

Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Old Geography and the New Strategic Reality

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Many observers have explained Japan's foreign and security policy in terms of its geostrategic location. A trading nation far from the sources of energy and natural resources, dependent on exporting manufactured goods for economic growth and security of the sea lanes for trading, Japan needed an alliance with a hegemonic maritime power—the United States. This alliance assured connectivity between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean, guaranteeing Japan's economic survival, while protecting its territorial integrity against external threats.

The age-old geography, however, faces a dynamic transformation of external strategic environment. The relative weight of the United States in the world economy has declined, and so has Washington's relative weight in the trade portfolio of Asian countries, including Japan. While a strong growth of China during the 1990s and 2000s initially led this transformation, the gravity of the growth is gradually shifting toward Southeast Asia and South Asia. The US military dominance is gradually eroding, yet without showing a clear successor. The uncertain transition necessitates that Japan's strategy includes hedges.¹ What does Japan's hedging strategy look like? Why would Japan adopt such a strategy (especially as opposed to bandwagoning with the United States)? What are the implications of Japan's hedging in regards to the US-centered alliance system in the Indo-Pacific region?

In this broad perspective, this article will analyze Japan's Indo-Pacific policies with selective focuses on sea-lane security, strategic alignment, and economic diversification. The article will first summarily review key features of geography that are relevant to Japan's strategic thinking, the ways the country has dealt with these features, and the limitations on Japan's actions. Then, the article discusses key changes in the external strategic environment surrounding Japan in the post-Cold War era and into the projected future. Lastly, the article analyses how Prime Minister Shinzō Abe has steered Japan to deal with the new external strategic environment and the implications of his efforts for the US-centered alliance system in the Indo-Pacific region.²

A “Reactive State” in the Old Geography

Continuity in Japan’s geographic features has not been affected in a way to fundamentally alter its strategic thinking. An archipelagic nation off the eastern edge of the Eurasian continent, Japan is located on a geostrategic front line of the world’s dominant maritime power—the United States. Since the end of World War II, US military presence on Japanese soil enabled American deterrence against and responses to security challenges against US interests. Air and sea military assets stationed throughout Japan have provided the United States a strategic power of sea deniability against hostile continental powers, be it the Soviet Union or the People’s Republic of China. Japan held a key geostrategic location, essential to the US Cold War containment strategy.

This locational advantage alone, however, did not allow Japan to free ride on US protection. As the neorealist theory of international relations would predict, the dominant ally demands a bandwagoning junior ally to make a due (or more) contributions.³ While financially aided by the United States during the early days of the Cold War, Japan repaid the United States with foreign policy autonomy and toed the US strategy of containment in East Asia. Japan continued to rely on the US naval dominance in the South China Sea (SCS) and the Indian Ocean for safe passage of its merchant ships into the post-Cold War period.

Japan has strategically viewed maritime security in Southeast Asia from the early Cold War days, although it did not define its role in military terms due to the restrictive interpretation of its constitution against collective defense. Politically, Tokyo emphasized friendly relationships with capitalist states of the region through Japan’s official development assistance (ODA) and economic interdependence built through business investments. For security, the Japanese Maritime Safety Agency has contributed to the capacity building of the littoral Southeast Asian states.⁴ While the main choke point of the Malacca Strait was the initial focus of security cooperation, Japan’s assistance has gradually expanded to antipiracy efforts in general throughout Southeast Asia and beyond.⁵

Tokyo’s assistance to the littoral states has expanded into the Indian Ocean region (IOR), keeping pace with the expansion of Japan’s naval activities in this region since late 2001. Under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, Japan quickly offered its naval refueling assistance to the navies of the United States and its allies and friends in a coalition effort to curtail smuggling activities by the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the United States. This operation continued until 2010.⁶ Japan, under a new government of more liberal-leaning former opposition parties, then switched to an antipiracy operation in the Gulf of Aden, a choke point connecting the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and ultimately

the Mediterranean Sea.⁷ With the opening of Japan's first post-World War II overseas military base in Djibouti, Japan is also enhancing its military intelligence gathering in liaison with the US forces in the Middle East and Africa. Moreover, Tokyo started inviting civilian coast guard trainees from the Indian Ocean littoral states into Japan's capacity building courses. The Japan-initiated Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery (ReCAAP), which initially focused on piracy in the Malacca Strait in the late 1990s, now operates an Information Sharing Center that disseminates information on piracy-related issues and offers a model of regional cooperation to the Red Sea littoral states. As a result of these initiatives, Japan's image as a "reactive state" has lost some validity.

Thus, Japan's post-World War II strategic thinking has been keenly aware of the importance of connectivity between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean. The gradually evolving Japanese maritime security roles in both Southeast Asia and the IOR do attest to a high degree of continuity in Japan's strategic interests. The extension of Japan's military and security outreach into the Indian Ocean has also kept pace with the ongoing extension of Japan's economic interests into South Asia and Africa. Japan's preoccupation with maritime security in the IOR and especially choke-point security in the two ends of the region (the Malacca Strait in the east and the Red Sea passage in the west) is clearly visible.⁸ However, Japan has also provided official aid for development of economic infrastructure in key African states as part of its Cold War burden sharing⁹ and further post-Cold War economic focus through the Tokyo International Conference on African Development mechanism.¹⁰ Such assistance has led some East African nations and South Africa to achieve rapid economic growth in the past two decades. These nations' importance to Tokyo no longer exclusively relies on their exports of natural resources and commodities to Japan; their importing of manufactured Japanese goods is of growing significance as well.¹¹ Together with India, Japan competes against China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in African economic connectivity infrastructure development,¹² but Tokyo's limited budget does not allow an expansion of the ODA, therefore the focus is now on private investments.¹³

The constitutional constraints against collective defense, political sensitivity against any potential use of combat military force, and the Japanese government's caution not to reignite historical fears of a militarist Japan in Asia led to the growth of Japanese activism at an incremental pace. While the geographical scope initially started in Southeast Asia and then expanded into the IOR post-2001, direct use of military assets other than occasional transit training and port call visits did not start in Southeast Asia until after the naval refueling dispatch to the Indian Ocean in late 2001. Japan's civilian focus in Southeast Asia contributed to the country's good diplomatic image (soft power). This soft power was applied not only toward

Southeast Asia but also to China, where Japanese foreign direct investment fueled the engine of economic growth. Not risking the ongoing regional economic integration in East Asia was clearly Japan's priority throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. However, a growing tension in the SCS between China and the littoral claimants of Southeast Asia and the growing concern about seemingly lacking involvement of the United States as a key outside stakeholder gradually raised an expectation among Southeast Asian littoral states (like Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia) for Japan to play a more active security role in this region. On the other hand, the new strategic environment in the two regions does not clearly allow Japan a definite strategic choice.

The New Strategic Reality

Continuity in the geographic conditions surrounding Japan is just one factor in determining the country's overall strategy. Both economic and political factors interact with geography, posing a dynamically altering external strategic environment for Japan.

For a brief decade, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union simplified mainstream thinking about Japan's external strategic environment. Under the new unipolar world leadership of the United States, Japan elevated its collective security efforts in a bandwagoning alliance for fear of abandonment by the United States. A series of new legislation dispatching Japan's Self-Defense Forces overseas during the 1990s and the 2000s set the basis for reinterpreting of the national constitution to permit collective defense¹⁴ and a provided a foundation for more comprehensive security legislation in 2015 under Prime Minister Abe.¹⁵

To some observers the rise of China and an economic forecast of its surpassing the United States in the near future appeared to be a hegemonic transition from the United States to China. To neorealists, an alliance with the declining (on relative terms) United States predictably now appears a balancing behavior on the part of China's concerned neighbors like Japan.

On the other hand, it is hardly convincing to view Japan's strategy as simple *balancing*. First, there are indications that China's rise may not be as consistent or as lasting as previously projected. More recent economic forecasts for the year 2050 places India closely behind China in the global GDP ranking, for example.¹⁶ It is unrealistic to assume that Japanese strategic thinkers are unaware of such long-term prospects or that they are acting on the straight-linear projection of the relative bilateral power balance between the United States and China.

Second, Russia's return to international power politics adds complexity to the power balance projection in Asia. Despite the absence of any credible economic

forecasts that predict Russia's rapid rise, Moscow will likely remain a formidable military power. In short, there are numerous signs that Japan sees as portending the coming of a multipolar world.¹⁷

Predicting what kind of order would prevail in a new multipolar world is not easy, however, let alone proactively leading it. At the end of the Cold War, Japan did proactively lead institutionalization of economic and security order in the Asia-Pacific via its joint efforts with Australia to promote Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN)-centered frameworks (i.e., ASEAN Regional Forum—ARF and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation—APEC). The kind of multilateralism inclusive of both the United States and China then aimed at anchoring US interests and commitment to the region and disciplining Chinese (and to a lesser extent American) behavior within the existing and enhanced multilateral rules and institutions based on economic liberalism and the prevailing US-led security order.¹⁸

To Japan's dismay, ARF and APEC have failed to achieve much. Instead, the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) cooperation became prominent in Japanese diplomacy on the back of growing intraregional trade and investments in East Asia. Japan, China, and South Korea joined the ASEAN in regularized APT meetings to discuss both economic and political matters, but Tokyo remained more focused on economic discussions, fearing growing Chinese domination in such a forum. Soon Japan courted Australia, New Zealand, India, the United States, and Russia into an expanded East Asia Summit for political discussions, to dilute the Chinese influence.¹⁹ The Obama administration reversed the previous US aversion to ASEAN-centered forums and joined the East Asian Summit.

Japan's pursuit of a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement, based on the APT membership, is another tactical move to gain greater leverage in negotiating a free trade agreement that includes the United States. The strategic rationale here is that a prospect of trade diversions from such an agreement would compel the United States to commit itself to a greater free trade grouping that includes East Asia, and multilateralism in such a forum would restrain the United States from exercising negotiation advantages Washington would otherwise enjoy in bilateral settings.

Thus, regional economic dynamics have compelled Japan to simultaneously seek greater integration with East Asia and promotion of trade liberalization with the greater Pacific Rim, including most importantly the United States. The basic dimension of the Japanese economic strategy to pursue greater economic integration under a freer rule remains solid. The Indo-Pacific emphasis of Japan's strategy also speaks to its growing expectation of economic opportunities with populous

South Asian countries, such as India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka and beyond (including developing East African states).²⁰

On the other hand, how to properly engage in power balancing for security in this multipolarizing region is far from clear. Japan's hedging amid this uncertainty involves enhancing internal balancing (building its own military capabilities) within the existing US–Japan collective defense framework, seeking supplementary “alignments” (security partnerships with other US allies and friends, such as Australia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and France), and further exploring new security partnerships (such as India, Indonesia, Russia, and Vietnam).

With Australia, Japan has been in a trilateral security dialogue (including the United States) since 1996 and closely coordinates security policy in nontraditional threat domains, such as counterterrorism and natural disasters in Southeast Asia.²¹ The attempted sale of the *Soryu*-class advanced diesel submarines to Australia, despite Japan's loss to a French competitor, indicated that mutual interests in a closer security alignment do exist. The ongoing collapse of the French deal may reopen a window of opportunity for Japan.²² Since 2013, Exercise Southern Jackaroo, a trilateral ground exercise, has epitomized the evolution of the security cooperation beyond the maritime domain, although bilateral ground troop cooperation had continued for two decades under UN peacekeeping missions' auspices. Moreover, the May 2017 iteration of Cope North, an annual multinational military exercise taking place in and around Guam, which has been trilateral since 2011 (Japan, Australia, and the United States) upgraded the trilateral security cooperation to a more comprehensive coverage of missions beyond humanitarian and disaster relief, including :the training such as air-to-air combat, covering combat, fighter combat, air-to-ground firing and bombing, electronic warfare, air refueling, strategic air transportation, searching operations.”²³ The inaugural bilateral Australia–Japan air combat drill *Bushido Guardian* in 2018 was postponed due to the earthquake in Hokkaido but is to be rescheduled in 2019.²⁴

With Singapore, Japan's security ties have been built on civilian maritime safety and security cooperation. Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) vessels have regularly made port calls in Singapore without fanfare en route to their training missions. With the United Kingdom, in 2018 the first British participation in a ground exercise in Japan marked a new page of security cooperation, but here again a precedent can be found in the British escorting of the Japanese engineering corps in Samawah, Iraq, during reconstruction efforts following the Iraq War. The British have been keen on entering the Japanese arms market and are discussing possible offers for Japan's next-generation fighter-support plane development, which to the Japanese would at least serve as leverage in negotiations with US suppliers.

With India and Vietnam, the most notable examples of security cooperation are found in the maritime domain. Since 2014, Japan's participation in Exercise Malabar, a trilateral naval exercise involving the United States, Japan, and India, has enhanced India's security cooperation with the United States. The strong efforts of Prime Minister Abe overcame the general resistance of the Indian defense bureaucracy against transforming any New Delhi's existing bilateral security cooperation arrangements.²⁵ Japan made its first sale of military equipment to India by exporting ShinMaywa US-2 large amphibious air-sea rescue aircraft. With Vietnam, Japan completed the first delivery of promised 10 patrol boats to Vietnam. Japanese MSDF ships have made port calls in Vietnam since 2014, and in 2018, the first submarine and Japan's new and largest helicopter carrier, JS *Kaga*, made a port call in Vietnam en route a joint antisubmarine warfare exercise in the SCS with the United States.

Security cooperation with Indonesia and Russia, by and large, is confined to nontraditional security and search-and-rescue domains, but a notable ongoing development is Japan's negotiation with Russia over a peace treaty and return of the disputed "northern territories" at the same time the Western world imposes economic sanctions against Russia over the latter's interferences in Ukraine.

Abe's Indo-Pacific Policies

Given the opportunities and constraints in the external security environment and internal resources, Japan is in no place to proactively lead a new strategic realignment in the region. However, the extremes of undisciplined unilateralism by either China or the United States clearly hurt Japanese economic interests. China's suspected drive to achieve a military hegemony in East Asia is a threat to Japan, but the credibility of the US alliance to militarily deter China has proven insufficient to satisfy complex Japanese interests that stretch in both military and economic domains. Japan has supplemented the US alliance with its own economic and diplomatic strategy in Southeast Asia and beyond. Japan fears a revival of the "Nixon Shock," in which the United States went behind Japan's back to improve ties with China in the early 1970s. This fear, in turn, prevents Japan from fully bandwagoning with the United States at the cost of risking economic benefits from China. At the same time, Tokyo builds its own capabilities and makes them selectively available for collective defense with the United States to prove Japan's worthiness as a partner in balancing against China if necessary.

Tokyo's efforts in enhancing Japan's sea-lane security into the IOR is limited due to the constraints in resources and willingness to project. Japan's promotion of a maritime coalition, often referred as the Quad (United States, Japan, Australia, and India), is largely for boosting the self-confidence of member states through

alignments against the fear of a rising China and the temptation to appease or even bandwagon with Beijing. It is more a diplomatic strategy than a military one.

Despite the connectivity between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, which the Indo-Pacific concept emphasizes, Japan's activities west of the Malacca Straits are limited. The antipiracy patrol in the Sea of Aden addresses the security of the maritime traffic in an important choke point, where Japan assigns two destroyers (rotating) for convoy escorting since 2010. The initiative started under the Democratic Party of Japan government, which let expire the Liberal Democratic Party-sponsored refueling of anti-Taliban naval coalition ships in the Indian Ocean and passed an antipiracy law instead.²⁶

In the SCS, Japan has mostly limited itself to transferring coast guard patrol boats and planes to the littoral states of Southeast Asia and symbolically dispatching its naval vessels to the region in protest of China's militarization of the reclaimed reefs. Despite the increase in unilateral and bilateral naval drills and port call visits in the SCS region during the last four years, Japan has not joined the United States to physically challenge the Chinese with freedom of navigation operations through the 12-nautical-mile zones of the reclaimed land features and/or disputable baseline claims. Japan's growing yet restrained presence in the SCS can be explained through a linkage between the two disputes in the SCS and the East China Sea (ECS). In the latter, the Japan-controlled Senkaku Islands and Japan's claim of maritime boundary with China are disputed by China, and Tokyo fears that Japan's active participation in the SCS may provoke China and invite further assertiveness by the Chinese in the ECS.²⁷ On the other hand, an escalation of tensions may very well occur in a reversed manner, in which China's provocations in the ECS may unshackle Japan from its self-imposed restraints in both the ECS and the SCS. Tokyo's announcement in August 2019 that Japan will convert its two *Izumo*-class flat-top destroyers into an aircraft carrier and procure 42 F-35B short takeoff/vertical landing stealth fighter planes (presumably to deploy on a new aircraft carrier) is symbolic of the country's resolve to regain the ability to independently repel small-scale invasion of its island territories.

The strategic alignments Abe has promoted are indeed just *alignments*, literally significantly less than *alliances*. The limited utility of such alignments are due to Japan's partners' increasing economic linkages with China and Tokyo's own reluctance to expand collective defense commitments beyond its partnership with the United States. Tokyo does not hold unrealistically high expectations of Japan's alignment partners but is inevitably hedging against the possibility that its partners might opt to bandwagon with China. Even with Australia, Japan's long-standing friend, it is reported that Japan's failed submarine sale was the result of Abe's personal push against the reluctance of the Japanese Ministry of Defense.

Tokyo's economic policy does not neatly meet Japan's security strategy. Japan did not join the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations until the United States joined the negotiations. This suggests Japan's strong interest in having a free trade agreement with the United States but not through a bilateral negotiation, which gives strong leverage to the United States through linkage with security policy. When the United States pulled out of the negotiations, Japan salvaged the talks under the amended title of Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) to lock in the tariff concessions in case the United States later decides to rejoin the multilateral agreement. The move was more of a tactical adaptation, looking at improving the terms of economic relations with the United States. What Japan strategically desires is not an alignment of trade policy with a military strategy of containing China, which the United States seems to be promoting. Instead, Japan is aiming at disciplining the behavior of both China and the United States with multilateral and liberal trade rules by leveraging the two negotiations (CPTPP and RCEP) against each other.

Conclusion

The post-Cold War transformation of the strategic landscape in East Asia is more complicated than an image of hegemonic transition from the United States to China. Based on economic projections, a more likely midterm prospect of an emerging multipolar system is driving Japanese strategic thinking more than the seemingly intensifying US-China competition *per se*.

The high degree of economic interdependence between China on one hand and Japan, other Asian countries, and even the United States on the other shows a different picture from the Cold War era bipolar confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. At present, China's aggressive behavior in the maritime domains of the ECS and SCS is clearly a threat to Japan, but to Tokyo, China is not a country to be contained. Japanese firms have established a strong presence in the Chinese economy, and these firms' regional and global linkages are being threatened directly and indirectly by the ongoing trade war between the United States and China. Diversification of this economic interdependence with China will primarily follow economic logic, and the government's ability to steer economic relations away from China for security considerations is limited, as seen in Japanese firms' strong linkages 10 years after the preferential Japanese ODA loans to China were terminated. With this recognition, Japan pursues a hedging strategy, which could evolve into a balancing alliance as needed and minimize the chance of "buck passing" from the United States to Japan. Japan can continue to enjoy the economic benefits of engaging both the United States and China on most-favorable terms under multilateral liberal economic rules, while minimizing

the cost of collective defense with the United States and seeking diversified security partnerships to possibly supplement the declining US credibility in countering the Chinese threats and encouraging key states in the Indo-Pacific regions not to bandwagon with China.

Applied in the Indo-Pacific regional context, Japan's strategic interests are summarized in the rhetoric of the free and open Indo-Pacific, but Tokyo's preferred way to maintain this order is a "rule-based" one, not a "power-based" one. The emphasis on multilateral rules show Japan's status-quo orientation, which intends to bind not only China's military and economic maneuvering in the region but also the US tendency to resort to nationalistic economic policy toward the region. Moreover, Japan's Indo-Pacific concept clearly eyes westward expansion of the integrated regional economic sphere beyond East Asia.

The US–Japan military alliance remains the foremost component of Japan's strategy. Maritime commerce and naval operability based on the open sea doctrine of the International Law of the Sea are in Japan's interests, and US engagement in the region is critical for maintaining this multilateral rule-based order. In addition, Japan's solicitation of likeminded states to join a coalition for this strategic purpose is clearly visible, most notably manifesting in its proposal of the Quad. A smooth transition into a multilateral regional order is, in the medium term, preferable in Japan's view due to the relative decline of the US capability, and efforts to enmesh US engagement in the region will lock in continuous US commitment to the region. The Quad is useful for Japan without fully being materialized in the form of a formalized mutual defense treaty because it raises the cost to the United States of abandoning Japan by collectively staking US credibility in the broader region. This in turn prolongs the status quo. This objective can coexist with the other, more commonly perceived objective of sending China a message of deterrence.

Japan's strategy draws on its long-held "comprehensive security" tradition. In the current global context, success of the strategy depends on Japan's own ability to arrest its ongoing relative economic decline and meet the challenge of worker shortage and upskilling. This will further enmesh the Japanese economy into the Asia-Pacific and increasingly Indo-Pacific economies. The westward extension of the regional economic integration, assisted by Japan's infrastructure aid and private investments, solicits partnerships of other Quad members and offers alternatives to the Chinese-led BRI projects.

At key junctures of security policy evolutions, more dynamic political leadership played a leading role in Japan's otherwise reactive foreign policy. However, the Japanese conception of *Indo-Pacific* today is not a part of the US grand strategy.

Rather, it is a grand strategy of Japan, in which Japan expects the United States to behave in certain ways. ❁

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Notes

1. The concept of *hedging* is used in this article to mean adopting a middle-of-the-road security strategy between *balancing* and *bandwagoning* in neorealist conceptualization, while concurrently taking advantage of all available economic opportunities. For a more elaborate discussion of this conceptualization, see Thi Bich Tran and Yoichiro Sato, "Vietnam's Post-Cold War Hedging Strategy: A Changing Mix of Realist and Liberal Ingredients," *Asian Politics and Policy* 10, no. 1 (2018): 73–99.

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