

Re-conceptualising the strategic order: Japan's responses to strategic uncertainties in the Asia-Pacific¹

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Introduction

It is a well-known argument that Japan is one of the strongest supporters of the US-led security order in the Asia-Pacific, which is underpinned by a set of bilateral military alliances with several Asian countries since the Cold War. China's growing capabilities and regional influence over the past decade have increasingly called into question the continuity of the US-centric arrangements. Anxious about Beijing's future strategic intentions, regional players, including notably Japan, have called for a deeper American engagement. At the same time, worries about the sustainability of the US security commitments in the Asia-Pacific have become more palpable across the region. There are growing perceptions of America's relative 'decline', which intensified in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. These US-associated uncertainties in Asia have been heightened since the start of the Donald J. Trump administration. In the meantime, regional perceptions of Chinese assertiveness in dealing with the territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas have grown since 2010. As the People's Republic of China (PRC) has continued to expand its influence on regional economic and security relations, and has pushed forward with its military modernisation and maritime expansion, the question about the future of Asia's strategic order has become all the more salient, for Japan, and in the wider Asian region.

Against this background and taking Japan as a case-study, this paper focuses on the two major strategic uncertainties in the Asia-Pacific in the context of the shifting geopolitical environment. On the one hand, there are broad concerns in the region about the continuity of the US security commitments, and, on the other, there are anxieties associated with future Chinese intentions, especially in the realm of maritime security (Atanassova-Cornelis and Van der Putten 2015). The purpose of this paper is twofold: firstly, it examines Japan's responses to these uncertainties since the early 2010s, and especially under the second Abe Shinzo administration (2012-present). Secondly, it seeks to assess the impact of uncertainties on Japan's conceptualisation of Asia's strategic order. As the focus is on how Japan perceives uncertainties, the perceptions of Japanese leaders and political elites in the context of state-to-state relations are emphasised. Conceptually,

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the analysis is based upon the concept of 'hedging' as a primary response to strategic uncertainties by Asian-Pacific countries.

Geographically, the paper defines the Asia-Pacific as including the subregions of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. As regional worries about China are largely driven by the PRC's maritime security behaviour, the case of Japan is particularly relevant. Not only does Japan – a treaty ally of the US, rely heavily on America for its defence, but it also depends on China in the economic area and is vulnerable as a maritime nation. Tokyo's concerns associated with China have progressively increased over the past seven years as a result of its maritime territorial dispute with Beijing in the East China Sea (ECS). Concomitantly, this has driven Japan's increased insecurity about the US security commitments.

The paper is structured as follows. It first conceptualises hedging and examines the relevance of this concept for the paper's objectives. The discussion then looks at Japan's uncertainties associated with the US and China, respectively. This is followed by an analysis of Japan's responses to the two uncertainties with reference to hedging policies. Before concluding, the paper engages with the debate on Japan's conceptualisation of the evolving Asian-Pacific order.

Conceptualisation of hedging

Given the uncertain regional environment, the Asian states' hedging behaviour is not really surprising.² A number of studies over the past decade, some of them reviewed below, have examined Asian responses to uncertainties with reference to hedging. For example, stressing the uncertainty of intentions, Medeiros (2005) has analysed US and Chinese policies towards one another, defining them as mutual hedging. His analysis points to engagement and institutional binding policies, on the one hand, and to realist-style balancing, such as the strengthening of alliances and alignments with various Asian players in tandem with national military build up, on the other. McDougall (2011) has examined the strategies of East Asian states in response to China's rise through the framework of 'soft balancing', i.e. the pursuit of political and diplomatic initiatives, and accommodation, using this framework to emphasise the coexistence of different approaches within hedging. Similarly, Thayer (2014) has underscored the mixed strategies pursued by Southeast Asian countries to address US-related uncertainties, including comprehensive engagement through ASEAN, and varying degrees of hedging and indirect balancing. Finally, Park (2011) has argued that the US and its Asian-Pacific allies have utilised the 'hub-and-spoke' security system as a hedge against uncertainties associated with the evolution of an undesirable multilateral order in Asia. A common point

² I thank Park Jae Jeok for this remark.

in the above-mentioned studies is the element of uncertainty in response to which states choose hedging. Hedging is also typically utilised to examine the complex nature of Asian states' alignment behaviour located on the broad spectrum between bandwagoning and balancing, and involving a mix of various forms of cooperation and competition.

This paper applies Kuik's (2016) conceptualisation of hedging, developed as a framework for examining the smaller states', i.e. ASEAN players, responses to China-associated uncertainties. To be sure, Japan is often considered a major power in terms of resources and capabilities. At the same time, there are inherent limitations associated with Japan's security role. These are based on domestic legal and institutional constraints related to the use of force, as well as on external constraints related to Japan's military alliance with the US. While not to the extent of the smaller ASEAN players, Japan is nevertheless vulnerable in the Asian-Pacific context of changing power configurations and shifting threats, and so its security behaviour is highly affected by the two uncertainties. Kuik's study emphasises the 'constituent components' of hedging as a form of alignment behaviour, including military and non-military (economic and diplomatic) approaches, as well as their interplay. This conceptualisation is particularly useful for the purposes of this paper, which seeks, firstly, to elucidate the links between Japan's specific regional concerns and its response options, and, secondly, to examine what these responses mean for Japan's thinking about Asia's strategic order. The main aspects of Kuik's approach are briefly reviewed below and applied later in the paper.

Hedging is understood here as an 'insurance-seeking behaviour' on the part of a sovereign actor that simultaneously seeks maximisation of returns and risk reduction in its interaction with a bigger power or a competitor (Kuik 2016). One of the defining characteristics of hedging, as stressed by Kuik (pp. 5-6), is that it is deliberately ambiguous in character and includes contradictory policy options pursued towards the stronger power: some of these approaches indicate its acceptance, while others point to its rejection. A hedger's main objective is thus to avoid choosing a side in an uncertain strategic environment. Policies that seek maximisation of returns are 'economic-pragmatism', 'binding-engagement' and 'limited-bandwagoning'; thus they typically emphasise the strengthening of economic ties and institutionalisation of relations by means of politico-diplomatic engagement with the bigger power, both bilaterally and multilaterally.³ Risk-reduction options include, what Kuik (p.6) defines as, 'economic diversification', 'dominance-denial' and 'indirect-balancing', or 'economic, political and military hedges', respectively. They refer to various non-military and military approaches

3 This paper does not strictly follow Kuik's conceptual configuration of the different constituent options of hedging, because the present analysis also focuses on Japan's US-associated uncertainties as a separate driver of hedging behaviour. Therefore, the discussion examines only those options that are relevant for Japan as it concurrently responds to both uncertainties.

designed to diversify ties and avoid dependence, as well as to constrain the competitor in a more indirect way. As hedging is composed of various policy choices, it makes conceptual sense to consider it as a 'broad strategic orientation' rather than a single strategy (ibid.). Some scholars (see, Hornung 2014) have conceptualised the various returns-maximising policies as 'soft hedging' where the emphasis remains on power-acceptance and cooperation (but does not exclude, for example, some form of military hedging, or indirect-balancing), and the risk-reduction approaches as 'hard hedging' where power-rejection and competition remain dominant (yet some returns-maximising acts such as economic or diplomatic engagement remain present).

Two important caveats should be made here. Firstly, the analytical focus of this paper is on Japan's alignment choices vis-a-vis the two great powers, i.e. the US and China. In other words, the particular interest of this paper is to examine not only Japan's hedging behaviour vis-a-vis China (individually, or with the US or other Asian players). Rather, it is to demonstrate how some of the constituent components of hedging are relevant for Tokyo as it simultaneously seeks to address its US- and China-related uncertainties.

Secondly, it should be noted that actors' hedging behaviour evolves over time, meaning that hedgers do not pursue all hedging options at all times or to the same degree (Kuik 2016). From this perspective, a special attention in this paper is given to the following three hedging approaches, which have emerged as important constituent components of Japan's hedging behaviour (towards the US and China) since the late 2010s. They include the pursuit of Japan's defence self-reliance in tandem with a strengthened US alliance (used concurrently for returns-maximisation and risk-reduction); strategic diversification policies in the form of bilateral non-treaty alignments between Japan and some ASEAN states (primarily for risk-contingency); and Tokyo's multilateral initiatives and policies towards ASEAN, and (collective) hedging acts pursued within multilateral settings with ASEAN (used concurrently for returns-maximisation and risk-reduction).

Japan's US-associated uncertainties

Japan has had long-standing concerns about the US security commitments in the Asia-Pacific. There are two fundamental dimensions to these uncertainties: the first dimension concerns the sustainability of America's Asian-Pacific engagement, while the second dimension is related to US-China relations (Atanassova-Cornelis and Van der Putten 2015). The relative weakening of the US influence in Asia following the 2008 financial crisis, doubts about the continuity of Obama's 'rebalance' and worries generated by

President Donald Trump's Asia policy have underlined Japan's more specific short- to mid-term concerns.

Japan, due to its position as the more dependent partner in the bilateral alliance, has had long-standing anxieties about 'abandonment' amid possible US disengagement from Asia (Ashizawa 2014). The 2008 financial crisis intensified Japan's worries about the sustainability of the US military commitments due to the growing fiscal and economic constraints in the US, especially cuts in America's defence spending. The strategic 'rebalance' of the Obama administration, officially announced in early 2012, was not able to sufficiently reassure Japan, and Tokyo's concerns about Washington's ability to fund the rebalance remained until the end of Obama's term in office.⁴ Japan's uncertainties were shared by many countries in the Asia-Pacific. Indeed, Obama's policies were not completely successful in achieving the desired reassurance and trust across Southeast Asia either, and anxieties about the (staying) economic and military power of the US remained lingering in the region.⁵

Many Japanese strategists have openly doubted America's ability and willingness to sustain its mid- to long-term security involvement in the region (Wallace 2013). More specifically, Tokyo's acknowledgement of Washington's commitment to the alliance has not eliminated its worries that the US might be reluctant to engage in a conflict 'that does not directly threaten' American interests (Tatsumi and Wan 2015), for example, in relation to the *Senkaku/Diaoyu* islands. The rise of Chinese power, and the implications this has for the US security commitments to Japan and, more broadly, to the Asia-Pacific reinforce Tokyo's anxieties. Indeed, while Japan (similarly to some other Asian states) relies on the US for security protection against the prospect of a more hostile China, it is also economically dependent on the PRC and so vulnerable to the uncertainties of great power politics.

A significantly reduced US presence in the region could potentially be an outcome of US isolationist policies. Although American retreat from the region is unlikely in the short- to mid term, Washington's decision to accommodate Beijing remains a distinct possibility. Given Japan's security over-reliance on America, Japanese strategists are particularly concerned about the latter scenario, which will mean a certain degree of Sino-US strategic understanding at the expense of Tokyo.⁶ Japanese worries in the short term include a possible US decision not to intervene in a *Senkaku/Diaoyu* contingency on Japan's behalf. This, either for fears of negative repercussions for US-China relations or because of the high costs for the US that such an involvement might entail in confronting China's 'anti-

4 Interview with Kotani Tetsuo, Tokyo, November 2015.

5 Author's personal communications and interviews in Jakarta, Singapore and Tokyo in 2015.

6 Author's interviews with Japanese officials and scholars in Brussels in 2014 and in Tokyo in 2015.

access, area-denial' (A2/AD) capabilities (Hughes 2016). A source of these anxieties was the Obama administration's emphasis on engagement of the PRC, especially in 2009-2010, as well as some signals sent by Washington suggesting that America was increasingly doubting its own ability to defend its allies in the Asia-Pacific. For example, China's military modernisation was said to 'threaten America's primary means of projecting power and helping allies in the Pacific' (Gates 2010).

Under President Trump the US withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement in early 2017. The lack of clarity about Trump's Asia-Pacific policy, especially, regarding US relations with China, has persisted since he assumed office and has reinforced Japan's 'abandonment' concerns. President Trump's rhetorical shifts on China, from threatening Beijing with a trade war to emphasising 'friendly' relations with the PRC in order to 'fulfill our historical responsibility' for the peace and stability of the world (Al Jazeera 7 April 2017), have made Japan even more nervous. Japan's 'fear of abandonment' now seems to be associated with a possible reduction in the US commitment to Japan not due to American withdrawal from Asia *per se*, but due to a shift in Washington's China policy; the latter broadly related to relative power shifts or, possibly, in the short term, to the prospect of some kind of a US-China (trade) bargain under Trump.

At the same time, Japanese strategists have recognised that the alliance with Japan has remained a main pillar of America's continuing regional involvement. The Obama administration's reaffirmation, on numerous occasions, that 'our [US] treaty commitment to Japan's security is absolute, and Article 5 covers all territories under Japan's administration, including the *Senkaku* islands' (*Asahi Shimbun* 2014) was a manifestation of the continuing value the US attached to its alliance with Japan. Washington has also strongly supported Tokyo's security initiatives under Abe, discussed later in this paper. For its part, early on in office, the new Trump administration has tried to reassure Tokyo of America's commitment to its Mutual Defence Treaty with Japan. Jim Mattis, the new Secretary of Defence, visited Japan on his first foreign trip and underscored that 'Article 5... is understood to be as real to us today as it was a year ago, five years ago - and as it will be a year, and 10 years, from now' (*Asahi Shimbun* 2017b). Similarly, Trump's meeting with Abe in February 2017 did send a strong signal of continuity regarding the US commitments to Japan. The American president reiterated a long-standing US position that the US was 'committed to the security of Japan and all areas under its administrative control' (The New York Times 2017). These developments may have eased somewhat Japan's initial uncertainties about the new US administration, although Tokyo's abandonment concerns do remain.

Japan's worries about the durability of the US security presence in the region

converge with the concerns of many ASEAN states (Kuik 2016). Indeed, there is (in varying degrees) regional apprehension in Southeast Asian capitals regarding Beijing's strategic objectives in light of its military modernisation, and especially due to its recent behaviour in the SCS disputes. While the ASEAN players have largely accepted US military dominance of the Pacific as an 'off-shore balancer', they are unlikely to accept China in such a role (Acharya 2009). This certainly applies to Japan as well. Accordingly, fears of a reduced in the future American security presence (or of Washington's retreat from the Asia-Pacific altogether) generate significant regional anxiety, for US disengagement would most likely lead to Chinese domination. This is not an acceptable scenario either for Japan or for many Southeast Asian states.

For the time being, the prevailing view among ASEAN states is to keep the US strategically engaged in the region, but avoid siding with it against the PRC. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has aptly summarised this, by saying that while '[the 7th fleet] has a stabilising influence on the security of the region... we want the US to have constructive and stable relations with China... Then we don't have to choose sides' (Weymouth 2013). In contrast, Japan is prepared to choose a (US) side, although it does prefer to avoid facing the risk of a US-China military confrontation and the uncertainties for the region that this will entail.

Japan's China-associated uncertainties

For Japan and many countries in the Asia-Pacific China-associated uncertainties include long-term worries about the PRC's future strategic intentions and how it will use its growing military power, and more specific short- to mid-term anxieties about Chinese maritime security objectives in the region (Atanassova-Cornelis and Van der Putten 2015). These anxieties have grown in response to the PRC's perceived assertiveness since 2010 in pursuing its territorial claims in the China Seas. The worries about the sustainability of the US security engagement arguably exacerbate Japan's China-associated uncertainties.

Japan's concerns about the PRC's strategic intentions in Asia have progressively increased since the early 2000s. A perceived lack of transparency on the PRC's national defence, as well as the double-digit growth of its defence spending in the post-Cold War period have driven the 'China threat' perception in Japan. As the tensions over the disputed *Senkaku/Diaoyu* islands have escalated since 2010, Japan's wariness of its neighbour has become especially pronounced. For example, the 2013 strategy documents of the Abe administration, namely the National Security Strategy (NSS) and the National Defence Programme Guidelines (NDPG), described the PRC's security behaviour, especially China's military modernisation, and its intensified activities in the seas and airspace

around Japan, as an 'issue of concern for the international community, including Japan' (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2013a, 2013b). The perception that the PRC attempts to unilaterally change at sea 'the status quo by coercion' (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2013b: 8), disregarding international law and infringing upon the freedom of navigation has come to dominate Japan's political discourse on China.

Tokyo's specific concerns about the PRC's 'attempts to unilaterally change the status quo' in the ECS (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016: 24), and its intrusion into, what Japan considers its territorial waters and airspace around the *Senkakus*, have grown concurrently with broader geopolitical worries. The latter include China's 'plans to further expand the sphere of its maritime activities' into the Pacific Ocean and its objectives of SLOCs defence (Ministry of Defence 2015a: 47-48), which alludes to Tokyo's anxieties about the PRC's possible control of trade routes and maritime domination in the SCS and beyond.

Japanese uncertainties about the PRC's growing military power are primarily related to China's expanding naval and air military capabilities. Of particular concern for Japanese strategists is China's rapid development of A2/AD capabilities, notably its anti-ship ballistic missiles (Gronning 2014), and the overall deployment of short- and intermediate-range missiles. Especially the missiles aimed at Taiwan are multifunctional and hence can target Okinawa or be used in a *Senkaku/Diaoyu* contingency.⁷ As the Chinese navy is developing capabilities to control the 'near seas' (within the 'first island chain'), its A2/AD strategy has led to worries in Tokyo that the ultimate objective of the PRC's military modernisation is China's future domination of maritime East Asia (Atanassova-Cornelis et al. 2015). In the short term, Japanese strategists worry that China's A2/AD strategy would deny the US access to the western Pacific and hence a possible intervention in a *Senkaku/Diaoyu* contingency to assist Japan. Additionally, the sea lanes crossing the ECS are crucial to Japan's trade and energy imports. Should the PRC acquire control of this maritime space, it would be able to block strategically critical for Japan trade routes that, in turn, could have potentially devastating economic (and security) implications for this island nation.

Japan's China anxieties are shared by some countries in (maritime) Southeast Asia, where, too, there have been long-standing concerns about the objectives of China's military build up and its broad geopolitical ambitions. The growing tensions in the SCS since the early 2010s have led to more specific fears of future Chinese naval domination of maritime Southeast Asia. This has echoed Japan's own anxieties in the ECS. Recent grievances include, among others, PRC's taking control in 2012 of the disputed with the Philippines Scarborough Shoal, its placing an oil rig in Vietnam's EEZ in 2014, and its dramatic acceleration of land reclamation works on reefs and islets in the SCS beginning

⁷ Author's interview with Dr. Simon Chang, Taipei, September 2012.

in 2014. SCS claimants have been alarmed by the PRC's construction activities, as it expands its presence in the heart of maritime Southeast Asia.

However, Southeast Asian leaders have largely refrained from openly articulating the 'China threat' in official discourse (Ciorciari 2009), although the Philippines was the exception to the rule until the arrival of President Rodrigo Duterte in mid-2016. This stands in contrast to the discourse in Tokyo. While statements by ASEAN in recent years have revealed growing (and more explicit) anxieties, the inability of the organisation on several occasions to 'speak with one voice' on the SCS issue has undermined Japan's efforts to seek a common stance against China.

Defence self-reliance and alliance with the US

A first major response by Japan to strategic uncertainties has included the military dimension, with a particular focus on maritime security in the ECS. Japan has increasingly emphasised pursuing defence self-reliance by means of strengthened military capabilities and responsibilities. This has included a growing defence budget under the Abe Shinzo administration, steady acquisition of capabilities to deal with potential ECS contingencies, as well as an overall expansion of the SDF's security role in terms of both geographical focus and missions.

The growing tensions with China over the *Senkaku/Diaoyu* islands since 2010 have prompted Tokyo to prioritise Japan's maritime defence in the framework of the country's overall national defence strategy. The emphasis is increasingly being placed on enhancing Japan's own naval power and achieving 'maritime supremacy and air superiority' (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2013a: 7) in order to respond to potential ECS contingencies. This has included the acquisition of military hardware such as Osprey transportation aircraft and amphibious assault vehicles, which can be used for retaking islands under foreign occupation. The defence budget has now seen five consecutive years of rise. In February, the Diet approved for fiscal year 2017 a record high budget of 5.1 trillion yen (US \$45 billion), which was a 1.4 per cent increase from 2016 (Cai Hong 2017). The priority expenses reflect the Abe administration's main security objectives, namely to ensure the 'security of seas and airspace surrounding Japan', to respond 'to attacks on remote islands' and 'to ballistic missile attacks' (Ministry of Defence, Japan, 2017). The main expenses will cover the strengthening of the SDF's intelligence, warning and surveillance capabilities; enhancing transportation and amphibious operation assets; and the acquisition of an advanced sea-based Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system, the Standard Missile-3 Block IIA (*ibid.*). The coast guard budget, too, is expected to be increased to a record of 210 billion yen (US \$1.8 billion) to cover the costs of eight new

surveillance and research ships, and the addition of some 200 maritime law enforcement staff (*Asahi Shimbun* 2016).

Increasing its defence self-reliance has proceeded in tandem with a strengthening of Japan's military alliance with America. The purpose is to ensure the US defence commitments to Japan, while also offsetting the security risks associated with China. In 2014, the Abe Cabinet reinterpreted Article 9 of the Constitution. Provided that 'Japan's survival is threatened' as a result of 'an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan', Japan is now allowed to exercise its right to collective self-defence under strict conditions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014). This means that, theoretically, the SDF will be able to defend US troops and assets from aggression. The reinterpretation is important as a hedge against US abandonment, for it involves expansion of Japan's commitments to its American ally and is a demonstration of Tokyo's willingness to reciprocate (although restrictions do remain).

In a similar vein, it was the logic of binding-engagement (a returns-maximising option) that underpinned Japan's willingness to seek a revision in 2015 of the *Bilateral Defence Guidelines*. Following from the 2014 Cabinet decision, the new guidelines allowed the SDF protection of US military assets, envisaged enhanced operational coordination and interoperability between the allies, and removed the geographical limitations on Japan's security missions (Ministry of Defence, Japan 2015b). They covered also bilateral cooperation at the regional and global levels in various areas, such as partner capacity building, securing the safety of SLOCs and maintaining 'maritime order', including freedom of navigation, as well as international peacekeeping and humanitarian disaster relief operations (*ibid.*). Although not explicitly stated, the message was one of a strengthened joint deterrence of China's naval expansion in Asian waters. The emphasis on maritime security in the guidelines closely followed Japan's ongoing geographic shift to southwestern defence, stated in the 2013 NDPG. While this shift and, especially, Japan's focus on the Tokyo-Guam-Taiwan strategic triangle is aimed at reinforcing the SDF's surveillance of the vital sea lanes converging in this area, it also enhances Japan's support for the US presence in the Western Pacific (Patalano 2014). In turn, this behaviour is consistent with Tokyo's policies aimed at keeping Washington engaged in Japan's security through the approach of binding-engagement.

The legal basis for the above-mentioned changes related to Japan's security role was laid out in the 2015 security legislation of the Abe administration. In spring 2017, amid the rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the MSDF helicopter carrier *Izumo* was deployed to escort a US Navy supply ship off the Pacific coast of Japan. This was a highly publicised mission of Japan's protection of the military assets of its US ally and represented the first instance of the implementation of the security legislation. Japan's

anxiety about US abandonment was clear when during the 2015 Diet deliberations of the new security legislation Abe stated that 'if Japan did not protect US Navy ships, and one was sunk leading to the death of many young sailors, the ties of the Japan-US alliance would receive a decisive blow at that precise moment' (as quoted in *Asahi Shimbun* 2017a). The strengthening of Japan's defence capabilities and responsibilities within (and commitments to) the alliance has, therefore, served a dual purpose of reducing the risk of US 'abandonment' while increasing Japan's ability to constrain the PRC (individually and together with America).

As to Japan's China policy, during the Cold War and much of the 1990s it was pursued primarily within the framework of economic and diplomatic engagement of the PRC. Some political and military hedging was gradually implemented in the 2000s. Over the past decade (and noticeably since 2010) there has been a palpable reduction in Tokyo's pursuit of returns-maximising options (or soft hedging) in favour of risk-contingency acts (or hard hedging) (Hornung 2014); this, as a result of Japan's growing uncertainties about China, especially in the maritime domain. For example, the 2013 NDPG point out that Japan 'will promote security dialogues and exchanges with China, and will develop confidence-building measures' in order to prevent accidental clashes (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2013s: 11). To this end, Japan has pursued a binding-engagement policy towards China in various ways. The high-level summits between Abe and Xi, foreign ministerial meetings, and bilateral security dialogue have served to reinforce institutionalisation, keep the channels of communication open and stabilise the bilateral relations. CBMs in the maritime domain have aimed at reducing the risk of accidents at sea. Some of the main arrangements have included the acceleration of talks on the implementation of the Japan-China Maritime and Air Communications Mechanism (which was expanded in 2015 with the addition of the aerial aspect), and the High Level Consultation meetings (since 2012), which include participants from various agencies involved with maritime issues (Parameswaran 2016b).

Despite the binding-engagement approach, Japan has placed a stronger emphasis on responding 'firmly and in a calm manner to the rapid expansion and intensification of Chinese activities on the sea and in the air' (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2013s: 11). To this end, Tokyo has stepped up the various risk-contingency measures, which have included implementing the military hedge alongside political and economic hedges, as discussed in the following sections. Importantly, as Tokyo has increasingly come to question the reliability of Washington's security commitments at a time (and because) of growing anxieties about Beijing's behaviour in the region, the various approaches have played a dual role for Japan to hedge against both US- and China-associated uncertainties.

Bilateral dimensions of hedging with ASEAN states

A second major response to strategic uncertainties by Japan may broadly be identified as a diversification policy, i.e., away from the US and China (Atanassova-Cornelis and van der Putten 2015). This has included Japan's reinforcement of the existing, or the establishment of new, bilateral (comprehensive) strategic partnerships with other players in the region, especially in maritime Southeast Asia. As a distinct form of alignment (Wilkins 2012), these partnerships are generally non-binding in nature and do not identify another state as a 'threat', and are also multidimensional. They allow hedgers to implement concurrently various risk-contingency options vis-a-vis bigger powers. Indeed, the pursuit of politico-diplomatic and economic initiatives is often paralleled by the enhancement of military ties between the hedging states.

In so far as Tokyo seeks to reduce the risks of potential Chinese hegemony in the Asia-Pacific in the mid- to long term, the pursuit of strategic diversification in the case of Japan may be associated with its China-related uncertainties. At the same time, forging stronger ties with various Asian-Pacific countries is also relevant for addressing Japan's concerns about the reliability of the US regional commitments. Thus, as observed by Ciorciari (2009), while these limited alignments seek to manage the risks associated with a rising threat (notably China), they also seek to reduce the risks related to over-dependence on an ally (the US), as an ally 'may prove unreliable'. Importantly, these approaches are particularly useful to the hedgers, such as Japan, for they do not explicitly target any particular state (such as the PRC, which will not be acceptable to ASEAN states), nor do they jeopardise the hedger's respective ties with an ally (i.e., with America). This means that Japan can continue to pursue returns-maximising options with both the US and the PRC, although these are more prioritised in Japan's relations with the US than with China.

Japan's strategic diversification in the Asia-Pacific, also defined by some scholars (Wallace 2013) as a 'strategic pivot South', has gradually become a prominent feature of Japanese foreign and security policies from the late 2000s on. Tokyo has prioritised enhancing its bilateral economic, diplomatic and defence ties with nations geographically located 'south' of Japan's primary sphere of its geostrategic interests in Northeast Asia (ibid.). Many Southeast Asian countries have reciprocated by embracing Tokyo's overtures and thereby pursuing their own strategic pivot 'North'. These bilateral engagements have included both non-military and military components, such as diplomatic visits, high-level summits and defence talks, military exchanges and exercises. Japan has provided military equipment to some ASEAN states to enhance their coastal defence, pursuing thereby

maritime security cooperation in the SCS (Hughes 2016). Tokyo has also signed economic partnership agreements (EPAs), for example, with the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia, and has increased its ODA provision to Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, for infrastructural projects (Wallace 2013).

Japan's pursuit of strategic diversification has been markedly accelerated under Prime Minister Abe. Already in his first year in office, Abe visited all ASEAN member countries, which marked the first time a sitting Japanese prime minister visited all ten nations. The Abe administration has sought enhanced defence cooperation and security dialogue, in particular, with the Philippines and Vietnam. Both countries have territorial disputes with China and share Tokyo's concerns about the PRC's geopolitical ambitions in the region. Japan has also deepened its political and security ties with Indonesia, as well as with the traditionally wary of antagonising China, Malaysia.

Japan is now an important partner for maritime capacity building of some ASEAN states, especially as they increasingly respond to China's maritime advances in the SCS with growing defence budgets and naval build up.⁸ Indeed, countries in maritime Southeast Asia are now seeking either to expand the capabilities of their coast guards, which is the case of the Philippines and Malaysia, or to develop such maritime security organisations separate from their navies, in the case of Vietnam (since 2013) and Indonesia (since 2014). In 2013, based on Manila's earlier request, Prime Minister Abe agreed to provide the Philippines with 10 new small coast guard patrol ships financed by Japan's ODA. The Philippines was the first such case under the 2012 US-Japan agreement for the strategic utilisation of Japan's aid through the provision of cutters to Asian-Pacific nations (*Asahi Shimbun* 2013b). In 2016, during a meeting with President Duterte, Abe pledged that Japan would supply the Philippines with two large patrol vessels and lend up to five used surveillance aircraft. Vietnam, too, has already received from Japan six used patrol vessels to enhance its maritime law enforcement capabilities. In 2016 Hanoi requested new ones and Prime Minister Abe on a visit to Vietnam in January 2017 promised six new ships. Japan will also reportedly give two decommissioned patrol vessels to Malaysia. Relations between Japan and Malaysia were given a boost in 2015. The two sides agreed to raise their bilateral relations to that of a strategic partnership, as well as to launch bilateral negotiations on transfer of defence equipment and technology with a particular focus on the areas of disaster relief and maritime security.

Tokyo is planning to strengthen further its role in Southeast Asia's maritime capacity building by establishing in fiscal 2017 a special unit within the Japan Coast Guard that will be tasked with international coast guard cooperation.

Japan has progressively deepened its bilateral defence engagements with nations in

8 Author's personal communications and interviews in Jakarta, Singapore and Tokyo in 2015.

Southeast Asia. In 2014, the SDF for the first time observed a joint US-Philippine training exercise. In 2015, Filipino and Japanese coast guard teams conducted a maritime law enforcement drill, which was the first such bilateral exercise after the signing in 2011 of the Japan-Philippines *Strategic Partnership*. Also in 2015, the Philippines and Japan (two Japanese destroyers and a Philippine warship) held their first joint naval drills in the SCS. This was a clear example of Tokyo's growing interest in expanding its presence in maritime Southeast Asia. In 2016, Tokyo signed an agreement with the then administration of Benigno Aquino for supplying the Philippines with defence equipment and technology; the first such agreement Japan has with a Southeast Asian nation. Bilateral defence cooperation has continued under Duterte and in 2017 the Philippines received on lease two (of the expected five) Japanese military surveillance planes for the purpose of patrolling the SCS.

Similarly, Japan's defence cooperation and exchanges with Vietnam have been stepped up, in particular amid the rising tensions in the SCS. In 2014, during the visit of President Truong Tan Sang to Japan the two sides elevated their already existing (since 2009) strategic partnership to an *Extensive Strategic Partnership*. In 2015, the Japanese and Vietnamese coast guards conducted a joint search and rescue exercise. Hanoi and Tokyo have also agreed to increase joint maritime drills. In 2016, for the first time since the end of World War II, two Japanese destroyers made a port call at Cam Ranh Bay in southern Vietnam, a strategically important area facing the SCS. This has been paralleled by enhanced bilateral trade and economic ties, especially as Japan is Vietnam's second largest foreign investor after South Korea.

Japan's security ties with Indonesia, with which a strategic partnership was signed back in 2006, are expanding as well. In 2015 Prime Minister Abe and President Joko Widodo decided to launch a high-level bilateral 'maritime forum' in order to expand maritime security cooperation, and boost Japan's capacity-building assistance to Indonesia for infrastructural projects and coastal defence. To this end, Tokyo and Jakarta signed in 2015 a (non-binding) defence cooperation pact, which involves cooperation in defence technology development. In early 2017 Prime Minister Abe visited Indonesia and agreed with President Widodo to enhance further the bilateral economic and maritime security ties. Japan is Indonesia's second-largest foreign investor, and is expected to contribute to the development of Indonesia's smaller islands and to cooperate for the building of a high-speed railway (*Channel News Asia*, 2017).

Multilateral dimensions of hedging

The final aspect of Japan's responses to strategic uncertainties includes multilateral

initiatives and policies, and (collective) hedging acts pursued within multilateral settings. Under Abe, Tokyo has noticeably increased economic cooperation with, and investment in Southeast Asia in the framework of Japan's multilateral engagement of ASEAN. For example, at the 2013 Japan-ASEAN summit the Abe administration pledged ODA assistance to the region of some \$20 billion over five years. This aid, provided primarily in the form of concessional loans, would focus on improving Southeast Asia's disaster relief capabilities, fund transportation infrastructure and assist the region's development, for example, by promoting economic development of countries in the Mekong river region (*Asahi Shimbun* 2013a). Furthermore, in 2015, the Abe administration unveiled a comprehensive assistance framework to Asian economies, which would include Japanese provision of US\$110 billion aid for infrastructural projects over the next five-year period. Observers point out that Tokyo's stepped-up engagement of ASEAN is a response to Beijing's increased diplomatic and economic influence in the region, including through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the One Belt, One Road initiatives.⁹ Tokyo's efforts aim at reinforcing Japan's economic and geostrategic importance for ASEAN states, both bilaterally for individual countries and collectively for the organisation. In this way, Japan attempts to minimise the risks of exclusion from various multilateral (economic) arrangements, and hedge against possible Chinese domination and coercion. This appears to be all the more important in the wake of the US withdrawal from the TPP and the PRC's strong push for the conclusion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Abe's suggestion that Japan would like to take a leadership role in moving forward the TPP agreement, despite America's withdrawal (Chandran and Fujita 2017), is an example of Japan's economic hedge against both China and the US in search of diversified trade and investment ties.

Japan has endeavoured to utilise multilateral frameworks and specific multilateral initiatives with ASEAN as political (dominance-denial) and military (indirect-balancing) hedges against China. Tokyo, for example, has sought to create a unified stance with ASEAN by jointly emphasising the importance of the rule of law in dealing with territorial disputes in Asia and for ensuring freedom of navigation (Hughes 2016). This push for a common Japan-ASEAN stance on maritime challenges reflects the progressive domination, over the past decade, of security concerns in Tokyo's Asian diplomacy as a result of the growing in Japan 'China threat' perception (Sahashi 2016). In its relations with ASEAN, Tokyo has attempted to constrain Beijing in an indirect way. Indeed, this is in line with ASEAN's long-standing principle of 'not choosing sides' and hence avoiding an explicit targeting of the PRC.

The Abe administration's 'Vientiane vision' unveiled in 2016 is an illustration of

⁹ Author's interviews in Tokyo, November 2015.

Japan's implementation of dominance-denial and indirect-balancing policies in regard to China. This new initiative seeks an expanded defence cooperation between Japan and ASEAN (as an organisation) in a comprehensive manner by including both non-military and military aspects. The initiative focuses on the promotion of the principles of international law and on maritime security, as well as on 'practical defence cooperation' such as organisation of seminars, equipment and technology transfer, human resource development and multilateral joint training (Ministry of Defence, Japan 2016). The comprehensive character of this initiative may dissipate regional concerns [by some ASEAN states or the PRC] that the Japan-ASEAN cooperation targets China (Parameswaran 2016a). By aligning with ASEAN on issues related to maritime security, Japan attempts to reduce both the political (and legal) and military risks associated with China's growing maritime threat. In regard to the US, Japan's deepening defence ties with ASEAN may be seen as a way for Tokyo to offset the risks of its overdependence on the US in the maritime domain, without jeopardising its alliance with Washington (consistent with the risk-contingency logic). At the same time, the cultivation of ties with the ASEAN states (both bilateral and multilateral) is also a way for Japan to reinforce the regional role of America and to maintain the US-led alliance system (Sahashi 2016), in line with the gains-maximising option.

A similar duality in hedging against multiple uncertainties is seen in Japan's approach towards various regional (ASEAN-led) multilateral mechanisms. Japan under Abe has continued to extend its support for the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ASEAN DMM+). On the one hand, this has served a purpose of binding the US and ensuring America's continuing regional involvement (Ashizawa 2014), in line with the returns-maximising logic. In this regard, Japan was pleased with the Obama administration's decision in 2009 to sign ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and subsequently to join the EAS from 2011 on. On the other hand, both Japan and the ASEAN states have used regional institutions in the Asia-Pacific to constrain China's influence, consistent with the dominance-denial behaviour (Kuik 2016).¹⁰ As the deepening economic interdependence has increased the costs for states of using military-based foreign policy instruments to undermine their rivals' power advantages, regional players now increasingly focus on competition within multilateral institutional settings 'without war' (He 2015a).

Collectively, ASEAN has endeavoured to enmesh both the US and China in ASEAN-centric regional (security) configurations, including the EAS and the ADMM+. By having both powers participate in these configurations, ASEAN has sought to ensure Washington's regional commitments, while concurrently engaging and socialising the PRC (He 2015b).

¹⁰ He (2015a) defines this as 'institutional balancing'.

Japan's approach to multilateral mechanisms has largely followed the logic of binding-engagement vis-a-vis the US, and dominance-denial thinking with regard to China. Tokyo attempts to tie down the US in regional multilateral arrangements so as to ensure America's regional engagement, while concurrently utilising this US engagement as a political hedge against China. A case in point is the joint US-Japan position (and pressure on China) on the maritime territorial disputes in the SCS, which was articulated within multilateral fora during Obama's term in office.

In regard to China, ASEAN since the 1990s has sought to engage the PRC multilaterally and socialise Beijing in various regional frameworks in order to cope with its China-associated uncertainties. However, ASEAN states have resisted Chinese efforts for a leadership role and exclusive membership in the EAS (Sutter 2010). This converged with Japan's push to include in 2005 Australia, New Zealand and India in the EAS. As argued by Kuik (2016: 9-10), ASEAN's behaviour is a clear demonstration of the two sides 'of the same institutional coin': engaging the PRC in regional institutions to encourage a larger role for Beijing (binding-engagement), while simultaneously pursuing political hedging (dominance-denial) to limit and check Beijing's influence. Although Japan did pursue in the 1990s binding-engagement policies towards China via multilateral ASEAN-led frameworks (Atanassova-Cornelis 2010), it is the risk-contingency logic that has increasingly become the driver of Japan's China policy. Multilateral mechanisms are now employed by Tokyo for the purpose of Japan's political hedging against the PRC rather than as a tool of engagement. A reflection of this is Tokyo's support for more *inclusive* regional fora, such as the EAS, in order to counter Beijing's push for *exclusive* regionalism centred on ASEAN+3.

Japan and Asia's strategic order

Japan's hedging responses to strategic uncertainties in the Asia-Pacific are certainly no exception. Many other regional players, including both the US and China themselves (Medeiros 2005), and the smaller ASEAN states (Kuik 2016), have embraced hedging. As far as Japan's responses are concerned, they are a reflection of Tokyo's strategic thinking about regional order in the following ways.

In the first place, Japan's hedging towards both the US and China suggests that Tokyo may have started to prepare for, and has embarked on a reconceptualisation of its vision of strategic order in favour of an inclusive of the US, but no longer a US-centric model. Given Japan's long-standing unwillingness or inability to consider a 'post-US' regional order with reduced American role (or even a US disengagement from Asia) (Ashizawa 2014), this signifies an important change in Japanese strategic thinking. Indeed, Japan has been one of the strongest supporters of the US-led order (Sahashi

2016) in the Asia-Pacific to the extent that Tokyo's support is sometimes said to exceed Washington's own commitments.¹¹

Secondly, what does appear to remain a constant in Japan's conceptualisation of future regional order is its reluctance, and even resistance, to include the PRC in the emerging order or to face the prospect of a more prominent Chinese role in order-building (Ashizawa 2014). This is clear from the strong priority given by Tokyo to the risk-reduction measures in its interactions with Beijing. In contrast to the ASEAN states that encourage a certain Chinese role in regional order-building through binding-engagement policies, Japan is, as Sahashi (2016) argues, 'more assertive...in its desire to guard against increasing Chinese influence.' Japan's efforts to constrain Beijing through dominance-denial policies and to enhance Washington's regional influence, instead, are at odds with the generally inclusive conceptualisation of order promoted by ASEAN. Tokyo does converge with ASEAN though on seeking to prevent an exclusive Chinese leadership in multilateral fora, as well as on supporting, and even demanding, a continuing American involvement in order to reduce the risks associated with the PRC's growing maritime threat.

Finally, it appears that by creating a web of bilateral and multilateral strategic alignments Japan is attempting to prevent the formation of an order along the lines of a Sino-American condominium or, as conceptualised by Zhao (2014), of a bilateral power-sharing arrangement. This scenario represents for Tokyo 'the worst case' (Ashizawa 2014) of an imaginable Asian-Pacific future and is arguably one of the major uncertainties associated with the future of Sino-US relations.

The implications of Japan's (and other actors') hedging policies for the Asian-Pacific security order are that it remains fluid with some contradictory and competing trends. On the one hand, the collective hedging acts through multilateral mechanisms reinforce the ASEAN-led system of interconnected regional institutions, and keep open the channels of consultation on various issues, including security. The various multilateral groupings help Asian states cope with strategic uncertainties by easing US-China rivalry, as well as by binding both Washington and Beijing to the region (Atanassova-Cornelis and van der Putten 2015).

On the other hand, reflective of the contradictory nature of hedging itself (see, Kuik 2016), order-building through inclusion and cooperation in the framework of multilateral institutions is concurrently undermined by the policies of the regional players. Japan, among others, recognises the limitations of the ASEAN-led fora for addressing Tokyo's strategic uncertainties about China. In particular, this concerns the inability of these

¹¹ Such a view was expressed by a Japanese scholar during an interview with the author, Tokyo, November 2015.

mechanisms to 'restrain', what Tokyo sees as, Beijing's assertive behaviour in pressing its territorial claims in the China Seas. Japan, therefore, pursues bilateral (both with the US and the ASEAN states) and exclusivist (of China) approaches to order-building in order to offset its China-associated uncertainties. Tokyo does so by implementing various risk-reduction options towards Beijing, including through multilateral mechanisms. Consistent with the dominance-denial policies of ASEAN in its relations with China (Kuik 2016), Japan, too, seeks to constrain the PRC by resorting to non-military approaches. Multilateral frameworks in the Asia-Pacific thus increasingly become arenas for major power competition and rivalry. Neither the US nor China, and even less so Japan, appears to be embracing an Asian order centred primarily on multilateral institutions (Van der Putten and Atanassova-Cornelis 2014).

Conclusion

This paper has examined Japan's responses to its two major strategic uncertainties in the Asia-Pacific, on the one hand, about the durability of America's security presence in the region, and, on the other, about the PRC's regional intentions. Japan's US-associated uncertainties have represented long-standing concerns. These have become more salient with the growth of Chinese power and influence, and the relative decline of America. A particular concern for Japan is the possibility of a future shift in US China policy towards accommodation, and the scaling down of the US involvement in the Asia-Pacific. Japan's China-associated uncertainties include worries about the PRC's long-term regional intentions, which have driven a growing perception of the 'China threat'. There are also more specific concerns about Beijing's maritime security objectives, especially in the China Seas, in the short- to mid term. It is, however, doubts about Washington's ability and willingness to continue maintaining its defence commitments to Japan (including bearing the costs) that magnify Japan's China anxieties.

Japan's hedging behaviour has sought to offset the China-associated security risks and simultaneously ensure the continuing US defence commitments, while also preparing Japan for a possible 'abandonment' scenario. Japanese hedging against the US-associated uncertainties has followed the logic of gains-maximisation. It has emphasised binding-engagement policies, seen in Tokyo's reinforcement of the alliance and its efforts to keep Washington committed to the region via multilateral frameworks. Binding the US in this way has also served a purpose of reducing the China-associated risks, especially in the realm of maritime security, for the US has acted as a counterbalance to the PRC's (political and military) power. Having a formal military alliance with the US has meant a certain loss of strategic autonomy for Japan. At the same time, Tokyo has pursued

economic diversification and incipient indirect-balancing policies, in line with the risk-reduction logic, in order to minimise its vulnerability in case of US abandonment or a Sino-US strategic accommodation. This behaviour is manifested in the palpable augmentation of the SDF's capabilities and responsibilities, and of Japan's defence partnerships (or limited alignments), with the ASEAN states, both bilaterally and multilaterally.

While Japan has not abandoned binding-engagement in its relations with the PRC, it has stepped up the risk-reduction measures through political, economic and military hedging. In this regard, the non-military approaches (i.e., economic-diversification and dominance-denial) seem as important as the military-based approaches (upgrading the SDF, strengthening the alliance with the US, and forging defence partnerships with ASEAN). At the multilateral level, Japan has pursued dominance-denial to constrain the PRC, and binding-engagement to ensure the continuing US regional presence.

Japan's hedging behaviour is a reflection of Tokyo's reconceptualisation of its vision of 'strategic' order in the Asia-Pacific, which has hitherto rested largely on US-centric approaches. In particular, Japan now appears to have reluctantly accepted the prospect of a diminished American role in the region. Although it seems that Tokyo has embraced an evolving concept of a 'post-US' regional order, that will no longer be centred on American regional leadership, Japan has steadily resisted to include the PRC, or to consider a certain Chinese role, in the evolving order. This is likely to remain so as long as the 'China threat' is not imminent and the US commitment to Japan is not nil. Neither of which is a likely prospect in the foreseeable future.

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