

Unambivalent alignment: Japan's China strategy, the US alliance, and the 'hedging' fallacy

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Abstract

This article examines whether the Asia-Pacific region's geopolitical vicissitudes are causing Japan to 'hedge' against deepening uncertainty and risk through major strategic realignments or diversification of security and economic ties, as the original hedging literature would expect. It examines trends since 2009 in three domains fundamental to identifying whether shifts are underway in Japan's strategic orientation vis-à-vis China: security policy (primary), trade/investment, and public opinion. Despite deepening uncertainty (and volatility), especially in 'the Trump era', this study finds negligible evidence of hedging behavior: e.g., realigning toward Beijing or adopting a 'middle position', much less developing any meaningful security ties with China. Rather, contemporary trends point in the opposite direction: Japan's China strategy primarily centers on strengthening indigenous deterrence capabilities, bolstering the US–Japan alliance, and diversifying regional

security ties beyond Beijing. Even the latter, somewhat paradoxically, aims to deepen ties with Washington and to keep it actively engaged in regional affairs.

1 Introduction

Dynamism, uncertainty, insecurity, and potential volatility are increasingly defining features of contemporary international relations of the Asia-Pacific. Major variables include China's rapidly expanding power and influence, the region's shifting geopolitical and geo-economic terrain, North Korea's advancing (thermo)nuclear and missile capabilities, and perceptions of America's relative decline and ambivalence in Washington about its regional role. Meanwhile, references to a new 'great power competition' and 'new Cold War' between the United States – Japan's sole security treaty ally – and China – Japan's top trading partner – permeate discourse about regional affairs. As US–China frictions worsen, Japan is on the front lines, if not in the middle – literally and figuratively.

These basic dynamics, which powerfully shape Japan's strategic environment, significantly predate 2016. Yet, from Brexit to the US presidential election, shocking and unanticipated developments since that year have heightened regional uncertainty and Japan's insecurity. The Trump Administration's 'America First' rhetoric and policies, in particular, have shaken global confidence, especially among U.S. allies. In Japan, 'confidence in the U.S. president to do the right thing regarding world affairs' plummeted by 54% following Donald Trump's (2017-) inauguration ([Pew Research Center, 2017](#)). Recent developments have also exacerbated inherent, decades-old 'alliance dilemmas' ([Snyder, 1984](#)). Saber-rattling vis-à-vis North Korea exemplifies entrapment risks for Tokyo, while Trump's rhetoric, policies, transactionalist inclinations, and mercurial, abrupt and unilateral decision-making exacerbate longstanding fears of abandonment, even possible alliance 'decoupling' ([Rapp-Hooper, 2017](#)). During his first week, Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States from the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a principle element of the Obama Administration's 'rebalance' to the Asia-Pacific and an initiative on which Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo (2012-) spent significant political capital. Since then, Trump has demanded further concessions from Japan on

bilateral trade balances and trade agreements, and imposed (or threatened) tariffs on Japan based on dubious 'national security' grounds. Though usually presenting a united front publicly, even Abe himself has candidly expressed concerns about a possible United States–Japan strategic disconnect. Of particular concern is a possible United States–North Korea 'grand bargain' that leaves Pyongyang's existing nuclear stockpile and medium- and short-range missiles – which range Japan – intact ([Associated Press, 2018](#)).

Major changes to Japan's regional environment over the past decade-plus, which have only accelerated since 2016, have precipitated robust debates in Japan about its strategic future and the risks of the status quo. One prominent debate asks what policy shifts should be adopted in response to regional vicissitudes. It has included unprecedentedly mainstream discussion of several formerly taboo topics, such as collective self-defense, nuclear weapons, de facto offensive capabilities, a marine corps, a carrier embarking fighter jets, and long-range strike capabilities. Another area of discussion has intermittently broached a possible strategic realignment away from Washington. Since 2016, it has resurfaced. As one Japanese scholar recently opined, under Trump America's 'unpredictable diplomacy' and 'unstable governance' weakens U.S. primacy, reduces bilateral trust, and 'jeopardises the strategic calculations of partner states, spurring the need for fundamental shifts in alliance behavior'; meanwhile, 'Escalation of unpredictability and uncertainty in relations with Washington leaves Japan with little choice but to review its tenuous relationship with China' ([Sahashi, 2017](#)). For Japan's leaders, U.S. withdrawal from TPP, little or no advanced warning of steel and aluminum tariffs, and Trump's abrupt, unilateral decisions to meet with Kim Jong-un and stop United States–South Korea 'war games' because they were 'provocative' and 'cost too much' have been jarring ([Smith, 2018](#)). One of Abe's top foreign affairs advisors has argued that 'the [United States–Japan] alliance has changed from one based on shared values to a transactional alliance,' and predicted that the United States–North Korea summit 'will serve as a trigger for the Japanese people to begin to realize that it is risky to leave Japan's destiny to another country.' ([Gill, 2018](#)) As two leading experts argue, 'greater strategic independence' vis-à-vis Washington finds increasing appeal in Tokyo as strategists question how long they can depend on the United States 'for credible commitments to Japan's

defense and provision of regional stability’ (Samuels and Wallace, 2018). Even the Trump Administration’s own Director of National Intelligence has suggested that ‘US allies’ and partners’ uncertainty about the willingness and capability of the United States to maintain its international commitments may drive them to consider reorienting their policies [...] away from Washington’ (Coats, 2018).

This study examines whether recent developments – from increasingly volatile United States–China dynamics to changing power differentials and deepening concerns about Washington’s commitments – are in fact causing Japan to engage in strategic hedging and to adopt a more ambiguous alignment vis-à-vis Beijing and Washington. The most recent peer-reviewed academic study to directly engage this question using data inclusive of the post-2015 period argues that Japan is ‘not *balancing against* China’ but instead ‘has followed a middle course, adopting a hedging strategy coherent with its middle-power status’ (emphasis in original; Vidal and Pelegrín, 2018, 194). Public discourse also often suggests a recalibration is underway (e.g., Cunningham, 2018; Pandey, 2018).

But is this really the case? Such claims run counter to recent studies of Japan’s behavior based on empirics through the mid-2010s arguing that Japan is balancing against a perceived threat from China (e.g., Hornung, 2014; Koga, 2016; Liff, 2016; Koga, 2017). Yet, these earlier studies’ evidentiary bases predate 2016; as such, perhaps their analyses are out-of-date. Indeed, claims abound that regional circumstances (and Japan’s policies) have changed fundamentally since that year. Beyond China’s continued rapid economic and military expansion, additional widely referenced indicators include the advent of the Trump administration; North Korea’s unprecedented 2017 intercontinental ballistic missile and thermonuclear tests and United States–North Korea saber-rattling; Beijing’s massive \$100 billion Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which has attracted more than 70 member countries (including major US allies); and significant Japanese national security reforms, many of which came online when major legislation went into effect in Spring 2016.

If, as some scholars argue, rather than balancing vis-à-vis China Japan was in fact strategically ‘hedging’ and pursuing a ‘middle course’ between Beijing and Washington, there would be a theoretically compelling rationale. For starters, even in the best of times international

anarchy, asymmetric/incomplete information, and the uncertainty of future commitments ensure that no state can be certain how its region's geopolitics will evolve (Fearon, 1995). This logic appears particularly compelling in a period of rapidly shifting balances-of-power, to say nothing of when the leader of Japan's sole treaty ally is transparently skeptical of US alliances, free trade, international institutions, and other aspects of the very regional and global order that has underpinned Japan's foreign policy orientation for 70 years. Furthermore, the hedging literature (see below) expects a 'secondary state' to hedge when conflictual dynamics exist between two great powers, it has a potential divergence of security and economic interests, and there is significant uncertainty about future trends. Coupled with scholars' frequent categorization of Japan as a 'middle power' or 'secondary state', Tokyo could therefore reasonably be expected to chart a 'middle course' between the United States and China (Soeya, 2005; Vidal and Pelegrín, 2018).

Japan would certainly not be alone in considering alternatives in response to regional vicissitudes. Debates about trade-offs and the risks of siding with Washington and/or antagonizing Beijing already manifest regularly across the Asia-Pacific, including in US treaty allies (e.g., Australia; the Philippines) and major security partners (e.g., Singapore). They are often framed as driven by perceptions of competing strategic and economic incentives (e.g., White, 2010; Cruz de Castro 2017; *The Independent*, 2018) and/or the risks of continued reliance on Washington. Especially after the 2016 U.S. election, some allied strategists call for a 'Plan B' given President Trump's 'America First' posture and 'mistrustful neglect' of alliances (Jennings, 2018).

In Japan, debates about how to approach the United States–Japan–China strategic 'triangle' are not new (Michishita and Samuels, 2012). Scholars often highlight and juxtapose a consolidating regional economic 'hierarchy' centered on China today against the simpler status quo ex ante: Japan and other US treaty allies' Cold War-era economic and security alignments with Washington (Ikenberry, 2016). In contrast, some argue, in the 21st century 'Japan's economic and security interests are often at odds' (Pempel, 2011). Basic data reveal how significantly circumstances have changed: in 1990, Japan's trade with the United States and China constituted 27.6 and 3.5%, respectively, of its total trade. By 2010, those numbers were 13.0 and 20.7%

(Drysdale and Armstrong, 2015, 196). Meanwhile, by some measures (purchasing power parity), China has already become the world's largest economy.

Beyond economics, China's rapidly expanding military capabilities would also seem to have changed the potential costs/benefits of alignment choices. In constant (2016) US-dollar terms, between 2000 and 2017, the ratio of China's military expenditures to Japan's surged from roughly 1:1 to 5:1 (SIPRI, 2018). China's air force, navy, and coast guard have all rapidly modernized and expanded; each now dwarfs Japan's own respective service quantitatively. In niche areas, they are also increasingly a match – and in some cases, arguably superior – qualitatively. Further challenging deterrence is Beijing's 'gray zone' assertion of its sovereignty claims in the South and East China Seas using paranaul forces, which appears designed to exploit explicit gaps in US security commitments, such as the US–Japan security treaty's Article V focus on deterring overt military aggression (Erickson and Martinson, 2019; Liff, 2019). Additionally, Japan's US ally is no longer universally seen as East Asia's uncontested/pre-eminent military power. Even the current commander of US Indo-Pacific Command has stated that China's military is 'approaching parity [with the United States] in a number of critical areas; there is no guarantee that the United States would win a future conflict with China.' (Armed Services, 2018, 11).

In short, as diverse trends reshape the Asia-Pacific, the theoretical potential for major realignments has increased sharply – making this special issue on hedging in East Asian international relations especially timely. Public and academic discourse concerning the allegedly transformative implications of post-2015 developments and, specific to Japan, recent scholarly claims that Tokyo is not balancing China but hedging and pursuing a strategic 'middle course' (e.g., Vidal and Pelegrín, 2018), make it crucially important to accurately assess Japan's contemporary China strategy and alignment inclinations. As the region's second-largest economy and a key ally and host for military forces of the United States – one which nevertheless counts China as its top trading partner and largest neighbor – Tokyo's strategic choices fundamentally shape regional geopolitics. The potential effects on Asia-Pacific international relations of a strategic hedge by Japan would be significant and both independent and second-order, as the

United States, China, and other regional states modify their own strategies in response.

This article is structured as follows: first, it briefly summarizes conceptual debates in the 'hedging' literature and introduces a basic definition and analytical framework. Next, an empirical survey examines major trends in Japan's security policy, trade policy, overseas investment patterns, and public opinion between 2009 and 2018. This tight chronological bound enables a much deeper analysis of contemporary policy shifts than that found in the two most recent academic studies of Japan's hedging behavior, both of which survey multiple decades of empirics in article-length manuscripts (Koga, 2017; Vidal and Pelegrín, 2018). A penultimate section discusses key implications of Japan's recent strategic choices, and a final section concludes.

This study finds remarkably little evidence of Japan engaging in strategic 'hedging' vis-à-vis China, or efforts to seek a 'middle course' between Beijing and Washington. Japan's alignment with and strategic preference for the United States, up to and including the Trump era, is hardly ambiguous. Balancing and tightening security alignments with Washington and US security allies and partners while simultaneously bolstering its own indigenous capabilities have been, and continue to be, the dominant trends in Japan's China strategy. Furthermore, practically significant security cooperation with Beijing – a necessary condition for any compelling argument that Japan is strategically realigning in China's direction – remains negligible. Beyond security policy (strictly defined), Japan's clear efforts to securitize TPP, shifting investment patterns away from China, and remarkably one-sided, pro-US public sentiment further buttress this study's core argument. They also suggest that a future strategic realignment toward Beijing is unlikely. In short, in policy terms, despite considerable geopolitical and geo-economic headwinds, worsening great power competition, and widespread uncertainty about the region's future evolution, Japan's strategic alignment with the United States remains unambivalent.

2 'Hedging' in East Asia: concept and method

For analytical purchase on contemporary dynamics and alignment patterns in the increasingly complicated 21st-century Asia-Pacific, many scholars look to the concept of 'hedging'. Though definitions vary, the

basic idea, which went mainstream circa 2005 (Goh, 2005; Medeiros, 2005), is that when great power competition exists and uncertainty about future developments is high, a ‘secondary state’s’ leaders have incentives to ‘hedge’ – i.e., pursue neither full alignment with, nor against, one or the other ‘great power’ in order to avoid antagonizing either. This approach also allows strategic flexibility as circumstances evolve. The basic goal is to protect against risk by not putting all one’s eggs in a single basket. As Goh originally defined the term in her seminal study, hedging ‘aim[s] at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality. Instead, they cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another’ (Goh, 2005, viii).

In Asia-Pacific-focused studies, the objects of potential (re)alignment are typically ‘great powers’ China and (vs.) the United States. Since 2005, a sizable literature has built on earlier scholarship (e.g., Goh, 2007; Kuik, 2008; Ciorciari, 2010; Lim and Cooper, 2015; Kuik, 2016; Koga, 2017; Vidal and Pelegrín, 2018). (For a critical, systematic comparison, see Haacke 2019) Lim and Cooper offer perhaps the best recent definition of ‘hedging’: ‘sending signals which generate ambiguity over the extent of their shared security interests with great powers, in effect eschewing clear-cut alignment with any great power, and in turn creating greater uncertainty regarding which side the secondary state would take in the event of a great power conflict’. Critically, they argue that ‘hedging behavior should not include costless activities that do not require states to face trade-offs in their security choices’ and that ‘alignment should be seen as signaling by a state that it shares common security interests with one side in a great power rivalry.’ (Lim and Cooper, 2015, 696–97, 709).

Though the concept and associated methods are heavily contested, this study’s analytical framework is basically consistent with that proposed by Jürgen Haacke, which draws partly on recently published scholarship (Lim and Cooper, 2015; Liff, 2016). It surveys basic trends in Japan’s security policies and ‘their attendant discourses’ from a concrete baseline (2009). Conceptually and empirically, it considers ‘ambiguity regarding the future security alignment vis-à-vis [...] major powers’ as a necessary condition for any claim that a state is engaging in hedging behavior (Haacke, 2019). It also conceives of hedging as

fundamentally about security policy and alignment choices, and theoretically and analytically distinct from 'balancing' behavior.

Though the major empirical basis for this study's central argument is security-related developments, in acknowledgment of both contested definitions and scholarly claims elsewhere that Japan is not balancing against China and is instead hedging, this study also examines trade policy, investment patterns, and public opinion for signs of countervailing, 'pro-China' tendencies or strategic ambivalence. This expanded, if secondary, analytical aperture provides a robustness check, an ecumenical empirical baseline for future studies, and facilitates more general conclusions concerning the likelihood of Japan realigning toward China in the future.

3 Assessing Japan's alignment choices, 2009–2018

What do major trend lines since 2009 tell us about Japan's response to the deepening uncertainty, insecurity, and potential volatility characterizing contemporary Asia-Pacific international relations? To what extent are Japan's leaders hedging against perceived risk through major strategic realignments, such as deepening ties with Beijing, adopting a 'middle position' between China and the United States, and/or sending ambiguous signals through diversification of security ties beyond, and/or downgrading existing ties with, Washington? Of particular interest is whether Japan is pursuing closer ties with China at the expense of the United States, which is the first-order concern of most scholarship on 'hedging' in East Asia. Digging a bit deeper, are there any other observable efforts by Tokyo to bolster security or economic ties with other regional countries? If so, to what extent are those efforts motivated by a strategic reorientation away from close alignment with Washington?

4 The DPJ era and 'Independent Diplomacy': the realignment that wasn't

Immediately after the Democratic Party of Japan's (DPJ) historic 2009 election victory, Japan's new leaders conspicuously flirted with major strategic realignments – in particular, pursuit of a more independent, middle road between Washington and Beijing. Context matters and the resulting strategic debate occurred amidst seemingly transformative

international and domestic developments. Internationally, the global financial crisis deepened impressions of US ‘decline’ and China’s surging relative and absolute influence, and, by extension, the potential risks of Japan’s overwhelmingly pro-US alignment status quo. By 2010, China’s economy had surpassed Japan’s to become the world’s second largest, while Beijing’s military spending reached levels thrice Tokyo’s (SIPRI, 2018). Concomitant with declaration of a ‘new situation’ (*xin xingshi*) in China’s international environment, Beijing responded to Japan’s September 2010 arrest of a Chinese fishing boat captain who rammed Japan Coast Guard vessels near the contested Senkaku (Diaoyu in Chinese) Islands by restricting exports of rare earths – over which China enjoyed a monopoly (more than 90%) and upon which Japan’s high technology companies relied. This effort was widely seen as a shot-across-the-bow warning Tokyo of the potential costs of antagonizing an increasingly powerful and assertive Beijing. Domestically, the DPJ’s landslide 2009 election victory had soundly defeated the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) – whose prime ministers had ruled Japan for all but two years since 1955. (The LDP lost the prime ministership and its Diet seat total plummeted from 300 to 119) The apparent collapse of the post-war dominant, overwhelmingly pro-U.S. LDP, the seeming emergence of a nascent two-party system, and the DPJ’s election platform’s foreign policy pillar of ‘independent diplomacy’ seemed to augur a major strategic reorientation characterized by far less emphasis on Washington and a focus instead on re-establishing Japan as ‘a member of Asia’ (Easley *et al.*, 2010).

Indeed, soon after the DPJ’s 2009 victory, new Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio described East Asia as ‘Japan’s basic living space’ (*seikatsu kukan*), stressed the necessity of ‘efforts to construct stable economic cooperation and national security frameworks in the region,’ noted that the era of US unipolarity was being replaced by a multipolar era, and asked ‘how could Japan maintain its political and economic independence and protect its national interests while caught between the US [...] and China?’ (Hatoyama, 2009). Further suggestive of a historic realignment of Japan’s foreign policy, during a visit to Beijing Hatoyama championed the formation of an ‘East Asian Community,’ remarking, ‘Until now, we have tended to be too reliant on the United States [...] The Japan-US alliance remains important, but as a member of Asia, I would like to develop policies that focus

more on Asia.' Three days earlier, then DPJ Foreign Minister Okada Katsuya had conspicuously excluded the United States from Japan's East Asian Community vision, proposing as members Japan, China, South Korea, ASEAN, India, Australia, and New Zealand, and stating 'Japan has its national interests, and the US has its own.' The DPJ even seemed to back away from Japan's decades-old reliance on US nuclear extended deterrence (Takahata, 2009). Ozawa Ichiro, a former DPJ president and head of the party's dominant faction who had long sought greater Japanese independence vis-à-vis the United States, famously led a large delegation of Japanese business leaders to Beijing and worked to terminate Japan's Self-Defense Force (JSDF) mission refueling U.S.-led coalition forces involved in *Operation Enduring Freedom* (Stratfor, 2007) – which had been a major and symbolically powerful Japanese commitment to its U.S. ally.

Thus, Hatoyama's administration was widely seen as marking a strategic inflection point for Japan. As *Time Magazine* assessed in 2010, 'a couple of decades from now, we may come to believe that [Hatoyama] contributed to a historic pivot in Japan that many view as inevitable: a gradual but unmistakable reordering of Tokyo's relationship with Washington and a reorientation of its foreign policy with an emphasis on the emerging power in East Asia, China' (Powell, 2010). A revealing headline in China's *People's Daily* opined: 'Japan back in middle of the road on China' (*People's Daily*, 2010).

Regardless of the prime minister's wishes, however, a major realignment and shift away from the United States was not to be. In fact, perceived mishandling of the United States–Japan alliance, especially due to a failure to move a U.S. military base outside Okinawa prefecture, contributed significantly to Hatoyama's resignation and damaged public confidence (Pekkanen and Reed, 2013, 8). Furthermore, rather than exploiting the apparent opening Hatoyama provided to drive a wedge between Tokyo and Washington, in 2010, Beijing antagonized both through its rare earth export restrictions and refusal to criticize two major North Korean provocations that killed a combined 48 military personnel and two civilians of South Korea, a fellow US ally. Meanwhile, U.S.–Japan cooperation during *Operation Tomodachi*, the allies' bilateral relief effort in response to Japan's March 2011 triple (earthquake/tsunami/nuclear) disaster, reaffirmed the alliance's relevance and domestic popularity (Samuels, 2013).

Hatoyama's two DPJ successors promptly reversed course, effectively abandoning 'independent diplomacy'. Inter alia, they adopted measures to significantly bolster JSDF capabilities and interoperability with the US military through new procurements, force posture shifts southwest, and emphasis on gray zone contingencies – in key regards clearly targeting a possible contingency with China. The DPJ also initiated a major review of the US–Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation, which Japan's defense minister explicitly linked to perceived Chinese threats ([New York Times, 2012](#)). By the time the DPJ's third – and final – prime minister was at the helm, perceived strategic imperatives meant Japan's security policy trajectory bore little resemblance to the party's 2009 election manifesto and 'independent diplomacy'. On the contrary, in its renewed focus on bolstering deterrence and strengthening the US–Japan alliance, Japan's post-Hatoyama DPJ-era security trajectory ended up comparable to previous LDP-led administrations. The potential realignment had fizzled.

5 Policy Shifts Since 2012: Japan 'Doubles-down' on the United States

5.1 Security affairs: unambivalent alignment with Washington

Three defining aspects of Japan's newly explicit, comprehensive 'strategic approach to national security' since former LDP Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and the LDP-Komeito coalition's return to power (2012-) have been bolstering and expanding JSDF capabilities and roles; strengthening Japan's alliance with the United States; and proactively deepening security ties with like-minded countries in the Asia-Pacific and beyond ([JMOD, 2014](#), 133–138). Each pillar is intended to reinforce the others, and entails comprehensive measures to bolster deterrence. Efforts to strengthen the US–Japan alliance are central. Even Japan's diversification of security ties and outreach beyond Washington are basically consistent with US strategy and appear aimed at responding to a series of US administrations' calls for allies to do more and demonstrating Japan's value as a proactive and strategically active regional player.

Meanwhile, and fundamental to any judgment about hedging behavior, there is no compelling evidence of a positive *strategic* shift toward China or deepening security cooperation with Beijing – a necessary condition for any claim that Japan is hedging or, to borrow from Goh's definition, staking out a strategic 'middle position' between Washington and Beijing. This relative lack of strategic ambivalence in Tokyo is particularly striking given China's geographical proximity; its rapidly growing GDP, military budget and power, and diplomatic influence; and its enormous economic and financial ties with Japan. As an authoritative illustration of Japan's alignment preferences, its 2017 defense white paper allots 34 pages to concerns about China, including Beijing's 'attempts to change the status quo by coercion,' while more than 50 pages focus on strengthening the US–Japan alliance (JMOD, 2017).

5.2 Strategic context

The basic trajectory of Japan's national security reforms since 2012 predates Abe's return to power. His administration has built on, and accelerated, a longer-term evolutionary shift. (Liff, 2018). The DPJ's own effective rejection of 'independent diplomacy' after Hatoyama's abortive nine-month tenure evinces a supra-partisan judgment over the past decade about the importance of the US alliance and security cooperation with other 'like-minded' states for Japan's security, even in a period characterized by significant concerns/uncertainty about US commitments and the implications of Trump-era rhetoric and policy. Importantly, it was not reached in a strategic vacuum.

Since North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, the threat Tokyo perceives from Pyongyang's rapidly advancing nuclear and missile capabilities – focused on perfecting its ability to strike Japan (and the United States) with a nuclear-tipped ballistic missile – appears most exigent. More ambiguous but attracting arguably greater elite and public attention over the past decade have been China's rapidly advancing military capabilities; the expanding geographical and operational scope of its deployments, including through the Japanese archipelago to the western Pacific; and its active assertion of its sovereignty claim to the Senkaku Islands militarily and paramilitarily, which has significantly raised the risk of a political-military crisis (Liff and Erickson, 2017).

China's construction (and subsequent militarization) of massive artificial islands and coercive posture in the South China Sea, despite a July 2016 ruling by an international tribunal in The Hague discrediting key aspects of Beijing's claim, also feed concerns in Japan about a China-dominated region. From the Abe administration's perspective all maritime and democratic nations have a shared interest ensuring that no territorial disputant backs down under military pressure (Green, 2013).

How exactly is Japan responding to concerns about the regional security environment? Japan's first-ever (2013) National Security Strategy highlights three major policy trends: 'strengthening and expanding Japan's capabilities and roles,' 'strengthening the Japan-US Alliance,' and actively promoting security cooperation with third countries in the Asia-Pacific and beyond (JMOD, 2014). In short, perceptions of an increasingly unfavorable threat environment have driven Japan's leaders not to hedge toward, much less bandwagon with China, but instead to adopt various means to balance through enhanced deterrence, both internally – i.e., enhancing Japan's own security-focused institutions and capabilities – and externally – i.e., bolstering cooperation with the United States and its security allies and partners, especially Australia, key South China Sea claimants (e.g., Philippines, Vietnam), and India.

5.3 Bolstering Japan's own capabilities

Though the North Korean threat looms large, after 2010 leaders in both the LDP and (now-defunct) DPJ linked key aspects of Japan's changing security policy directly to concerns about China. Recent defense white papers criticize China's 'assertive' behavior and 'dangerous acts' (esp. vis-à-vis the East China Sea), (low) military transparency, rapidly increasing defense spending, and the pace and scale of its military modernization and operations near Japanese territory. Even in the DPJ era, such factors were already deemed a 'matter of concern for the region and the international community' (JMOD, 2010). More recently, Japan's defense minister called Beijing's maritime activities 'extremely aggressive' and 'a concern for the entire global community' (Asahi Shimbun, 2018).

In response to this changing threat environment, Japan's government has pushed through major reforms to bolster executive leadership of strategic planning, whole-of-government decision-making,

intelligence collection and analysis, and crisis management (e.g., the new National Security Council, National Security Secretariat, and National Security Strategy) and new security legislation to bolster authorities of the Cabinet and Diet. A major thrust of China-focused measures is force structure and posture shifts to bolster situational awareness, deterrence, and expeditious response capabilities in Japan's southwest. These include changing doctrine to emphasize jointness and rapid, flexible deployment to confront conventional and 'gray-zone' challenges, especially around the contested Senkakus; creating a Southwest Islands defense network; standing up Japan's first amphibious forces since 1945 in Nagasaki (with planned deployments to Okinawa); and procuring and deploying additional high-end capabilities to the area. The latter include an additional F-15J air wing in Okinawa, quiet submarines, F-35s, P-1 maritime patrol aircraft, and helicopter-carrying destroyers (DDH), as well as significant increases to the budget, capabilities, and operational reach/presence of Japan's Coast Guard. A major 2018 defense plan committed to developing cross-domain operations, purchasing an additional 105 F-35s, long-range standoff missiles, and – in another post-1945 first – modifying DDHs to embark F-35Bs (JMOD, 2018). All these measures appear focused primarily on a possible contingency with China.

5.4 Strengthening US–Japan security cooperation

In policy terms, far from manifesting increased ambivalence toward Washington, much less a strategic reorientation toward China, since 2010 US–Japan alliance ties and commitments to each other have deepened significantly. Particularly salient developments include institutional reforms to bolster bilateral strategic planning, decision-making, intelligence sharing, and flexible crisis response across a range of scenarios in peacetime, a gray-zone contingency, and actual armed attack. Examples can be found in the 2015 Guidelines for Defense Cooperation, such as its establishment of an Alliance Coordination Mechanism, and calls for expanded cooperation in the cyber and space domains (JMOD, 2017).

Also significant are high-level political commitments to provide mutual support in certain scenarios. In April 2014, President Barack Obama declared that the US–Japan security treaty applies to a

contingency between Japan and China over the Senkakus. Another example is the Abe administration's historic 'reinterpretation' of the Article 9 'peace clause' of Japan's constitution and the Diet's passage of landmark legislation enabling JSDF to, conditionally, use kinetic force to defend US forces outside a strict 'defense of Japan' scenario. Abe highlighted his take on the significance of this major policy shift for a 'much stronger' US–Japan alliance, stating boldly: 'we can defend each other from now on' ([Japan Times, 2016](#)). Inter alia, the new legislation allows JSDF to use weapons to shoot down a ballistic missile threatening the United States and to aid US military forces defending Japan in peacetime ('asset protection' missions) or in the event of armed attack under certain conditions (so-called 'limited' collective self-defense). Such legal and policy changes have facilitated a significant expansion of bilateral training and exercises – independent of and together with additional US allies and partners. For example, in 2017 Japan carried out its first-ever maritime and aerial escorts of US forces, and bilateral exercises tripled relative to 2015 (from 19 to 62). Further indicative of deepening security cooperation have been additional reforms to allied force structure and posture, including US deployments of its most capable assets to Japan (e.g., the first overseas deployment of F-35s in 2017); greater interoperability; and Japanese commitments to big-ticket purchases of US military equipment (e.g., Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defense) ([Liff, 2018](#), 13–17). The aforementioned 2018 decision to strengthen DDH decks also has alliance implications: it will enable US F-35s to land on, and possibly operate off of, Japanese ships ([JMOD, 2018](#)).

Thus, far from reducing or weakening security cooperation with Washington, Japan has actively pursued significantly deeper ties and even rendered possible, and made an implicit political commitment to take on, far greater security risk vis-à-vis its ally than ever before – even beyond a strict 'defense of Japan' scenario. Since 2017, joint statements have reaffirmed key commitments made during the Obama era, including implementation of the 2015 guidelines ([MOFA, 2017](#)). Japan's latest defense plan makes the trend abundantly clear when it asserts that 'strengthening Japan's relationship with the United States, which shares universal values and strategic interests, has become *more important than ever* for Japan's security' [emphasis added]. ([JMOD, 2018](#), 12)

5.5 Expanding security cooperation beyond Washington

A third major feature of Japan's national security strategy has been diversification of security ties and outreach beyond the United States. It is important to note, however, that these measures are compatible with the United States' own initiatives and signal Japan's value as a proactive and strategically active regional player. Indeed, successive US administrations have called for allies to do more and pursued a gradually deepening regional 'web' of security ties among like-minded nations. The latter effort culminated rhetorically in the Obama administration's calls for like-minded nations to 'catalyze the Asia-Pacific's principled and inclusive security network' in order to ensure regional peace, prosperity, and stability, to strengthen cooperation in maritime security, and to commit 'to keeping the region's waterways open and secure' – a reference to and expression of concerns about the destabilizing effects of Chinese activities in the South and East China Seas (Carter, 2016; DOD, 2016).

Beyond significant efforts to bolster ties with major US treaty allies (e.g., Australia), Japan has also joined the United States in pursuing more expansive ties with other regional security partners, such as India (through 'the Quad') and in Southeast Asia, where Japan's 2016 'Vientiane Vision' marks Tokyo's first-ever call for an ASEAN-wide defense framework (JMOD, 2016; Dalpino, 2017). As Christopher Hughes argues, even Japan's recent expansion and diversification of arms transfers beyond Washington has as its 'overwhelming strategic objective' to 're-centre on the US–Japan alliance' by 'ultimately complement[ing] and reinforce[ing] the US–Japan alliance relationship and the US 'rebalance' in the Asia-Pacific' (Hughes, 2018, 425–426). Various Japanese joint declarations and statements with China's neighbors increasingly contain references to 'shared principles such as freedom, democracy and basic human rights,' 'order based on the principles of international law,' peaceful resolution of disputes, and opposition to unilateral changes to the status quo – all language compatible with US rhetoric and intended to contrast Tokyo's policies and values with Beijing's.

Thus, in both rhetoric and substance Tokyo's recent diversification of regional security ties is not a hedge against risk of abandonment but part of an effort to emphasize Japan's and the United States' common

values, interests, and vision for a rules-based regional order, and an indication of shared concerns about China's and the region's future trajectory. As Abe told a joint session of the US Congress in 2015,

[Japan] support[s] the 'rebalancing' by the U.S. in order to enhance the peace and security of the Asia-Pacific region. And I will state clearly. We will support the U.S. effort first, last, and throughout. Japan has deepened its strategic relations with Australia and India. We are enhancing our cooperation across many fields with the countries of ASEAN and the Republic of Korea. Adding those partners to the central pillar that is the U.S.-Japan alliance, our region will get stable remarkably more [sic.] (Abe, 2015).

5.6 Security trends in the Trump era

Since Trump's unexpected election victory in November 2016, rather than looking to realign Japan's security orientation and pursuing security ties with Beijing as a hedge against abandonment or entrapment vis-à-vis Washington, the Abe administration has responded externally to deepening uncertainty by pursuing even deeper ties with the US and its security partners, as Japan continues to bolster its own security posture.

Abe himself has been extraordinarily proactive in his efforts to ensure stable US–Japan ties. As of August 2018, he had met with Trump more than any other leader (Washington Post, 2018). He was the first foreign leader to meet with both President-elect Trump – in New York immediately after the election – and President Trump – during a three-day visit just days after the January 2017 inauguration. Within weeks, Abe had also hosted Trump's secretaries of defense and state in Tokyo (Reuters, 2017; New York Times, 2017a; U.S. Department of State, 2017). In the waning days of the Obama administration, Abe also moved quickly to ratify TPP, make a historic visit to Pearl Harbor, and promote maritime capacity building in Southeast Asia (Smith and McClean, 2017). Just before Trump's inauguration, Abe also flew to Southeast Asia to make 'strategic adjustments' to Japan's relations with Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam – all with the aim of bolstering Japan's defense diplomacy to expand JSDF presence in Southeast Asia, strengthen security partnerships, and focus on shared

norms, especially international maritime legal principles with direct bearing on Japan's own claims vis-à-vis China (Dalpino, 2017, 124).

Abe's efforts to ingratiate himself (and Japan) to Trump, who has a decades-old reputation as a Japan critic, appear to have paid off – at least so far. Despite significant headwinds, the major alliance rupture many analysts feared has not occurred. In August 2017, the allies reaffirmed bilateral and multilateral security cooperation, made an explicit 'commitment to the security of Japan through the full range of capabilities, including US nuclear forces,' and expressed support for further diversifying security ties, emphasizing 'ongoing Alliance efforts to advance trilateral and multilateral security and defense cooperation.' They also noted the allies' shared emphases on a rules-based international order, and capacity building and defense equipment/technology transfers to Southeast Asian countries (MOFA, 2017). Revealingly, it was also at this meeting of United States and Japanese security principals – not in Southeast Asia – that Japan announced a \$500 million initiative to help South China Sea disputants Philippines and Vietnam procure patrol vessels and coast guard equipment, and to improve surveillance and law enforcement. Not coincidentally, this initiative appeared to be modeled on the United States' own Maritime Security Initiative, itself also a response to China's controversial South China Sea policies (Mainichi, 2017). Meanwhile, Japan's renewed calls for a 'Quad' (deeper security ties among democratic Japan, Australia, India, and the United States) and a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific,' both Abe-championed concepts the Trump administration subsequently embraced, also evince a desire to diversify ties in a manner basically compatible with US objectives (Tatsumi, 2018).

In short, despite significant concerns exacerbated by the advent of Trump and 'America First', Japan's overriding strategic objectives amidst deepening uncertainty, insecurity, and volatility persist after 2016: bolstering its own capabilities while binding the United States more closely to Japan and the region and proactively demonstrating Japan's value as an ally and partner in supporting regional order. Far from indicating a strategic shift away from the United States, Japan's diversification of security ties with other players within and beyond the Asia-Pacific is modeled to significant degree upon, and compatible with, the United States' own basic strategic objectives. Japan's latest defense plan makes Tokyo's objective clear: 'strengthening close

cooperation with countries sharing universal values and security interests, *with the U.S.-Japan alliance as the hub [kijiku]* [emphasis added]. (JMOD, 2018, 12).

6 Economics and investment: securitization of TPP and 'China-plus-One' diversification

As noted earlier, recent economic trend lines in China–Japan relations represent a stark departure from Cold War-era dynamics, when trade largely 'followed the flag'. Based on some metrics, bilateral economic and financial ties between China and Japan now dwarf those between Japan and the United States. From a 'hedging' perspective, the inevitable question that follows is: do economic trends and Japan's economic policies constitute a powerful countervailing force in fundamental tension with Japan's traditionally US-centered strategic orientation, as is often claimed?

The answer appears to be 'not really.' In a heavily symbolic gesture with significant practical implications, Tokyo conspicuously stood alongside Washington in refusing to join the China-created Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, which now has more than 70 members – including other major US allies (Bloomberg, 2017). Even Tokyo's continued championing of TPP-11 after the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal appears aimed at diversifying Japan's regional ties with players in significant part *in order to incentivize Washington to come back into the fold*, with the hope that doing so will further enmesh it politically, strategically, and economically in the region. These efforts, in turn, appear aimed at reducing the risk of China potentially economically dominating or setting the rules to the feared detriment of Japan. Meanwhile, other indicators suggest the Japanese government is attempting to diversify economic links and investments *away from China*, at least in part to mitigate risk.

6.1 *The Trans-Pacific Partnership and Japan's efforts to pull the United States closer*

Japan's most strategically significant foreign economic policy initiative since 2009 has been its about-face on the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – history's largest, most substantively ambitious

trade agreement. At first glance, following President Trump's abrupt January 2017 withdrawal from the painstakingly negotiated TPP, the Abe administration's pursuit of 'TPP-11' (signed in March 2018) might suggest that Japan is looking past the United States. Indeed, such claims permeate media commentary ([New York Times, 2017b](#)).

Yet, such claims can be misleading: first, in the context of this study it should be stressed that China is not a member of TPP – accordingly, any embrace by Tokyo of TPP cannot logically be considered economic realignment toward Beijing and away from Washington. Second, it is clear that by moving forward with TPP-11 Japan hopes Washington will ultimately come back to the agreement and sees that as in its strategic interest. Indeed, Tokyo arguably would never have overcome significant domestic political opposition to TPP without the powerful strategic incentive it presented of deeper ties among the United States, Japan, and the greater Asia-Pacific region and a relative reduction of China's influence over the region's future evolution. The 'securitization' of TPP among United States and Japanese policymakers during the 2012–2016 period was also conspicuous ([Mulgan, 2016](#); [Oyane, 2016](#)). These logics persist even after US withdrawal. In short, Japan's decision-making evinces a clear inclination to deepen economic ties with the United States relative to those with China, in significant part based on strategic and security rationales.

6.2 TPP's strategic logic

By the mid-Obama Administration, TPP had evolved into the economic 'centerpiece' of its widely referenced Asia-Pacific 'rebalancing' strategy. As President Obama argued upon its signing in 2016, 'TPP allows America – and not countries like China – to write the rules of the road in the 21st century, which is especially important in a region as dynamic as the Asia-Pacific' ([White House, 2016](#)). That May, he further championed strategic and national security rationales ([Obama, 2016](#)). Similarly, US national security leaders argued that diversifying strategic links through TPP would help address regional concerns about China, and incentivize the United States to stay engaged. In 2015, former US defense secretaries and other military leaders (including future Trump Administration Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis) extolled the 'tremendous strategic benefits' of TPP, which,

would reinforce relationships with important allies and partners in critical regions of the world. By binding us closer together with Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia and Australia, among others, TPP would strengthen existing and emerging security relationships in the Asia-Pacific, and reassure the region of America's long-term staying power (Brown *et al.*, 2015)

The next April, eight former secretaries of defense argued that TPP would 'deepen relationships with allies' and its economic and national security benefits 'cannot be overstated.' US 'engagement and leadership on international trade are fundamental to U.S. national security,' they stressed (Rubin, 2016).

In short, for the Obama Administration, TPP had a larger strategic, not just economic objective: bolstering political relations with like-minded states and linking their economies (and interests) more closely in a mutually beneficial trade, financial, and security web. Importantly, the aim was not to 'contain' China but to demonstrate US commitment to the region, to level various playing fields, and to incentivize Chinese leaders to adopt order-sustaining, win-win policies salubrious for regional stability and which could, in theory, enable Beijing to ultimately join TPP, too.

6.3 Japan's circuitous embrace of TPP

In Japan, TPP was for years deeply unpopular, especially among politically influential interest groups (e.g., the agriculture lobby, a major supporter of Abe's LDP). Yet, support deepened after 2010 as the regional security environment worsened and as the US-Japan alliance confronted major internal stressors under Hatoyama. These stressors exacerbated concerns that China would seek to exploit United States-Japan frictions. They provided powerful *strategic* incentives for rethinking the TPP's utility (Iida, 2017, Ch. 5; Solis and Urata, 2017, 1).

Reconsideration began under Hatoyama's two DPJ successors and accelerated after Abe's new administration explicitly linked TPP to 'strengthening US-Japan relations' and its 'benefits for regional security' (Oyane, 2016; Iida, 2017, 116). Amidst worsening territorial disputes with China and Russia, analysts identified reinvigorated US-Japan economic ties as force multipliers bolstering Japan's 'diplomatic

power' in a difficult security environment (Okamoto, 2010; Iida, 2017, 122). To convince a skeptical Japanese public, Abe provided an explicit national security rationale and differentiated TPP partners from China, arguing for 'a new economic zone with our [US] ally,' 'creating new rules' with 'other countries who share the universal values of freedom, democracy, basic human rights, and the rule of law' – not coincidentally, many of whom are US security allies (e.g., Australia) and partners (e.g., Singapore, Vietnam) – and TPP's significant contribution to Japan's security and Asia-Pacific stability (Kantei, 2013; MOFA, 2016, 257). In a meeting with his US counterpart the following month, Japan's foreign minister explicitly referenced the TPP's 'strategic importance' and described Japan's participation as 'contribut[ing] to strengthening the US–Japan alliance' (U.S. Department of State, 2013). Addressing a US Congress joint session in 2015, Abe identified TPP's significance as 'far beyond just economic benefits' and 'about our security', calling its long-term strategic value 'awesome' (Abe, 2015).

6.4 TPP-11 in the Trump era: Japan 'Leaves the Light On'

Japan announced its completion of domestic procedures for TPP on Trump's inauguration day. Three days later, Trump unilaterally withdrew America from the largest free trade agreement in history – one championed by his Democratic and Republican predecessors. Abe's response to the prospect of US withdrawal was revealing of TPP's significance for Japan: 'The TPP would be meaningless without the United States', he said (Reuters, 2016).

Yet, since US withdrawal Abe has championed TPP-11 with the ultimate goal of incentivizing the US' return. Japan's chief TPP negotiator has stated that 'the differences between the original TPP-12 and TPP-11 [should be kept] to a minimum [...] to induce the U.S. to come back to the deal'. In the meantime, for Japan even a (US-less) TPP-11 carries manifold benefits compatible in spirit with a balancing posture: reducing the likelihood of Chinese dominance of regional economic integration; preserving an economic rulebook that deters perceived Chinese mercantilism; and raising the costs to Washington of continued self-imposed isolation from mega trade deals, while hopefully encouraging its ultimate return (Solis and Urata, 2017, 17). As Mireya

Solis argues, Japan's long-term goal is 'to anchor the United States to the regional architecture'. ([Japan Times, 2018](#)).

Reportedly, Abe has even consulted with other TPP-11 leaders about how to convince Washington to rejoin ([Nikkei, 2017](#)), and other TPP signatories appear to be counting on Japan to bring the United States back ([Abe, 2017](#)). In the meantime, officials from major Japanese political parties and influential members of Congress repeatedly stress TPP's strategic value ([Kyodo, 2017](#)). Given the stakes, Japan is unlikely to give up. The strategic arguments in favor of TPP have only strengthened since US withdrawal.

6.5 Japan's 'China-Plus-One' Strategy of risk diversification

Though not fundamental to strategic alignments under globalization, one underappreciated related development during the post-2012 period is that it marks the first time since the early 1980s that Japan's trade with and investment in China have both declined. Sino-Japanese trade intensity has been falling since the early 2000s, and Japanese investment in China plummeted after 2012, making it an outlier among other major regional economies ([Seguchi, 2016](#); [Iida, 2017](#), 21–22, 26). Meanwhile, in 2016 the most significant transfer pattern concerning Japanese firms' domestic and overseas bases and functions was an intraregional shift *away from* China toward ASEAN (15.3%). The second most common transfer pattern – also to ASEAN, but from Japan (12.9%) – was the dominant trend in 2013 (24.2%) and 2014 (22.7%). Transfers from Japan to China, which had been most common (of five trends) in 2010 (22.0%) and 2006 (37.4%), plummeted to 6.8% by 2016 ([JETRO, 2017](#), 6). Inter alia, these trends suggest a relative *reduction* in economic incentives for Japanese leaders to pursue a strategic shift toward China, thus further reducing the likelihood of a realignment away from the United States henceforth.

Throughout much of the post-Cold War period Japanese investment in China surged, and Japan's more than \$100 billion of cumulative investment made it the largest national investor in post-1978 China ([PRC Embassy in Japan, 2015](#)). This investment acted as a major ballast for bilateral political relations. In recent years, however, the trend line appears to have shifted. A political connection seems clear. A sharp drop-off followed massive anti-Japan protests in China in spring 2005. In

response to Beijing's economic coercion following the September 2010 Senkakus incident, an interministerial coalition of Japanese government and business entities cooperated to diversify rare earth suppliers away from China. Japan also deepened ties with the United States, its allies and partners such as Australia and Vietnam (Vekasi, 2015).

Following a more severe September 2012 diplomatic contretemps over the Senkakus, many Japanese firms accelerated a 'China-plus-one' diversification strategy (Iida, 2017, Chapter 6). Japanese investment in China fell, while investments in Southeast Asia expanded. As early as 2013, the latter had surged to 2.33 trillion yen, three-times the amount invested in China (Reuters, 2014). Meanwhile, Japanese firm sentiment (measured as willingness to invest in China) reached a nadir in 2015. By 2016, actual investment reached its lowest level since China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001.

Associated decisions are of course not motivated entirely by politics and national strategy. China's economic slowdown, industrial policies, rising labor costs and worker protections, technology transfer requirements, and other nonstrategic issues are also important factors driving relevant trends. Yet, the post-2005 and post-2012 drop-offs, coupled with Japan's status as a conspicuous outlier since 2012, suggests, and business surveys second, that bilateral relations-specific political factors play a role. Indeed, Japanese firms assessing 'grave' or 'some' negative impact from anti-Japanese protests surged from 10% after 2005 to 23% after 2010 to 65% after 2012 (Iida, 2017, 149–150). Furthermore, after September 2012 firms – with government support – started diversifying to Southeast Asia at a higher rate than basic economic variables would predict. Neither 2005 nor 2010 had similar effects (exception: the rare earth industry) (Vekasi, 2018).

Though not specific to security policy, these trends constitute a significant new development relevant to any discussion of Japan's likely future strategic alignment. They also challenge earlier work suggesting that political tensions do not negatively affect Sino-Japanese trade or investment flows (Davis and Meunier, 2011). If these trends persist, history may show 2012 to be an inflection point in Sino-Japanese political and economic ties. Though the 1.3-billion strong Chinese domestic consumption market will certainly remain attractive to Japanese firms, coupled with ongoing investment and production diversification – especially to Southeast Asia – these data suggest that even Japan's

economic interests (narrowly defined) may not provide as strong a realignment incentive as is sometimes assumed.

7 Public Opinion

Regardless of objectively measurable strategic and economic trends, it is worth asking whether trends in public opinion might incentivize Japan's democratically elected leaders to change course and pursue strategic realignment toward China. The short answer appears to be 'no'. Opinion surveys reveal a strong and stable desire to pull the United States closer, and little interest in pursuing a strategic 'middle road,' much less bandwagoning with China.

As a baseline, Japan's Cabinet public opinion surveys since 1978 consistently reveal strong affinity (*shitashimi*) toward the United States. This affinity reached an all-time high of 84.5% in October 2012, just weeks after the 'nationalization' of the Senkakus. Five years later – even after the 2016 US election – in October 2017 it remained high at 78.4%. Meanwhile, 84.4% believe Japan–US relations are 'good' and 95.2% believe the bilateral relationship's future development is 'important' or 'quite important'. In stark contrast to generally pro-US sentiment, since 2012 popular affinity toward China remains below 20%, a sharp decline from earlier periods (e.g., 68.5% in 1988; 47.9% in 2003; 38.5% in 2009). Meanwhile, only 14.9% believe Japan–China relations are 'good'. On a positive note, however, 76.9% believe the bilateral relationship's future development is 'important' to Japan ([Cabinet Office, 2017](#)).

Concerning strategic issues, Japan's two most recent (triannual) Cabinet surveys on defense issues (2015 and 2018) show China's military modernization and maritime activities to be the Japanese public's primary (2015; 60.5%) or secondary (2018; 48.6%) 'peace and security' concern.¹ (In contrast, in 2009 China was a concern to only 30.4% of respondents.) Meanwhile, public support for the US–Japan alliance and the JSDF as the best way to protect Japan's security reached an all-time high of 84.6% in 2015 (a seven-point monotonic increase since 2009) – a clear signal of the public's alignment preferences. (In 2018,

1 North Korea became number one in 2018, likely due to its 2017 nuclear and missile tests, several of which flew near or over Japanese territory, and the resulting war scare.

it was 81.9%). The same survey revealed 77.5% of respondents believe the alliance serves its purpose (*yakutatteru*), the third-highest percentage since the triennial poll began in 1978, though a slight drop since 2015's all-time high: 82.9% (Cabinet Office, 2018).

The Chicago Council's most recent poll on related topics (2016) found that support in Japan for US bases has increased since 2010, and that Japanese respondents identified the following as either 'critical' or 'important' threats to Japan's 'vital interest': China's territorial disputes (72%), North Korea (71%), China's military power (69%), a 'confrontation' between North and South Korea (62%), and China's economic power (59%). The Japanese public expresses extraordinary confidence in US military *and* economic superiority vis-à-vis China, suggesting little demand for accommodation of Beijing. Only 6% thought China was more militarily powerful (compared to 78% who saw the US military as more powerful, with 16% seeing the US and Chinese militaries as equals). Meanwhile, more Japanese respondents (61%) believe the US economy is more powerful than China's than do Americans themselves (31%). Economically, only 16% believe China is more powerful, while 23% see the two economies as roughly equal. Meanwhile, though a plurality of Japanese (39%) support Washington and Tokyo working together to undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China – compared with 63% in the United States – 23% believe the allies should 'actively work to limit the growth of China's power' (Kafura, 2017).²

Though Trump himself does not seem to be particularly popular in Japan (Pew Research Center, 2017), over two-thirds of Japanese respondents continue to have a favorable view of the United States and prefer the United States over China as 'the world's leading power'. (Pew Research Center, 2018) Perhaps more importantly, the aforementioned 2018 Cabinet survey shows overwhelming popular support for the US–Japan alliance and persistent, deep security concerns vis-à-vis China (and North Korea). A more recent (September 2018) survey by two political scientists further supports these general findings. It reveals very strong popular affinity toward the United States (+37%), despite low affinity for President Trump (−46%). It also shows low affinity for China (−57%) and a widely held perception of threat vis-à-vis Beijing's

2 37% were 'not sure/declined to answer.'

military power (+74%), activities in the South China and East China Seas (+75%), and economic influence (+66%). Furthermore, respondents strongly support both strengthening the US–Japan alliance and deepening ties with regional countries as a counter to China (Liff and McElwain, 2019).

In short, there is little ambiguity about which way the Japanese public wishes for its leaders to align strategically. Available data suggest comprehensive, consistent evidence of three trends in Japanese public opinion: toward China, extraordinarily low affinity coupled with worsening threat perceptions; toward the United States, strong affinity together with exceptional confidence in US military and economic power relative to China; and a widespread belief that close United States–Japan alliance ties are the best way to ensure Japan’s security. In each case, the relevant figures appear to have reached historical extremes during the 2009–2018 period.

8 Discussion

This study finds strikingly little evidence that Japan is responding to recent geopolitical and geo-economic shifts, general insecurity, uncertainty under anarchy, or potential regional volatility by hedging – as the concept is assessed in Haacke (Haacke, 2019). Rather than following a ‘middle course’, Japan’s pro-US orientation is hardly ambiguous. The 2009–2018 period shows that the crux of Japan’s strategy is to balance China through national security reforms, bolstering indigenous capabilities, strengthening security cooperation with Washington, and diversifying ties with US allies and partners. Significantly, these basic trends persist in the post-2016 US election environment. Though this study conceives of hedging as fundamentally about security policy and strategic alignment choices, evidence from foreign economic policy, investment patterns, and public opinion further support the core argument. They also suggest major countervailing forces that might otherwise incentivize Japan’s leaders to reverse course and/or pursue a strategic realignment toward China are unlikely for the foreseeable future.

To say that there appears to be negligible evidence that Japan is pursuing an ‘ambivalent,’ ‘ambiguous,’ or otherwise ‘middle position’ between the United States and China is not to claim that Japanese strategists are unconcerned about US commitments, or that the Japanese

government and private firms do not seek to benefit from economic, diplomatic, educational, and other constructive exchanges with China and its population of 1.3 billion. A balancing posture need not be incompatible with self-interested engagement by states or firms in other domains. Balancing is not containment – the two are analytically and theoretically distinct concepts (Liff, 2016, 429–431). Furthermore, ‘hedging behavior should not include costless activities that do not require states to face trade-offs in their security choices’ (Lim and Cooper, 2015, 696–97).

Considering the powerful geopolitical and geo-economics forces reshaping Asia-Pacific international relations, China's growing power and influence and increasing willingness to attempt to drive wedges between the United States and its allies, worsening US–China frictions, and significant uncertainty about the region's future evolution, from a hedging perspective the paucity of ambivalence reflected in Japan's strategy is striking. Even Japan's efforts to diversify its security and economic ties regionally – what some might colloquially refer to as ‘hedging’ – on closer inspection are part of a balancing strategy, compatible with US objectives, and designed to demonstrate Japan's increasingly proactive contributions to regional security and encourage Washington to stay engaged. Japan increasingly positions itself alongside the United States as an alternative and, when deemed necessary, counterforce to growing Chinese influence. As Abe remarked in a widely cited 2013 speech in Washington, ‘Japan must work even more closely with the United States, Korea, Australia and other like-minded democracies throughout the region. A rules-promoter, a commons’ guardian, and an effective ally and partner to the United States and other democracies, are all roles that Japan MUST fulfill’ (Abe, 2013). Japan's leaders increasingly appeal to the United States not only based on shared interests but also democratic principles, even ideology – in the views of some scholars, to ‘other’ China as a potential threat and nondemocracy (Suzuki, 2015). They frame their proactive championing of TPP in terms of strategic – not strictly economic – utility. Even investment patterns evince relative shifts *away* from China – or at least engaging in a ‘China-plus-one’ strategy to reduce economic and political risks. Japanese public opinion, meanwhile, is overwhelmingly pro-United States, pro-alliance, and clearly perceives China as a major security concern – not a potential security partner.

Whether one defines hedging as a risk management strategy aimed at diversifying ties under conditions of uncertainty or as ‘pursuit of a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose’ sides and increases strategic flexibility (Goh, 2005, viii), with the arguable exception of the 2009–2010 period Japan’s basic strategic orientation over the past decade is hardly ambiguous. Not only have Japan’s leaders repeatedly made positive choices to reaffirm and strengthen security ties vis-à-vis Washington and US security allies and partners, but there is also a conspicuous absence of accommodating much less bandwagoning with China. Here, an oft-overlooked point fundamental to any discussion of hedging bears repeating: there is little evidence that Japanese elites or the public consider China a potential security partner, and bilateral security cooperation and defense ties/exchanges are negligible. Even political ties remain weak, at best. For example, lost in the excitement over a resumption of high-level exchanges in 2018 was the sobering reality that the visit to Japan by China’s premier as an ‘official guest’ was the first in over a decade and the foreign minister’s visit was the first in eight years. The last visit by a Chinese president was in 2008. Meanwhile, Abe’s trip to Beijing was the first official visit by a Japanese premier to China in seven years, and the two sides held only their first mid-level defense exchanges in six years. The obstacles to deeper high-level exchanges are political, not logistical (a flight between Beijing and Tokyo takes three hours). In the absence of historical reconciliation and as territorial disputes fester, China’s military capabilities grow, and Japanese leaders perceive China to be threatening key aspects of the liberal international order, a major realignment seems unlikely for the foreseeable future.

Thus, contrary to claims that Japan is pursuing ‘a middle course’ between Beijing and Washington, Japan’s leaders seem to have judged there is little to be gained from a realignment toward China and much potentially to lose. During the DPJ’s brief flirtation with ‘independent diplomacy’ in 2009–2010, Sino-Japanese relations worsened despite clear DPJ efforts to make concessions and friendly overtures to Beijing. Meanwhile, frictions with Washington increased. In the decade since, one apparent suprapartisan takeaway seems consistent with former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro’s maxim that ‘The better our relationship with the US, the better we’ll get on with China.’ ([Financial Times](#), 2018).

Nevertheless, what is at present is not necessarily what shall forever be. Japan's leaders will continue to face a complex, dynamic, and potentially volatile strategic environment. Increasingly difficult trade-offs may manifest, especially if China's military power, economic wherewithal, and willingness to attempt to drive wedges between the United States and its allies grow. An exogenous shock could also upset Japan's basic trajectory. Indeed, this possibility appears less remote today given China's and North Korea's recent policies, geopolitical and geo-economic shifts, US relative decline, and President Trump's skepticism of alliances and free trade. Yet, even in this case, Japan's continued pursuit of more independent military capabilities and strategic autonomy while simultaneously bolstering security cooperation with the United States and its regional partners seems more likely than a strategic realignment toward Beijing.

9 Conclusion: Japan's unambivalent alignment

Have ongoing power shifts and deepening uncertainty, insecurity and potential volatility in Asia-Pacific international relations caused Japan's leaders to hedge against risk through major strategic realignments toward Beijing, or to seek strategic flexibility by not 'taking sides' between China and the United States, as the hedging literature would suggest, and as some observers and scholars claim?

The available evidence from the 2009–2018 period suggests a clear answer: 'no.' Despite some antecedent conditions present in other regional cases of observed hedging behavior, when viewed across a 10-year time horizon, toward China Japan has behaved in a manner far more reminiscent of balancing. Recent security policy shifts, the securitization of trade policy, changing investment patterns, and public opinion suggest little ambivalence in Japan concerning a pro-US strategic orientation, and little fertile soil for a major realignment in China's direction. On the contrary, China is generally seen as a security concern – not a partner. In short, the alignment signals from the past decade are hardly ambiguous.

To be sure, recent developments within and beyond Washington have raised significant concerns about the United States' staying power and the credibility of its commitments to regional security and economic affairs, as well as the future of the international order that

Japan's leaders identify as fundamental to national security. Thus, the long-term sustainability of Japan's China strategy remains to be seen, and may hinge on what comes next, and when. In particular, whether Japan can continue to walk the Trump tightrope – especially if it persists beyond the US 2020 presidential election or in a post-Abe era – will be a critical variable. A feared reduction of US forward-deployed forces in Korea or a deal with Pyongyang that eliminates ICBMs but leaves shorter-range nuclear-tipped missiles in place are just two examples of possible indirect shocks to the alliance. At least for the foreseeable future, however, as it concerns a widely-implied 'choice' between Beijing and Washington, Japan appears to be 'all in' on a clear-cut strategic alignment with the United States.

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