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Narrative Hedging and Identity Displacement: On the Instrumental Transformation of Soft Power in Japan's Diplomacy

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Abstract. As Japan accelerates its pursuit of "normal statehood" and expands its defence functions, vigilance within the international community, especially the Western bloc, against its historical revisionism has continued to weaken. Existing studies have paid insufficient attention to how Japan reconstructs its role identity to address diplomatic dilemmas under the dual burdens of geopolitical pressure and historical issues. This paper proposes the theoretical mechanism of "identity hedging". It argues that when a state faces geopolitical pressure and its inherent historical identity becomes a diplomatic burden, ontological security anxiety emerges. The state then proactively constructs high-order, universal role identities and exports soft power of political values through such identities, so as to conceal or offset diplomatic obstacles brought by negative historical labels. This paper comparatively analyses the evolution of Japan's identity construction and foreign policies in two phases: "apology and passive hedging" from the 1990s to the early 2000s, and "values and active hedging" from 2012 to the present. By reconstructing its national identity from a "post-war beneficiary of peace" to a "defender of the rules-based order", Japan turns this instrumental identity displacement into value-based soft power. Such soft power effectively reduces the vigilance of the international community, particularly the Western bloc, toward its historical revisionism, and creates strategic room for its advancement of "normal statehood". This research reveals the instrumental deployment of soft power in diplomatic strategies and expands the dynamic analytical framework of constructivist identity theory.

Keywords: Japan's diplomacy, identity hedging, soft power, constructivism, normal statehood

1. Introduction

1.1. Research question

Since the end of the Cold War, Japan's diplomatic strategy has undergone a series of notable adjustments. From the peace diplomacy centred on "historical reflection" in the 1990s, to the strategic assertiveness under the banners of "proactive pacifism" and the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" after Shinzo Abe returned to power in 2012, Japan has gradually broken the constraints of

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the post-war system in its security policy. Actions such as lifting the ban on collective self-defence, continuously raising defence spending, and actively participating in overseas military operations have markedly increased its moves toward "normal statehood". Nevertheless, one phenomenon worthy of in-depth exploration is this: amid persistent historical revisionism, the rightward shift of textbooks, and ongoing disputes over comfort women and forced labour, major states within the Western bloc have not sustained criticism, but instead actively supported Japan's expanded role within alliances. Historical revisionism should erode a state's international legitimacy and restrict its room to expand military roles. Why, then, has Japan managed to avoid fierce criticism and vigilance from the Western bloc and other states while advancing its pursuit of normal statehood? While existing scholarship has explained the United States' strategic arrangements to bolster Japan from the perspectives of alliance studies and US Asia-Pacific strategy, it has not adequately accounted for how Japan exercises policy initiative to hedge against international condemnation.

The core research question of this paper is therefore: How does Japan transform its narrative through identity reconstruction, so as to reduce Western vigilance against its historical revisionism while pushing forward "normal statehood"? This paper selects two comparable phases for case comparison: the phase of "apology and passive hedging" from the 1990s to the early 2000s, and the phase of "values and active hedging" from Abe's return to office in 2012 to the present. It examines how Japan's distinct identity hedging strategies eased diplomatic pressure and paved the way for its strategic advancement. Drawing on constructivist theory and soft power theory, this paper develops the mechanism of "identity hedging" to explain the internal logic behind shifts in Japan's foreign policy.

1.2. Literature review

Existing studies on shifts in Japan's diplomatic strategy mostly discuss changes in Japan's national strength, redefinition of national identity, soft power development, or historical revisionism along separate dimensions. Few integrate multiple factors, and there lacks a systematic explanation for the following mechanism: under the dual burdens of geopolitical pressure and historical issues, how Japan actively constructs a "higher-order" and "more universal" role identity to hedge against negative labels and thereby weaken Western vigilance toward its historical revisionism.

Most existing analyses of adjustments to Japan's security and diplomatic strategies adopt perspectives of realist power structures, liberal institutional cooperation, or cultural soft power dissemination. In *Theoretical Studies of Japan's Security Policy in US Academic Circles* [1], Wu Huai-zhong notes that realist structural determinism, self-help defence logic and balance-of-power theory can effectively explain the rapid turn of Japan's security policy under Junichiro Koizumi and Shinzo Abe, namely the strengthening of the Japan–US alliance and the development of offensive military capabilities. Other scholars argue that adjustments to Japan's security policy stem mainly from shifts in international power structures such as the rise of China and threats from the DPRK, which in turn generate rational choices within domestic politics [2]. Yet this explanation has limited explanatory power. It fails to clarify why Japan adopted a defensive policy when facing Soviet threats in the 1970s, yet moved toward an autonomous offensive posture under comparable threats. Research from the liberal perspective argues that Japan promotes economic cooperation frameworks including the TPP and RCEP, deploys Official Development Assistance (ODA), and advocates the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific". Through these channels, it seeks to build economic and security networks grounded in liberal democratic values across the Indo-Pacific, compete for rule-setting power, and boost its domestic economy [3]. In addition, some scholars in cultural studies observe that Japanese popular cultural products such as animation and video games, widely consumed

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worldwide, form the primary source of its soft power and help improve its national image. Though existing research accounts for the drivers and manifestations of Japan's foreign policy from multiple angles, no study has systematically addressed how Japan combines discursive reconstruction with soft power accumulation during identity transition to form a complete mechanism that hedges against the diplomatic burdens brought by historical issues.

Within international relations scholarship, constructivist identity theory has been widely applied to analyse identity construction for state and non-state actors across different countries and regions. In his theory of "Normative Power Europe", Ian Manners examines how the EU promotes "norms" and "values" to construct itself as a normative power and gain international influence exceeding its material capabilities. In his monograph *Constructing a Security Community: ASEAN and Regional Order*, Amitav Acharya adopts constructivist theory to analyse in detail how ASEAN states form the "ASEAN Way" through norms including consultation, consensus and non-interference in domestic affairs, build collective identity and regional security order, and cope with pressures from major external powers. Further studies also explore Russia's identity confusion after the Cold War and its search for ontological security by repeatedly emphasising its "distinct civilisation".

Existing research convincingly demonstrates that state identity is not static but can be reconstructed through discourse and practice. These works, however, share a common gap: most offer relatively static analyses of identity formation or its effects, and seldom adopt dynamic "process tracing" to reveal how a state deliberately employs the "identity hedging" mechanism to mitigate diplomatic burdens stemming from negative historical labels. Accordingly, they fail to unpack how Japan consciously reshapes its identity through narrative reconstruction, and leverages the political-value soft power generated by this new identity to actively hedge against diplomatic burdens arising from historical issues.

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to fill this gap by addressing the following question: How does Japan reconstruct its identity from a "post-war beneficiary of peace" to a "defender of the rules-based order", so that its narrative shifts from "historical reflection" to "contribution to universal values"? In this way, it can advance "normal statehood" while minimising vigilance from the international community, especially Western states, toward its historical revisionism. This paper puts forward the "identity hedging" mechanism. Using process tracing, it compares Japan's identity construction and foreign policy in two periods: "apology and passive hedging" in the 1990s–2000s, and "values and active hedging" from Abe's return in 2012 to the present. It thereby develops a causal mechanism and tests the theoretical hypothesis.

2. Theoretical hypothesis

To fill the aforementioned research gap, this paper puts forward a core theoretical hypothesis: the key reason why Japan can partially reduce the international community's vigilance against its historical revisionism while advancing "normal statehood" and increasing defence spending lies in its effective deployment of an "identity hedging" mechanism. That is, by proactively constructing a "higher-order" and "more universal" role identity, Japan shifts the focus of its narrative from "historical reflection" to "contributions to universal values". It then leverages the soft power of political values generated by this new identity to offset or conceal the diplomatic burdens brought by negative historical identity labels.

This mechanism is theoretically grounded in the organic integration of constructivism and soft power theory. From the constructivist perspective, a state's "type identity" is defined by its internalised political values and norms. It is not a passive outcome shaped by structural factors, but can be strategically reshaped through official discourse and policy practices. When a state is under

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dual pressures: geopolitical pressures such as the rise of major powers and intensifying security threats, and persistent diplomatic pressures triggered by its existing historical identity, it will fall into "ontological security anxiety". This means deep uncertainty about the coherence of its own role identity and the stability of recognition granted by the international community. To ease such anxiety, the state tends to actively build a "higher-order", "more universal" role identity that enjoys wider recognition from the international community.

Joseph Nye's soft power theory provides a concrete pathway for such identity transformation to effectively reduce diplomatic frictions. He argues that a state's political values and foreign policies constitute the core sources of soft power. When Japan successfully re-narrates itself as a "defender of the rules-based international order" or a "standard-bearer of liberal democratic values", it exports a set of political ideas highly compatible with dominant Western perceptions to the Western-led international community. The value-based soft power derived from these ideas can in turn substantially reduce criticism from external actors over its historical revisionism. The underlying logic is that sustained criticism of Japan's historical revisionism would create internal tensions with the strategic need to jointly uphold the so-called "liberal democratic order". Consequently, attention to this issue is spontaneously downplayed within the Western bloc. In this way, Japan achieves systematic hedging against negative historical labels through high-order identity reconstruction and corresponding value export.

To test the hypothesis above, this paper adopts process tracing and comparative case study methods. Process tracing is an important approach to explore causal mechanisms within case studies [4]. This paper divides the evolution of Japan's diplomatic strategy from the 1990s to the present into two comparable phases. The first phase is "apology and passive hedging" (the 1990s to the early 2000s). The second phase is "values and active hedging" (from Abe's return to power in 2012 to the present). The two phases display systematic differences in geopolitical environment, official narratives, identity positioning, soft power deployment and hedging outcomes, forming a sharp contrast. The first phase is oriented toward "historical reflection" with the identity of a "post-war beneficiary"; the second phase centres on "value contributions" with the identity of an "order defender". Correspondingly, the overall hedging outcome of Japan's strategy shifts from "failure to shake off historical burdens" to "substantially reduced Western vigilance and progress toward normal statehood".

Through this comparison, the paper identifies a dynamic causal mechanism: rising geopolitical pressures and negative historical identity assets trigger a state's ontological security anxiety, pushing the state to construct a new role identity. With the accumulation of soft power rooted in political values, international vigilance regarding its historical issues is eventually lowered, creating space for adjustments to its diplomatic strategy. The proposed "identity hedging" mechanism remedies the limitations of existing studies that treat identity as static or focus solely on cultural soft power. It also demonstrates the potential for integrating constructivism and soft power theory in diplomatic analysis.

3. Case analysis

To verify the validity of the "identity hedging" mechanism, this paper conducts a comparative analysis of two critical phases in the evolution of Japan's diplomatic strategy. The first phase is "apology and passive hedging" from the 1990s to the early 2000s, and the second phase is "values and active hedging" from Shinzo Abe's return to power in 2012 to the present. Systematic differences between the two phases in geopolitical environment, official narratives, identity

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positioning, soft power deployment and hedging outcomes render them suitable cases for testing the causal mechanism.

3.1. Apology and passive hedging (1990s–2000s)

3.1.1. International order transition and domestic structural pressures

The Cold War ended in the early 1990s, ushering in a period of transformation for the international order, and Japan faced multiple structural pressures. First, the end of the Cold War made the "peace dividend" a mainstream expectation of the international community, while Japan's strategic value as the "Far East bulwark" of the Western bloc declined relatively. Second, after the Cold War, Asian neighbours, especially China and the Republic of Korea, partly shifted their diplomatic focus to historical issues, demanding that Japan face its history of aggression. Multiple controversies over textbook screening, the comfort women issue and prime ministerial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine in the 1990s repeatedly exposed Japan to the negative label of a "perpetrator" in international public opinion. More profound structural pressures stemmed from domestic conditions. The bursting of Japan's economic bubble in 1991 triggered prolonged economic stagnation, which continuously undermined public confidence in Japan and the political legitimacy of its ruling elites. The combination of uncertainty over its international status and domestic economic recession plunged Japan into "ontological security anxiety": deep uncertainty about its own role identity under the dual squeeze of internal and external challenges. In line with the theoretical hypothesis outlined above, such "ontological security anxiety" served as a major driver pushing Japan to pursue identity transformation. How to respond to domestic and international doubts over its identity while retaining the banner of the Peace Constitution became an important agenda for Japanese diplomacy at that time.

3.1.2. Official narratives and identity positioning

Faced with the above pressures, Japan's official narrative in the 1990s adopted "historical reflection" as its keynote. The most emblematic text was the Murayama Statement delivered by then Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama on 15 August 1995. The statement explicitly acknowledged that "Japan, with its mistaken national policy, followed the path of war, put its people in a crisis of survival, and brought enormous damage and suffering to many countries, particularly the peoples of Asia, through colonial rule and aggression". The statement framed Japan as a "peace-loving state", stressing that Japan should "reject self-righteous nationalism, promote international coordination as a responsible member of the international community, and advance the ideals of peace and democracy" [5].

The keywords of Japan's identity discourse in this period can be summarised as "peace-loving state" and "beneficiary of the post-war peace order". Its core anchor was Article 9 of the Peace Constitution, under which Japan renounces war, the threat of force or the use of force [6]. The logic of its identity construction was as follows: given that Japan was bound by constitutional constraints resulting from war, its international contributions must be premised on the baseline of "not becoming a perpetrator". Although this narrative secured a degree of understanding from Asian neighbours, it was essentially defensive and reactive. Whenever historical issues triggered diplomatic crises, Japan calmed tensions by issuing reflective statements or providing economic compensation, lacking the capacity to shape international perceptions proactively.

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3.1.3. Deficiencies in soft power and limitations of external strategy

The limitations of this reflective narrative were further reflected in the ways Japan sought international influence. During this phase, Japan mainly relied on Official Development Assistance (hereinafter referred to as ODA) to cultivate international goodwill through economic aid. For example, Japan's ODA to Southeast Asian countries was often packaged together with the discourse of "reflecting on history and supporting development", attempting to obtain understanding from Asian neighbours via economic cooperation.

Strictly speaking, however, ODA does not fall within the scope of soft power. Joseph Nye clearly distinguishes hard power, which relies on coercion and inducement, from soft power, which rests on persuasion and attraction. ODA belongs to the "inducement" resources within the former category, rather than attraction derived from political values or culture. The core challenge for Japan in this period was that it made no real attempt to build an inspiring set of political values. When Japan spoke of "peace contributions" on international occasions, its narrative focused heavily on concrete technical matters: the implementation of ODA projects, the progress of engineering work in peacekeeping operations, and so on. Practical as these efforts were, they failed to deliver a value framework capable of setting international agendas. In other words, Japan's soft power in this phase lacked support from high-order political ideas. While overseas projects delivered funding and technology, they could hardly reshape the structural perceptions of Japan held by the international community at the level of national identity.

3.1.4. Reactive response model and its hedging outcomes

The approach to handling historical issues was a logical extension of the above identity narrative and the form of soft power deployed. As early as 1982, when Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology screened textbooks, it revised terms such as "aggression into North China" by replacing "aggression" with "advance", sparking fierce protests from China, the Republic of Korea and other countries [7]. Such controversies recurred repeatedly in the 1990s. Right-wing forces established the *Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform* in 1997, explicitly proposing to remove content on Japanese military atrocities including the comfort women system [8]. In response to these issues, the Japanese government adopted a highly consistent pattern: reflection, apology, and economic compensation. This "passive hedging" model eased sentiments among Asian neighbours to some extent and prevented Japan from being permanently labelled a "perpetrator" in the way Germany was. Nevertheless, it failed to fundamentally erase Japan's entrenched identity imprint in the international community. Although the Western bloc paid little attention to Japan's historical issues during this period, it did not actively back Japan's calls for "normal statehood". In short, passive hedging only reduced diplomatic frictions instead of generating diplomatic momentum. This model of passive hedging gradually revealed its limitations after the 2010s. Dramatic shifts in the geopolitical environment and domestic development demands pushed Japan to search for more proactive strategies of identity reconstruction.

3.2. Identity reshaping and active hedging (Abe's return in 2012 to the present)

3.2.1. Strategic windows and escalating geopolitical pressures

When Shinzo Abe returned to office at the end of 2012, Japan faced a geopolitical environment vastly different from that of the 1990s. The primary structural shift was the rise of China: China's

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GDP surpassed Japan's in 2010, marking a historic reversal in the balance of power between the two countries [9]. Thereafter, China established an Air Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea [10] and advanced island and reef construction in the South China Sea [11]. Japan interpreted these developments as challenges to the existing regional order. Nuclear and missile threats from the DPRK continued to intensify, directly undermining Japan's security expectations. At this juncture, the United States rolled out the "Asia-Pacific Rebalance" strategy and its subsequent "Indo-Pacific Strategy", explicitly expecting Japan to assume greater responsibilities within the alliance framework [12]. This opened a rare strategic window for Japan to expand its defence role. Domestically, wartime survivors gradually passed away, and younger generations held markedly weaker understandings of World War II memories [13], laying a social foundation for the shift in official narratives.

3.2.2. Official narratives and identity reconstruction

The core discursive innovation of the Abe administration was "proactive pacifism". It argued that Japan should move beyond the earlier "passive" pacifism defined merely by "not being a perpetrator", and adopt an active posture of "making more positive contributions to world peace and stability" [14]. The *National Security Strategy* adopted in December 2013 elevated this idea to a national strategy [15].

The key to this narrative reconstruction lay in redefining "peace": peace was no longer equated with "not waging war", but with "contributing to peace". On this basis, Japan began shifting its identity from a "beneficiary of the post-war peace order" to a "defender of the rules-based international order". The Abe Statement, issued on the seventieth anniversary of the postwar period in 2015, centred on "learning wisdom for the future from the lessons of history" [16]. In contrast to the Murayama Statement, which prioritised reflection, Abe devoted much of the text to future-oriented topics and Japan's "international contributions" [17]. Notably, this phase also strategically amplified the narrative of Japan as an "atomic bomb victim", partly hedging against the "perpetrator" label.

Through this discursive shift, Japan redirected its narrative focus from "what we did wrong in the past" to "what we can do for the world now". The subtlety of this transformation is that it did not reject the need for reflection, but moved the core agenda away from accountability over historical issues and toward demonstrations of capacity to deliver value-based contributions.

3.2.3. Export of political-value soft power

Unlike the earlier phase, which relied on material resources such as ODA to advance foreign policy, Japan began systematically exporting political values in this second phase. Its first major carrier was the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity". The concept was initially proposed by then Foreign Minister Taro Aso in 2006. It advocated uniting democratic states along the periphery of the Eurasian continent to form an arc and promote the values of "freedom, democracy and prosperity" [18]. Abe refined this framework and placed it at the heart of Japan's diplomatic agenda during his second term [19]. The second carrier was the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (hereinafter referred to as FOIP). Abe formally introduced this concept in August 2016 at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI) held in Kenya [20]. FOIP's core proposition was to build a regional order rooted in "freedom", "openness" and "the rule of law" across the Indo-Pacific [21]. With this discourse, Japan tightly bound its national identity to dominant Western values including liberal democracy, market economy and the rule of law. This narrative not only

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underpinned a regional order framework, but also supplied normative legitimacy for Japan to expand its defence role and pursue "normal statehood".

In addition, the Quad was relaunched in 2017. Japan framed this four-nation democratic maritime security coalition around "shared values" [22]. The CPTPP set high-standard rules across a wide range of areas, and Japan emphasised shared fundamental values such as freedom, democracy and the rule of law among member states [23]. Japan actively embedded the discourse of a "community of values" within multilateral platforms including the Quad and the CPTPP. Once Japan was accepted by the Western bloc as a "core member sharing these values", its expansion of military roles was packaged as an act of "jointly defending the order", rather than a continuation of historical revisionism. This aligns with the classic logic of soft power theory: value export can "shape the preferences of others", reducing external actors' willingness to criticise its vulnerabilities amid strategic cooperation.

3.2.4. Proactive response model and hedging outcomes

On historical issues, Japan adopted a more proactive hedging strategy in this phase. Textbooks continued to shift rightward. By 2025, new junior high school textbooks nationwide replaced "the Nanjing Massacre" with "the Nanjing Incident"; some textbooks even revised the cause of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident to claim that "Japanese troops came under unexplained gunfire while conducting military exercises". Roughly 80 percent of Japan's current junior high textbooks are published by Tokyo Shoseki and Teikoku Shoin, with accounts of Japan's wartime responsibility as an aggressor substantially weakened [24]. In terms of official discourse strategy, narratives shifted from "reflection" to "future-orientation" and "shared challenges", diverting scrutiny away from historical questions. Meanwhile, at the domestic societal level, the passing of wartime survivors and generational turnover weakened emotional ties of younger generations to the history of World War II. The "future-oriented" narrative gained substantial domestic acceptance.

The proactive hedging strategy produced notable effects. Public criticism of Japan's historical revisionism from the Western bloc declined sharply. The United States and major European states instead actively supported Japan's expanded alliance role, including lifting the ban on collective self-defence, raising defence spending and participating in overseas military operations [25]. FOIP also became a powerful discursive tool in Indo-Pacific order competition, boosting Japan's regional influence. Nonetheless, the strategy had clear limits. Criticism of historical revisionism from Asian neighbours such as China and the ROK persisted, and disputes over comfort women, forced labour and territorial issues remained unresolved. Excessive deployment of the victim narrative risked moral doubts; instrumentalising the tragedy of the atomic bomb for contemporary political objectives did not always win international recognition. Domestic left-wing and peace groups in Japan continued to voice opposition, reflecting deep societal divisions. Moreover, Russia, the DPRK and other states maintained tough stances on security matters. This shows that the soft power of political values worked effectively mainly within the US-centred Western bloc.

3.3. Causal mechanism and alternative explanations

The time-series comparative case analysis confirms the dynamic causal mechanism proposed earlier: when geopolitical pressures intensify and the burdens of historical identity become salient, a state develops ontological security anxiety. To ease such pressures and carve out new strategic space, the state chooses to proactively construct a "higher-order" and "more universal" role identity. This enables the accumulation of soft power rooted in political values. Through continuous domestic

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communication and external dissemination, such soft power helps reduce vigilance among other states within the international system toward historical issues, creating room for the pursuit of "normal statehood" and a more proactive foreign policy. This causal chain forms the core logic of the "identity hedging" mechanism advanced in this paper.

To establish the independent causal validity of this mechanism, two alternative explanations are addressed below.

Realism argues that the fundamental driver behind shifts in Japan's diplomatic strategy lies in changes to the power structure [26], especially security pressures generated by China's rise. Nevertheless, shifts in power structure cannot account for Japan's specific choices of discursive strategy. If Japan merely aimed to counter security threats, it could directly push for constitutional revision and military expansion, without repeatedly building a value-centred discourse anchored in the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and "proactive pacifism". More importantly, realism fails to explain why Japan, while pursuing military normalisation, strives to frame itself as a "defender of the order" rather than a "regional power". This strategic choice of identity narrative demonstrates that identity reconstruction carries independent strategic value: it supplies normative legitimacy for material policy adjustments.

Institutional liberalism holds that Japan's engagement in regional cooperation through institutional frameworks such as the CPTPP and ODA reflects the logic of institutional cooperation. The limitation of this explanation lies in the instrumental nature of institutional cooperation. It cannot explain why Japan presses ahead with historical revisionism while promoting economic cooperation, given the inherent tension between the two. Under rational choice logic, if Japan sought only to maximise economic cooperation, a more sensible strategy would be to downplay historical issues to avoid frictions with China and the ROK. Contrary to this expectation, Japan advances economic cooperation alongside historical rightward shifts. The identity hedging mechanism proposed in this paper offers a more compelling account of this pattern: within institutional cooperation frameworks, Japan deliberately hedges the diplomatic costs stemming from historical issues. Institutional cooperation provides platforms for Japan to engage deeply with the Western bloc, and these platforms in turn dilute Western allies' attention to Japan's historical revisionism.

In summary, structural pressures and institutional cooperation function as important external conditions, yet neither can replace the explanatory power of the meso-level "identity hedging" mechanism. The mechanism developed here dynamically extends constructivist identity theory by showing that identity is not merely shaped by structural forces [27], but can be strategically deployed by states in foreign policy. It also represents a theoretical integration of soft power theory for diplomatic analysis.

4. Conclusion

By introducing the mechanism of "identity hedging", this paper develops a dynamic analytical framework integrating constructivist identity theory and soft power theory to interpret the evolution of Japan's diplomatic strategy. This study demonstrates that the transformation of Japan's diplomatic strategy is not merely shaped by shifts in power structures or driven by the logic of institutional cooperation. Instead, it stems from "ontological security anxiety" triggered by the dual pressures of rising geopolitical risks and the burden of historical identity. Driven by such anxiety, Japan has proactively reconstructed its identity from a "post-war beneficiary of peace" to a "defender of the rules-based order". Through this identity displacement, Japan has successfully shifted its narrative focus from "historical reflection" to "contributions to universal values". It has accumulated political-value soft power centred on liberal democracy, the rule of law and market economy. This soft power

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has substantially reduced vigilance within the Western bloc against its historical revisionism and created strategic room for its pursuit of "normal statehood".

Through process tracing and comparative analysis of the phase of "apology and passive hedging" from the 1990s to the 2000s and the phase of "values and active hedging" from Abe's return in 2012 to the present, the core hypothesis of this paper receives empirical support. In the "passive hedging" phase, Japan relied on material resources such as ODA and reflective narratives. While these measures eased sentiments among its Asian neighbours to some extent, its passive acceptance of identity and reactive policy responses failed to fundamentally transform the international community's structural perceptions of Japan, and the progress toward "normal statehood" remained slow. In contrast, during the "active hedging" phase, Japan reconstructed its identity through discursive tools including "proactive pacifism" and the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", and systematically exported political-value soft power. Driven by demands for strategic cooperation, Western states have downplayed their attention to historical revisionism. This provides normative legitimacy for Japan's policy adjustments such as lifting the ban on collective self-defence and increasing defence spending.

The theoretical contributions of this paper fall into three main areas. First, it extends constructivist identity theory from static structural analysis to a dynamic strategic instrument. It shows that state identity is not only shaped by structural factors, but can also be deployed deliberately by states within foreign policy to achieve specific policy goals. Second, it advances Joseph Nye's soft power theory beyond cultural products to the dimension of political values. It reveals the independent strategic function of political-value soft power: it can not only shape the preferences of other states, but also offset the diplomatic costs brought by negative historical labels through narrative reconstruction. Third, by combining constructivism and soft power theory, this paper addresses the weaknesses of realism and institutional liberalism in explaining shifts in Japan's diplomatic strategy, and illustrates the potential of cross-paradigm theoretical integration for understanding complex diplomatic phenomena.

Nevertheless, this research has limitations. First, regarding methodology, although process tracing and discourse analysis adopted in this paper help uncover the underlying logic of the causal mechanism, its external validity requires further case validation in future research. Second, with respect to case selection, this analysis centres on Japan's relations with the Western bloc and pays insufficient attention to responses from Asian neighbours such as China and the Republic of Korea. This analytical choice serves the core research objective of examining how Japan hedges against Western vigilance. It also means that a full evaluation of the "identity hedging" mechanism still needs supplementary investigation from the Asian perspective.

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