

# Japan's Perception of International Political Status Sequence and Its Diplomatic Choices

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A country's own perception and judgment of international political status sequence is the dominant factor that shapes its diplomatic choices. The international system is always changing and developing, but a country's perception of its own status in the sequence does not correspondingly change easily. If there is a large discrepancy between its own perception and the actual status sequence, the national interest will eventually be crippled, no matter how strong the national will is. This paper argues that the rise and fall of Japan in modern time reflects its perception of the international political status sequence and its diplomatic choices. It seems that Japan's national self-positioning has never been that of a "medium power" or an "ordinary country". Within different periods of international political orders, Japan has shown an astonishing burst of resilience and upward mobility in its pursuit of a "great power diplomacy" strategy with the volume and potential power of a "medium power", as well as of the international political status sequence as a dominant country. This ambition of breaking out of the current system has led itself to a series of national crises. In a period of turbulence and change in the post-war international political system, Japan's new diplomatic choices based on its perception of the international political status sequence deserve attention.

*Keywords:* Japan, international political status sequence, diplomatic choices

## Introduction

In international order, the superficial order is the written rules, and the underlying order is the power game. The outcome of the power game among great powers gives life to the codified rules on the surface, and the small and medium countries seek their own national interests in the surface order while complying with the outcome of the game. The diplomatic choices of states are therefore usually divided into "great power diplomacy" and "medium power diplomacy". The so-called "great power diplomacy" is characterized by unilateralism based on the country's history, traditions, and values, with military power as the last resort in diplomacy, as well as the political and security spheres of the great powers at the center, thus dominating the basic pattern of the international order. In contrast, "medium power diplomacy" is premised on the international system defined by the great powers, renouncing full-scale confrontation with them and maintaining its subjectivity in areas without great power-dominated diplomacy (Soeya, 2015). It should be noted that the term "medium power" in the sense of international politics and diplomacy does not only refer to the medium size and power of a country, but also to the areas in which it devotes

its diplomatic resources.

Since the 21st century, Japan's national strategy has been undergoing an accelerated transformation. In response to the new changes in international politics, especially in the field of international security, Japan has become more proactive in participating in the construction of the international political order, hoping to escape from its status as a defeated country in the post-war period through a diversified alliance based on the Japan-US alliance, and hoping to transform Japan's "hard power" and "soft power" accumulated over the years after the war into the reality of the enhancement of its position in international political status sequence. As a result, Japan broke with its post-World War II tradition of "economic and trade dominance and political subsidiarity", actively advocated the construction of a new regional order that highlights its dominant position and is based on so-called "liberal values", stepped up its involvement into the security affairs of neighboring and even non-regional regions, and conducted other actions that break the post-war peace constitution. These actions show the new trend of shifting from "medium power diplomacy" to "great power diplomacy".

However, focusing on the shift in Japan's foreign policy from a phenomenological perspective is not the purpose of this study. The formulation and implementation of state foreign policy is fundamentally about transforming the pursuit of national interests into concrete foreign policy actions (Li, 2005). Thus, a deeper judgment of national interests is the basis for deciding on foreign strategies. The definition of a country's national interests

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requires a comprehensive consideration of external environmental factors, especially the macroscopic influence of the international system, but ultimately the decisive factor is the cultural and historical traditions of the country and the resulting perception of its international status based on its own traditions. Therefore, while the international system is constantly changing and evolving, a country's perception of its own status may not necessarily change easily. As a result, if there is a large discrepancy between the self-perception and the actual position in status sequence, no matter how strong the national will is or how successful the phased external strategy is, it will ultimately undermine its own national interests.

Japanese scholar Hando Kazutoshi's "forty-year view of Japanese history" suggests that the history of Japan after the Meiji Restoration can be divided into four periods of forty years: Japan became a "first-class power" in the world through the Meiji Restoration from 1865 to 1905; Japan expanded abroad and eventually became a "third-class weak country" from 1905 to 1945; from 1945 to 1985, Japan became the second largest economic power in the Western world after the United States through its post-war recovery; after 1985, the bubble burst and a new recession began (Hando, 2011, as cited in Mi, 2010). If we analyze Japan with this historical circulate process of "one boom, one bust", we will see a new cycle of "bust to boom" since 1985, with the successful hosting of the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 and the confirmation of the bid for the Osaka World Expo in 2025. These events seem to be the end signal of the recession period.

This paper argues that each cycle of Japan's rise and fall in modern times has been the result of its perception of its position in international political status sequence and its diplomatic choices. It is therefore worth in-depth analyzing and studying whether Japan's perception of the changes in the international political order in each period was correct, whether its perception of its own position of power changed, and whether its diplomatic turns and specific choices were historically inertial and met its intentions to improve international political status sequence.

### **The Changing Perception of Japan's International Political Status Sequence**

Japan is geopolitically an archipelagic country on the edge of Asia and Europe, with the nearest distance to the mainland being about 100 miles. This special geographical situation has developed a distinctive national tradition and culture in its mature civilization. According to the 14th-century book of *Jinno Shotoki (Succession of Imperial Rulers in Japan)*, "Japan is the land of the gods. It was founded by the gods, and for thousands of generations, the sons of Amaterasu Omikami (Sun goddess) have been its rulers. Japan is the only country where this is the

case, and no other land is like this. Therefore it is called the Land of the Gods". From this perspective, most Western political scholars define Japan as a distinct civilization, as opposed to some Eastern scholars who see Japan as a result of the incorporation of Chinese religion and culture to construct a Confucian or "Chinese-sphere" civilization (Huntington, 2013; Kissinger, 2015; Zbigniew, 2007). Japan's special geographic environment and national character have shaped its unique strategic culture. The condition of Japan's isolation from the mainland is conducive to deciding whether to participate in international affairs and whether to allow foreign trade and culture into Japan. Even it has greater freedom to choose whether and to what extent to join an international order. Crucially, because it has been positioned at the periphery or margin in international order for a long time, its position in the international political status sequence has often been characterized by both ambiguity and an impulse to "think ambitiously of itself".

Before the modern era, Japan, unlike most the civilized societies in the Chinese sphere, did not consider itself obliged to pay tribute to China because it had "studied under China". Although it participated in the "tribute trade", it never really submitted to the "Hua-Yi Order" (tribute system) established by China. For the whole of the pre-modern period, Japan, at least, refused to formalize its position in what was known as "world politics" at that time, that is, the China-centered tribute order, insisting on its ritual equality with China, which was reflected in the consistent use of the title "Emperor" in Japan's diplomatic documents to China, and the occasional initiative to challenge China-centered "world order". It is clear that ancient Japan did not recognize its dominant international status, made its own decisions on whether to intervene in Asian affairs and always tried to subvert the Chinese-dominated "tribute order" when its military power allowed it to do so, as typically exemplified by Toyotomi Hideyoshi's military actions against Korea after the unification of Japan in the late 16th century. From the high level of politics in the use of strategy and the investment of diplomatic resources, it is clear that ancient Japan already had a "great power perception" toward international politics.

In modern times, international politics has entered the Western-dominated "treaty system", and world politics has expanded to a global scale. Japan, which was on the periphery of the "tribute system", took the initiative to accept and embrace the Western-dominated global order, joining an international order based on the concepts of sovereign states, free trade, international law, imperialism, and colonialism. Japan actively engaged with the West at a national level, learning about the post-Westphalia world system, modern industry, mercantilist economics, and "modern" military. It has been argued that the

call by Fukuzawa Yukichi, one of the intellectual enlighteners in modern Japan, for the “total Westernization” of Japan and its “departure from Asia into Europe” is an example of the recognition of Japan’s low international political status. His influential work *Civilization Theory Outline* considered Western civilization to be the highest civilization of its time and Japan to be lagging behind the West; it also noted that “the reason for advocating that Japan break away from the East Asian civilization dominated by Confucianism and Buddhism and strive to learn from Western civilization was to catch up with and eventually surpass the West” (Fukuzawa, 1959, as cited in Wang, 2010). It can be seen that even in the early days of its entry into the modern international system, Japan did not feel inferior because of its status as a backward “civilized nation” in the so-called Western international order. Japan’s insistence on maintaining its identity through its own cultural and social uniqueness has led it to become one of the world power in a few decades. Japan pursued the recognition of major Western powers as the “leader” of modern Asian countries, and it launched the “Kogo War” (The first Japanese-Chinese War in 1895), “Russo-Japanese War”, “Japanese War of Aggression against China” (1931–1945) and “Pacific War” successively. Regardless of war nature, Japan still focused on the means and fields of participation in international affairs with high political order after its “civilization”. It also reveals that the perception of international political status sequence is to be the operator of world politics. During World War II, Japan used the slogan of “New Asian Order”, and later proposed the establishment of the “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere”, in an attempt to establish its own anti-Westphalian system as its sphere of influence, which is “a group of Asian countries led by Japan without Western countries”. It ranks countries’ seats according to their powers “so that all nations find their proper place in the world”. In this new order, the sovereignty of all other Asian countries is subject to some form of Japanese tutelage (Kissinger, 2015). Japan obviously had “self-recognition of great power” at that time, and had a strong desire to pursue the recognition of “great power status” in the world.

After World War II, Japan was occupied by the U.S. dominated allied forces. The U.S. Allied Command was over Japan’s domestic political rule and dominated the Japanese constitution and political system reform. Japan’s power of military strength and economic volume were wiped out, resulting in a “third-class country” in international politics because it was a defeated country in the war. During the same period, the international political environment also underwent major changes. The collective security mechanism represented by the United Nations replaced the modern time balance of power politics, and the bipolar pattern of the Cold War replaced

the confrontation of multi-national alliances before the war. Under this background, previous studies suggested that postwar Japan was almost out of the shape and construction of the pattern of the international political system because of the limitation of the pacifist constitution. Its international political participation is embodied in the feature of “medium country diplomacy”. That is, in terms of diplomacy, the U.S. is the only one to follow, and its limited budget and human resources are concentrated on international organizations such as the United Nations, and its foreign relations are mainly in the economic and cultural fields, with less participation or non-initiative participation in international interactions in the fields of international politics and military affairs. However, it cannot be denied that Japan’s post-war perception of the international political status sequence was imposed by external forces, which reflected Japan’s prudent assessment of the strategic situation and its own living conditions. Whether this assessment conforms to Japan’s national value identification based on its history, or whether Japan will adhere to the perception of post-war international political status sequence with the revival of post-war economics, the rise of its own power status, and its right in international discourse, is obviously questionable. In fact, even Japan’s diplomacy in early post-war, also reflects its clear perception of international political position sequence, as Japan actively selected the strategy of “separate peacemaking” with the Western camps, and announced its support for Western countries that believe in the principle of democracy and the international community. By relying on the United States obligation of protection in the “Japan-U.S. Security Treaty”, it can deter potential enemies for its own national safety. By offering special economic support for the “Korean War”, it recovered its national strength. These measures helped Japan achieve post-war recovery and modernization faster and better than it could have done on its own. During the Cold War period, Japan resisted the American and Western demands for “rearmament” on the grounds of post-war pacifism and insisted on keeping itself out of the ideological struggle of the bipolar pattern. This ingenious strategic autonomy also reflected its unique perception of the international political status sequence.

In the 1960s, the Ikeda Cabinet’s implementation of the “National Income Doubling Plan” laid a preliminary economic foundation for Japan’s pursuit of great power status. In 1964, the Sato Cabinet announced that it would “actively speak out on world politics”, reflecting the emergence of Japan’s perception of international political status sequence. In the 1970s, after the United States’ “top diplomacy” toward Japan, the Tanaka Cabinet proposed to adopt “multilateral independent diplomacy” in the context of the international multi-polarization landscape. In the 1980s, Japan formally put forward the diplomatic strategic

goal of becoming an “international nation”, especially the “post-war political accounting” proposed by the Nakasone administration, which set up the goal for Japan to become a political power. This goal marks that the Japanese strategists and ministers have ideologically changed from economic priority to economic and political parallelism. In 1984, at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone stated that the 21st century is Japan’s century, which was a well-known saying for part of the people. He said “I believe that in order to make such expectations come true, three conditions will be required... In face of the current difficulties, our country (Japan), which has become one of the most important poles in the world along with Europe and the United States, must seek a positive role commensurate with our current international status” (Wang & Ke, 2005). Obviously, the perception of Japan’s international political status sequence has been floating up to become one of the three poles—the United States, Europe, and Japan.

After 1985, Japan’s economy slowed down and faced challenges such as economic stagflation, financial crisis, aging population, earthquake and tsunami, nuclear leakage, etc. However, Japan responded to every difficulty with strong social cohesion and national dedication. In response to the new changes in the international political system pattern after the Cold War, Japan gradually revealed its international political ambition, made clear its “normal nationalization”, carried out active regional policy and alliance policy, and began to re-establish its broader role in the international order. In recent years, Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense have emphasized annually that “as Japan’s security environment becomes increasingly severe, Japan must make more proactive efforts in accordance with the principle of international cooperation.” These efforts include strengthening military forces to deal with “threats”, amending or reinterpreting the pacifist constitution, adopting more independent diplomacy, seeking UN permanent membership, etc. The perceptual orientation of its own international political status sequence obviously shows an impulse to break out of the post-war bondage, and its perceptual orientation of “great power” is gradually revealing.

### **Japan’s Habitual Diplomatic Choice**

Based on Japan’s perception of its position in international political status sequence above, it is not difficult to find that Japan’s own national positioning has never been a “medium country” or an “ordinary country”. In different periods of the international order, Japan embodies the particularity and independence of its national essence and cultural tradition, erupting in amazing adaptability and upward impulse. Japan’s

ability to cope with the changes in the international political system is extraordinary. No matter whether it is the “tributary system” centered in China, the “treaty system” centered in Europe, the bipolar pattern of the Cold War, or the current new international political and economic order, Japan can quickly integrate itself into them and play its unique role. According to the different stages of the evolution of the international political system pattern, Japan’s habitual diplomatic choices are roughly as follows:

Firstly, in response to the changes in international politics, Japan’s diplomacy tends to have direct and in-depth contact with the dominant countries of the system and take the initiative to reform its own system to adapt to changes. In the China-centered “tribute system”, Japan sent Sui and Tang envoys to learn Chinese bureaucracy and Confucianism, and Buddhism, in order to reform its own political structure. Even the city landscaping plan of Kyoto in Japan completely imitated China’s cities of Xi’an and Luoyang. In response to modern time challenges from the Western countries, after keenly analyzing the equipollence balance of material and psychological power, Japan studied the political and economic systems of major Western countries such as Britain, France, and Germany, and took the initiative to establish itself as a “civilized nation” through the reform of the Meiji Restoration. After the “Black Ship Turmoil” in 1853, Japan signed “The Treaty of Peace and Amity” with the United States in 1854, “The Agreement” between Japan and Britain in 1854, and “The Treaty of Reconciliation” between Japan and Russia in 1855. Until 1857, Japan had signed “The Treaty of Peace and Trade” (its umbrella name is “Ansei Five-Power Treaties”) with the major powers of the world (i.e., the United States, Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Russia) successively (Mi, 2010). Subsequently, Japan sought to revise the unequal treaties signed with the West in the late years of the shogunate government through its own reform; Japan laid a foundation for winning the Chinese-Japanese War by seeking to sign “The Treaty of Trade and Navigation” with the world greatest power, Britain, at that time; Japan also paved the way for winning the Russo-Japanese war through forgery an alliance with Britain. After its defeat in the Pacific War, Japan opened its arms to “embrace defeat”, and formed a path of peaceful development based on the “Nine Articles of the Constitution”, relying heavily on the United States in the field of diplomacy and security, and rapidly establishing a pattern of foreign relations based on the Japan-US alliance (Zhang, 2016).

Secondly, in the international political system, Japan’s diplomacy tends to maintain its independent nature and personality, refusing to be completely dependent on the dominant countries to avoid being tied up by strategy. Under the “tributary system”, paying tribute to China was a symbol of

obedience to the world order established by China, but Japan sought only the benefits from the tributary trade, not the desire to be a member of a Chinese-led hierarchy. Unlike the core members of the “Chinese circle” such as Korea and Vietnam, Japan rejects China’s dominance in terms of Japan’s national title, imperial power, and year title. In the modern “treaty system”, Japan rose rapidly to become one of the five great powers by learning the Western system and forging alliance, and then abandoned the Japan-Britain alliance and withdrew from the League of Nations in an attempt to gain exclusive hegemony in Asia. In 1936, before Japan launched its all-out aggression against China, Japan’s Five-minister conference decided on “the National Policy Benchmark”. Its “Basic Outline” pointed out that “excluding foreign powers’ hegemonic policies in East Asia, adopting the principle of genuine co-existence and co-prosperity, and celebrating each other’s happiness, which embodies the spirit of the Emperor, should always be the guiding spirit of our foreign development policy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1973, as cited in Mi, 2010). After the war, Japan, while accepting the pacifist constitution and the allied occupation, rejected the bondage of war, and stuck to its position on issues such as the “Korea Clause”, “Taiwan Clause”, “nuclear non-entry” and “rearmament” to avoid becoming the front line in the Cold War confrontation. In October 1956, despite American obstruction, Japan issued a “Joint Declaration” with the Soviet Union, so the two countries restored diplomatic relations; and at the end of the same year, Japan joined the United Nations with Soviet support (Mi, 2010). This autonomic strategic act not only eased the hostility between Japan and the Soviet Union caused by the confrontation between the different camps, but also created profitable conditions for promoting equal relations between Japan and the United States. After the detente between China and the United States in the 1970s, the formation of the “Great Triangle” relationship was built among China, the United States, and the Soviet Union; Japan again took the initiative to exert its strategic independence to be the first to establish diplomatic relations with China. In fact, it was the first to walk out of the Cold War.

Thirdly, Japan’s diplomacy tends to pursue opportunism and seek the dominant position in the system with a gambling mentality, with its awareness of the changes in the international political system pattern. In 1590, after Toyotomi Hideyoshi unified Japan, the tacit understanding between China and Japan on the status of “tributary” was broken up. Japan sent 160,000 troops and 700 warships to launch an invasion of Korea and declared that it would merge Korea, conquer China, and attempt to overthrow the China-dominated Asian order. In the 1920s and 1930s, Japan abandoned the idea of “external coordination” after World War I, pursued the thought of militarist expansion, and

attempted to break the West-dominated world system with the goal of establishing a “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere”. In the 1970s and 1980s, after experiencing the post-war economic prosperity, Japan once clamored to “buy out the United States” with the thoughts of economic nation-building and foreign aid diplomacy, in an attempt to impact the world economic pattern dominated by the United States. From the perspective of strategic culture, when facing strategic opportunities, Japanese national policy often maintains and tends to give priority to the policy with the features of “taking a leap without hesitate”, “a single bet on one”, and “betting on national luck”. This strategic culture can be clearly revealed in Hideki Tojo’s statements about the reasons for war on the United States to the Japanese Emperor at the Imperial Council before the outbreak of the Pacific War. He said that “there is a famous Buddhist temple in Kyoto, called Kiyomizu Temple, which has a platform that juts out of a cliff. Sometimes one has to muster the courage to do something, like jumping off the platform of Kiyomizu Temple with eyes closed” (Hattori, 1965, as cited in Sun, 2012).

Overall, Japan always believes that its national mission will never dilute due to adopting other societies’ technology and system, and will only be enhanced due to the successful adaption to the outside world. Thus, its perception of position in the international political status sequence has always been as “the great power”. However, a country must make a diplomatic choice corresponding to its perception of the international political status sequence. From this point of view, Japan is always impulsive to pursue “great power diplomacy” no matter when and what international political system it is in. Although Japan was forced to adapt to the system changes at certain periods, showing the characteristics of “medium country diplomacy”, it is more reasonable to interpret it as a strategic act to meet its foreign strategic needs.

### **Assessment and Potential Situation Analysis**

The principle of political science reveals that a country must set realistic goals if it is to carry out its foreign policy effectively. The so-called realistic goal is that it must conform to the realistic capabilities of the country. If a country sets goals beyond its capacity, it will harm rather than benefit itself. As a result, a country must assess its own capabilities and those of other countries in the formulation of its strategies, and follow the ideal way to use its political, economic, military, and cultural resources in order to stand a vantage point in its interactions with other countries (Li, 2005).

Through the evaluation of Japan’s perception of its position in international political status sequence and its diplomatic choice

over a long period, it can be found that Japan has been conducting the strategy of “great power diplomacy” with the size and potential of a “medium country”, and pursuing a dominant international political status in the system. Although Japan’s country and society have always been calm, resilient as well as resolute, and its foreign policy and national strategy can always be flexible and calm in response to changes and take the lead, it cannot surpass the influence of the material and systematic factors of international political interaction so as to achieve the strategic purpose of shaping and dominating the international political system.

Given Japan’s national potential energy, size, and strategic capability, if it positions itself with proper self-perception, adheres to the orientation of “medium country diplomacy” and actively participates in the construction and maintenance of the international order, it will be able to become one of the important countries in any international political system. This can also explain why Japan can make a rapid change, and successfully complete the identity switch in different historical stages of the international political system, and it can form a unique influence in the process of adapting to different world systems. If Japan cannot fundamentally change its self-perceptual tendency of international political status and strategic impulse as a “great power” or even a “leading country”, it will inevitably try to seek opportunities and impact the existing system in the form of gambling national fortunes. This can also explain why Japan has been trapped in the cyclical law of history since modern times. The “rise and fall” in Hando’s “40-year history view” is embodied in Japan’s strategic impulse as a “great power” and the strategic tolerance as a “medium country”.

At present, the turbulence of the international political system represented by the Russia-Ukraine conflict has seriously impacted the international coordination and collective security mechanism established after World War II. Almost all major powers are evaluating and constructing their own status in the potential future international order, and Japan is certainly no exception. Historical experience shows that Japan is better at grasping the opportunity of the change in the international system, better at establishing relations with the possible leading countries of the new system, and better equipped with the strategic impulse and determination to take advantage of the system change to improve its own international status. When Abe Shinzo became prime minister, he proposed a series of great power diplomacy measures, such as “overlook the globe diplomacy,” “active pacifism,” and “general final account of post-war diplomacy”. In recent years, Japan has successively adjusted the “three principles of arms export”, announced the lifting of the ban on collective self-defense, implemented a new security law, and discussed the construction of “attack capability

on enemy bases”. It is clear that Japan is making strategic arrangements in advance for the possible transformation of the international political order (Zhang, 2018).

However, as a long period reveals the conclusion of national rise and fall of rotation, if Japan can correct the perception of its position in international political position sequence, fully assess the equilibrium balance of power of global power, fully consider the region’s security concerns, find a suitable international role of its own, then it could make full use of the changes in the international system order to end the cycle of recession since 1985, ushering in a new round of national potential growth. But if Japan continues to adhere to the “great powers” perception, chasing the status of “dominated country in the international system”, it is likely to be in problem again in this round of change of international system and international order, implementing a national foreign strategy with a “leap without hesitate” to bet all it has, and once again influence the stability of world politics.

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