Rethinking Japanese Security Policy

Turning to Asia: Is Abe’s security policy altering the strategic scope of Japan’s defense strategy?¹

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Japan’s increased security contributions to Southeast Asia within the bilateral alliance or in cooperation with other partners in the region in recent years suggest an increasing significance of the region for Tokyo’s security strategy. In light of these developments, several scholars argue that Japan has geographically expanded its strategic scope by considering the Indian Ocean vital to its security interests, while other stress Japan’s new role as an active contributor and promoter of security and stability in Southeast Asia. (Wallace 2013) Foreign policy measures to expand technical and capacity building assistance to Southeast Asian countries support these claims. (Japan Times, 18.12.2015; Lee et. al. 2016; de Castro 2016: 44-45)

First, the expansion of rights regarding SDF dispatch along with the loosening of the arms export ban indicate steps to change Japan into what Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye have called tier-one nations – countries that have “significand economic weight, capable military, global vision, and demonstrated leadership on international concerns.” (Armitage and Nye, 2012:1)

Second, for Japan to become a tier one nation, Prime Minister Abe has to expand the country’s security policy role by deepening security ties with Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. (Lee 2016:31)

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Although the majority of research reflecting on Japan’s *pivot South*, identifies an increasing military cooperation by strengthening bi- and multilateral security ties, i.e. Tokyo’s expanding security policy focus towards Southeast Asia, most analysis lack a comparative empirical analysis of these alliances to support the hypothesis of an “evolving security strategy” towards Southeast Asia.

The purpose of this study is to provide an empirical insight to Japan’s security policy in the Asia Pacific by demonstrating that existing bilateral alliances have been significantly intensified and highlighting that new security agreements have been established. However, a comparative analysis of the data only partially supports Wallace’ claim of an elaborated Japanese strategy towards the Asia Pacific. Because Japan has intensified its military alliances with some countries while remaining on a low level of exchange with others, this study remains sceptic to identify Abe’s current southeast Asia policy as a new “strategy”.

To conduct a focused comparison, our study relies primarily on data provided by the Japanese Ministry of Defense, in particular analyzing its annual Defense White Paper, and on additional data by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The data suggests that Japan has been intensifying its bilateral cooperation with the Philippines and Vietnam on a high level. While the Philippines under President Aquino has already been an important security partner to Japan, the data shows a sharp increase in security cooperation with Vietnam. On the other hand, with countries like Thailand, for instance, diplomatic ties remain rather stable and security related high-level talks between Ministry of Foreign Affairs staff continue to be low. Thus, a more diversified analysis of Japan’s security alliances in Southeast Asia appears necessary to assess the dimensions of Japan’s *pivot South*.

Following a brief review of the literature on the *pivot south* hypothesis, this article evaluates the data on SDF dispatch and cooperation measures of MOFA and MOD staff with their counterparts in the region. Secondly, a process tracing analysis helps to identify the political initiatives that led to Japan’s increased commitment to the security of the region. Finally, case analysis offers insight into Japan’s concrete security cooperation with Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam.
Literature Review on the Pivot South

As Michael Green argues, by establishing a new National Security Council to coordinate Japan’s strategy, expanding the capacity of the Maritime Self Defence Force as well as the Japan Coast Guard, Prime Minister Abe has introduced a new balancing strategy towards China’s military expansion in Southeast Asia. Hence, Japan’s current focus on Southeast Asia presents a possibility for Tokyo to strengthen the bilateral alliance with the U.S. by contributing to Washington’s presence in Asia. (Green et. al. 2016: 21)

For example, enhancing the security cooperation with India, Australia and the Philippines presents an opportunity to strengthen ASEAN’s security profile and enforce pacific security dialogues. Green argues a generation change among diplomats in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs along with Abe’s decision to appoint younger diplomats to the NSC resulted in a higher recognition of the ASEAN being important for Japan’s diplomatic strategy. Most younger diplomats have received their academic education entirely or partly abroad, are fluent in Asian languages and served a significant time overseas. (Green et. al. 2015: 2)

Constructivist analyses about Japan’s recent security strategy towards Southeast Asia emphasize Japan’s attempt to promote international norms and Abe’s reinterpretation of Article 9, allowing Japan now to engage in collective self-defense, proving Japan’s break with pacifist norms in its foreign policy. Building on the research by Thomas Berger and Peter Katzenstein, Rikki Kersten argues that while Prime Minister Abe has repeatedly emphasized that the basic interpretation of Article 9 remains unchanged and the deployment of Japanese SDF units is still restricted, new norms have been established that now underlie and catalyze a more intensive security cooperation between Japan and its pacific partner. It is precisely the new focus on the U.S.’ security policy towards the Pacific that defines the framework in which Prime Minister Abe can further normalize Japan’s foreign policy. (Kersten 2016: 6-23)

Corey Wallace’ analysis of Japan’s strategic pivot South provides the first comprehensive assessment of Japan’s evolving security partnership with countries south of Tokyo’s traditional strategic sphere. Wallace interprets Japan’s orientation towards Southeast Asia as an attempt to minimize the dilemma that evolved from Tokyo’s bandwagoning policy and Japan’s free ride on under the U.S.’ security umbrella. Some of the issues stemming from this dilemma involve being
exposed to the danger of entanglement into Washington’s international conflicts and being expected to contribute significantly to the alliance – even in regions that do not represent Japan’s primary security concerns. (Wallace 2013) As previous research has already pointed out, due to ongoing territorial disputes with China over the Senkaku Islands, a possible nuclear threat posed by North Korea and the rather unsatisfying implementation of the trilateral security dialogue with South Korea and the U.S., Japan is currently confronted with several unpredictable risks in the region. (Tow and Limaye 2016) Tokyo’s current strategy of strengthening bilateral security ties with Southeast Asian neighbors thus addresses these imponderabilities and vulnerabilities.

In his analysis of a presumably increased Southeast Asian focus in the Japanese security policy, Wallace points to Tokyo’s contribution to peacekeeping operations in Cambodia and Timor-Leste, to the dispatch of SDF units in the aftermath of the Tsunami in 2004 and unit-level cooperation as part of a UN nonproliferation security initiative. (Wallace 2013:492) However, the analysis falls short on explanations for a foreign policy turn that could be identified as “strategic”, and is thus not persuasive why Japan’s security policy should be identified as “pivotal”. Although Wallace poses an important contribution to strengthen the awareness of the strategic relevance of Southeast Asia for current Japanese security policy, he does not explain his case selection. There seems to be no criteria to prioritize the analysis of Indonesia or the Indian Ocean over other countries or regions as cases studies for Japanese military engagement in Southeast Asia. Thus, Wallace does not explain why his selection presents crucial cases that support his pivot hypothesis better than other southeast Asian countries. (for case selection method see Eckstein, 1975: 118; George and Bennet 2005: 119-122; Seawright and Gerring, 2008: 303-304)

The dominant view in the literature on Japan’s security policy in the region reviewed for this study identifies a crucial or significant change in Tokyo’s foreign policy strategy. (Wallace 2013; deCastro 2016; Shoji 2014; Enval and Hall 2016). Often these measures are identified as being part of a balancing strategy against China’s enhanced security approach to the region as well as minimizing the traps of the still inefficient multilateral security coordination among Japan and Southeast Asian countries. (Tan 2015: 309; Morris 2017: 103-104; Hughes 2014; de Castro 2016: 145; Miyamoto and Watanabe 2014: 99-110) However, strategic perceptions towards China vary among Southeast Asian states. While the Philippines and Vietnam share similar threat
perceptions towards China’s hegemonic policy, Beijing’s approach to the region presents also
important strategic and economic opportunities for Cambodia, Laos and (in part) Thailand. (Lee
et. al. 2016: 301)

In contrast, Prof. Haruko Sato of Osaka University’s Graduate School of Public Policy does
not see a gradual strategic shift introduced by Japan’s security cooperation with Southeast Asian
countries mainly due to the fact that the actual agreements and legal frameworks of these
cooperation do not enable the SDF to contribute significantly in military terms to the alliances.
Thus, she claims, Abe’s pivot South does not present a new strategic vision for Japan that could
alter Tokyo’s security policy in the long run. (Author’s talk with Prof. Sato during Panel session on
Japan’s foreign policy in the Asian Pacific Security Conference in Osaka, Dec. 9th, 2016)

Notwithstanding the apparent significance of the topic, in depth empirical small-n sample
research designs on Japanese security policy in Southeast Asia are far less common than
exhaustive single case studies or theoretical approaches to Prime Minister Abe’s recent security
strategy towards the region. Therefore, this study aims to provide new empirical insights by
addressing these shortcomings and by testing the hypothesis of Japan’s increased engagement
in Southeast Asia against the available empirical data the MOFA and MOD provide.

Regarding the sources used for this study, the author acknowledges the possible
differences between the data that the official and annual reports of the Japanese ministry state
and the existence of other (unavailable) data that is classified for security reasons, as well as
agree to the fact that additional insights might be gained from other qualitative sources, such as
through conducting narrative interviews. However, this type of data is often coupled with other
difficulties regarding the generalization of results. Furthermore, for a small to mid-size n-sample
these sources involve often pitfalls when comparing analyzed categories of variables in different
cases.

Hence, the object of this case study lies in the clarification and diversification of the
hypothesis claimed in the aforementioned research by adding the analysis of empirical data to
the present discourse on Tokyo’s strategy for the Pacific century.

Background on the Japan’s new found security interest in the Southeast Asia-Pacific
Prime Minister Abe has emphasized Southeast Asia’s strategic importance when he visited all ten ASEAN member states within the first year of his second term in 2013. On the Joint Statement of the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit in December 2013 Abe stressed the importance of a close cooperation between Japan and ASEAN member states to address regional security challenges. (Abe 2013) Southeast Asia and the Pacific Region presents great importance for Japan’s economic and strategic policy in the region. Japanese Foreign Direct Investment in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore, which currently experience substantial economic growth rates, has reached around 10 billion U.S. dollars and, thus, has surpassed even China since 2009. (Nikkei Shimbun, 11.9.2013 and 20.11.2013)

Hughes has stressed the importance of sea-lanes (the Malacca Strait, South China Sea, and East China Sea) to ensure the region’s economic growth along with Japan’s energy supplies. No less than 95 percent of Japan’s energy supplies pass through the South China Sea. (Hughes 2015: 119) Thus, Japan has introduced several steps to deepen cooperation with Southeast Asian states like Philippines and Vietnam by offering capacity building assistance as well as expanded Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR). (Hughes 2015: 127) In this sense Japan has responded to the new challenges the region faces. A closer examination of the data suggests that, rather than introducing a new broader security strategy to the region, Japan has improved security cooperation with several key alliance partners while a broader strategy is still missing.

On his address to the Asian Security Summit (Shangri La Dialogue) Prime Minister Abe stressed Japan’s intention shoulder more responsibility to secure Southeast Asia. As key elements of this strategy Abe emphasized his intention to no longer act just as an alliance partner within the bilateral security framework with the United States but also to articulate own security interests. One important step to establish a closer cooperation among Japan and ASEAN member states was the ASEAN Foreign Minister meeting in November 2014. During this meeting, it became evident that an increase in military cooperation is favored by most Southeast Asian countries. In consequence, it was agreed to increase joint military exercises in the region on bilateral and multilateral levels. Prime Minister Abe includes these measures to promote his strategy towards Southeast Asia. Since the introduction of the “Democratic Security Diamond” among Australia, India, Japan and the U.S. state of Hawaii to safeguard the maritime commons
stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific, Abe has tried to expand bi- and multilateral agreements in the region. This is also partly due to the fact that the strategic concept for this approach has been poorly articulated. Thus, Abe’s approach to other Southeast Asian states and recent attempts try to strengthen military cooperation by addressing these shortcomings. (Abe 2012; Abe 2013) Abe has stressed cooperation in particular within a security triangle between India and Australia, when he articulated his vision for Japan’s security policy and role in Asia (and the World). (Abe 2013b: 161-164) It is also that Abe aims to embrace Southeast Asia (including India and Australia) by a comprehensive approach that encompasses political and economic as well as security cooperation elements.

There are several reasons for the Japanese Southeast Asian strategy to not have completely unfolded to date. Indeed, the “strategy” to engage closer with Southeast Asia seems not steady but rather issue-oriented, and very diverse when compared among all security initiatives with countries in the region.

**Empirical analysis of Japan’s security policy in Southeast Asia between 2012-2016**

In deciding which variables should be analyzed to identify an increase or decrease in bi- and multilateral security cooperation, this study builds on Lebovic and Saunders’ analysis of strategic factors determining the security strategy of countries by examining visits from U.S. Presidents and U.S. Secretary of State to foreign countries over a period of 60 years (between 1946 and 2010), in order to explain what factors significantly contributed to the selection of the destination country. (Lebovic et. al. 2016: 110) As a merely surprising result, Lebovic et. al. showed that those regions that were visited often by the Secretary and the President during the above time span, correlated with the respective regional strategic focus of U.S. grand strategy at the time. (Lebovic et. al. 2016: 118) Hence, the analysis of regional preferences that manifest in interactions between state officials can provide a useful variable in determining the importance of a geographic area or certain states for a country’s foreign policy strategy.

The present analysis adapts this approach and analysis, but limits the variable not only to secretary of state or Prime Minister, but also includes the head of states and government leader, along with members of the cabinet and exchanges on diplomatic, bureaucratic and military level.
In the run-up to a foreign policy decision we often can observe multiple interaction between state officials and bureaucrats, thus it helps to estimate the actual degree of cooperation if we take into consideration visits by bureaucrats and ministry staff with their counterparts. Hence, tracing the processes that lead to a foreign policy decision affecting bilateral cooperation is always mirrored in the increasing number of visits and meetings by state officials. This data helps to evaluate the cooperation on foreign policy issues between Japan and its cooperation partner.

The white paper lists military cooperation between the SDF and military units of eleven security partners between 2012 and 2016, as well as one value summarizing participation in ASEAN conducted exercises. With a total of 40 dispatches between January 2012 and December 2016, the data shows a median of 4 exercises per security partner with units of Air SDF, Ground SDF and Maritime SDF units. (MOD 2016: 448)

Vietnam shows with 9, the highest value, while Malaysia and Thailand conducted the fewest joint exercises with Japan, concluding a low value of 1 exercise each for the total value of five years. This difference might demonstrate their varying significance as a more or less valuable cooperation partner to Japan in terms of military security in the region. While the increasing and high interaction of Vietnamese naval units with MSDF units supports the hypothesis of an increase in the strategic value of the region to Japan’s security policy strategy, the low level of military cooperation with Malaysia and Thailand indicate otherwise. When analyzing these cooperation efforts in detail, the material reveals three different types of cooperation. The Japanese White Paper categorizes cooperation efforts in a) diplomatic/traditional development assistance, b) know-how transfer and capacity building and c) obvious military assistance/military exercises that train for concrete measures as reaction to certain events, i.e. counter terrorism or anti-piracy exercises. Military forms of cooperation include for example the increase and deepening of defense cooperation (bouryoku kyouryoku), cooperation in areas where a military character is clearly identifiable as well as cooperation declared as joint-exercises or defense exchanges. Apart from this military-type cooperation, the White Paper lists also cooperation measures that can be clearly identified as “civilian” or “infrastructure measures” and are thus (at least towards developing countries) usually development assistance.
The Japanese Ministry of Defense Annual White Paper lists a total of 69 cooperation interactions and cooperation dialogues between January 11, 2012 and September 20, 2016 with Southeast Asian countries. Roughly two thirds of these agreements, a total of 43 (62.32%), contain military components and agreements that include military related cooperation on securing the region, joint military exercises, or other defense exchanges. In detail, these agreements contain either joint exercises with one other Asia-Pacific state, the exchange of military personnel, or involve MSDF, ASDF or GSDF members as training instructors or advising allied soldiers in the handling of military equipment. About one fourth (27.9%) of all documented security policy interactions with southeast Asian states can be characterized as “new” initiatives, i.e. they do not continue already existing cooperation agreements that have been introduced by earlier administrations. Around 75% of these “new” initiatives contain military components, which either focus on coordination and dialogues between military-to-military level officials or between high-level member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense and their counter parts in the respective Pacific country.

Minister of Defense (MOD 2016: 456) Nakatani Gen’s visit to Thailand in July 2016 would be an example for this interaction, as would be the recently conducted training exercises between Japanese MSDF and GSDF Units and Thai forces. (MOD 2016: 456)

Approximately 46% (46.38%) of all Japanese security initiatives conducted in Southeast Asia or the Asia Pacific between 2012 and 2016 have been implemented already before Prime Minister Abe took office. However, the data reveals that 36.23% of these existing cooperation measures were being intensified, especially regarding their military character, during Abe’s term as Prime Minister, January 2013 and August 2016 (the annual report was published in August 2016). Thus, all listed figures could only be extrapolated until the end of 2016 or, if mentioned, scheduled events for autumn and winter 2016 were included in the calculations after these events could be verified by other sources, mainly through news coverage. (MOD 2016: 454-457)

Apart from joint exercises as an indicator for military cooperation, a closer examination of high-level talks on security issues might offer valuable insights into military strategy planning between Japan and its allies. A variation in frequency of high-level talks might indicate a closer cooperation or coordination of military units as well as strategic planning. Thus, these talks also
resemble the interaction between the bureaucracy, the Foreign Ministry and the Defense Ministry as they usually aim to deepen mutual cooperation, prepare upcoming security agreements or define a more detailed cooperation between partners regarding security issues. Surprisingly, the data for high-level talks between Tokyo and Southeast Asian countries presents a mixed result. The bilateral high-level security talks between Japan and ten Southeast Asian countries surged 90% in 2015 as opposed to 2014. Compared over a period of five years, bilateral talks increased by 40.74% from 2010 to 2015. (MOD 2015: 271; MOD 2016: 312; 452-460)

These figures include security talks with Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. In 2012 security talks rose significantly compared to 2010, which can be explained by a series of frictions stemming from the tensions that occurred in response to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island conflict that peaked in 2012. (Schultz 2015: 172-202) The lowest level of bilateral talks in total along with the least variation in intensity is measured for the bilateral security talks between Japan and Malaysia. This can be explained, at least partly, due to the fact that Malaysia aims to stabilize and deepen its relationship with China and thus refrains from taking a stance on the matter of territorial disputes. Rather, Malaysia hopes to increase economic cooperation with its biggest trade partner. Thus, Prime Minister Najib Razak’s appeal at the Shangri-la Dialogue in 2011 to ASEAN member states to pursue a foreign policy that will result in a peaceful resolution of the territorial disputes should be evaluated against this backdrop. (Parameswaran 2015; for Malaysia’s proposed contributions to the U.S. pivot to Asia and subsequent military cooperation within a U.S.-led framework for an Asia-Pacific security initiative see Hiebert et. al. 2012: 14-21)

A survey of JSDF units’ participation in multilateral coordinated maneuvers can help evaluate the importance of those maneuvers for Japan’s security strategy. At the same time, such an analysis might help to estimate the actual security cooperation between Japan and other Southeast Asian states without being embedded in multilateral joint exercises conducted by the U.S. such as RIMPAC, the annual joint naval exercise in the Pacific. Because Washington is conducting multilateral exercises with allied countries in the Pacific including Japan, considering these exercises for the analysis might distort the result. Because, those missions are primarily part of the U.S.’ security strategy towards the Pacific region, and should not be seen primarily as
part of the Japanese security strategy. In other words, even though it should be obvious that research on national security strategies naturally includes bi- and multilateral cooperation with friendly nations, an empirical analysis of national security strategies should nevertheless focus primarily on actions that are (at least partly) strategically planned by the agent in question, that is in our case Japan.

Between January 2012 and September 2016 units of Japanese GSDF, ASDF and MSDF hold 20 multilateral joint exercises together with Southeast Asian countries. 90% of these exercises were a continuation of already implemented joint exercise programs. Almost 25% of these exercises were intensified, modified and changed in their content in comparison to the previous years. The material by the Japanese Ministry of Defense suggests that in over 50% of the cases the joint exercises conducted in the Pacific were not part the bigger annual multilateral exercises regularly conducted by the U.S. in the Pacific, such as COBRA Gold, or exercises within RAMPAC and MALABAR. Bilateral and smaller multilateral training exercises that were conducted without participation of U.S. units together with southeast Asian countries increase between 2014 and 2016 by 28.57%. (MOD 2016: 315-373; 445-459; MOD 2015: 385-390; MOD 2014: 442-450)

The cooperation initiatives, i.e. the joint exercises, between Japan and its regional security partner do not only vary in their frequency and quality, but also in their content. For example,
there are major differences in the military cooperation with countries such as Vietnam or the Philippines on the one hand, and other southeast Asian countries, such as Myanmar, on the other. This is partly because some initiatives have been established a while ago, while other cooperation agreements are rather new. While military exchange with Vietnam was initiated through meetings on Vice-Ministry of Defense level in November 2012 and gradually increased in the following years by a close cooperation on security exchanges and jointly conducted military exercises, interaction between the Japanese Ministry of Defense and Myanmar is relatively new. Direct exchange between an SDF Chief-of-Staff with Myanmar in May 2014 marks the starting point of the high-level exchange.

However, in the case of Myanmar, this delayed strengthening of military ties is probably due to the recently introduced democratization process after the demise of the military government in Naypyidaw. (MOD 2014: 288) Together with Sri Lanka, Myanmar has an important strategic value for controlling the SLOCs between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, which is why some MSDF officials advocate a closer military cooperation with Myanmar. (Karim 2017:75) However, until today, current security dialogs with Myanmar do not include cooperation in maritime security. (Koga 2015: 71) Besides intensifying administrative channels of communication between the Ministries of Defense or bilateral ministerial meetings, Japan has recently expanded its defense cooperation with partners in the region, as follows:

Between 2012 and 2016 Japanese Naval units have conducted joint exercises with the Indian Navy to improve cooperation in combat tactics (June 2012) and participated together with the U.S. in the Pacific Partnership Initiative “Malabar 2014-2016,” conducting trilateral Naval exercises between Sabsebo and Okinawa. (MOD 2016: 449-451)

In January 2013 SDF initiated capacity building projects in cooperation with the Cambodian army and in March 2014 MSDF units joined the KOMODO exercise, a joint naval training exercise in cooperation among Japan and 16 other ASEAN countries. In February 2013 members of the Japanese Ministry of Defense and Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF), MSDF and Air Self-Defense Forces (ASDF) along with the Joint Staff Office participated in Cobra Gold 15 exercises in Thailand under the command of the United States. (MOD 2015: 80)
Furthermore, Japanese units have been deployed to join multilateral exercises in the Pacific within the RIMPAC 2016 initiative in June 2016, while the SDF have also cooperated with Filipino naval units between November 2013 and May as they participated in Disaster Relief Exercises (ARF-FiREx) conducted by members of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Malaysia. Apart from these developments, units have also participated in joint training exercises with Timor L’este between 2013 and 2016. (MOD 2016: 448)

A process tracing analysis of these developments suggests that the increase of Japanese participation in joint training exercises with other Southeast Asian states is in part a consequence of the 6th Japan-ASEAN Vice Defense Minister Meeting on October 7th 2014, as the concluding statement reveals the aim to further improve cooperation in equipment and capacity building, along with technology transfer and development assistance. Apart from these forms of assistance the minister agreed to engage in deeper maritime cooperation in the Southeast Asian pacific region. (METI 2014; The Diplomat December 14th 2015).

Corey Wallace’ analysis of Japan’s new security policy concludes that Tokyo has shifted the strategic focus towards Southeast Asia. Japan’s new focus towards Southeast Asia by strengthening bilateral alliances with countries in the region is partly supported by the data. Strong support for this claim can be found in Japan’s cooperation with Vietnam and the Philippines. Cooperation with Myanmar is relatively increasing in recent years. However, bilateral cooperation in maritime security between Japan and Singapore, Brunei and Laos remains on a rather low level. (MOD 2016: 448; 445-459) Moreover, the data does not suggest an increased military cooperation with India outside of the trilateral security initiative together with the U.S. or in multilateral cooperation initiatives with Australia. Therefore, new data needs to be gathered that would strongly support the closer Japan-Indian security ties through new forms of defense communication also outside U.S. initiated channels. (Wallace 2013: 499) With respect to Myanmar the data also suggests that bilateral cooperation measures do not only include development assistance or assistance for infrastructure building to compete with China for influence in the region. (Wallace 2013: 502) Moreover, joint exercises and newly implemented roadmaps for a more sophisticated common security strategy indicate that Japan will further
strengthen its alliance with Myanmar, as this cooperation may unfold as strategically important for Tokyo’s stance in the Mekong Delta. (MOD 2016: 454-456; Koga 2016)

Overall, the data suggests a “moderate” pivot South in Japanese security strategy. In particular, the data does not support Wallace’ expectation that Abe’s “new” strategic policy towards Southeast Asia might hold the potential to unfold as a policy that sets Japan on a path to evolve towards a more independent security strategy. (Wallace 2013: 514-17) This is mainly due to the fact that most increased security cooperation is embedded in the broader U.S.’ security strategy in the Pacific. For example, Japan shares in many cases more burden and contributes to the bilateral alliance with the United States in more significant ways than before. Yet, these measures should be interpreted to stem from the motivation to strengthen the bilateral alliance in the Pacific, or as an attempt to reassure Japan’s commitment to the U.S.’ pivot to Asia. This analysis remains skeptical that the initiated security measures or intensified cooperation with allies in Southeast Asia will subsequently (completely or partly) replace or significantly reduce the role of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

To address the rather undeveloped security alliance with Malaysia, Abe and Prime Minister Najib Razak have implemented measures to increase cooperation. For example, Japanese MSDF units have conducted joint exercises with the Royal Malaysian Navy in March 2016 as a result of a new security agreement on strategic partnership in May 2015. However, while Prime Minister Razak and Prime Minister Abe have stressed the importance of securing the sea lanes of communication between Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, the data sample shows that cooperation remains at low intensity. Thus, taking this new definition of the bilateral partnership as an indicator for intensified cooperation may be misleading. (Koga 2016) Apart from military initiatives, Japan has been stepping up to push economic cooperation and financial investment in Malaysia. Currently, Japan is preparing a more sophisticated proposal to export Shinkansen technology to the country and pushed for the economic deal at a high-speed rail symposium in Kuala Lumpur in May 2017. (Nikkei Asian Review, May 3, 2017) However, a 5 year comparison over the years 2012 to 2016 suggests that with regard to military cooperation, the bilateral security relation with Malaysia appears negligible. The bilateral cooperation rather currently seems to express the intention to deepen military cooperation while substantial
measures have not been established yet. However, further steps in increasing the cooperation are indicated by the dispatch of one MSDF vessel in March 2016 after a three-year interception of low cooperation intensity. (Japan Times, August 30, 2016)

**Strengthening the Japanese-Filipino security alliance**

Prime Minister Abe has tried to strengthen ties in particular with the Philippines and Vietnam. For the Philippines, Japan presents the only military alliance besides the United States, hence, security ties have been deepened under former Filipino Prime Minister Benigno Aquino III. (Japan Times, February 28, 2016) An important step to increase security ties was the implementation of a security agreement on January 29, 2015 along with announcing a common strategy for South East Asia. (MOFA 2015a, MOFA 2015b). Central to this strategy was the strengthening of the Filipino Coast Guard by Japanese arms exports and cheap credit options for the purchase of ten Patrol Vessel. Along with expanding Coast Guard Capacities, consultative meetings between Ministry of Defense on a regular basis were implemented. (MOFA 2015b; Nikkei Shimbun, July 27th 2013)

An analysis of Japan’s annual defense white papers shows that bilateral security cooperation has been continuously intensified between 2013 and 2016. Both countries agreed to increase exchanges among SDF and Filipino Army staff, closer interaction between navy units and to deepen command structures. In February 2015, joint training exercises between ASDF and Filipino Air Force were conducted that aimed to increase cooperation in the field of Air Safety and Air Surveillance. On March 2, 2016, the Ministers of Defense in both countries agreed on the purchasing of five TC-90 by the Filipino Air Force for the purpose of training exercises. These aircrafts will be checked and maintained by the Japanese SDF. (MOD 2016: 455; Koga 2016)

Although these measures present a further step in deepening the security cooperation between both countries, current Filipino President Duerte has expressed several times that the Philippines are also seeking to strengthen security ties with China. However, the Filipino-Japanese cooperation presents, in contrast to cooperation established with other Southeast Asian countries, a more precise military element. (PDI, October 28, 2016)
Between 2013 and mid 2016 cooperation on regional security issues significantly increased, with Tokyo dispatching MSDF units for disaster relief and rescue missions in November 2013, and Japanese Vice-Ministry of Defense Nishi meeting with his counterpart in January 2014, as well as establishing a new security dialogue on a regular basis between the Japanese Ministry of Defense and the Filipino Department of National Defense (Kagawara ng Tanggilang Pambansa). (MOD 2016: 440-455)

Moreover, Air Self Defense Force units and Filipino Air Force conducted Airlift Trainings to improve military coordination in the South China Sea in February 2015. Additionally, ASDF units trained Filipino pilots on ASDF TC-90 aircrafts in May 2016. (MOD 2016: 93-94; 440-450; MOD 2015: 385-6) Compared with other Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand for instance, this example shows that exchanges between the two Ministers of Defense are more developed than the bilateral security dialogs between Japan and other Southeast Asian countries. The data does not suggest Deeper structures of cooperation with other neighbor states. In this sense, the Filipino-Japanese security ties differ substantially from the ties with other security partners. The Japanese-Filipino case also suggests that data gained by process tracing can be helpful in identifying progress and variance in implemented policy strategies or initiatives. Refuel exercises have been expanded in cooperation with Filipino units which bears implications for future Japanese rear area support for U.S. units. (de Castro 2016: 145-146) The announcement of implementing a common security strategy also led to a significant increase of high-level defense talks which, in turn, affirms our hypothesis that increased military or security cooperation can be measured (in part) by examining official data from the Ministry of Defense or MOFA.

**Strengthening the Japanese-Vietnamese security alliance**

Intensifying Japanese-Vietnamese security cooperation dates back to a joint statement by Prime Minister Abe and then-Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in October 2006 on establishing a strategic partnership between both countries. (The Diplomat, October 24th, 2014) Security Dialogue between both Asian states have been on a steady but low level between 2010 and 2015 – when compared with other southeast Asian countries.
However, the bilateral cooperation on security issues between Japan and Vietnam presents the highest variance among all cooperation of Japan with all other Southeast Asian countries. Apart from regular bilateral exchanges at the Minister of Defense level, interactions include intensive consultations between Chief-of-Staff, Service Chiefs, and coordination among other security experts. Both countries also engage in port calls of naval vessels along with conducting joint exercises on maritime security, pilot training, cooperation in Air Safety and exchange of information and military technology. (MOD 2016: 445-463)

Since 2011 Japan has continually increased security cooperation with Vietnam within a trilateral framework together with the United States. These policies aim to intensify track 1 and track 1.5 dialogues between official and non-officials to focus on improving cooperation in maritime security, disaster relief assistance, and humanitarian assistance. In total, the interaction includes 187 areas of cooperation. (Matsubara et. al. 2012) These areas of cooperation were further elaborated at the first bilateral Vice Minister of Defense meeting on November 26, 2012 which resulted in 2013 in supplying Vietnam with further Japanese patrol vessels and support in advancing Vietnamese coast guard capacities by Japanese and U.S. personnel. (Mori and Nishihara 2013; Parameswaran, 2015; Koga 2016: 3) Richard Samuels has previously pointed out that the expansion of the Japanese Coast Guard’s competences de facto transformed it into a
fourth branch of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. (Samuels 2007/8: 95) Japanese Coast Guard vessels are predominantly used for counter terrorism measures in Southeast Asia and thus have to be interpreted as contributing substantially to the expansion of Japan’s overall strategic scope. (Fouse and Sato 2006: 1) Thus, Samuel’s statement suggests that also with respect to recent expansions of Japanese Coast Guard vessels and their participation in Japanese-Vietnamese maritime security, Disaster Relief Assistance should be not neglected. There remains great dispute on whether or not to assess these forms of cooperation as expanding Japan’s security scope (this assumption is shared by Prof. Sato of Osaka University). Nevertheless, Japan’s policy of providing capacity building assistance to Southeast Asian navies should be further investigated to evaluate how these policies contribute to expanding Japanese security strategy.

The data suggests that Tokyo has been first concentrating on strengthening Vietnamese maritime capacities before conducting joint exercises. While Japan had already begun to supply vessels to Vietnam in 2012, only in 2014 did the Japanese Ministry of Defense start personnel exchange between ASDF and Vietnamese National Air Defense forces. The first joint exercises for Air Safety were conducted in March 2014 before both countries entered a strategic dialog. (MOD 2016: 448-449) During their meeting in early 2015, Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Kishida and Vietnamese Vice-President Nguyen Thi Doan expanded this strategic dialog through enhanced military cooperation. (Dalpino 2015:7)

Prime Minister Abe’s comments on Japanese-Vietnamese military cooperation during his Hanoi visit on January 16, 2017 indicate that the MSDF will further increase their cooperation with Vietnamese Navy as part of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” to slow down the current trend of slightly decreasing regional cooperation between Japanese and Vietnamese units on bilateral level during 2016. (see image page 11) The meeting concluded with a new 44-point plan to gradually implement further cooperation and define these in detail. According to the plan, increasing maritime cooperation will be a key element in strengthening bilateral security ties. Minister of Defense Nakatani and Vietnamese Defense Minister General Phung Thanh have further stressed cooperation in UN Peacekeeping Missions along with the Air Defense and joint surveillance operation in the South China Sea. (The Diplomat October 14, 2014; People’s Army Newspaper Online, November 6, 2015; MOD 2016: 435-450)
The intensified bilateral security ties between Japan and Vietnam affirm the hypothesis of an increased engagement of Japanese Security Policy in Southeast Asia. The Abe administration has strengthened the bilateral strategic cooperation through military exchanges, mainly in the form of joint maritime exercises. Although the Japanese-Vietnamese example presents a somewhat extreme case in supporting the hypothesis, this support is only strong when we compare it with Japanese security initiatives towards other Southeast Asian countries. Without this direct comparison (as listed above) these measures do not necessarily represent an overwhelming “shift” toward Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

This analysis aimed to provide a more sophisticated insight to the claim of Japan’s increased security-related interest to the Southeast Asian region by expanding Tokyo’s military commitment to the region. The empirical data gathered for this study support Wallace’ hypothesis of Japan’s pivot South only (and somewhat partly) with respect to the Japanese-Vietnamese and Japanese-Filipino security relation. The data for the variable “joint-exercises” did not indicate substantial military cooperation built-ups in the case of Japanese relation with Malaysia, Myanmar, and Brunei and was hence not supported.

The results show the need for further empirical investigation, in particular in a large-\(n\) design. Also, this study showed there is a need for specific codifying of the variables of interest. Indeed, there still remains a variety of possible variables that might be suited for a focused comparison and thus, further research with new variables on Japanese-Southeast Asian security related cooperation is desirable.

In sum, the security initiatives introduced between the end of 2012 and 2016 indicate that the Southeast Asian region presents an important part in Japanese Security strategy shifts. However, the results of this study suggest skepticism as to whether this policy approach presents an already elaborated “security strategy”.

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