism and Western alignment. Japan's identity is continually negotiated through interactions with others, both externally (e.g. China, the US, Korea) and internally (e.g. domestic political factions and societal discourses) (Maull 2011, 190). Linus Hagström's research is central here. Hagström has in his research demonstrates that Japan's foreign policy discourse often defines the nation by contrasts: democratic versus authoritarian China, modern versus historical Asia, or peaceful versus militaristic (Hagström & Pan 2020, 45; Hagström & Hanssen 2016, 268 & 280; Hagström & Gustafsson 2015, 9). What is often described as Japan's "identity crisis" stems precisely from these contradictions of the coexisting pacifist norms deeply rooted in national consciousness, and the structural pressures of an increasingly volatile regional environment. This relational construction creates both opportunities and anxieties, as the identity stability depends on the persistence of recognisable significant "Others". While Japan continues to define itself through its pacifist tradition, the expectations of its allies and the realities of its security environment increasingly demand that it assume the role of an active security provider. (Hagström & Gustafsson 2015, 14-16.)

From the 2010s onwards, these contradictions have intensified. Globalisation, as Hall argued, has made state identities increasingly unstable by eroding the predictability of international structures and introducing new sources of uncertainty (1996, 277). The global diffusion of power, economic interdependence, and the rise of populist politics have weakened the stable global structures that previously guided international behaviour. For Japan, this environment of uncertainty has necessitated continuous adaptation and identity work. Michal Kolmaš (2018)

extends this argument by analysing how Japan's conservative revisionists, most notably former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, have sought to recalibrate Japan's post-war identity. Abe's invocation of a "beautiful Japan" sought to reclaim pride and normality, recasting Japan as a responsible but proactive international actor (Abe 2007). Kolmaš interprets this as a form of identity revisionism: a discursive attempt to loosen the constraints of the pacifist identity without fully abandoning it. Importantly, this identity shift is negotiated not only in policy, but in discourse through political speeches, textbooks, and media representation. (Kolmaš 2018, 513-115.)

In addition, the 2015 reinterpretation of the Constitution's Article 9 to allow limited collective self-defence marked a critical step in Japan's gradual redefinition of its pacifist role. These changes were not merely policy adjustments, but manifestations of deeper identity negotiation, which included process of reconciling the image of Japan as a "peace state" with the emerging self-understanding of a "proactive contributor to peace" (Kolmaš 2018, 516; Debroux 2017, 18-19). Abe's concept of "proactive pacifism" epitomises this duality by reframing military preparedness and alliance cooperation as consistent with, rather than contradictory to, Japan's pacifist identity.

The changing posture of the US under the 2016 Trump administration have profoundly accelerated these processes. For decades, Japan's postwar identity and role were anchored in the US-Japan security alliance, which provided a stable framework of recognition and validation (Maull 2011, 187). Under this security umbrella Japan could focus on economic growth and soft power diplomacy, which means that the alliance not only ensured Japan's material security, but also legitimised its pacifist role within a hierarchical yet predictable structure. (Berger 1996, 343; Funaiole 2015, 362). However, while the demand from the US for Japan to be more proactive in its own security has existed since the 9/11 terrorist attack, the Trump administration's transactional approach to alliances, its ambivalence toward multilateralism, and its emphasis on burden-sharing have further destabilised this arrangement. The once-stable expectation that the US would act as a reliable guarantor of Japan's security has been replaced by uncertainty and doubt. This disruption has exposed the vulnerability of Japan's identity as a dependent security actor and generated increasing pressure to assume a more autonomous role in regional security. (Richardson 2020; Maull 2011, 186.)

The Taiwan Strait conflict has become one of the most significant contemporary contexts through which Japan's identity and role are being renegotiated. The conflict engages multiple layers of Japan's self-conception, suggesting that crises such as this are sites of ontological insecurity moments, where a state's sense of self is challenged, prompting discursive efforts to reaffirm or redefine it (Krickel-Choi 2024, 14-16). In addition to the US, Japan's identity in the Taiwan context is also defined vis-à-vis China (Hagström and Gustafsson 2015, 11-12). The erosion of autonomy of China's special administrative regions such as Hong Kong's, the intensification of its military activity around Taiwan, and its increasingly coercive diplomacy have transformed the strategic and ideational landscape in which Japan's identity operates. The portrayal of China as an aggressive "Other" serves to stabilise Japan's self-image as a peaceful and democratic state (Hagström & Hanssen 2016, 280). Yet, this relational construction also heightens Japan's sense of insecurity and compels it to re-examine the adequacy of its pacifist role in deterring aggression and maintaining regional order. In order to defend peace, it must possess the capability and resolve to act. Thus, identity construction and role expansion become mutually reinforcing. (Kolmaš 2018, 508; Hagström & Hanssen 2016, 284-285.)

In the logic of role theory, the aforementioned shifts can be read as a form of role conflict, where Japan's internal conception of itself as a pacifist state have increasingly diverged from the external expectations of its allies and partners (Maull 2011, 187-190). In his study Holsti assigned Japan the role of "developer", which describes a state that sees its foreign policy as an instrument for internal economic and social development, emphasising economic cooperation, peaceful engagement, and reform of international economic structures (1970, 266). This role was congruent with Japan's pacifist identity and legitimised its economic activism within Asia during the Cold War. However, as the regional environment has evolved, researchers have identified new emerging roles, such as Japan as the bridge state between East and West, as well as peacekeeping state contributing to global order (see e.g. Debroux 2017; Pehlivantürk 2016). The US and several regional actors have began altercasting Japan in the role of a "security contributor" or "regional stabiliser", expecting more active involvement in defence and deterrence activities (Maull 2011, 187-190). This process has challenged Japan's self-understanding and forced it to reconsider the behavioural scripts consistent with its

identity. The result has been a gradual, discursively mediated process of role adaptation, which has been negotiated through political rhetoric, media discourse, and policy reform.

The literature discussed here shows that Japan's identity is neither static nor singular, as it fluctuates between competing narratives. Crises such as the Taiwan Strait expose these tensions and trigger discursive renegotiations of identity and role. In sum, Japan's engagement with the Taiwan Strait issue is not only a question of strategic alignment, but also an act of identity performance. Through identity theory and role theory, we can see Japan's discourse as an ongoing negotiation of national selfhood in a changing regional order, instead of simply as a policy rhetoric. But while a lot of research exists on both Japan's identity and role conceptions, most of this research has mainly examined these discursive changes through official government documents or other more elite-driven policy change. When it comes to Japan, not much research exists on the discourses facilitated by the media, even though it has just as important effect on the identity and role conceptions. This thesis aims to add to this discussion by examining just that.

4. Method and Material

This chapter outlines the methodological framework employed in this thesis, by first briefly discussing the historical importance of newspapers in Japan as influential agenda-setters, which explains the context while simultaneously working as a justification for choosing newspaper editorials as the material of analysis. Next, this chapter introduces the specifics of the chosen material in more detail. Lastly, it explains the theoretical framework of discourse analysis, justifications why it is well suited for this particular research topic, and details how the analytical procedures were applied in practice.

4.1. History of Japanese newspapers & Introduction of the research material

Newspapers occupy a historically central and culturally significant place within Japan's media landscape. Their earliest forms date back to the late Tokugawa-period (1603–1867), but newspapers resembling those of today first appeared in the Meiji-era (1868-1912) when modern print journalism emerged as part of broader nation-building and modernisation (Huffman 1997, 23-25, 36-27). Major national newspapers such as *Yomiuri Shimbun* (founded in 1874) and *Asahi Shimbun* (founded in 1879) quickly developed into influential institutions that have shaped public opinion, spread political ideas, and helped construct a shared national consciousness (Ibid., 20-22, 47; Gordon 2020, 272-274). Throughout the 20th century, newspapers in Japa have maintained exceptionally high circulation rates, reflecting their deep integration into everyday life and their role as trusted sources of information (Nakanishi 2024). Even in the contemporary digital era, Japan's leading newspapers continue to exert substantial agenda-setting power. Their editorial sections in particular serve as authoritative venues for institutional viewpoints and ideological interpretation, playing a key role in framing political developments and legitimising national narratives. (Takeshita & Ida 2009, 167-169; Kaneko, Asano & Miwa 2021, 725-726.)

The material used in this study consists of newspaper editorials published by four major Japanese newspapers: *Asahi Shimbun*, *Yomiuri Shimbun* (or its English-language edition The Japan News), *Mainichi Shimbun*, and *The Japan Times*. The editorials were collected from the online databases of these newspapers by using the keyword "Taiwan". The articles were then selected based on if the topic was specifically about the Taiwan Strait conflict, meaning that

editorials that talked about unrelated topics (e.g. Taiwan's economy only) were excluded. With these limitations, the research material consists of 189 editorial articles in total.

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	In total
Asahi Shimbun						2	3	12	19	**36**
Mainichi Shimbun			1	2	5	3	5	4	25	**45**
The Japan Times	4	5	7	6	3	7	3	9	11	**55**
Yomiuri Shimbun (The Japan News)								9	44	**53**
										189

Table 1. Number of editorials per year

The timeframe of the study is limited to the period from 2014 to 2022. This period was selected in order to capture a coherent phase of Japanese identity and role construction. The year 2014 constitutes a meaningful starting point, as it follows a series of significant political developments such as the reinterpretation of Japan's Article 9 and the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan, which contributed to a reconfiguration of cross-strait relations and regional security debates. The endpoint of 2022 marks the conclusion of this distinct pre-escalatory period, meaning prior to the escalation of the conflict and heightened military activity in the Taiwan Strait beginning with American politician Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. Limiting the timeframe to full calendar years ensures consistency across sources.

However, while the selection of this timeframe is theoretically motivated, the distribution of editorials within it is shaped by variations in archival availability. As illustrated in Table 1., *The Japan Times'* database offers the longest archival availability, while *Mainichi* has coverage only from 2016 onwards. *Asahi* offers editorials starting from 2019, while *Yomiuri* offers the most limited access from late-2020 onwards only. This means that the discrepancies of data shown in the Table 1. reflect archival accessibility, rather than deliberate selection by the researcher. In order to limit issues rising from this, direct cross-outlet comparisons are therefore conducted primarily within overlapping periods of availability, while editorials from earlier years are analysed on a case-specific basis to offer further contextualisation.

To limit errors caused by potential mistranslation from Japanese to English, the editorial texts are sourced from each outlet's English-language editions, which are written, edited, and officially published by the newspapers themselves. While it's important to acknowledge that some of the linguistical nuances may have gotten lost in the official translation even if the translations have been done by professionals, using the official English versions still maintains

the ideological positions expressed by the editorial boards and allows for more consistent linguistic analysis.

Standard news reporting in Japan adheres to strict norms of neutrality, factual description, and avoidance of overt evaluation, which are reinforced by press clubs and professional guidelines (Takeshita & Ida 2009, 150). Editorials, on the other hand, are inherently ideological, argumentative, and interpretive in nature, making this claimed neutrality and impartiality merely an illusion (Kanako, Asano & Miwa 2021, 726). They represent the institutional voice of a newspaper rather than the view of an individual journalist, as they are crafted collectively by editorial boards and are intended to articulate the newspaper's official political stance and ideological position, interpret current events, prescribe actions, and influence public debate (Clausen 2003, 25–26, 30). As several scholars note, editorials in Japan are allowed a much broader linguistic range, including stronger modality (e.g. "must," "should", "cannot allow"), explicit judgment, moral evaluation, and normative claims and recommendations about policy directions (Saft & Ohara 2006, 85). This process of guiding the public's interpretation through deliberate language usage is often called *framing* (Clausen 2003, 63, 68–69). Editorials thus differ from regular news articles not only in purpose but also in linguistic openness, making them particularly valuable research material.

A key strength of this study is the inclusion of newspapers with diverse political leanings, which enables a broader and more balanced understanding of how identity and role are constructed across the ideological spectrum. *Yomiuri Shimbun* is widely regarded as conservative and strongly supportive of a robust security posture, often aligned with more aggressive interpretations of Japan's defence responsibilities (Kanako, Asano & Miwa 2021, 725). It has historically endorsed close cooperation with the US, and tends to view regional threats such as Chinese military expansion with urgency. In contrast, *Asahi Shimbun* occupies a more leftist position (Clausen 2003, 29). It is known for its emphasis on pacifism, constitutional restraint, diplomacy, and human rights, often expressing scepticism toward military expansion and securitisation (Saft & Ohara 2006, 86). *Mainichi Shimbun* is generally considered centrist-liberal (Abe 2015, 92). While not as strongly progressive as *Asahi*, it maintains a critical stance toward government policies and highlights social welfare, democratic values, and transparency. Its editorials tend to promote balanced, moderate interpretations of regional security issues. (Kanako, Asano & Miwa 2021, 725.)

Including *The Japan Times* provides an additional dimension, as it is Japan's oldest and largest English-language newspaper and therefore has a more international orientation than the domestic dailies. Although not as easily mapped onto traditional Japanese left–right divisions, it often adopts a liberal, globalist perspective and is written with an international readership in mind (Wellisch & Laš 2022, 5). This makes its editorials useful for understanding how Japanese foreign-policy identity is framed for global audiences, which is an important angle to include when studying international conflict and national self-presentation.

Using editorials from newspapers spanning this ideological range ensures that the analysis captures ideological variation, rather than relying on a single dominant narrative. This is particularly important when studying identity construction, as different outlets may emphasise different values when interpreting Japan's position in the Taiwan Strait conflict. Comparing these perspectives allows to identify both shared national narratives and points of ideological divergence, offering a more nuanced picture of Japanese discourse. So, while this research relies on publicly available texts and therefore poses minimal ethical concerns, ethical awareness is still relevant in maintaining accurate representation of sources and avoiding mischaracterisation of media outlets' positions.

4.2. Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is a qualitative research method that examines language as a form of social action (van Dijk 2011, 3; Fairclough 2003, 3). It approaches language, whether textual or verbal, as a dynamic and context-dependent social system shaped by the time, place, and social conditions in which it is used (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, 5-6). According to Michel Foucault (1972, 218-219), who has played a central role in the development of discourse analysis, the norms and practices that form in any given era or location are rooted in the historically formed social structures, which define what kind of language usage is desirable, acceptable, or prohibited. In more simple terms, norms shape what can be said and how. (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019, 1.1, 1.4.) On the other hand, language also has causal effects that shape the surrounding world and cause social change (Fairclough 2003, 8, 22). Because discourse both responds to and influences its social context, the meanings produced in language are never separate from the conditions in which they emerge. Political, cultural, and institutional environments guide which perspectives become dominant or marginal, while linguistic choices can reinforce, challenge, or transform these very environments by framing issues,

assigning roles, or redefining what is seen as possible (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, 8-10; Fairclough 2003, 8-9, 12-13).

Discourse analysis therefore investigates how language reflects, constructs, and reproduces social meanings, identities, and power relations (Fairclough 2003, 7). In this thesis, the analysis makes use of critical discourse perspective, which treats discourse as both shaped by and shaping broader social structures (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, 61-62). It operates on the premise that language is not neutral, but constructs subject positions (e.g. China as a threat) as well as legitimises or challenges political actions (Saft & Ohara 2006; Fairclough 2003, 7).

There are several key concepts guiding the analysis, which are heavily influenced by Fairclough's (2003) approach to discourse analysis. First of these concepts is *identity construction*, which examines how linguistic choices are used to depict the character and nature of international actors. (Ibid., part IV.) This involves tracing the adjectives, metaphors, and narrative frames used to characterise not only Japan, but also China, the US, Taiwan, and other stakeholders such as multilateral organisations. Through these linguistic choices, editorials construct particular images of each actor's intentions, values, capabilities, and moral standing. In more simple words, identity construction answers the question "*Who is this actor represented as?"*.

Closely related, but analytically distinct, is *role attribution*, which focuses on the expectations and responsibilities assigned to these actors (Ibid.). Whereas identity construction describes an actor's character, role attribution considers what the editorial argues the actor *should do* within the given geopolitical context of the Taiwan Strait conflict. This includes prescriptions, obligations, or duties, such as calling on Japan to mediate, urging China to de-escalate, or positioning Taiwan as needing support. Role attribution therefore answers the question "*What actions or responsibilities are assigned to this actor?"*.

The analysis also considers *intertextuality*, exploring how editorials use existing broader cultural narratives, established foreign policy traditions, and historical references to legitimise their arguments and situate events within familiar frames (Fairclough 2003, part IV; Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, 74). Finally, attention is also paid to *modality and evaluation*. This includes the use of modal verbs, evaluative adjectives, and explicit stance-taking, which reveal how texts

signal necessity, obligation, criticism, or support, thereby shaping readers' interpretations of international relations. (Fairclough 2003, part IV.)

Based on the concepts above, the analysis was guided by the following supporting questions:

1. What context is the Taiwan Strait conflict mentioned in?
    a. time? -> how it affects how Taiwan is talked about (e.g. Russo Ukrainian conflict, Korean conflict…)
    b. what has happened for it to be mentioned? (e.g. multilateral meeting, an arms sale…)
2. How does Japan describe itself, its actions and its position?
3. How are other relevant actors and their actions talked about?
4. Does the editorial suggest possible solutions to the conflict and if yes, what and how?

The analytical process itself proceeded in the following steps. The first stage involved close reading of all collected editorials with the before-listed questions in mind. The aim was not to examine each editorial in isolation from the others, but to find unifying discourses within them. Notes were taken on recurring themes, rhetorical patterns, and salient representations of Japan and other relevant actors, as well as the broader regional environment. This initial coding identified segments related to identity construction, role expectations, security framing, and evaluations of different actors.

These codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories, which helped structure the data and reveal underlying patterns of meaning. Within each thematic category, linguistic features were examined in detail. This micro-level analysis included:

- Voice and agency (who is represented as acting, reacting, or being acted upon)
- Lexical choices (terms used that show ideological stances, such as words describing the conflict, e.g. "provocation", "restrain")
- Metaphors and imagery (e.g. Japan as the "bridge-builder")
- Modality (expressions of obligation, recommendation, or uncertainty, e.g. "must", "should", "is expected to")

This means that the focus was particularly on reoccurring word choices, or words and phrases that were frequently repeated in the material. These linguistic elements were analysed to understand how identities and roles were constructed and justified. Finally, these results were synthesised into overarching narratives and discursive patterns, which in this thesis are named discourses. These findings were interpreted in relation to the broader socio-political context, including Japan's security policies, historical relations, and public discourses surrounding regional stability. This was done in order to bridge textual analysis with geopolitical dynamics, allowing the study to situate editorial discourse within national identity formation processes. These syntheses form the basis of the thesis's discussion and conclusions.

As shown above, discourse analysis provides deep insight into the rhetorical and ideological dimensions of editorial writing, making it well suited for understanding identity construction. It enables to uncover subtle assumptions and normative positions that may not be explicitly acknowledged. (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, 67-68.) However, this thesis acknowledges that discourse analysis is inherently interpretive and context-dependent. The findings reflect the researcher's interpretive lens, even though efforts were made to mitigate potential biases by ensuring systematic coding and transparency. (Fairclough 2003, 14.) Discourse analysis as a method also focuses on language and its meaning-making, rather than actual causal effects such as audience reception (Ibid, 15; Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, 89). This means that conclusions in this thesis concern discursive production rather than public impact.

5. Findings

Identity construction in the editorials is rarely explicit. Instead, it is embedded in metaphors, evaluative language, and assumptions about appropriate behaviour. Through discourse analysis, these identity claims become visible, revealing the normative foundations upon which role expectations are built. Across the four newspapers, the Taiwan Strait conflict works as a critical site of identity negotiation and role conflict, where alliance expectations, historical memory, democratic legitimacy, and threat perceptions intersect. This means that rather than producing a single coherent identity, Japanese media discourse reveals ongoing negotiation over the limits and responsibilities of Japan's identity and role in the international stage.

In this chapter, findings have been categorised into four overarching discourses, titled: "Japan as a Peace-Oriented Civilian Power vs. Frontline Security Actor", "Strategic Autonomy vs. Alliance Loyalty", "China as a Relational Neighbour vs. Existential Threat", and "Universal values, Rule of Law, and Societal Legitimacy". While the first three findings are dichotomous in nature, the last one serves as a unifying framework that bridges the contrasting perspectives together. In each subchapter, discourses from each newspaper are first introduced separately, and then brought together into a small summary at end. All of these finding will then be discussed and connected to the theoretical framework in more detail in a discussion subchapter.

Before going into the specific discourse findings, this thesis will introduce the style of each newspaper. As stated by Fairclough (2003):

> "Styles are discoursal aspect of ways of being, identities. [...] Styles are linked to identification – using the nominalisation rather than the noun 'identities' emphasizes the process of identifying, how people identify themselves and are identified by others." (161.)

This means that the stylistic choices used in news reporting contribute to ongoing processes of identification, shaping how events and social actors are represented and interpreted. Introducing the overall style of each newspaper thus provides an important contextual foundation for the subsequent discourse findings, as it highlights the broader identity positions and value orientations.

Among the newspaper editorials analysed, *Yomiuri Shimbun*'s database is the most limited, only offering coverage until 2021. However, out of all the outlets, its coverage of the Taiwan Strait conflict during 2022 was the most extensive, almost more than all the other editorials combined that year (see Table 1.). Linguistically, *Yomiuri*'s editorials are characterised by a strongly assertive and directive tone. Opinions and suggestions are often framed as self-evident truths through declarative constructions, such as "it is obvious that…", "it is only natural that…", "it is clear that…", and "it is a fact that…", which discursively function to present evaluative judgments as objective reality rather than subjective interpretation. *Yomiuri*'s editorials also tend to adopt an impersonal voice, avoiding personal pronouns in favour of "it" constructions that are often combined with modal verbs and passive voice. This further contributes to the presentation of opinions as neutral or universally accepted.

Yomiuri also makes frequent use of quotation marks and attribution markers, such as "reportedly", though interestingly the source of quoted material is not always clearly specified. A final notable feature of *Yomiuri*'s used language is that it tends to be highly emphatic, relying on evaluative descriptives such as "*brutal* crackdown", "*immense* responsibility", "*crushing* defeat", and "*unprecedentedly* tense", in addition to metaphorical phrases such as "pave the way" and "be plagued by", which collectively reinforce a strong evaluative stance while maintaining an impersonal and authoritative editorial voice.

Asahi Shimbun's editorials on the other hand are characterised by a comparatively colourful and expressive use of language, with frequent reliance on metaphors, figurative expressions, and descriptive turns of phrase. At the same time, it tends to adopt a notably rational and analytical editorial style, often exploring multiple perspectives and competing arguments within a single text. This deliberative approach is frequently supported through the usage of comparisons and analogies, which function to explain and contextualise complex political or strategic issues for the reader, even as the overall lexical choices remain emotionally charged. *Asahi*'s editorials also tend to be markedly people-oriented, foregrounding human experiences and social consequence. Linguistically, *Asahi* makes regular use of assertive constructions, such as "there is no question that…", "there is no arguing that…", "it is obvious that…", and "it goes without saying that…", which function to present certain evaluations as self-evident or beyond reasonable dispute, despite the outlets emphasis on balance and rational debate.

Mainichi Shimbun's editorials are comparatively direct and unambiguous in their writing style. Evaluative positions are frequently articulated through definitive and future-oriented constructions, such as "will do" or "is going to", with relatively limited use of hedging or epistemic uncertainty. This results in a clear and assertive presentation of opinion. In contrast to other outlets such as *Yomiuri*, *Mainichi* makes frequent and explicit reference to "the government" when discussing Japan-related issues. It also generally exhibits a greater use of personal pronouns, including first-person plural forms such as "we", which function to foreground the editorial voice and make the newspaper's stance more clear. However, the editorials also demonstrate temporal variation in modality, with increased use of epistemic markers such as "may", "might", and "probably" during the first Trump administration, indicating a more cautious or speculative stance during periods of increased political uncertainty. In addition, *Mainichi* regularly includes quotations from academics, which serves to lend argumentative support through external authority, as well as references to historical examples than function as comparative reference points. Past events are used as lessons through which contemporary issues are evaluated, strengthening arguments though analogy rather than through descriptions alone.

Lastly, *The Japan Times* is characterised by rational and analytical writing style aimed at an international audience, with a clear emphasis on exploring multiple sides of an argument. However, while this approach is maintained through a lot of its coverage, it often adopts a notably assertive tone when advancing a clear evaluative position. Rather than framing recommendations through explicit opinion markers (e.g. "we think") or overtly prescriptive formulations, *The Japan Times* tends to frame suggestions within declarative statements that present particular outcomes as inevitable unless alternative action is taken (if A is not done, B will happen). Modal constructions such as "must" are frequently used, allowing normative judgments to be advanced as matters of necessity rather than preference. The editorials also show a noticeable focus on the linguistic analysis of official statements, closely examining the wording used by government figures in order to construct meaning and assume implications. Stylistically, *The Japan Times* regularly uses short, concise sentences, often arranged sequentially for rhetorical impact. In addition, attention is frequently directed toward the symbolic significance of state actions, with language choices highlighting how policies and gestures function communicatively within domestic and international contexts.

5.1. Discourse 1: Peace-Oriented Civilian Power vs. Frontline Security Actor

The first discourse centres on Japan's postwar pacifist identity and whether it remains appropriate under contemporary security conditions. While all newspapers engage with this identity, they diverge sharply in how they interpret its meaning and future.

Within the pacifist discourse, military force is consistently subordinated to diplomacy. *Asahi Shimbun* articulates Japan as a peace-oriented civilian power, whose postwar identity is rooted in pacifism, restraint, and diplomacy. By calling Japan "diplomatic power first, defensive power second", it underscores the belief that Japan's legitimacy and security derive from dialogue, trust-building, and multilateral cooperation rather than military strength (Asahi Shimbun, 17.12.2022). However, at the same time, *Asahi* acknowledges that this identity is under strain from external "pressures" that expect it to assume a more assertive security role (Asahi Shimbun, 23.6.2022). While it expresses understanding for strengthening defensive capabilities in principle, it is still heavily critical of the Kishida administration's approach and ultimately believes that "the actions the government are taking could increase the risk of the nation coming under attack." (Asahi Shimbun, 17.12.2022). The Kishida administration's defence policy changes are depicted as not merely strategic adjustments, but as challenges to the normative foundations of postwar peace-oriented Japan (Asahi Shimbun, 16.8.2022). The lack of public debate surrounding increased defence spending and constitutional reinterpretation are framed as particularly troubling, being described as "arrogant" and "irresponsible" (Asahi Shimbun, 2.9.2022).

In *Asahi*, Taiwan Strait conflict is primarily contextualised within broader international crises. But rather than presenting Taiwan as a trigger requiring Japanese military readiness, *Asahi* frames it as a symptom of deeper global failures in leadership and communication (see e.g. Asahi Shimbun, 15.2.2022). References and comparisons to Ukraine and Hong Kong serve as cautionary parallels, highlighting the catastrophic consequences of failed dialogue and unchecked militarisation, while implicitly warning against Japan abandoning its postwar principles under external pressures. This framing reinforces Japan's peace-oriented identity by positioning persistent diplomacy, open dialogue, rejection of nuclear weapons, mutual trust-building, and strengthening of multilateral platforms as the appropriate responses to instability (Asahi Shimbun, 15.11.2021). In terms of solutions, Japan alongside other small and mid-sized

countries are encouraged to act as a mediators and consensus-builders in this increasingly fragmented world, while raising defence budgets, restricting trade under the banner of national security, or excluding China from international frameworks are portrayed as counterproductive and even outright dangerous (Asahi Shimbun, 26.11.2019).

Mainichi Shimbun follows a somewhat similar peace-orientation as *Asahi*, but reinforces this perspective by foregrounding civilian perspectives and societal costs. This is done especially through its extensive coverage of Okinawa, where roughly 70% US military facilities in Japan are located, presenting it as a concrete illustration of how security policies disproportionately burden local communities (see e.g. Mainichi Shimbun, 23.7.2021). This is shown, for example, in the editorial published in 15.5.2022, which states as follows about the Okinawa's situation:

> "The national government's apparently iron-fisted tactics were bolstered under the administrations of former prime ministers Shinzo Abe and Yoshihide Suga, which spanned a total of nine years. While there once were statesmen who were pained by the harsh history Okinawa had gone through and exerted their efforts in an attempt to ease its burden, politicians today do not even give a glimpse of such sympathy." (Mainichi Shimbun, 15.5.2022.)

Testimonies from civilians, atomic bomb survivors, and residents of militarised areas function to morally anchor the argument against an expanded security role, reinforcing the idea that Japan's identity as a peaceful nation is inseparable from the protection of civilian life and is rooted in lived experience and historical memory (see e.g. Mainichi Shimbun, 15.8.2022).

Proposed changes to defence policy and constitutional interpretation are therefore discursively constructed as risks that could undermine Japan's identity as a peaceful nation and destabilise the regional security environment. This concern is frequently articulated by *Mainichi* through warnings about the emergence of a "security dilemma", in which military build-ups by one actor provoke countermeasures by others, leading to spiralling tensions rather than enhanced security (Mainichi Shimbun, 3.12.2022; 27.6.2022). Due to this, *Mainichi* is highly critical of Prime Minister Kishida and the LDP's "power diplomacy", particularly when it comes to the proposals to raise the defence budget without transparent funding plans or public consultation (Mainichi Shimbun, 18.10.2021). Conservatism is often framed as closely linked to an excessive focus on security, contrasted with the opposition CDP's emphasis on "soft

power diplomacy", though both are seen to "share common ground on economic security" (Ibid.).

When it comes to *Mainichi*'s civilian-centred perspective, it's also important to note its tendency to see time as moral and commemorative, with focus on long-term consequences rather than immediate urgency. Similarly to *Asahi,* Taiwan Strait conflict is frequently framed through analogies to other wars and crises, with such comparisons used to warn how quickly regional stability can deteriorate if deterrence, diplomacy, and dialogue fail. Earlier periods, such as the Cold War, postwar settlements, as well as anniversaries of treaties and important diplomatic milestones are also invoked to encourage learning from past restraint and to focus more on peaceful multilateralism rather than bloc politics.

In contrast, *Yomiuri Shimbun* consistently frames Japan as a frontline security actor tasked with defending not only its own territory, but also the broader rule-based international order. While *Yomiuri* doesn't reject Japan's postwar peace narrative outright, it instead reinterprets peace as something that must be actively defended through strength and deterrence. Defence reforms and increased military capabilities are framed as a moral obligation to protect international law, democracy, and regional stability. Rather than depicted as a return to militarism, these changes are represented as necessary and responsible adaptations to a "deteriorating security environment", as well as proofs of governmental resolve and national maturity (see e.g. Yomiuri Shimbun, 24.5.2022; 12.3.2022). In this way, *Yomiuri* constructs a continuity between Japan's peaceful identity and its evolving security role, arguing that restraint without capability risks inviting aggression rather than preventing it. This shows, for example, in the following snippet:

> "Japan is in a difficult period in which countermeasures to deal with military tensions and efforts to reduce such tensions are simultaneously required.
> The notion that peace will be maintained if nothing is done is a dangerous illusion. It is important to think about what is necessary to preserve peace, and then think concretely about the ways to bring about peace and act upon that." (Yomiuri Shimbun, 1.1.2022.)

In another words, peace is framed as dependent upon the ability to protect the nation and international order, with defence normalisation presented as a natural evolution of Japan's identity rather than a division from it.

Similarly, in the editorials by *The Japan Times,* Japan is depicted as a rational, pragmatic and self-reflective actor undergoing a significant transformation in its strategic thinking. The editorials explicitly narrate identity change, noting that "Japanese thinking has changed" from strict postwar pacifism toward a more active defence posture (The Japan Times, 2.12.2022). Rather than framing this shift as purely ideological, *The Japan Times* presents it as rational and adaptive, driven by external structural pressures. Japan is depicted as increasingly aware that it must be able to defend itself in order to be taken seriously by allies and adversaries alike (The Japan Times, 11.2.2022; 2.12.2022). Linking securitisation to the legitimacy of its leadership, the editorial broadly supports changes to Japan's defence policy and the expansion of defence capabilities. Simultaneously, Japan is urged to "step up" to "fill the gaps" left by declining and inconsistent engagement of the US, especially in the Indo-Pacific, through economic statecraft, technology cooperation, and multilateral institutions (The Japan Times, 1.4.2022). Despite all this, concerns are still raised about public backing, fiscal sustainability, and the need for greater governmental transparency. Japan's identity is thus constructed as both security-capable and normatively accountable.

Both *Yomiuri* and *The Japan Times* frame Taiwan as a direct security contingency whose destabilisation would have immediate consequences for Japan's national survival, *Yomiuri* even framing it as "a matter of life and death" (Yomiuri Shimbun, 10.8.2022). Ambiguity and hesitation are depicted as dangerous, reinforcing the necessity of preparedness and alliance-based deterrence. Overall, their proposed responses to the crisis prioritise firmness, credibility, and coordinated action over soft diplomacy, which reflects a clear hardening approach and a shift away from purely pacifism as a defence policy.

Taken together, these discourses reveal not simply a division between "pacifist" and "security-oriented" positions, but a shared struggle over how Japan's postwar identity can be sustained under conditions of changing international order. Across all newspapers peace remains a central normative reference point, but what differs is how it's defined and how it should be protected. *Asahi* and *Mainichi* ground peace in restraint, historical responsibility, and civilian protection, while *Yomiuri* and *The Japan Times* redefine it as contingent on deterrence, preparedness, and alliance credibility. Rather than representing mutually exclusive visions, these positions expose a common anxiety: that Japan's existing frameworks, whether diplomatic or military, may be insufficient to manage a rapidly deteriorating regional and global

order. The question therefore lies in whether Japan's postwar principles can survive without transformation, or whether transformation is required to preserve them.

Ultimately, this first discourse thus demonstrates that Japan's current security debate is less about choosing between pacifism and militarisation, and more about reconciling competing temporalities and moral claims. While *Asahi* and *Mainichi* privilege long-term historical memory and civilian consequences, *Yomiuri* and *The Japan Times* emphasise urgency, deterrence, and structural change. Yet all of these discourses converge on the recognition that Japan stands at a critical juncture where inaction, miscalculation, or democratic deficit carries profound risks. The crisis, therefore, is not solely external but deeply internal.

5.2. Discourse 2: Strategic Autonomy vs. Alliance Loyalty

The second discourse concerns Japan's alliances, particularly the with the United States. Japanese media discourse constructs national identity through an ongoing negotiation between alliance loyalty to the US, and the pursuit of strategic autonomy in regional affairs. The Japan-US alliance has long been a cornerstone of Japan's postwar foreign and security policy, and functioned not only as a strategic arrangement, but as a core element of Japan's identity. However, the Taiwan Strait conflict has intensified questioning regarding the extent of how much Japan's national interests actually align with those of the US. Across the examined newspapers, this tension is articulated not as an outright rejection of the alliance itself, but as a debate over Japan's appropriate role within it.

Across the editorials by *The Japan Times*, alliances are framed not merely as instruments of security, but as markers of legitimacy, credibility, and shared values. The US in particular regarded as Japan's most important bilateral relationship, being consistently described as Japan's "only ally" and an "the cornerstone of peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific" (The Japan Times, 27.5.2022). However, at the same time the editorials reflect a growing awareness of the limits of the US engagement and reliability, highlighting the periods of inconsistency that have forced Japan to reconsider its own role within the alliance (see e.g. The Japan Times, 24.4.2021).

Within this framework, Japan is increasingly depicted as needing to assume greater responsibility for its own defence and regional security. The findings from *The Japan Times* suggest a clear shift away from reliance on the US protection alone, moving towards a model of alliance cooperation more based on "burden sharing" and "realistic and appropriate division of labor" (The Japan Times, 12.3.2019; 18.3.2021). This doesn't only concern what Japan should do, but the editorials also advocate for other actors to become more autonomous. For example, in the editorial titled *Europe's military presence highlights Asia's importance* it's stated that:

> "If European governments want to make a truly substantive contribution to Indo-Pacific security, then they should do more to prepare for their own defense, a move that would free up resources that the U.S. could then devote to this region." (The Japan Times, 10.9.2021.)

So, rather than advocating for splitting away from the US-led international order, *The Japan Times* frames greater autonomy as a prerequisite for a healthy and credible alliance. The ability to defend itself is repeatedly linked to credibility, respect, and being taken seriously as a partner (see e.g. The Japan Times, 26.11.2020). A credible ally is seen as someone who must be able to act, invest, and endure costs (see e.g. Japan Times, 2.12.2022). Autonomy, therefore, is not positioned in opposition to alliance politics, but as a condition that strengthens Japan's alliances, particularly with the US.

At the same time, however, the findings from *The Japan Times* reveal an implicit hierarchy within Japan's partnerships. While stressing that Japan is "by no means a Western or U.S. puppet", the editorials nonetheless portray a relationship marked by subordination and leadership, with the US occupying a central guiding role (Japan Times, 15.4.2022). Japan is encouraged to "stand with" the US, reflecting both loyalty and alignment, while simultaneously being called upon to demonstrate initiative and leadership of its own (see e.g. The Japan Times, 27.5.2022). Japan is portrayed as well positioned to take on a leadership role within the multilateral networks such as G7, as well as in Oceania and Indo-Pacific, particularly through economic assistance and technological cooperation (The Japan Times, 18.3.2021).

When it comes to other alliances, increasing value is placed on cooperation with other "like-minded states", such as the European partners, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand (The Japan Times, 27.5.2022; 25.2.2021; 2.8.2019). However, these relationships are more often

than not framed as extensions of the Japan-US alliance network, with multilateralism being treated in pragmatic, transactional terms. Strong emphasis is placed on responding to challenges and ensuring that undesirable behaviour does not go unchecked, even at economic or political cost. Willingness to "endure pain" in pursuit of alliance commitments is framed as a sign of seriousness and reliability. (The Japan Times, 11.2.2022.) In this sense, alliances are not only cooperative arrangements, but also mechanisms of discipline and credibility.

In *Yomiuri Shimbun*, alliance loyalty is presented as both "indispensable" and morally justified (Yomiuri Shimbun, 17.12.2022). It frequently invokes policy documents, security strategies, and legal frameworks to legitimise this position, reinforcing the idea that alliance commitments are not merely strategic choices, but obligations derived from Japan's identity as a responsible member of the international community. In this sense, alliance participation becomes a core component of Japan's post-war role conception. The Japan-US alliance in particular is framed as the "foundation of Japan's security framework" and the central pillar of the regional stability, and by extension Japan's postwar peace and prosperity (Yomiuri Shimbun, 15.5.2022). Although criticism is directed at specific US administrations, particularly the Trump administration, the US is consistently portrayed as the leader of the international order, with Japan positioned as a loyal and increasingly capable partner (see e.g. Yomiuri Shimbun, 5.11.2021; 24.5.2022). Critiques are therefore framed as concern over temporary deviations, rather than structural problems within the alliance itself.

Like *The Japan Times, Yomiuri* editorials frequently invoke the "traditional division of roles", where US' offensive military capabilities are paired with Japan's defensive posture to create a stable foundation of regional security (see e.g. Yomiuri Shimbun, 17.12.2022). While *Yomiuri* argues that the changing security conditions necessitate expanding Japan's defence capabilities and revising national security policies, this push isn't framed as a move toward strategic independence from the US. Instead, even if US' influence is recognised to be declining, Japan is urged to "recognise the reality" of the US's "difficult" position and do more to support it (Yomiuri Shimbun, 15.10.2022). So rather than acting as steps toward full strategic autonomy, calls for increased defence spending (even if funded by tax hikes), cybersecurity reforms, and expanded operational scope are framed as deeper burden-sharing in support of American leadership, providing proof of Japan's resolve to uphold the alliance and capability to protect the international system.

Yomiuri places strong emphasis on multilateral alliances and partnerships, but mainly as extensions of the bilateral Japan-US framework. International multilateral frameworks such as the G7 and the Quad are portrayed as communities of shared values, rather than ad hoc coalitions, reinforcing a sense of collective identity among like-minded states (Yomiuri Shimbun, 3.1.2022). Japan is frequently encouraged to act as a "bridge" between the US and Asian partners, and other different competing blocs (Yomiuri Shimbun, 31.7.2022). Cooperation with South Korea, Australia, and Oceanic countries is highlighted as increasingly important, particularly in areas such as sanctions coordination, military interoperability, and economic security (Yomiuri Shimbun, 3.1.2022; 25.10.2022). Multilateralism doesn't therefore dilute the centrality of the US alliance, but rather amplifies it. *Yomiuri* editorials also position Japan as a model for other states, suggesting that countries such as Germany should look to Japan and US' close coordination as an example of how to manage relations with China without "disrupting the solidarity of the democratic bloc" and without undermining the rules-based international order (Yomiuri Shimbun, 5.11.2022). In doing so, Japan is constructed as a reliable and responsible ally, whose identity is closely tied to upholding the US-led international leadership.

Interestingly, similarly to *The Japan Times,* in *Yomiuri* consistently portrays alliance partners are as transparent, accountable, and motivated by the common good, particularly in comparison to non-allied actors such as China. Aid, security cooperation, and rulemaking by Japan and the US are framed as legitimate and benevolent, while China's are treated with high suspicion and assumed to have ulterior motives, for example in the case of the Belt and Road Initiative (Yomiuri Shimbun, 16.10.2022.) This reinforces a moral hierarchy within the alliance system, which further limits the conceptual space for Japan to pursue a path that diverges from alliance norms. Within this discourse, the Taiwan Strait is portrayed by both *The Japan Times* and *Yomiuri* as a shared alliance challenge. Japan is encouraged to deepen cooperation with the US in order to support its leadership amid intensifying competition with China. (see e.g. Yomiuri Shimbun, 15.8.2022.) The US involvement in Taiwan is thus framed as legitimate and necessary, while Japan's strengthening defensive capabilities are constructed as a natural extension of alliance obligations rather than a controversial policy choice. This is demonstrated, for example, in the following snippet:

> "If China invades Taiwan, would it be recognized as a "situation threatening Japan's survival" under the security-related laws, and would it be a case in which Japan and the United States should be able to exercise the limited right of collective self-defense? The Japanese government must anticipate all kinds of situations and accelerate discussions on strengthening Japan's defense capabilities." (Yomiuri Shimbun, 10.8.2022)

By contrast, both *Asahi Shimbun* and *Mainichi Shimbun* articulate a more cautious and autonomy-oriented construction of Japan's alliances. Rather than treating alliances as an unambiguous source of security, both editorials express persistent unease about potential overdependence. While neither outlet questions the importance of the Japan-US alliance, both repeatedly emphasise that the national interests of Japan and the US "do not totally coincide" anymore, particularly regarding China (Asahi Shimbun, 17.12.2022). *Asahi* explicitly states that Japan's geographic proximity to China, economic interdependence, and historical experience differentiate its strategic priorities from those of the US, which is portrayed as more insulated from the consequences of regional escalation:

> "From the U.S. point of view, China is challenging its hegemony. Washington's strategic goal is probably aimed at defeating Beijing's challenge.
> For Japan, however, China is a near neighbor with which it has strong historical and economic ties. An armed conflict in East Asia would cause far more damage to the lives and livelihoods of the Japanese than to those of the American people." (Ibid.).

This misalignment is also highlighted through references to the volatility of US foreign policy, which is depicted as heavily influenced by domestic political cycles and shifting priorities (see e.g. Mainichi Shimbun, 23.1.2017; Asahi Shimbun, 31.10.2022). As a result, excessive dependence on the United States is framed as a vulnerability rather than a guarantee of stability, potentially limiting Japan's capacity to make independent decisions in moments of crisis. This is why Japan is frequently urged to have its "own independent strategy" (Asahi Shimbun, 24.5.2022; 29.9.2022; 27.12.2021).

Japan-US alliance is repeatedly described through the metaphor of functional division, with the US acting as the offensive "spear" and Japan as the defensive "shield" (Asahi Shimbun, 17.12.2022; Mainichi Shimbun, 3.12.2022; 27.6.2022: 18.10.2021). However, while similar framing is done by the right-leaning publications, the one used by both *Asahi* and *Mainichi*

underscores a more normative understanding of Japan's role within the alliance as primarily defensive and restraint-oriented. Attempts to modify this division without proper public debate through constitutional reinterpretations, expanded military capabilities, or increased defence spending are all treated with scepticism and concern (Ibid.). As Mainichi states in its editorial published 18.10.2021: "If Japan was to lay hands on the spear, its neighbors would inevitably be alarmed." This suggests that true strategic autonomy cannot be achieved solely through stronger alliances or military capabilities, but must be grounded in public consent and transparency. Without this foundation, Japan's international posture is portrayed as externally driven rather than autonomously chosen.

Beyond the bilateral alliance with the US, *Asahi Shimbun* also evaluates Japan's growing network of partnerships with other like-minded actors, including European countries, South-Korea, as well as the member countries of the G7 and ASEAN. Compared to right-leaning outlets, these relationships are generally framed more positively, especially by emphasising shared values, multilateralism, and non-military cooperation (see e.g. Asahi Shimbun, 15.6.2021; 22.5.2021; 1.7.2022). Notable about *Asahi* is how it tends to draw a clear distinction between diplomatic coordination and military alignment. While multilateral dialogue and economic cooperation are heavily encouraged, the expansion of security-oriented frameworks is often described in cautious or critical terms, particularly when such initiatives are perceived as contributing to bloc formation or ideological polarisation (see e.g. Asahi Shimbun, 21.6.2022; 14.3.2022).

Mainichi Shimbun shares a very similar stance with *Asahi*. Rather than calling for a radical departure from existing alliances, *Mainichi* editorials frame autonomy as a matter of balance: Japan should remain allied with the US, but not subordinate its foreign and security policy entirely to American strategic priorities. Japan is urged to avoid becoming a mere follower of the US, particularly in such an era characterised by American decline and its internal division (Mainichi Shimbun, 27.10.2018; 23.1.2017). The editorials argue that Japan must develop a comprehensive independent strategic vision, one which complements rather than confronts the US alliance (Mainichi Shimbun, 3.12.2022). Autonomy is thus framed primarily in diplomatic terms, emphasising initiative, mediation, and agenda-setting rather than military self-assertion and "sabre-rattling" (Mainichi Shimbun, 4.1.2022). Drawing this clear boundary between militarisation and autonomy, Japan's strategic autonomy is instead linked to

diplomatic proactivity, historical reflection, and the creation of multilayered dialogue channels. Mainichi's frequent use of historical analogies and commemorative editorials reinforces the idea that Japan's past, particularly its postwar restraint, should serve as a guide for contemporary alliance management (see e.g. Mainichi Shimbun 23.6.2021; 4.1.2022).

Like *Asahi, Mainichi* puts emphasis on multilateralism and partnerships grounded in universal values. Japan's alliances with other like-minded states are presented as extensions of its identity as a peaceful, economically powerful nation committed to democracy, human rights, international law, and open trade (see e.g. Mainichi Shimbun, 14.11.2020; 27.10.2022). These relationships are not depicted as military blocs aimed at containment, but as networks for dialogue, economic cooperation, and norm-building (see e.g. Mainichi Shimbun, 17.8.2022; 27.10.2022). In this sense, alliance-building is framed as a way for Japan to amplify its influence without abandoning its postwar principles.

Together, these findings demonstrate that Japanese media discourse does not present strategic autonomy and alliance loyalty as mutually exclusive categories, but rather as interdependent and continuously negotiated elements of Japan's postwar identity. Across the ideological spectrum, the Japan-US alliance remains a central reference point through which Japan's role in the international order is defined. What differs is not the perceived importance of the alliance itself, but the conditions under which it is considered legitimate, sustainable, and aligned with Japan's national interests. The Taiwan Strait context intensifies these negotiations, making visible the anxieties over entrapment, credibility, and agency that are otherwise embedded more subtly in alliance discourse. From a role-theory perspective, these findings highlight a case of contested role expectations and differing responses to altercasting.

5.3. Discourse 3: China as a Relational Neighbour vs. Existential Threat

The third discourse constructs China as the primary external reference point ("Other") against which Japan defines itself. While all newspapers are critical of China, the tone, framing, and implications vary considerably. Rather than producing a unified threat narrative, the Japanese media discourse reveals a spectrum ranging from the securitisation of China as an existential threat to a more relational framing that emphasises coexistence, interdependence, and managed rivalry.

Because *The Japan Times* database includes editorials from earlier periods than the other outlets, it has made it possible to observe a discursive shift, particularly during 2017 and onwards. Earlier editorials placed greater emphasis on dialogue, mutual restraint, and respect for the will of the Taiwanese people (for example The Japan Times, 9.12.2014), whereas more recent articles have adopted a markedly stronger and more securitised tone, framing China's actions as systematically destabilising and incompatible with the existing regional order. Though it's not possible to pinpoint a specific event that caused the shift, events that were repeatedly covered by the editorials can be interpreted as contributing factors. Examples of these include the election of Tsai Ing-wen as Taiwan's president in 2016, which contributed to the deterioration of cross-strait relations, as well as China's increased assertiveness in the South China Sea (The Japan Times, 30.5.2016; 18.5.2015; 3.11.2015; 25.2.2016).

After the discourse shift, *The Japan Times* consistently portrays China as "a revisionist power that seeks regional preeminence" (The Japan Times, 8.10.2020). While it occasionally recognises that China's behaviour and concerns are, at least to some extent, "understandable" and "valid" given its history and pursuit of national rejuvenation, such acknowledgments rarely soften the overall assessment (The Japan Times, 30.9.2022; 5.8.2022; 24.9.2021). Instead, China's emphasis on absolute sovereignty, territorial claims, and unilateral action are depicted as fundamentally hostile to the rule-based order that Japan and its allies seek to uphold. Territorial disputes, most notably over the Senkaku Islands in addition to the obvious Taiwan, are framed as geographical and strategic issues stemming from competing visions of regional order rather than historical grievances (see e.g. The Japan Times, 26.4.2020; 30.9.2022). This reinforces the view of China as a present and future threat, rather than a victim of past injustices.

The Taiwan issue functions as the central node through which China's threat perception is articulated. Unification is framed as a core component of China's national rejuvenation by both the editorials and China itself, making compromise unlikely and increasing the risk of conflict (The Japan Times, 18.11.2022). As noted before with the election of Tsai Ing-Wen, developments in Taiwanese domestic politics are treated as directly relevant to Japan's own security and economic interests, reinforcing the portrayal of China's actions as existential threat rather than distant and abstract (see e.g. 26.11.2018; 7.4.2019).

A notable feature unique to *The Japan Times* is also the emotionalisation of China's behaviour. China is frequently described as highly emotional, too sensitive, and easily provoked, with word choices such as China being "infuriated", "outraged", and "thin skinned" (The Japan Times, 5.1.2019; 7.4.2019; 18.11.2022). Such traits are then often linked to irresponsible, belligerent, and sometimes outright childish behaviour. This framing contrasts sharply with the presentation of Japan as rational, measured, and rule-oriented, which serves to legitimise tougher responses to Chinese actions. China's diplomatic language and symbolic gestures are closely scrutinised, with words repeatedly dismissed as "hollow" unless accompanied by concrete action (The Japan Times, 18.1.2021; 26.4.2018; 20.12.2016). Even shifts in Chinese diplomacy, such as the perceived move away from the so-called "wolf warrior diplomacy" towards a more multilateral posture, are met with suspicion and seen as having hidden intensions (The Japan Times, 18.11.2022; 8.10.2022).

The Japan Times does still acknowledge that cooperation with China remains both necessary and desirable, particularly in economic affairs and on global challenges such as climate change, vaccines, and emerging technologies. (The Japan Times, 30.9.2022; 18.4.2021) However, this cooperation tends to be portrayed as conditional and increasingly constrained. The findings from the editorials show that engagement is framed more as risk management, with repeated warnings against economic overdependence (see e.g. The Japan Times, 25.2.2021). The Russo-Ukrainian war is frequently invoked as a cautionary example, with the EU's reliance on Russian energy cited as evidence of how economic interdependence can rapidly transform into strategic exposure when relations deteriorate (see e.g. The Japan Times, 11.2.2022; 2.12.2022). China's demonstrated wiliness to use of trade and supply chains as "tools of coercion" is also used as evidence that interdependence can be exploited, prompting calls for resilience, diversification, and strategic decoupling in critical sectors such as energy and microchips. (The Japan Times, 25.2.2021; 10.9.2021; 11.2.2022)

Similarly to *The Japan Times, Yomiuri* acknowledges the structural necessity of engagement with China, but overwhelmingly privileges threat perceptions that justify military strengthening and normative boundary-drawing between it and the rest of the international community. This means that China is defined with notable clarity as threatening, with China's rise described as a "matter of life and death" and an "existential threat" to peace, stability, and the rule-based international order (Yomiuri Shimbun, 10.8.2022; 1.1.2022). Importantly, China is rarely framed

as only a bilateral concern, but as a "threat to international community" as a whole (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2.12.2022). Multilateral frameworks such as the G7 and the Quad are used to reinforce a narrative of collective unity, positioning China as an isolated outlier challenging the established status quo and the US leadership (see e.g. Yomiuri Shimbun, 7.11.2022; 15.10.2022; 8.8.2022).

To legitimise threat constructions, *Yomiuri* relies heavily on direct references to policy papers, official statements, and international legal frameworks (see e.g. Yomiuri Shimbun, 23.7.2022; 2.12.2021: 13.2.2021). Quotations are frequently used to convey authority and consensus, at times without clearly identifying the speaker, further creating a perception of China as objectively problematic. Accompanying these representations are strong assumptions about China's intentions, which are often speculative and tonally negative, portraying China as power-hungry, selfish", hegemonic, and increasingly authoritarian (Yomiuri Shimbun, 7.11.2022; 17.12.2022; 17.10.2022). Historical references play a legitimising role, particularly comparisons between Xi Jinping's concentration of power and Mao Zedong's personality cult, which reinforce portrayals of China as autocratic and dangerous (Yomiuri Shimbun, 13.1.2021; 24.10.2022). Statements by China are met with heavy scepticism, while similar scrutiny is more rarely applied to the US, and although US-China relations are discussed critically, responsibility for rising tensions is overwhelmingly attributed to China (see e.g. Yomiuri Shimbun 3.1.2022). China's rise is also further framed as threatening because it challenges the US leadership, which is framed by statements such as: "It is significant that the United States will regain its global leadership under the Biden administration and lead the fight against authoritarianism." (Yomiuri Shimbun, 13.2.2021).

Rather than adopting a consistently alarmist tone *Mainichi* editorials position China as a complex actor whose behaviour must be critically assessed, but notes that its presence and influence in broader regional relationships is unavoidable. China is frequently described as attempting to change the regional status quo, with China's military modernisation, coercive diplomacy, and efforts to reshape the regional order being portrayed as sources of genuine anxiety, especially for Japan's security and for vulnerable regions such as Okinawa. (Mainichi Shimbun 27.10.2022; 27.5.2022; 18.10.2021; 27.10.2018.) The potential for escalation around Taiwan is discussed not only as a strategic problem, but as a humanitarian one (. Significant attention is paid to civilian suffering and the risk of dragging Japan into conflict, which

reinforces the perception that China's actions could fundamentally endanger regional peace, even if military confrontation is not presented as inevitable (see e.g. Mainichi Shimbun, 15.8.2022).

However, while the existential threat narrative is never fully absent, the language used by *Mainichi* to describe China is notably measured. The editorials avoid highly emotive or accusatory wording, as well as resist attributing sole responsibility for regional tensions to China. Instead, China's actions are situated within a wider strategic environment shaped by great-power rivalry and shifting US engagement in Asia. (Mainichi Shimbun, 14.11.2020; 18.10.2021; 15.8.2022.) This more restrained tone supports the construction of China as a relational neighbour with whom Japan must continue to engage, especially economically (see e.g. Mainichi Shimbun, 15.6.2022; 8.8.2022). The *Mainichi* editorials frequently reference past periods of pragmatic cooperation, for example during the first Trump administration when uncertainty surrounding the US leadership pushed Japan to deepen economic ties with China despite unresolved security concerns (Mainichi Shimbun, 27.10.2018). Historical examples like this are used to demonstrate that coexistence and cooperation are not only possible, but necessary, given the geographic proximity and economic interdependence. Japan is positioned as a potential mediator, capable of maintaining communication channels with China while also working with allies and partners to uphold international rules (Mainichi Shimbun, 12.2.2017; 10.1.2019; 27.6.2022).

While building relationships and dialogue channel with others are deemed important, it is emphasised that China should not be forgotten and left out of these discussions. Excluding China from regional and global frameworks is depicted as both unrealistic and counterproductive, potentially worsening insecurity rather than alleviating it. (Mainichi Shimbun, 18.10.2021; 3.1.2022.) For example, China is repeatedly contrasted with Russia, particularly following the invasion of Ukraine, with editorials expressing cautious optimism that China can still be persuaded through diplomacy to avoid conflict (see e.g. Mainichi Shimbun, 27.5.2022). This distinction reinforces the belief that China remains responsive to international norms and dialogue, even if it does not consistently uphold them. Japan is thus encouraged to pursue stable relations and "multilayered dialogue" with China, while simultaneously urged to remain aware about points of friction (Mainichi Shimbun, 13.8.2018; 8.8.2020; 19.11.2022).

Like *Mainichi, Asahi* editorials predominantly construct China as a relational neighbour rather than an existential threat. China is framed as an actor whose relationship with Japan is complex, enduring, and resistant to simplistic securitisation. While concerns over China's military expansion and poor human rights records are acknowledged, these issues are consistently embedded within a broader relational context that prioritises engagement, dialogue, and mutual understanding over confrontation (see e.g. Asahi Shimbun, 24.1.2022). For example:

> "Efforts to build a broad network of friendly relations in a wide range of areas contribute greatly to Japan's national security.
> Strong rhetoric about deterrence alone cannot ensure a nation's security and prosperity." (Asahi Shimbun, 29.9.2022)

> "If Japan allows temporary rivalry and emotions to dictate its policy toward China, it would stifle opportunities to improve the bilateral ties for the future. There are inevitably ups and downs in the relations between the two neighbors.
> But thoughtful diplomacy focused on pursuing mutual interests from a long historical perspective is more important than ever." (Ibid.)

This framing is reinforced through opposition to policies that treat China as a systemic enemy. Efforts to restrict trade under the pretext of national security, or forming of rigid blocs that exclude China are criticised as short-sighted and destabilising. The editorials warn that such approaches risk deepening mistrust, fuelling ideological confrontation, and dividing the world into opposing camps reminiscent of the Cold War. (see e.g. Asahi Shimbun, 10.1.2022; 21.6.2022.) In this context, China is portrayed less as an existential threat than as an indispensable participant in addressing shared global challenges, such as, food security, nuclear disarmament, prevention of infectious diseases, and climate change (Asahi Shimbun, 2.10.2019; 8.3.2021; 27.12.2021; 16.11.2022).

A recurring theme in the *Asahi* editorials is the depth of economic, cultural, and social ties between Japan and China. The editorials repeatedly present China as a geographically and historically close neighbour, with the two countries being bound by extensive networks of trade and investment that render outright antagonism both unrealistic and undesirable (see e.g. Asahi Shimbun, 17.12.2022; 5.6.2021). China actions are stated to have direct and lasting implications for Japan, highlighting the belief that Japan's security and prosperity are closely

linked to stable relations with China, and that policies aimed at exclusion or isolation are inherently counterproductive (see e.g. Asahi Shimbun, 19.4.2021).

Especially historical awareness plays a central role here. *Asahi* editorials explicitly acknowledge Japan's wartime past and the friction it continues to generate in Sino-Japanese relations (Asahi Shimbun, 29.9.2022). Rather than treating historical memory as an obstacle to be overcome, *Asahi* presents it as a necessary reference point for diplomacy (Asahi Shimbun, 15.8.2022). Actions perceived as undermining this awareness, such as visits by Japanese politicians to the Yasukuni Shrine, are heavily criticised for damaging Japan's international image and reinforcing distrust among neighbouring countries (Asahi Shimbun, 16.8.2022). This reflects an understanding of China's behaviour as partially shaped by historical experiences, rather than solely by contemporary strategic ambition and aimless power hungriness.

Overall, the findings show that Japanese editorial discourse does not construct China through a single, unified narrative, but along a continuum ranging from relational neighbour to existential threat. Across newspapers, China functions as the constitutive "Other" through which Japan's identity as a liberal, rule-based, and responsible actor is articulated. While tone and emphasis vary, there is broad agreement that China is an unavoidable and consequential actor whose actions have direct implications for Japan's security and prosperity. All newspapers recognise China's efforts to change the regional status quo and acknowledge the risks of escalation, especially in relation to Taiwan. At the same time, none of the outlets entirely reject engagement with China. Even when China is framed as a revisionist or an outright existential threat, cooperation is portrayed as necessary, even though increasingly conditional and constrained. The central divide thus doesn't exist between engagement and opposition, but in whether coexistence with China is seen as manageable or fundamentally incompatible with the existing regional order.

From a role-theoretical perspective, these different constructions of China enable different Japanese role conceptions. *Yomiuri* and *The Japan Time*'s portrayals of China as an existential threat casts Japan in the role of a frontline defender tasked with containing revisionism and upholding the international order. In contrast, the relational framing by *Asahi* and *Mainichi* supports a role conception of Japan as a mediator or balancer that is responsible for managing tensions through diplomacy and maintaining channels of communication. These competing altercastings of China structure the boundaries of Japan's imagined agency, shaping whether

security is understood primarily in military or diplomatic terms, looping back to the first discourse of Japan's identity contestation of peace-oriented civilian power versus frontline security actor.

5.4. Discourse 4: Universal values, Rule of Law, and Societal Legitimacy

The fourth discourse frames the Taiwan Strait conflict as part of a broader struggle over the preservation of the rule-based international order and the defence of so-called universal values, such as democracy, free trade, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for sovereignty. Universal values function as key collective identity markers, shaping how Japan understands itself, selects its partners, evaluates perceived threats, as well as reaffirms both its domestic and international legitimacy. However, significant variation exists in how these values are interpreted and operationalised, revealing competing conceptions of Japan's moral responsibilities and appropriate international roles. Rather than being treated solely as a regional security issue, Taiwan is frequently framed as a test case for the resilience of international law, democratic norms, and multilateral governance. The conflict and Taiwan therefore become symbolic sites through which Japan's own identity as a normative actor is articulated and contested within the broader value-based international community.

In *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the rule-based international order is articulated as both fragile and under direct assault, with China positioned as its primary challenger (see e.g. Yomiuri Shimbun, 14.12.2021; 17.11.2021; 13.2.2021). Universal values are treated as non-negotiable standards that clearly distinguish responsible states from revisionist actors, thus functioning as collective identity markers that separate a community of law-abiding, "like-minded" states from those positioned outside this normative boundary, for example in the case of China whose actions are repeatedly framed as fundamentally incompatible with international norms.

> "China's threats to global peace and free trade, and its disregard for universal values such as human rights and the rule of law have triggered concerns in the whole international community, not just in the United States. It is unacceptable that Xi does not understand the situation and dismisses it as interference in internal affairs." (Yomiuri Shimbun, 16.11.2022.)

> "Trampling on universal values such as human rights and the rule of law and attempting to rewrite the international order so that it is centered on China should not be tolerated." (Yomiuri Shimbun, 17.11.2022.)

International law, particularly principles of sovereignty, freedom of navigation, and peaceful dispute resolution, is invoked not only descriptively but prescriptively, serving as a moral benchmark against which state behaviour is evaluated and judged (see e.g. Yomiuri Shimbun, 2.6.2022; 19.11.2022). The defence of Taiwan is therefore deeply linked to the defence of international law itself, transforming a geopolitical dispute into a normative struggle between order and revisionism. The rule of law also stands out as a key value through which Japan's own identity as a restrained and legitimate security actor is enforced. Security is thus presented as a continuation of Japan's long-standing commitment to international law and peaceful order, and not as a departure from its post-war identity.

Yomiuri editorials put emphasis on law as a central source of legitimacy, with both international and domestic legal frameworks being used frequently to justify security-related policies (see e.g. Yomiuri Shimbun, 17.12.2022; 29.8.2022). By framing these measures as necessary to uphold shared norms rather than as expressions of power politics, the outlet seeks to anchor security policy in legal legitimacy and moral responsibility. In doing so, legality becomes a symbol of collective belonging to a rules-based international order. They also function to present policy changes as lawful, responsible, and normatively grounded responses to a deteriorating international environment, instead of exceptional or radical.

This value-centric framing legitimises an expanded security role for Japan, and reinforces a self-image of moral clarity and responsibility. By identifying itself strongly with universal values, Japan is portrayed as belonging firmly within a community of liberal democracies, bound together by shared principles rather than geography alone. This sense of collective identity makes shared values a key basis for partnership and solidarity. In addition, by positioning itself as a frontline defender of international law and democracy, Japan is also portrayed as bearing a special obligation to act in coordination with these like-minded states, particularly the US and members of the G7 and the Quad. (see e.g. Yomiuri Shimbun, 7.11.2022; 24.5.2022; 23.1.2022.) Multilateralism is thus seen as the collective expression of shared values rather than a neutral institutional arrangement, with alliance formation being framed as value based. States that don't share these values are implicitly framed as unreliable, alien, or even threatening. Taiwan's

significance is amplified precisely because its portrayal as a democratic polity that shares Japan's normative commitments, making it a natural partner worthy of protection. In contrast, China is consistently presented as isolated and lacking genuine allies, reinforcing the identity narrative in which Japan belongs within a cohesive democratic camp aligned against a singular disruptor of peace (Yomiuri Shimbun, 15.10.2022).

The findings from *Yomiuri* further show that public understanding and societal acceptance are portrayed as necessary conditions for effective security policy. Calls for increased defence spending, tax hikes, and expanded military capabilities are often accompanied by assertions that "the government must make efforts to provide careful explanations to gain the understanding of the public" (Yomiuri Shimbun, 4.9.2022). A lack of transparency or delayed political communication is repeatedly framed as contributing to public distrust, which in turn is seen as weakening Japan's overall security posture (Yomiuri Shimbun, 15.8.2022). Domestic legitimacy is therefore not assumed, but treated as something that must be actively cultivated through openness, legal clarity, and responsible governance.

Leadership and domestic political unity play a central role in this construction of domestic legitimacy. A notably positive portrayal of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his diplomatic and security policies are frequently cited as demonstrating strong leadership, strategic clarity, and value-based diplomacy (Yomiuri Shimbun, 29.9.2022). On the other hand, internal division, particularly criticism from opposition parties, is often described in strongly negative terms (Yomiuri Shimbun, 11.8.2022; 12.3.2022; 2.11.2021). Hesitation, ambiguity, and delayed responses are being portrayed as failures to meet the demands of an increasingly severe security environment. The editorials also suggest that division within the Diet and broader political sphere risks signalling weakness to adversaries and diminishing Japan's standing within its alliance networks and undermining its credibly. (Yomiuri Shimbun, 12.3.2022; 6.2.2022; 2.11.2021.) Domestic stability is therefore repeatedly described as a prerequisite for effective diplomacy, alliance cooperation, and leadership in multilateral frameworks. Political decisiveness and continuity are framed as indicators of national resolve and reliability as an international partner, with strong leadership being tied to the moral responsibility to protect the nation and uphold the international order. In this sense, a stable, unified, and law-abiding society is presented as the foundation upon which Japan's credibility as a defender of universal values rests upon.

The Japan Times shares *Yomiuri*'s emphasis on the universal values and rule-based order, with societal and international legitimacy being closely tied to the consistent enactment of these values. The editorials emphasise that rhetoric alone is not enough, frequently characterising words as hollow unless supported by concrete action. (see e.g. The Japan Times, 11.2.2022.) Legitimacy is therefore framed as performance-based, dependent on a state's willingness to respond to perceived violations of the rule-based order, even at economic or political cost (The Japan Times, 30.12.2022). Enduring such "pain" is presented as an indicator of responsible leadership and seriousness (The Japan Times, 11.2.2022). Discursively these norms derive their meaning more from enforcement and consequence, rather than abstract universality. Taiwan is presented as a critical test of whether democratic states are willing to uphold the principles they profess, with failure to respond firmly being portrayed as undermining the legitimacy of the entire liberal order (see e.g. The Japan Times, 15.4.2022; 11.2.2022).

The US plays a prominent role here. While *The Japan Times* acknowledges the periods of internal division and weakened global standing, US influence is framed as deriving its historical association with universal values rather than military power alone (The Japan Times, 18.3.2021; 5.6.2019; 11.2.2022). Japan's alliance with the US is thus legitimised through shared principles, alongside strategic interests. At the same time, Japan is portrayed as increasingly responsible for upholding these values when US engagement appears inconsistent.

At the domestic level, legitimacy is also linked to societal consent and resilience. *The Japan Times* editorials note gaps between political elites and the public, particularly regarding defence policy and fiscal burdens. As an example, regarding the new defence policy paper changes, the editorial states as follows:

> "The Japanese public has not — does not — fully appreciate the significance of national defense. The only way that changes anticipated in the new strategic documents will be accepted and implemented is if they enjoy public understanding and support. Obliging them to bear a part of those costs will help secure that support.
>
> The temptation to keep the public out of this transition is strong. The new strategies demand a fundamental shift in thinking about national defense. It is far easier to legislate and implement this evolution out of sight of the public, minimizing the chances of disruption or for objection. Yet it is precisely because

these reforms are so central and so needed that public backing is demanded." (The Japan Times, 2.12.2022.)

The outlet urges to build a more transparent relations, framing it as essential for maintaining public trust, for example by stating that "Foreign policy must better serve the interests of the middle class and not be seen as a tool of elites." (The Japan Times, 26.11.2020). Similarly, multilateral cooperation with like-minded states is similarly legitimised through shared values, even as relationships are framed in pragmatic, transactional terms.

In contrast, *Asahi Shimbun* adopts a more ambivalent stance toward the rule-based order, acknowledging its importance while questioning the consistency and selectivity of its application. While *Asahi* strongly affirms the same universal values, it's more critical of the tendency to instrumentalise these norms in great-power rivalry (see e.g. Asahi Shimbun, 14.3.2022; 29.9.2022). It cautions that framing the Taiwan Strait exclusively through a moral binary can risk intensifying divisions, and "close the door to" opportunities for dialogue (Asahi Shimbun, 29.9.2022). The editorials frequently highlight the need for inclusive diplomacy, warning that reducing complex regional dynamics to ideological confrontation may undermine the very norms it seeks to protect (Asahi Shimbun, 15.8.2022).

This scepticism extends to multilateral institutions themselves. While *Asahi* recognises the symbolic and practical importance of forums such as the G7, it also notes their limitations in addressing the concerns of non-Western actors (Asahi Shimbun, 15.6.2021). Sustaining a rule-based international order is framed to require not only deterrence, but also legitimacy depending on fairness, transparency, and the willingness of all major powers, particularly the US and its allies, to stick to the same standards they promote (Asahi Shimbun, 15.8.2022; 19.4.2021; 15.6.2021; 6.8.2021). In this context, Japan's identity is constructed less as an enforcer of universal values and more as a normative mediator capable of bridging competing visions of order and facilitating dialogue across ideological divides (Asahi Shimbun, 29.9.2022).

A core element of *Asahi*'s value-based discourse is the emphasis on peace as a universal and historically grounded norm. The editorials consistently reject militarisation, nuclear weapons, and arms races as incompatible with both Japan's postwar identity and broader international expectations. Nuclear weapons in particular are framed as categorically illegitimate, with criticism directed not only at potential adversaries but also at allies, including the US (Asahi

Shimbun, 31.10.2022; 6.8.2021). Peace, in this context, is not presented as a national preference, but as a shared global responsibility.

Democracy and open dialogue emerge as equally central to the construction of legitimacy. Domestically, policy changes related to defence, constitutional interpretation, and alliance commitments are repeatedly evaluated based on how extensively the decision makers involve public debate and societal consent (Asahi Shimbun, 9.2.2022; 23.7.2022; 11.8.2022). Decisions seen as bypassing citizens or local communities are described in highly negative terms, such as "arrogant and irresponsible", showing that legitimacy is understood to rest on democratic participation rather than executive authority (Asahi Shimbun, 2.9.2022).

Internationally, freedom of speech and the inclusion of diverse perspectives are portrayed as safeguards against polarisation and conflict, reinforcing the idea that democratic norms contribute directly to stability (Asahi Shimbun, 28.5.2020; 1.8.2020). Universal values are also invoked in relation to economic cooperation and global governance. Free trade is consistently framed as a norm that reinforces peace and prosperity, while protectionism and "haphazard" trade restrictions justified by national security concerns are portrayed as destabilising (Asahi Shimbun, 21.6.2022). Multilateral institutions such as the G7, UN, EU and NATO are assessed primarily on their capacity to uphold shared values and facilitate collective problem-solving (Asahi Shimbun, 15. 6.2021; 1.7.2022). While concern is expressed over declining global leadership and weakened multilateral influence, these institutions are still portrayed as essential for addressing global challenges that "[n]o single country, no matter how powerful, can solve [...] on its own" (Asahi Shimbun, 8.3.2021). This emphasis on multilateralism reinforces the notion that legitimacy is collective, rather than unilateral and led by a single authority.

Similarly, *Mainichi Shimbun* emphasises universal values while maintaining a critical distance from securitised interpretations of Japan's defence. The newspaper consistently highlights the human dimension of international law, linking abstract principles to the lived experiences of civilians, particularly in Okinawa and among victims of wars (see e.g. Mainichi Shimbun, 23.6.2021; 6.8.2022). By centring these perspectives, *Mainichi* reframes the defence of international order as inseparable from the prevention of human suffering. This approach challenges narratives that equate normative commitment with military preparedness, instead

advocating for multilayered dialogue and confidence-building as primary tools for sustaining peace (see e.g. Mainichi Shimbun, 13.8.2018; 2.5.2020).

As noted in the other discourse findings, historical reflection plays a particularly prominent role in *Mainichi* editorials. Editorials commemorating key treaties and anniversaries draw lessons from past failures of international law, cautioning against complacency and moral exceptionalism (see e.g. Mainichi Shimbun, 15.8.2022). The newspaper's assertion that Japan was treated too leniently after the WWII suggests that genuine commitment to universal values and international norms requires accountability and humility, rather than selective remembrance (Mainichi Shimbun, 15.8.2019).

Also very similarly to *Asahi, Mainichi* editorials suggest that societal legitimacy is constructed through democratic process, transparency, and public consent. The editorials are highly critical of government-led security initiatives and policy shifts enacted without clear explanations of funding sources or meaningful public consultations, finding it "irresponsible" and "unacceptable" (Mainichi Shimbun, 27.6.2022; 9.9.2021). The frequent use of the term "government", alongside inclusive pronouns such as "we", position the newspaper as voice of civil society, expressing a societal perspective that contrasts with top-down decision-making (see e.g. Mainichi Shimbun, 24.5.2022; 11.5.2022; 15.8.2022).

In *Mainichi* editorials universal values also function as a boundary-drawing mechanisms vis-à-vis other actors. In particular, references to China's "abnormal" positions, such as policies against religious groups and high surveillance, highlight China's divergence from universal values (Mainichi Shimbun, 26.9.2018). Interestingly, what is perceived as troubling by the editorials is not only the normative deviations, but the fact that such policies appear to function effectively against all odds, seemingly defying established international norms (Mainichi Shimbun, 1.10.2019). This framing reinforces the centrality of universal values by implicitly questioning a regional order in which norm-breaking behaviour can still yield power and influence.

These findings show that universal values function as a key axis of differentiation in Japan's media discourse and as markers of collective identity that define Japan's sense of belonging within a wider community of "like-minded" states. *Yomiuri Shimbun* and *The Japan Times* articulate Japan as a guardian of liberal order, aligned with Western democracies and prepared

to assume greater security responsibilities, and thus situating Japan firmly within a value-based international collective. On the other hand, *Asahi Shimbun* and *Mainichi Shimbun* convey alternative identity narratives that emphasise mediation, historical consciousness, and moral restraint, indicating a more ambivalent understanding of Japan's collective role in the region. These competing narratives reveal that while all newspapers draw upon the same vocabulary of universal values, they attach differing interpretations to what it means to "defend" them and which roles such a defence entails.

Ultimately, the Taiwan Strait conflict serves as a discursive mirror through which Japan's evolving normative identity is reflected and debated. Taiwan's portrayal as a democratic partner sharing Japan's values reinforces its symbolic importance within this discourse as like-minded member of a broader value-based community. Yet the variation in how universal values are mobilised highlights the central finding of this thesis: Japan's identity is not fixed, but continuously negotiated, shaped by tensions between deterrence and dialogue, enforcement and legitimacy, and value-based alignment with Western democracies and engagement with the broader Asian region.

5.5. Theoretical discussion

This subchapter interprets the before-outlined findings through the lens of identity theory, with role theory serving as a complementary framework used for analysing how identity is translated into observable expectations and behaviour. As explained in the theory chapter, constructivist identity theory conceptualises state identity as socially constructed, relational, and continuously reproduced through discourse and interaction, rather than treating it as fixed or singular (Cho 2012, 308-309; Aria 2025, 22-23, 30). The findings of this thesis support these ideas. Across the four newspapers, Japan's identity is presented as actively negotiated in response to external pressures, alliance expectations, historical memory, and normative commitments.

The editorials analysed in this thesis consistently engage in identity work by positioning Japan in relation to significant Others, most notably China and the US. These relational constructions shape Japan's sense of self as peaceful vs. assertive, autonomous vs. dependent, Asian vs. Western, and morally restrained vs. normatively responsible. The Taiwan Strait conflict serves as a focal point that intensifies identity articulation, forcing Japanese media to confront

tensions between competing self-images. In the case of role theory, the findings of this thesis demonstrate repeated instances of role contestation, role strain, and competing altercastings. The findings also show that the Taiwan Strait conflict functions as a catalyst that exposes underlying tensions within Japan's postwar identity, from which the different role conception then originate.

The first discourse highlights a fundamental tension within Japan's postwar identity, which is the relationship between post-war pacifism and security responsibility. Pacifism operates as a core constitutive norm of Japan's self-understanding, being deeply embedded in constitutional principles, historical reflection, and moral narratives of restraint in using force (Tamaki 2019, 114). *Asahi* and *Mainichi Shimbun* strongly reproduce this peaceful identity by anchoring Japan's legitimacy in civilian protection, diplomatic leadership, and historical responsibility. Military expansion and alliance-driven deterrence are framed as inconsistent with this identity, and therefore as threatening to Japan's sense of self. Here pacifism is not merely a policy choice, but a moral identity that differentiates Japan from both its wartime past and contemporary great-power militarism. (Hagström & Hanssen 2016, 284-285.)

Yomiuri Shimbun and *The Japan Times*, however, prioritise an identity narrative centred on responsibility, where Japan is depicted as a democratic major power whose postwar pacifism should not translate into passivity. So, while these two editorials do not reject pacifism outright, they reinterpreted it as conditional and tied to deterrence and preparedness to act. This represents an attempt at identity adaptation aiming to preserve continuity at self-image level (pacifist Japan), while simultaneously altering the roles and practices through which that identity is enacted. Peace is redefined from only meaning restraint to responsibility to uphold it, allowing military normalisation to be framed as identity-consistent instead of identity-threatening. This competing interpretation thus seeks to stabilise Japan's identity through transformation rather than preservation.

Role theory helps to further explain why these contestations related to pacifism are so intense. The role of a "peace-oriented civilian power" carries behavioural expectations of mediation, restraint, and diplomacy, while the role of a "frontline security actor" entails deterrence, active alliance coordination, leadership, and readiness to use force (Holsti 1970, 242, 245-246). The media discourse thus becomes a site where incompatible role expectations are negotiated. The findings show that Japan is experiencing role strain as external expectations from its allies,

particularly the US, are pulling it towards a more assertive security role, while historical narratives and domestic interpretations continue to reinforce expectations of restraint. (Maull 2011, 187-190.)

Importantly, this debate is not simply ideological, but also temporal. While *Asahi* and *Mainichi* focus on long-term historical continuity and moral responsibility, *Yomiuri* and *The Japan Times* emphasise urgency and adaptation to structural change. This temporal divergence reflects deeper disagreements over whether identity stability is best achieved through preservation or transformation, which is a core tension in identity and role theory when states face systemic change (Mader & Schoen 2023, 886-887; Harnisch 2011, 10-13).

The second discourse shows how alliances function as identity-shaping social structures (Thies & Wehner 2021, 2 & 7). Across all newspapers, the Japan-US alliance remains central to Japan's self-conception, confirming identity theory's emphasis on relational identity formation (Hagström & Gustafsson 2015, 5; Qin 2016, 37-38). The US is frequently constructed as a normative mirror, with Japan's identity and its other alliances being repeatedly articulated in reference to it. Whether Japan is seen is as a loyal partner, a restrained subordinate, or a cautious ally seeking greater autonomy depends on the newspaper. While *Yomiuri* and *The Japan Times* see alliance with US as evidence of shared values, maturity, and international responsibility, *Asahi* and *Mainichi* portray excessive closeness to the US as identity-eroding, risking the loss of Japan's autonomy and distinctiveness. The alliance thus functions as both an identity anchor and an identity constraint (Iwanami 2024, 723).

From a role-theoretical perspective, this discourse reveals sustained role contestation and altercasting (Thies 2009, 8). *Yomiuri* and *The Japan Times* largely accept the altercasting imposed by the alliance framework. The allies, particularly the US, cast Japan as a reliable, responsible, and increasingly capable partner within the US-led international order. Calls for increased defence spending and burden-sharing are framed as necessary to perform this role credibly. In this framing, autonomy is not independence from the alliance, but competence within it.

Contrastingly, *Asahi* and *Mainichi* partially resist this altercasting. While neither reject the alliance completely, they question whether alliance loyalty should override Japan's own distinct interests, responsibilities, and geographic realities. The emphasis on more

independent strategy, public consent, and diplomatic initiative reflects an alternative role conception where Japan acts as a mediator, balancer, and/or agenda-setter, rather than a frontline security enforcer. This resistance highlights a key insight from role theory, which is that roles aren't simply adopted but negotiated, and actors may comply selectively or reinterpret expectations to preserve autonomy (Wendt 1999, 227-228).

The Taiwan Strait highlights these dynamics by bringing attention to the chance of entrapment (Berkofsky 2022). The findings show that concerns over being drawn into the conflict between China and the US is closely tied to identity anxieties about agency and sovereignty. Japan's struggle is therefore more about how to ally without losing control over its own role conception, rather than about the allying itself. This further supports the argument that alliance politics are deeply intertwined with identity maintenance, not merely security calculations.

The third discourse also demonstrates how Japan's identity is constructed relationally, this time through representations of China as the significant "Other" (Wendt 1999, 11). In all four newspapers China functions as a key reference point against which Japan defines its values, behaviour, and international role. Identities are often stabilised through differentiation, and the findings clearly show that narratives about China serve this function (Hagström & Hanssen 2016, 270).

However, the form of othering and differentiation varies significantly across the outlets. *Yomiuri* and *The Japan Times* construct China as an existential and systemic threat that is fundamentally incompatible with the rule-based international order. China is repeatedly associated with authoritarianism, status quo revisionism, and strategic opacity. This framing reinforces Japan's self-image as a responsible, law-abiding, and value-oriented actor embedded within the liberal international community, while simultaneously enabling a role conception of Japan as a frontline defender and containment actor. China, in turn, is altercast as a revisionist adversary, which narrows the range of acceptable Japanese roles to those centred on deterrence, alliance coordination, and the active enforcement of international norms. (Kolmaš 2018, 510.)

Conversely, *Asahi* and *Mainichi* adopt a more relational othering that preserves space for coexistence and engagement. China is portrayed as problematic, but not uniquely irredeemable, and its behaviour is understood to being shaped by history and ideological

differences. These two editorials emphasise historical ties, economic interdependence, and shared regional space, suggesting that Japan's identity cannot be fully detached from Asia. This supports Japan's role conception centred on mediation, dialogue, and tension management. However, it is important to note that this framing does not deny threat perceptions, but instead embeds them within a broader relational context, allowing Japan to maintain its identity as a peaceful and responsible neighbour. The coexistence of these narratives observed from the different outlets highlights once again that identity boundaries are not fixed, but contested. The findings suggest that Japanese media discourse reflects uncertainty over whether Japan's identity is best secured through exclusionary boundary-drawing, or through managing differences.

The fourth and last discourse discusses the universal values as central pillars of Japan's identity and legitimacy. Democracy, rule of law, human rights, and multilateralism are repeatedly invoked as "universal", constructing an imagined unified community in which membership is defined by adherence to shared normative standards. These values thus function as moral signifiers that allow Japan to situate itself within a transnational "we", aligning its national identity with a wider liberal collective and anchor Japan's self-image as a responsible and legitimate actor. (Wendt 1999, 106 & 162; Insebayeva 2019, 856-857.) At the same time, this process is inherently exclusionary, with actors that are framed as violating these norms being positioned as outsiders, legitimising differentiation and even outright opposition (Hagström & Hanssen 2016, 270; Margalit & Raz 1990, 445-447).

Yomiuri and *The Japan Times* use universal values as central identity markers to legitimise a more assertive security posture. Taiwan is framed as a symbolic test case for the credibility of the rule-based international order, through which Japan's own normative identity is evaluated. Japan's willingness to act is treated as evidence of its commitment to the values it claims to uphold. Japan's self-image as a responsible, liberal actor must be continuously reproduced through concrete practices, which reflects an understanding of identity as performative and relational (Qin 2016, 37-38). Role theory helps explain how these identity claim translates into behavioural expectations. By adopting the role of a defender of universal values, Japan implicitly accepts the associated expectations of action, sacrifice, and enforcement. Legitimacy thus becomes performance-based, dependent on Japan's ability and willingness to

translate normative commitments into material support and direct action, particularly in coordination with the community of other like-minded states (Aria 2025, 19; Cho 2012, 305).

In contrast, *Asahi* and *Mainichi* equip a more participatory conception of legitimacy. While these outlets also situate Japan within the same liberal moral community, universal values are understood to be upheld through consistency, inclusivity, and democratic consent, rather than through pure enforcement alone. This reflects an understanding of legitimacy as socially constituted through shared norms and collective recognition, both domestically and internationally (Wendt 1999, 206-208). Militarisation without meaningful public debate is therefore framed as undermining, rather than reinforcing normative legitimacy and identity. In role theoretical terms, these outlets promote a role conception of Japan as a normative mediator rather than a normative enforcer, emphasising dialogue, persuasion, and example-setting as the appropriate means of enacting Japan's values. This role conception prioritises moral credibility and relational trust over material displays of power, reinforcing a vision of Japan's identity rooted in restraint and democratic accountability.

Taken together, these four identified discourses suggest that Japan's identity, at least in relation to the Taiwan Strait conflict, is best understood as contested, layered, and situational. All of the editorials consistently engage in identity construction by defining Japan in relation to external Others, normative frameworks, and historically embedded self-understandings. This supports a constructivist conception of state identity as continuously reproduced through discourse and interaction, rather than as a stable attribute that predetermines behaviour. (Hall 1992, 296-299.)

The Taiwan Strait conflict acts as a critical juncture that intensifies these dynamics. Faced with the increasing likelihood of Japan getting trapped in between a great-power rivalry, Japanese editorials revisit foundational questions about who Japan is and what it stands for. The Taiwan Strait conflict forces Japan to mull over questions such as how far pacifism can stretch before it can no longer be considered pacifism, how autonomous an ally can really be, how to coexist with a rising China, and how to operationalise universal values without eroding democratic legitimacy. Rather than finding a clear unified answer to these questions, Japanese media discourse reflects their ongoing negotiation.

Whether Japan's identity is derived primarily from its restraint and historical experience, or from its willingness to defend norms alongside other liberal democracies, these findings highlight an

important identity tension. Japan's postwar identity contains multiple, sometimes conflicting, elements that coexist, producing a layered and sometimes contradictory identity structure. Pacifism, alliance commitment, democratic values, regional embeddedness, and responsibility for international order all function as identity anchors, yet they point toward different and sometimes contradictory expectations of behaviour. Universal values further complicate this identity landscape. Across all outlets, democracy, rule of law, and multilateralism function as key markers of Japan's self-image as a legitimate and responsible actor that is part of a unified international community. However, the findings show deep disagreement over how these values should be enacted. These competing interpretations highlight that values do not generate fixed roles, but instead provide a shared vocabulary through which differing role conceptions are justified.

Relational identity construction therefore plays an important role in this process. As the findings of this thesis show, the US and China emerge as the two most significant reference points through which Japan's identity is articulated. Alliance with the US is diversly framed as a source of legitimacy, responsibility, and shared values, or as a constraint on autonomy and independent judgment. Similarly, China is alternately constructed as an existential threat or as a relational neighbour, enabling divergent understandings of Japan's own role as either a frontline defender of order or a mediator managing regional tensions. These relational constructions reflect external realities and actively shape the boundaries of Japan's imagined agency by delineating what kinds of roles are seen as appropriate, legitimate, or dangerous.

In conclusion, to answer the research question "How does Japanese media construct national identity in its discourse about Japan's relations with the US and China in the context of the Taiwan Strait conflict?", this thesis argues that Japanese media constructs national identity as plural, relational, and contested. This identity is articulated through narratives of peace, responsibility, and regional embeddedness, and translated into roles through observable behaviour suggestions. The findings suggest that Japan is not undergoing a simple linear identity shift from pacifist to militarised, but rather a complex process of identity rearticulation. Competing role conceptions coexist and overlap, indicating that Japan's future international behaviour is likely to remain uncertain and context dependent. This study also shows that Japan's foreign policy debates are not merely strategic, but deeply rooted in competing understandings of national selfhood (Wendt 1999, 2). Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates how

Japan struggles to act in ways that remain consistent with its identity and role claims under conditions of systemic change.

6. Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how Japanese media discourse constructs Japan's national identity and role in the context of the Taiwan Strait conflict between 2014 and 2022. By combining identity theory and role theory within a critical discourse analytical framework, it has demonstrated that the Taiwan Strait functions as a discursive arena in which Japan's sense of self is continuously negotiated, contested, and reformulated. Rather than revealing a singular or coherent "Japanese identity", the editorials analysed in this study exposed several competing yet overlapping discourses. Across the ideological spectrum, Japan was simultaneously socially constructed as a peace-oriented civilian power, a frontline security actor, a loyal US ally, a potential autonomous stabiliser, a democratic value defender, and a cautious regional neighbour. These identity articulations were not static descriptions, but normative claims about what Japan is, and more importantly, what it should be.

6.1. Relevance to the Current Political Climate

Although this study's timeframe ends in 2022, its findings still resonate strongly in the current political climate. Since the escalation of tensions following Nancy Pelosi's 2022 visit to Taiwan and China's subsequent military exercises, the Taiwan Strait crisis has become even more central to Japan's strategic planning (Mochizuki 2022). Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy and the government announcing a multiyear plan aiming to roughly double the defence spending to 2% of GDP signalled another substantial shift toward enhanced deterrence capabilities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022, 20). This level of spending is more commonly associated with NATO countries rather than with Japan's traditionally cautious defence policy, and it laid the groundwork for acquisition of capabilities extending beyond the narrowest interpretation of self-defence, including counterstrike ("strike-back") capacities (Ibid., 18, 19-20, 22). Under successive administrations, including the current government led by Sanae Takaichi, these policies have accelerated even more, with the Cabinet having approved a record-high defence budget of 9.04 trillion yen for 2026. This marks the 12th consecutive year of sharp increases to the budget, which places Japan on track to potentially surpass the 2% of GDP defence spending target two years ahead of the original schedule. (Takahashi 2025.)

In this context, the discursive tensions identified in this thesis have not diminished, but instead they have deepened. The contradictions between Japan's pacifist self-understanding and expectations of military preparedness are no longer abstract discussions, but have become embedded in concrete policy debates over counterstrike capabilities, defence budgets, and alliance coordination. The media discourses analysed here anticipated many of these developments. Even before open escalation, Japanese editorials, particularly the right-leaning ones, were already negotiating the legitimacy of role expansion by framing a stronger security posture as a necessity. At the same time, the US-China rivalry has intensified even more, making strategic ambiguity increasingly fragile. When viewed in today's political context, the identified discursive tensions around alliance reliability, burden-sharing, and strategic autonomy appear as early signs of deeper structural uncertainty that has since increased.

The first Trump administration marked a turning point in how Japan publicly negotiated its alliance identity. Donald Trump's transactional rhetoric, emphasis on defence cost-sharing, scepticism toward multilateral institutions, and ambiguous statements regarding alliance commitments introduced a new layer of unpredictability into what had been for a long time perceived as a stable security framework. While the US-Japan alliance had always been asymmetrical, the assumption of automatic American strategic reliability was destabilised. What is intriguing in retrospect is that the editorials analysed in this thesis already registered this instability in real time. Across ideological lines, there was an emerging awareness that Japan could no longer rely exclusively on US guarantees. Even newspapers strongly supportive of the alliance framed burden-sharing as necessary steps towards credibility.

This scepticism towards US alliance reliability has proven true in the current Trump era. Recent actions and statements by the US suggest that defence commitments are contingent upon allies' financial contributions. This combined with the open criticism of multilateral institutions and abandoning of long-standing alliance arrangements signal a shift away from viewing alliances as enduring strategic partnerships, and towards treating them as negotiable transactions. Such rhetoric implicitly reframes collective defence as a service that may be withheld if compensations for it is deemed insufficient. For allies such as Japan, this conditional framing validates the concerns expressed in media discourse that the US protection cannot be assumed to be automatic or unconditional. When alliance commitments appear subject to domestic political bargaining in the US, deterrence credibility becomes less

stable. The current rhetoric therefore does not introduce a new anxiety, but rather confirms the structural doubts about alliance reliability that Japanese editorials had already begun articulating during the first Trump administration. In more simple terms, what has changed isn't the presence of doubt, but its normalisation. Strategic hedging has now become part of Japan's mainstream security conversation. The identity and role renegotiations identified in this thesis are therefore entering a more decisive phase.

6.2. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this thesis provides valuable insights into Japanese identity development and its role conceptions, several methodological and conceptual limitations need to be acknowledged. These limitations help to offer possible suggestions for expanding on the topic of this study.

Firstly, as mentioned in the section about the research method and material, the reliance on English-language editions might have filtered certain linguistic nuances present in the original Japanese texts. Although official translations should generally maintain the original ideological consistency, subtle rhetorical features may have been lost. Future research could incorporate Japanese-language analysis in order to deepen the interpretive precision.

Secondly, archival discrepancies across the outlets limited full temporal comparability. A more uniform dataset or expanded timeframe would allow for stronger longitudinal conclusions. Extending the dataset to include 2022–2025 would, for example, allow to examine whether discursive tensions have solidified into clearer identity shifts following the intensification of the crisis.

Thirdly, conceptually this study centres on media discourse rather than policymaking processes themselves. While discourse both reflects and shapes political possibilities, it does not map directly onto policy outcomes. Future research could therefore combine discourse analysis with elite interviews or policy papers in order to explicitly connect identity narratives to concrete strategic decisions. A systematic comparison between official policy documents and media editorials could also clarify whether newspapers follow elite cues or actively shape them.

Finally, while editorials provide institutional voices and reflect a more easily identifiable discourses than official policy papers do, they don't capture audience reception. Discourse

analysis reveals how identity is constructed, but not how it is internalised, resisted, or reshaped by readers themselves. Survey data, interviews, or social media analysis could complement this study to explore how discursive constructions circulate within society. Other media platforms, such as social media or television, may also construct identity differently. Given generational shifts in media consumption, incorporating these platforms with the editorial angle or focusing on another media platform altogether would provide a more comprehensive picture. Exploring how younger audiences interpret Taiwan-related discourse on social media platforms, for example, could reveal emerging identity narratives that differ from legacy press constructions.

6.3. Final words

This thesis demonstrates that geopolitical conflicts aren't only material struggles over territory or power. They are also struggles over meaning. In an era marked by intensifying great-power rivalry, democratic uncertainty, and increasingly conditional alliance politics, questions of identity have become central to international relations. Through identity claims strategic choices are legitimised, constrained, as well as made clearer. Japan's case illustrates how middle powers navigate structural pressure by reinterpreting who they are and adjusting their behaviour accordingly.

Ultimately, the Taiwan Strait conflict functions as a mirror, forcing Japan to answer fundamental questions about who it understands itself to be and how it should act based on that understanding. In confronting China's rise and evolving expectations from the US, Japan is simultaneously confronting itself. Each debate about deterrence, burden-sharing, and defence expansion reflects deeper tensions about the meaning of pacifism, alliance loyalty, and national responsibility. Whether Japan's evolving security posture represents adaptation, learning, or a deeper identity transformation remains an open question.

What is clear, however, is that identity renegotiation is ongoing, and that discourse remains one of the primary ways it happens. It unfolds in policy documents and defence budgets, but also in the language through which Japan narrates its place in the world. Strategic uncertainty will always persist, and so too will the effort to reconcile alliance, autonomy, and self-understanding into a coherent national story. In the end, Japan's response to the Taiwan Strait conflict is about defining the kind of state it chooses to become.

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