Japan has become a pivotal player in shaping the strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific region—enhancing the U.S.-Japan alliance in many security domains, actively facilitating security cooperation with regional states other than the United States, and frequently engaging in joint military exercises in the region. This is a surprising development, considering Japan’s constitutional constraint, Article 9, which prohibits the use of force in resolving international disputes and the fact that Japan remained minimalist in traditional security areas during the Cold War.


Conventional IR theories such as realism and social constructivism have attempted to explain this phenomenon (4-8). Realism attributes Japan’s policy shift mainly to structural pressures, namely China’s rise, while social constructivism argues that the transformation of Japan’s state identity “from ‘peace state’ to ‘international state’” (7) propelled Japan to contribute to international and regional security in the post-Cold War era. However, Singh argues that these explanations are not satisfactory because they provide only “background variables” (9) that show conditions under which Japan can change its security policy, not the actual process that is crucial to explicate a policy change.

To overcome such shortcomings, Singh introduces two main factors: the concept of “external military crisis” and the role of Japanese security policy-making elites. External military crises are “specific military incidents that disrupt the peace and stability of the regional and international security environment” (11). Either a single incident or a series of crises opens a window of opportunity for Japanese security policymaking elites to construct “threats” and inflate or deflate threats to control the political narrative for a security policy change. In so doing, those elites can overcome domestic and international constraints on Japan’s security policy, resulting in Japan’s security policy expansion. To illustrate this process, four cases are employed: (1) the 1990-91 Persian Gulf Crisis, (2) a series of crises surrounding the 1994 North Korean Nuclear Crisis, the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, and the 1998 Taepodong Crisis, (3) the 2001 September 11th attacks and subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and (4) China’s maritime assertiveness in the 2010s.

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Singh’s book is theoretically interesting and empirically rich. While this study is categorized as foreign policy analysis rather than an IR theory, incorporating both structural factors (external military crises) and agency (Japanese security policymaking elites) helps explain the nuanced dynamics of the Japanese security policy expansion process in the post-Cold War era. The four case studies carefully show how Japanese crisis narratives were formulated, nurtured, and tweaked over time. In particular, Singh vividly depicts the process of these narrative changes through accounts of Japanese policy-making elites, including government officials, think-tank researchers, and academics who were in the position of providing advice to the government.

While *Reconstructing Japan’s Security Policy* offers a plethora of interesting insights, there are three points that could further strengthen the book’s argument. First, the book is does not touch upon at least three alternative theories that can be applied to explain Japanese security policy expansion: neo-classical realism, historical institutionalism, and securitization. Neo-classical realism incorporates domestic factors into the balance of power theory to illustrate the dynamics of foreign policy formulation. Singh briefly discussed the theory but does not emphasize the relevance of its domestic variables. In fact, one of the domestic variables that neo-classical realism identifies is the leaders’ perception on change in the balance of power, which corresponds to Singh’s theoretical argument. Also, historical institutionalism’s core concepts of “external shock” and “path dependence” well illustrate the continuity and change in social phenomenon, including the evolution of foreign policy. A growing body of IR literature on international change, foreign policymaking, and regional architectures includes this theoretical framework, which is no longer arcane in the field. Further, securitization theory provides an analytical framework for illuminating a nuanced process of how policy-makers create security agendas, persuade their audience, and pursue policy implementation. The concept of “external military crisis” and the role of security policy-making experts are likely to be explained by these alternative theoretical frameworks.

Second, the method for identifying an “external military crises” is not necessarily evident. There are two points here. One is the matter of ontology—whether such crises are objectively observed or subjectively labelled by certain actors, such as by security policy-making experts. Singh does not offer either definition, and in fact his definition falls in between the two. On the one hand, the crisis is something that can create a “policy window” for experts to control its importance by inflating or deflating its threat level through narrative creation. Here, a crisis is an objective phenomenon, and it exists before the actors recognize the event as a crisis. On the other hand, the elites can generate “crises” from non-crisis events, which indicates that the crises are subjectively constructed, and thus artificially invented. It is true that the reality falls in between, but if so, it is also necessary to articulate the conditions under which the actors can and cannot artificially attach a crisis-feature to a non-crisis event. Otherwise, the “crises” are not determined by the actors or the situation but defined arbitrarily by an analyst. The other point is to determine whether the crisis needs to be a single crisis or a series of crises to change Japan’s security policy. Both cases are plausible in triggering Japan’s security policy change, but such occurrences can be quite contingent, making the assessment post-facto and weakens the cause-and-effect theoretical argument that Singh puts forward. Therefore, the range of “external military crises” could be discussed further.

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Third, the target audience to whom Japanese security policy-making experts signal during the process from threat construction to security policy implementation seems unfixed. Singh articulates that “threat” is a social construction and that the policy-making experts play a pivotal role in negating, inflating, or deflating the level of threat. More specifically, experts can do so by using political justification of domestic reasoning (i.e. Japan’s survival or national interests) and/or international reasoning (i.e. regional or global security that links Japan’s international responsibility or national interests). In the securitization theory, this is called a securitizing actor and the theory emphasizes the importance of the target audience who can politically support the securitizing actor in altering the existing policy. Certainly, Singh acknowledges the importance of international and domestic audiences, however, further articulation of when and how a particular audience matters would have strengthened the analysis. For example, when the reinterpretation of the Japanese Constitution to activate Japan’s right to collective self-defence faced large domestic opposition from the public, such opposition did not prevent Japan from its implementation. This case illustrates that various political conditions changed who the veto players are in altering Japanese security policies. Careful examination of target audience can clarify which domestic and international actors we need to closely monitor when Japan’s security policy changes.

_Reconstructing Japan’s Security Policy: The Role of Military Crises_ provides a detailed account of the development of Japan’s security policy in the post-Cold War era. This book covers all the important security events that Japan faced from 1990, showing how each event was framed and utilized to overcome political and legal constraints by the Japanese policy-makers. As Singh rightly points out, as long as Article 9 of the Japanese constitution exists, there remains a limitation to Japan’s use of force in the international realm. Even so, it is important to acknowledge these incremental changes that resulted in significant change in Japan’s security policy in the past 30 years. This is an impressive addition to the literature on Japan’s security policy and an excellent read for anyone who is interested in Japan’s foreign policy and international relations in the post-Cold War period.