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Japan's Proactive Pacifism: Investing in Multilateralization and Omnidirectional Hedging

Stephen R. Nagy

Abstract: Since 2012, Japan's foreign policy under Prime Minister (PM) Abe has been characterized as assertive, welcome or provocative. By employing the fear of abandonment/entrapment theory as the analytical framework, this article finds that Japan's regional foreign policy under Abe is characterized by consolidation and investment in broad-based multilateralism, proactive engagement with partners in the region, including China, and strategic hedging. Findings suggest that the current foreign policy under the rubric of 'proactive pacifism' will continue to expand as Japan endeavours to consolidate and invest in multilateralism and rule-based norms through regional trade agreements, and by playing a proactive role in international organizations and regional security operations that abide by Japan's constitutional limitations.

Introduction

Prime Minister (PM) Abe's first trip abroad after assuming office in December 2012, was in January 2013 to South East Asia during which he promulgated the 'The Bounty of the Open Seas: Five New Principles for Japanese Diplomacy'. These principles focused on the promotion of: the so-called international norms of human rights; democracy and freedom of the press; rule-based freedom of navigation; free and open economics; and fruitful cultural exchanges among youth.¹ It is noteworthy that each of these five principles conveyed the sense that an exclusive group of like-minded countries was being formed and juxtaposed against China, the one country in the region that is perceived to not share the same interpretation of these principles.

This trip was followed by a flurry of diplomatic activity wherein Abe visited all Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries,² attended India's national day,³ hosted PM Modi in Kyoto,⁴ while simultaneously strengthening security cooperation with Vietnam, the Philippines, Australia, India and the US.⁵

Most consequentially, the passing of the divisive Collective Security Bill in September 2015 was representative of PM Abe's diplomatic shift, in the region and globally.⁶ Diplomacy and security cooperation have been buttressed by the promotion of shared norms and trade, with the then-viable Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) being the most contemporaneous example of this.⁷ We have since seen: expanded security cooperation with South East Asian states such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore;⁸ a December 2015 agreement with South Korea to arrive at a final settlement on the Comfort Women issue;⁹

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a visit to Hiroshima by the then US President Obama; and reciprocal visits by PM Abe to Washington in April 2015 and Pearl Harbour in December 2016.¹⁰

PM Abe's proactive diplomacy and his focus on strengthening relations with both South East Asia and the US, to counter China's growing influence in the region, contrast with his first tenure as PM in 2006 when his first overseas visit was to Beijing, to repair the damage done to Sino-Japanese relations by PM Koizumi's repeated visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine.¹¹ The changed tenor of Sino-Japanese relations during Abe's second tenure as PM reflects: the growing anti-China sentiment in Japan in the aftermath of the nationalization of the Senkaku/Diaoyu tai Islands;¹² the perceived Chinese hubris in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC),¹³ and the growing concerns within Japan's security community relating to China's military build-up as evidenced by the successive National Defence Programme Guidelines (NDPG) from 2010 to the present wherein China is increasingly portrayed as being a serious security concern for Japan and the region.¹⁴

We would be remiss in not also mentioning that the perceived threat of Chinese militarization and its perceived assertive behaviour have also been skilfully deployed by politicians in Japan to consolidate their domestic political dominance—which, as Smith asserts, has been a well-used tactic in post-WWII Japanese politics.^{15,16} PM Koizumi used this ploy to push through neo-liberal market reforms such as the privatization of the postal service.¹⁷

Is this hyper-diplomatic activity ideologically driven by PM Abe's nationalistic inclinations? Are his diplomatic initiatives since 2012 China-centric? Do these domestic insecurities relate to the strength of the US–Japan alliance and the American commitment to Japan? Are they driven by domestic political instability? Do the changes in security and diplomatic leanings represent an incremental shift in Japanese security policy or something more radical?

This article aims to investigate these questions. It argues that, rather than the singular fear of entrapment or that of the weakening of the US–Japan security alliance, it is the prolonged and intensifying security competition with China and domestic political stability that have prompted PM Abe to implement a more proactive diplomatic security agenda to counter Japan's deteriorating security environment. Japan has been able to pursue a more proactive security agenda as it complements, and in many ways is in synergy with, the US security agenda in the region.¹⁸ In this way, this article buttresses the arguments of scholars such as Mearsheimer who argue that we should expect a deepening of the cooperation between the US and the neighbours of China, as China's development challenges American primacy through the reshaping of the power structure in the region.¹⁹

We should understand that it is the complementary and synergistic nature of Japan's more proactive diplomatic security agenda that gives it the political space to develop, whereas an agenda counter to American global interests would be strongly resisted by the US. In short, if Japan's regional security activities continue to complement the US' global security strategy, Japan will find a supportive advocate in Washington.

By applying the fear of abandonment/entrapment theory, this article finds that Abe's foreign policy in the region is characterized by: consolidation and investment in multilateralism; a proactive engagement with partners in the region including China; and strategic hedging. The acceleration of this realist approach to structural change in the region has been driven by sustained domestic political stability and a sense of urgency regarding the necessity of countering China's rise.

There is evidence to suggest that current foreign policy under the rubric of 'proactive pacifism' activity will continue to expand, as Japan attempts to consolidate and invest in multilateralism and rule-based norms through regional trade agreements and by playing a proactive role in international organizations and regional security operations that are in conformity with Japan's constitutional limitations.

At the same time, this article differs from Heginbotham and Samuels' analysis, according to which Japan will continue to dual-hedge its security strategy.²⁰ This article argues that Japan's foreign policy hedging strategy will be pursued through a strengthening of the US–Japan alliance, while at the same time continuing to strengthen its economic, political and security ties with South East Asia, India, Australia and other willing countries, both regionally and globally, through strategic partnerships that eschew a full-fledged military alliance.²¹ Viewed through the lens of omnidirectional hedging, an analysis of Japan's foreign policy demonstrates that the fear of entrapment and/or abandonment should not be solely linked with its bilateral security relationship with the US, but also with its regional and other security partners.

The article is structured into five sections. The first serves as the introduction. The second will introduce some of the main theoretical constructs employed in this article. The third will introduce the methodology followed by this article. The fourth will then focus on analysing PM Abe's diplomatic initiatives from December 2012 to December 2016, from the points of view of fear of abandonment, domestic political stability and the increasing security dilemma emanating from China's growth and perceived assertiveness. The fifth will conclude by addressing the factors that might attenuate or accelerate the current trend.

Literature review

Two states in a security alliance that faces deteriorating security conditions, respond in accordance with their perception about the state of their security relationship. Fear of abandonment is one driver for radical or incremental changes in security postures. According to Mandelbaum (1981, pp. 151–152) and Snyder (1984, p. 467), abandonment signifies the fear or insecurity that an ally will not live up to its commitments, or worse, withdraw from an alliance.²² Cha further elaborates on our understanding of the fear of abandonment in terms of a barometer that illustrates a patron's commitment.²³

Still others see abandonment and entrapment as the opposite ends of a security continuum in which alliance partners could be worried about the ally entrapping them in a conflict or worrying about abandonment of the existing security partnership at a time of need.²⁴ Miyamoto and Watanabe highlight this concern in their analysis of the 2010 fishermen incident in which the US only provided moral support for Japan's position. Miyamoto and Watanabe conclude that the US' position strengthened the abandonment concerns of the Japanese while at the same time underscoring US concerns about being entrapped by the Japanese in any potential conflict with China.

While analysing the Japan–US security relationship, Shinoda stresses that fear of abandonment is especially strong when the junior partner (Japan) is in an overly asymmetric relationship with the more powerful partner, that does not necessarily require the junior partner for its survival.²⁵ This interpretation has become increasingly

salient following the deepening economic relationship between the US and China, the lack of a Cold War unifying threat and Japan's relatively declining economic and political clout within the region. The failure of President Obama to ratify the TPP in December 2016 and President Trump's election and isolationist rhetoric have further magnified concerns in Japan about the reliability of the US–Japan security alliance.²⁶

In *Intimate Rivals: Japanese Domestic Politics and a Rising China*, Sheila Smith argues that rather than fear of abandonment or entrapment, domestic politics drivers in Japan (as well as in China) have complicated and produced an increasingly securitized bilateral relationship.²⁷ Her book echoes scholars such as Gustafsson who suggest that the bilateral relationship has been constructed (on both sides) for domestic political purposes, linked to ontological security imperatives. Thus, security calculations in Japan cannot be solely understood through the lenses of fear of abandonment or entrapment.²⁸

But in each of these cases the dialectic of fear of abandonment and entrapment does not fully explain Japan's foreign policy activity since 2012 under Abe, nor does it reflect Japanese foreign policy changes since the 1980s. Given this inability of this dialectic to fully explain Japan's foreign policy shifts, this article will link endogenous and exogenous factors to analyse Japan's foreign policy behaviour and its trajectory under PM Abe, since 2012.

Framework of analysis and methodology

This article employs a three-tiered analytical structure to investigate the drivers of change in Japan's foreign policy during Abe's second tenure as PM. The first tier of analysis looks at the changes in Japan's security policy through the prism of the fear of abandonment/entrapment. The second tier views the changes in security policy through the framework of defensive realism, as per which Japan's security changes have been effected as a response to a security competition with China. The third tier examines the link between domestic politics and security changes. This three-tiered analytical structure is necessary to understand the connection between the domestic, regional and global influences and the security changes in the Japanese context.

Resources for this analysis are derived primarily from existing scholarly works, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MOFA's) publications in both Japanese and English and other government documents available online.

Discussion

Fear of abandonment/entrapment

Fear of abandonment, as economic, political and security relations between the US and China deepen or become more complex, is often touted as an explanation for Japan's shifting security posture. The first 'Japan passing' under the Clinton administration,²⁹ and the 'strategic ambiguity' that the US engaged in regarding its commitment to the defence of the Senkaku Islands³⁰ until President Obama's visit in April 2014,³¹ led Japan into a period of strategic insecurity regarding the US' commitment to Japan, as China became a more important economic partner.

But just the fear of abandonment cannot fully explain Japan's security shift under PM Abe since 2012. Firstly, prior to his return to power in December 2012 the US

and Japan had been strengthening their commitment to each other, in terms of practice, policy and vision.

In terms of practice, 3/11 (the March 11, 2011 earthquake/tsunami and Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant disaster) provided Japan with ample proof of US commitment to Japan, by way of *Operation Tomodachi*.³² Direct and indirect assistance from the US to Japan following the tsunami and the Fukushima Daiichi incident in the form of logistics, transport, supplies and expertise demonstrated not only the US' capacity to help but also the deep inter-operability of the Japanese Self Defence Force (JSDF) and the American military forces stationed in Japan.³³

Other examples of the deepening US commitment to Japan include the strengthening of the Japan–US Defence Guidelines³⁴ and the support for easing restrictions on the JSDF that would facilitate a more functional security partnership in multi-lateral frameworks, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), and at the bilateral level with countries such as Australia and India.^{35,36} These examples are contemporary illustrations of the pre-existing track record of the strong security commitment of the US to Japan, as evidenced by the 'Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee' of April 27, 2012 (prior to Abe's second stint as PM) which was promulgated during the Noda administration.³⁷

Scholars such as Satake point out that new guidelines for Japan–US security cooperation and the US' interest in promoting greater cooperation with Japan are contributing to East Asia's security architecture. He stresses expanded bilateral cooperation not only in the South China Sea (SCS), in terms of surveillance, but also in capacity building with like-minded states in the region, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, to meet regional and global security challenges.³⁸

As regards the fear of entrapment, the US' desire and encouragement to include Japan in surveillance and other security operations in the SCS, and beyond, could be interpreted as a slippery slope that could draw Japan into a US-related conflict. Notwithstanding this possibility, Japan has minimized this risk at the legal level by imposing rigorous limitations, as to when and how Japan can cooperate with the US for collective security.³⁹ At a normative level, Japan has partially inoculated itself against a reactionary military involvement by means of public opinion that is widely sceptical of security cooperation.⁴⁰

At the same time, successive politicians, including Noda (Democratic Party of Japan [DPJ]) and Abe (Liberal Democratic Party [LDP]), have proactively sought to strengthen and expand security cooperation with the US as mainstream political parties and members of Japan's political centre recognize the need for a reconfiguring and normalization of Japan's security architecture.⁴¹ In short, Japan has worked proactively under several administrations and political ideologies to expand the activities of its JSDF while at the same time limiting the scope of their involvement. This delicate balance is partly driven by the fear of entrapment, but Japanese security concerns in the region also require a realistic calculation of how to enhance Japanese security, while remaining true to its post-World War II pacifist tradition.

In terms of policy, Japan and the US have grounded their security policy in bilateral and multilateral economic arrangements, as illustrated by the now invalid but salvageable TPP, the Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) and a commitment to the multilateralization of maritime security through the Rim of the Pacific Exercises (RIMPAC). Bilateral support for the installation of the Terminal High Altitude Air Defence (THAAD) counter-missile systems in South Korea to counter North Korea's

growing capabilities further demonstrates that, rather than abandonment or being entrapped by each other's security issues, both countries are proactively working together to mitigate security threats in the region.⁴²

Lastly, fear of abandonment seems further diluted when we consider the chorus of joint and individual statements on the importance of their joint leadership in promoting peace, prosperity and economic development.⁴³ The strongest example of this shared world-view was the recent visit of President Obama to Hiroshima, which sent an overt message to China that the US and Japan stand together and that their security alliance is not one-dimensional. The salience of the partnership and shared world-view was again illustrated by both rhetoric and action on December 27, 2016 when PM Abe visited Pearl Harbour to express his condolences for the fallen and Japan's commitment to promoting peace, international law and its pledge to 'never again wage war'.⁴⁴

In short, the Japan-US relationship is a comprehensive alliance based on shared norms and deepening economic ties through trade agreements such as the now suspended TPP along with political and broader security cooperation in the region surrounding Japan, but also in the SCS and other areas considered to be for the global public good.⁴⁵ Even in case the TPP fails to be resurrected, US-Japan bilateral economic relations remain the cornerstone of economic stability and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific as their economies are highly integrated in terms of trade in goods and services, as well as in being important sources for imports for each country.⁴⁶

Each of the foregoing examples counters the arguments that assert that fear of abandonment by Japan is the primary driver for foreign policy changes under PM Abe since 2012 but also since the early 1990s. Notwithstanding the lack of direct linkages between changes in foreign policy under PM Abe's leadership since 2012, a case can be made that owing to 'Japan passing' and 'strategic ambiguity' up until President Obama's pronouncement that the Senkaku Islands fell under the Japan-US Security Alliance agreement, there was concern in Japan that economic relations between the US and China had the potential to shape the US' policy on the Senkaku Islands.⁴⁷

Security competition with China

Together with China's economic growth has come the modernization and expansion of its military. With double-digit growth year-on-year and an estimated 170 per cent increase in military spending over the past 20 years,⁴⁸ Japan and the region have become increasingly concerned as to the nature of Chinese socio-economic development in the region.⁴⁹ This concern first emerged in 1993 when the US and Russia were both downsizing their nuclear arsenals and China tested a nuclear weapon in the Gobi desert despite the protests of both the US and Japan.⁵⁰ The Taiwan Strait crisis of 1996 brought to the fore the issue of China's long-term intentions and capabilities.⁵¹

Then a series of anti-Japanese actions related to the Senkaku Islands, in 2005, 2010 and 2012 (all pre-Abe), put the defence establishment in Japan on alert.⁵² The 2012 official and grassroots response to the nationalization of the Senkaku Islands, which included anti-Japanese riots in mainland China, and the presence of military and non-military aircraft and ships in and around the Senkaku Islands, further exacerbated concerns about Chinese intentions within the region.⁵³

Long before the unilateral declaration of the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ)⁵⁴ in 2013 or the ‘island building’⁵⁵ by China in the SCS, we saw Japan undertake an incremental shift in its security policy, partly in response to concerns about Chinese intentions in the region. In this sense, China’s re-emergence as a regional economic, political and security giant with a perceived less than benevolent and transparent track record, has been a significant factor in the shift in Japanese security arrangements.

In terms of foreign policy changes in relation to China in Japan under PM Abe since 2012, concerns over China’s military enlargement, intentions and actions in both the East China Sea (ECS) and SCS have been the indirect and direct drivers of the shifts in Japan’s security policy. For example, the *Diplomatic Bluebook 2016: Japanese Diplomacy and International Situation in 2015* released on July 29, 2016 specifically makes mention of ‘attempts (by China) to unilaterally change the status quo in the East China Sea’. It provides well-documented evidence, from January through the end of December 2015, of Chinese government-owned vessels (95 in total) intruding into Japanese territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands, 35 times.⁵⁶ This tone and concern contrast with the *Diplomatic Bluebook 2007–2011* in which ‘China’s military build-up without sufficient transparency, and its increase of maritime activities’ and Japan’s continued ‘effort to encourage China to play a more appropriate role as a responsible member in the international community with enhanced transparency’ were stressed.⁵⁷

China is not the only driver of these changes. North Korean missile tests have also influenced the shifts in Japan’s security and foreign policy within the region.⁵⁸ Japan’s approach to North Korea under Abe was to portray the security threat as a threat not only to Japan and the region, but also to the international community. Under successive administrations, including PM Abe’s second term, the Japanese government has invested in theatre missile defence, anti-ballistic missile defence, and satellites to monitor and track North Korean missile development through cooperation with the US. In its efforts to multilateralize and strengthen the security cooperation between Japan, the US and South Korea, Japan has gone so far as to support the installation of the THAAD system in South Korea to help mitigate the North Korean security issue.⁵⁹

That being said, North Korean provocation, although serious, represents a less existential threat to Japan, compared to the Chinese military, economic and political expansion. Given the US–Japan security alliance and TMD, a militarily weak North Korea would have little to gain from engaging in any confrontation with Japan as it would mean the end of their regime. China on the other hand, with its claims in both the ECS and SCS, its economic relations with Japan and ASEAN countries and its growing power, would be a formidable opponent in the event of regional friction. With this in mind, Japanese policy makers, both before and prior to Abe’s second term, have recognized the importance of incremental and accelerated foreign policy changes, that address the current situation trends now and those likely to come in the future, as evidenced repeatedly by the evolution of diplomatic statements in official documents such as the *Diplomatic Bluebook* dating as far back as 1991.⁶⁰

Domestic politics and regional relations

PM Abe has successfully used the so-called ‘China Threat’ to push through several security-related initiatives, including: the strengthening of the Japan–US security alliance

during his visit to the US in April 2015; the divisive Collective Security Bill in September 2015; enhanced cooperation with the Philippines through the provision of coastguard vessels; while at the same time strengthening military-to-military cooperation with Australia, India and Vietnam.⁶¹

This approach however has not been the exclusive purview of PM Abe. PM Koizumi from 2001 to 2006 effectively demonstrated how to play the ‘China card’ to consolidate his domestic politics.⁶² Similarly, Abe effectively rallied those within his party and public support by taking a strong stance on China in his successful bid to regain the premiership in 2012.⁶³

In each case, strong leadership *vis-à-vis* China and unknown threats have been used to justify the changes made under Abe’s leadership. The argument can be made that there has been an acceleration under Abe, but it would be inaccurate to say that these changes are directly related to his nationalistic inclinations, as the record demonstrates that incremental changes in Japan’s security posture have been taking place for at least 25 years, irrespective of party, leadership, strength of the economy or the relative strength/weakness of the US.⁶⁴

Domestic political stability

Japan’s domestic politics has been marred by the disabling effects of factional politics and a revolving set of prime ministers since the early 1990s.⁶⁵ With 17 prime ministers in 25 years, Japan has lacked sustained leadership, with the exception of Koizumi’s five-year tenure and Abe’s second tenure as PM.

Abe and Koizumi could both overcome factional politics and be popularly elected.⁶⁶ Koizumi’s election allowed him to push through neo-liberal reforms to privatize the postal service. This initiative was strongly resisted by factions within the LDP. However, Koizumi’s electoral victory allowed him to exercise strong leadership. Similarly, PM Abe’s populist approach as illustrated by his catchy, if not oversimplistic, ‘three arrows’ campaign to reinvigorate the Japanese economy has been useful in solidifying his political base.

Through this multi-tier analysis and taking into consideration the endogenous and exogenous factors influencing the shift in Japanese security policy, we can conclude that these security policy changes are incremental, defensive in nature and a result of the interaction between domestic politics, regional security competition, and to a lesser degree the fear of abandonment and entrapment.

This expansion of Japan’s security, political and economic ties across the region can be interpreted as *keiretsu gaikô* (系列外交) as per which Japan has been reorganizing its political, security and economic relations into a horizontal and mutually reinforcing structure of complementary, and mutually self-strengthening, networks that multilateralize and expand the number of stakeholders in the global common goods in the East and South China Seas.⁶⁷ This security strategy shifts Japan’s traditional practice of regional security from the Washington–Tokyo–Beijing calculus to one that inculcates many partners, in order to lessen Japan’s sensitivity to any shifts in the triangular relationship. Rather than dual hedging, Japanese foreign policy can be understood as hedging in all directions, i.e. engaging in an omnidirectional hedging process, which accounts for the shifting dynamics of geopolitics in and outside the region.

In this sense, instead of the fear of abandonment and entrapment with the Japan–US alliance being the singular driver behind incremental changes in Japanese foreign policy under Abe, we also need to consider how leadership changes in the region, such as in the Philippines and the US, political instability in countries such as South Korea, apart from the Sino-Japanese and Sino-US rivalries and domestic political stability, all play a role.

Conclusion

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of this article, we can conclude that foreign policy changes are a cumulative result of endogenous and exogenous factors that change over time. Whether or not the hyper-diplomatic activity is ideologically driven by PM Abe's nationalist inclinations, this article has shown that the hyper-diplomacy undertaken by him is not tangentially linked to his nationalistic inclinations. Rather, changes in foreign policy are driven by three factors: (1) the perceived assertive Chinese behaviour following the nationalization of the Senkaku Islands; (2) the consolidation of political power within and amongst political parties following the perceived ineffectual and disastrous leadership provided by the DPJ, that led to a more proactive leadership; and lastly (3) strong support for Japanese cooperation in Southeast Asia by ASEAN countries and the US.

In this sense, the diplomatic initiatives taken by PM Abe since 2012 are directly related to Chinese initiatives in the region and a sense that internal politics resulting in a short-term and revolving Japanese leadership created the conditions for an ineffectual leadership that led to an ineffective foreign policy in the region. The result has been China making significant inroads in the competition for influence, in regional and global institutions.

Domestic insecurities relating to the strength of the US–Japan alliance and the American commitment to Japan were also mentioned at the beginning of this article. It was demonstrated that there is some insecurity relating to the strength of the alliance and a fear of abandonment and entrapment. That said, the successive and deepening commitments between the two countries, in terms of practice, policy and vision, reveal a long track record of largely mutually reinforcing behaviour in the realms of politics, economics and security. The TPP was the most contemporary example of this track record, but the political and security cooperation between Japan and the US over a period of 25 years shows that the two are strengthening, not weakening, their relationship.

This article has demonstrated that the frequent changes in political leadership have both challenged and handicapped Japan's ability to have a sustained foreign policy. At the same time, the leadership vacuum has prevented a radical shift in foreign policy, resulting in incremental change since the early 1990s. The unchallenged political position of Abe—both intra- and inter-party—has created favourable conditions for a change in Japan's security posture towards a more proactive and engaged foreign policy. This stance is reflective of the Japanese government's recognition of the acceleration of the structural change associated with China's rise, the threats that it poses for Japan's influence in the region, but also how that rise requires a recalibration of Japan's singular reliance on the US–Japan alliance, to one that is manifested as omnidirectional hedging.

Lastly, while this article acknowledges that Japan's foreign policy under PM Abe has been comparatively proactive, in terms of expanded and deepening security partnerships, it stresses that the proactive pacifism is attenuated by deeply pacifist

norms, a preference for multilateralism and the role of the US–Japan alliance, that serves to protect Japan but also limits its ability to expand militarily.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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