Assessing Shinzo Abe’s China Policy: Constructive Balancing?
By: Trissia Wijaya
Graduate School of International Relations
Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan

Abstract
To fill a void left by the conventional strategic scholarships in examining Shinzo Abe’s China policy, this paper would puzzle out a linkage between the political identity clusters among Japanese policy makers and a set of strategic options in responding to the rise of China. Complemented with the narrative of “political survival prospect”, the political constraints in the pursuit of Abe’s revisionist agenda would also be pinpointed. This paper serves three arguments. Firstly, four identity clusters comprising Pacifist-Normalist, Pacifist-Merchantilist, Merchantilist-Nationalist, and Normalist-Nationalist respectively define the policy makers’ strategic preferences, while Abe is vividly positioned in the fourth cluster, Normalist-Nationalist that tend to pursue a balancing and containment policy. However, there is greater tendency that he embraces a pragmatic sense on developing relationship with China given a natonalist Abe has been being framed in a domain of gains that required him to behave cautiously, otherwise it would backfire on the political capital that he has been constructing for years. Second, the trajectory of Abe’s China policy is hitting two birds with one stone, that is designed not only to purely balance against China’s rise or Xi’s Chinese dream, but also to revive “Japanese Nationalist Dream”. It has unveiled new pattern of balancing, namely constructive balancing, that is about to balance the threat from China as well as to construct the Nationalist-Normalist identity simultaneously. Lastly, Abe’s new rule of balancing against China has brought on a watershed in the Japanese diplomatic values and codes of conduct. Interestingly, there is a parallel shift between the growing identity of Nationalist-Normalist and the strong interest in the pursuit of neo-autonomist foreign policy tenet, which give a leeway for the revisionists to involve military preeminence in the conduct of foreign relations.

Keywords: balancing, revisionist, political identity, Shinzo Abe, Sino-Japan relations, senkei-bunri, foreign policy.

Introduction
After assuming the prime ministership again in December 2012, Shinzo Abe has not only been challenged to implement bold strategies for reviving the Japanese economy, but also emboldened to pursue a more staunch approach in wrestling with the assertiveness of China under President Xi Jinping’s leadership. The China that Abe encounters is vastly different from the China that he has ever accommodated through several “ice breakings” during his first tenure in 2006 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2006; Cheng, 2014). It is the second largest economy that has surpassed Japan, the world’s largest trading magnate, and a country with biggest foreign reserves in the world. Furthermore, the two decade of double-digit budgetary growth has resulted the modernization of China’s military that is fortifying its capability to challenge the United States’ primacy in the Asia Pacific and to deploy a massive number of ballistic missiles in the South and East China Seas that directly threaten Japan (Deng, 2014).
Accordingly, Xi’s overarching vision of Chinese dreams – to assert the great rejuvenation of Chinese nation – that involves the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and an audacious project of Belt and Road initiative, is signalling to the world to keep accommodating with the rise of China, yet simultaneously becoming a flash point in Sino-Japan relations (Wang, 2013). Xi’s pursuit of expansion has kept a veil of anxieties among Japanese elites and voters, including Abe himself, where his administration capacity in formulating a good policy to encounter China’s expansion is certainly being scrutinized while furthering his much-touted Abenomics. Yet, responding to the dramatic increase in China’s power since returning to power in September 2012, Abe has seemingly pushed through a series of institutional, legal, diplomacy, and importantly, military reforms in bids to enhance Japan’s regional posture over the coming decade. He even blatantly stated his desire to amend war-renouncing Article 9 and thus see a revised Constitution enforced in 2020 through a video message released on May 3, 2017, Japan’s Constitution Day – soundingly showcasing a newly reborn Japan during Tokyo Olympics (The Mainichi, 2014, May 4; Rich, 2017, May 3).

The nationalist Abe has vividly distanced his country from its postwar pacifism and merely unveiled a new, more realist stances and foreign policy to counterbalance China. International relations studies in defining the ongoing Japan’s China policy recently have been saturated with realism explanations, leaving a cause and effect analysis underresearched. How realist Abe’s China policy inherently is and how to define the new realism approach remain undermined. Thus, this paper attempts to shed light on Japan’s China policy under Abe’s second administration and assess the strategies carried out through a set of theoretical analysis that is about to be linked with Abe’s political identity. This paper serves three arguments. Firstly, while Abe’s idiosyncracy has a significant role in pursuing hawkish policy towards Beijing, he still embraces a pragmatic sense on developing relationship with China given he has been being framed in an advantageous situation that required him to be risk averse. Secondly, the trajectory of Abe’s China policy is a mixed bag that is designed not to purely balance against China’s rise or Xi’s Chinese dream, but also to revive “Japanese Nationalist Dream”. It has unveiled new pattern of balancing, namely constructive balancing, that is about to balance the threat from China as well as to construct the Nationalist-Normalist identity simultaneously. Thirdly, Abe’s new rule of balancing against China has brought on a watershed in the Japanese diplomatic values and codes of conduct. Interestingly, there is a parallel shift between the growing identity of Nationalist-Normalist and the strong interest in the pursuit of neo-autonomist tenet, which give a leeway for the revisionist to include the military preeminence in the conduct of foreign policy. This paper is organized as follows. The following section presents theoretical frameworks in which the connection with Abe’s political identity is examined. The third section investigates the new rule of balancing during Abe’s second tenure. The fourth section pinpoints the implication of the “constructive balancing” to the foreign policy. Finally, this paper concludes with the main findings as well as a brief discussion of the future trajectory of Japan-China relations.

(2) Revisiting Theoretical Expectations and Realities: A Myriad of Options yet Many Constraints

Mochizuki (2007) clustered four strategic options that Japan possibly carries out to respond to China’s expansion. The contested views are: (1) cooperative engagement
with a soft hedge, where Japan should strive for a “road map for community building” in the region together with China, promote a security dialogue, and depoliticize the history issue; (2) competitive engagement with a hard hedge, that encourages Japan to modernize and expand its own defense capabilities, strengthen the alliance with the US, and develop security ties with other countries to impede China’s hegemonic ambitions; (3) balancing and containment, which calls for Japan’s legitimacy in deploying a combination of missile defense and its own nuclear forces, given that US has signalled lack of credibility to defend Japan against China, and; (4) strategic accomodation, that opposes an expansive military role and favors stabilizing relations with China by accomodating its basic interests.

In theory, Abe could simply opt one of the aforementioned strategic options as his policy basis to interact with China. Yet, practically speaking, having played two-level international and domestic game and overwhelmed by the narrative of political identity, the identities variable should not be peripheral to the story. Abe’s China policy is stirring Japan away from the rhetoric expectations and eventually formulating a “constructive balancing” strategy in the region. The question is how was the term of constructive redefined? Before answering, one should analyze the connection of this intervening variable with strategic options by conceptualizing the domestic identity among Japanese elites.

The concept of “domestic identity hierarchy” from Funaiolo (2015) and theory of “political survival prospect” (McDermott, 2007) can be extracted into the independent variables in this study. In the aftermath of Cold War, the division of domestic identity among Japanese elites has increasingly become apparent and it is not merely about left vs right wing. In this sense, there are two-layered identities based on military, foreign policy, and economic terms that emerged. Primary political identities can be remapped into two clusters. First is the Mercantilist groups, who rever Yoshida Doctrine and wish to maintain a low diplomatic profile and focus on economic growth. Another cluster is the Normalist, who seek to strengthen Japanese bargaining position, particularly in economy, and favor Japan to become more active in the international stage through great power foreign policy strategy. The second layer identity is rooted from the stances on Article 9. The Pacifist group is regarded as the defenders of Article 9 who staunchly opposed revision to the Japanese pacifist constitution, while the notorious Nationalist group called for the revisions and wished to revive Japanese imperialism and traditional military power.

Accordingly, this paper generates these two-layered identities into four strategic groups in Japan that respectively have different preferences on Japan’s China policy. Four identity clusters comprise Pacifist-Normalist, Pacifist-Merchantilist, Merchantilist-Nationalist, and Normalist-Nationalist. The strategic formation vividly defines their position in Japanese political constellation, as it does matter to the identity they hold - the strategies chosen would either destruct their identity or construct their identity. Diagram 1 provides a visual reference for the nexus of identity and Japan’s China strategy option.
Diagram 1: The domestic identity and Japan’s China policy

However, the link between the concept of political identity hierarchy and strategy options to counter China would just explain the most dominant policy that are highly taken into account. Yet, in the realm of policy execution, by borrowing the concept of “political survival prospect”, this paper argues that the dominant policy would be supported by inferior strategy to not let the leaders as well as his groups’ identity hit the nadir. For instance, if Abe purely implemented the strategy of strong containment to China, the combination of pacifist lovefest in domestic stage and geopolitical weight, to a greater extent, would put a lot of constraints on the advancement of the strategy and question the commitment on the top priority of Abenomics. In this context, the political survival prospect accentuates situational choices, where leaders are in advantageous situation (a domain of gains), they are more likely to behave cautiously or become risk-averse to protect their gains and avoid losses. However, when they are situated in a disadvantageous situation (a domain of losses), they are more likely to choose risky behavior, including containment, that may either reverse or worsen their losses (Levy, 1992; McDermott, 2007). Furthermore, the following chapters would examine how the variable works and puzzle out the the cause and effect of situational choice within Abe’s China policy.

(3) Shinzo Abe: From Third Cluster to Fourth Cluster?

In terms of the idiosyncracy, instead of getting much inspiration from his father, Shintaro Abe, Shinzo Abe is much influenced by his grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi who served as Prime Minister in 1957-1960 (Walsh, 2006; Edstrom, 2007). Following the establishment of Japan’s SDF in 1954, as a revisionist and nationalist politician, Kishi devoted his political life to revising the Article 9 as it was considered to be a bottleneck in Japan’s pursuit of having a sovereign and independent foreign policy as well as defending itself (Takahashi, 2014). As a result, the foundation of Japan-US relations which remains intact more than half of century, is the one that Kishi signed in 1960 – Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States of
As an “appetizer” of his comeback in 2012, Abe concluded his speech about Abenomics and National Defense Program at CSIS Washington DC with a special remark, “Japan is back”. Indeed, this is how Abe set out to pursue the goal of fourth cluster. In 2013, China’s “unilateral escalation” by setting up a new air-defense identification zone in the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Island has infuriated Abe at once revived his spirit of revisionists (Tisdall, 2013). Such killing two birds with one stone, Abe could construct his long-standing identity while framing “China cost” in tandem with North Korean nuclear threat to allow further discussion on the Article 9 revision. Consequently, he dragged one’s feet in summing up the past with China while kept grasping at straws to quicken the constitutional revision (Drysdale, 2015). It was also triggered by the cloud of uncertainties signalled from Washington as well as the dilemma of external balancing by both sides. Japan could expect that the US security umbrella would effectively balance against China if Chinese intentions turn out to be malign, but conversely, it could trigger China to contain Japan. For Washington, defending Japan in a direct way would increase the responsibility burden of its hub and spoke alliance arrangement in the region and of Trump’s unpredictability, none could
ensure his real stances toward China’s assertiveness. Hence, in a traditional thinking, Abe should have required a legal framework for expanding the role of SDF, particularly in the disputed territories, as an act of internal balancing.

In the realm of policy making, Abe’s domestic policy seems sufficient enough to explain his constructive balancing. Abe acknowledged that his balancing strategy should imminently build on and accelerate the decades-long expectation of pursuing JSDF’s role expansion and a “normal” Japan within US-Japan alliance. Thus, the policy might seem balancing China, yet it is intended to construct the fourth group identity. Pyle (1992) depicted Japan’s post-1945 policy as the “eight noes”, namely no overseas deployment, no exercise of collective self defense, no power projection capability, no nuclear arms, no arms exports, no sharing defense technology, no military spending above one percent of GDP, and no military use of space. Yet, except no nuclear arms, the seven noes have been gradually vanished. Since December 2013, reverberating a new doctrine of “Proactive Contributions to Peace”, Japan has established a National Security Council and released its first ever National Security Strategy to impede bureaucratic inertia as well as to centralize national security policy decision making and ensure rapid and effective inter-agency planning. Simultaneously, his administration also updated the seminal 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines, passed a controversial secrets protection law, and in 2014, significantly revised a decades-old ban on arms exports and even empowered Japanese arms producers to seek markets around the world (Lee, 2015). Additionally, in July 2015, Abe’s Cabinet “reinterpreted” Article 9 to partially lift a longstanding, self-imposed prohibition on exercising the UN-sanctioned right to collective self defense. That said, the reinterpretation of Japan’s pacific constitution to allow “collective-self defense” is apparent through the participation of SDF in anti-piracy control in the Indian Ocean and regular air patrols, port calls, and join naval exercises in the South China Sea. Amid respective territorial disputes with China, Japan also inked a landmark defense and technology agreement with the Philippines that stipulated the progress of their burgeoning security partnership. More importantly, both sides are discussing specifics to allow Manila to lease five Beechcraft TC-90 King Air Planes from Japan, that are intend to be used for safeguarding the country’s claim in the disputed South China Sea (Parameswaran, 2016; Calica, 2016). If ratified, it will remark the first time that Japan would lend military aircraft to a foreign country after decades of forging self-imposed ban on weapon exports. Although China unsurprisingly complains, Japan’s military footprint boost is well-received in the region, with Australia, Vietnam, India, and the Philippines, paving the way for Abe to gear up the legitimacy of SDF in the region. On December 22, 2016, Japan also adopted new guidelines that allow JMSDF (Maritime Self Defense Forces) to protect US Navy vessels and there has also been growing interest to speed up the deployment of combat units by JMSDF to East China Sea (Gady, 2016, December 23).

Playing in the domestic level, Abe’s administration’s political capital more firmly than at any other time in the past six years, ostensibly brings Japan a window of opportunity to advance its foreign policy goal. Komeito Party, who set up Abe’s support base has strong reservations about changing the reinterpretation of Japan’s war-renouncing Constitution and prone to limit the scope of any collective self-defense operations (Hughes, 2006). However, in September 2015, for the first time in the seventy years since World War II, Japan’s parliament gave final approval to legislation that allow government power to use the military in overseas conflicts even if Japan itself is not
under attack (Borah, 2015). Such mastering the art of compromise among politicians, despite any critics, Abe also successfully gained support from the pacifist Komeito that adamantly against revisions in the past. Consequently, Komeito members vindicated the decision as they prevented the Abe administration from going too far by having it accept three conditions for the use of force based on whether the attack poses a clear danger to Japan’s survival and its citizens’ rights to life, liberty, and happiness; there is no other way of repelling the attack; and the use of force is limited to the minimum necessary (Japan Times, August 18, 2015). It imminently would put Japan simply in the equal position with the US that consequently gearing up a much stronger external balancing and building reciprocal relationships with US by boosting deterrence against a growing Chinese military in the South and East China Sea. Furthermore, the Abe-led ruling coalition also scored a landslide victory in the Upper House election held in July 2015. Convincingly, the election result would increase the grand total of Diet’s pro-revision forces that is about to bring Abe a huge step forward toward his nationalist ambition of amending the Constitution (Sieg and Funakoshi, 2016, July 11).

Equally important, the vast majority of Abe’s cabinet belongs to Nippon Kaigi - the result of the merger from two influential organizations namely Nippon o Mamoru Kai centering on religious groups and Nippon o Mamoru Kokumin Kaigi comprising business leaders, politicians, and intellectuals in 1997 (Mullins, 2016). It is an ultranationalist nonparty organization with around 38,000 fee-paying members and a network that reaches deep into the government, who call for preserving Japan’s “beautiful traditional national character” by praising the Imperial family, revising the pacifist Constitution, promoting nationalistic education, and supporting parliamentarians’ visits to Yasukuni Shrine (Kato, 2014). According to a report posted by Asahi Shimbun (2016), the Nippon Kaigi Discussion Group of the Diet has 289 members, mostly conservatives from LDP - occupying 40 percent of the entire Parliament. About a third of the Diet and fifteen of the nineteen members of Abe’s first Cabinet are also staunch supporters of Nippon Kaigi while Abe is its “special adviser” (Kato, 2014).

On the other side, this constructive balancing lamentably came at a price for a democratic Japan, when Abe adamantly blew off tens of thousands of protesters who opposed the security bills off (Takenaka, August 30, 2015). Ironically, LDP even tried to upend the pacifist arguments among grass-root levels by producing manga titled Honobono Ikka no Kenpo Kaisei Ite Nani (The Honobono Family Asks What are Constitutional Revisions?) to make case for constitutional revision (Johnson, 2015, May 11). The comic touts the irrelevancies of the Article 9 to the current condition and was targeted to the younger generation who have been nurtured in the state of a Pacifist Japan. It accentuated how the Article 9 was “written” by Americans and thus made Japan continuing as a loser nation. The conversations in the comic are also intended to patch up the fear of Japanese people about revising Article 9 by echoing the importance of human rights as well as human security (ibid, 2015; Jones, 2015, July 15).

Another point worth noting in examining the spectrum of constructive balancing is how Abe managed the China’s “demands” as well as historical cards. The absence of Japan-China Summit and over-reliance on the historical pages, have restricted both countries to strive for a futuristic approach. The “demands” that are expected to become a benchmark for Abe’s policy, basically reiterate three conditions. First, Japan should maintain the position given in the “four basic documents” issued between the two

For decades, Japan-China relations were carried out under the principle of “separating economics and politics” (seikei bunri) to accommodate the history issue and deepen the commercial relations in a belief that a prosperous China would become friendly to Japan (Nagy, 2015). During the first twenty years of reform and the opening-up policy, at the time when China’s economic took off was relatively lacking capital and technology, Japan also pledged the yen loans qualified them as official development assistance (ODA) that basically had contributed to the development of China’s basic infrastructure. Even after Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, Tokyo averted the linkages between aid and political issues as ODA was just frozen for several months and thus resumed again in July the following year (Jerden and Hagstrom, 2012).

All the benign hopes tapered in September 2010 due to the territorial dispute over a group of islands, known as Senkaku islands in Japan and the Diaoyu island in China. China’s demarcation of an air defense identification zone over the disputed territories has undoubtedly infuriated Abe and led him consequently calling forth the belief that depoliticizing the history issue would just weaken Japan’s position although the Japanese leaders have exercise restraint for Yasukuni visits. Subsequently, on the MOFA Diplomatic Bluebook (2014), it is adamantly stipulated that China has been continuing unilateral attempt to change the status quo in waters and airspaces, including the East China Sea and South China Sea. Furthermore, the high-level dialogues, including summit talks have also been suspended.

In contrast to his low-profile position in 2006, Abe’s policy shifted away from “accomodating the past” to being “less indulgent” about Chinese harping on the history issue. It was apparent in December 2013, he prompted outrage from China by visiting Yasukuni in a private capacity and insisted the visit that was called by China as “unacceptable to the Chinese people”, as a part of anti-war gesture by reporting to “the souls of the dead” and Japan’s effort to maintain the peace. Worth noting is, despite the visit was widely criticized by the Chinese, Koreans, and almost all of international society, it was largely accepted by Japanese as an opinion survey indicated that over 70 percent of Japanese approve of such visits (Wang, 2014). This is considerably one of Abe’s strategy in securing his administration and advancing his foreign policy through supports from popular beliefs in domestic level, especially in “running the mandate” from the Nippon Kaigi. Furthermore, Abe’s 70th war anniversary speech was also ambiguous. Although he did not fully rescind the Murayama statement, he obviously excluded the word “aggression” that is important for China. The only point could be concluded without no doubt is, he indirectly impeded China’s much-touted strategy of using “historic card” to stumble Japan. The speech expressed “deepest remorse” and “sincere condolences” to Japan’s wartime victims while let the comfort women issue off the hook (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, August 14, 2015). In this case, by reiterating that the future generations should not foreordained to apologize themselves
he was simply signalling his once-for-all and more “future-oriented” policy could close
the page of history. In the meantime, rubbing salt in the wound, Abe’s administration
has also doubled their intervention on the contentious historical issues in Japanese
school history textbooks. Textbooks compiled by private-sector publishers are required
to pass the screenings from education ministry and one of the key guidelines on school
textbooks must point out the Japanese governmen’s position on history as well as
territorial issues. Consequently, on the sensitive issue of “comfort women”, only one
publisher addressed the subject and indeed many requests for modifications were made
to descriptions of historical facts, such as the “Japan’s wartime atrocities” were modified
into “Japan’s colonial rule”.

Differences over history have soured ties between Japan and China. As Prime Minister
of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong (2016) coined, “The difference between the Chinese
and the Japanese is that the Japanese cannot remember the war and the Chinese cannot
forget it.” Thus, having awareed that a very little readiness in China to accept Japan’s
effort to promote reconciliation, it is not surprising if a conservative Abe is eagerly
sealing the history instead of facing it with a self critical interpretation. The row is one of
several disagreements over wartime history has recently infuriated Japan. UNESCO’s
Director General, Irina Bokova, approved to include disputed Chinese documents
about the 1937 Nanjing Massacre in its Memory of the World List program. To Japan,
it was extremely regrettable that an international organization reflected a biased Chinese
view of history. A case in point is the documents’ integrity and authenticity, as Chinese
historians claim that Japanese imperial army troops killed more than 300,000 soldiers
civilians in a six-week rampage, but Japanese adamantly refutes it by insisting the
death toll was between the 20,000 and 200,000. Responding to this explicit bias, Japan
threatened to halt its funding for UNESCO (McCurry, 2015; Han, 2015).

However, at the certain point, Abe’s realist strategy implies a mix-bag of approach,
given that he still embraces pragmatic sense on the strained relations between Tokyo
and Beijing and remains focused on developing a working relationship with China.
Regardless in a cooler atmosphere and less-than-enthusiastic handshake, he held
several summit meetings with his Chinese counterparts – attended meeting at the Great
Hall of the People in Beijing, held talks with President Xi on the sidelines of a
gathering of Asian and African countries in Jakarta, Indonesia, and in November 2015,
he attended first trilateral meeting with Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang, and the leader of
South Korea, President Park Geun-Hye (Obe, 2015; Reynolds, 2015). Accordingly,
Japanese Foreign Minister, Fumio Kishida, also paid an official visit to Beijing in April
30th, 2016, that has regarded as the first Japanese top diplomat to visit to China in more
than four years. It sounded out part of Abe’s effort to seek way to compromise with
China, along with growing speculation that a Xi-Abe meeting is in the card. Indeed, by
making a symbolic statement of intent to bolster economic cooperation and invigorate
regional peace, Abe simply signalled that the positive trends in Sino-Japan relations is
possibly continuable (South China Morning Post, April 30, 2016; Japan Times, April
22, 2016). Indeed, in the face of a “new level of threat”, North Korea’s missile
programs, Abe showed desires to work hand-in-hand with Beijing to further the
bilateral cooperation in preventing Pyongyang from taking more provocative actions
(Japan Times, April 3, 2017).

Touching upon the thesis of “political survival prospect”, behind the pragmatic move is
Abe’s situational choices in elevating his long-standing identity yet maintaining certain
degree of the containment of China. Abe was lucky in his timing. He has been being framed in an advantageous situation, among others the unrivaled political capital amalgated with the nuclear threat of North Korea that giving him a leeway to pursue his revisionism. Yet, it is not yet the time to tweak the Constitution and directly contain China. For accumulating his power, Abe has passed through different spectrum of political constellation that eventually brought him a tailwind to regain voters’ confidence. Referring to the Regular Public Opinion Poll conducted by Asahi Shimbun in 2015, citizens remain pacifist at heart. Although 45 per cent of respondents claimed their support on the Abe cabinet and 61 per cent of them agreed the reinterpretation of Self Defense Forces (SDF) operations for defending the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island, only 53 per cent strongly opposed the geographical extension of SDF operations. The pacifist stances did not significantly change into the revisionist one even though the government has framed the importance of amendment within the “emergency condition” such as natural disaster and “the cost of North Korean nuclear threat”. According to a Kyodo News survey carried out in mid-2016, though the support rate for Abe’s Cabinet stood at 53.0 per cent, almost half of the nation (48.9 per cent) are against making any revision on the Article 9. Thus, it is not surprising that Abe must protect the aggrandizement and avoid political losses. There is still room for pragmatism as a revisionist Abe is less likely to choose risky behavior. Conclusively, the connection between the political identity, political prospect, and Abe’s constructive balancing is portrayed in Diagram 2. The growing identity of Nationalist-Normalist in a very right timing has unwittingly coalesced into a remarkable shift on China’s policy. The shift from first cluster to fourth cluster is increasingly apparent, yet there is a little sense of accommodation policy due to the risk-aversion of Abe’s political capital.

Diagram 2. Remapping the Identity and Strategy
(4) The Revival of Fourth Cluster and the Implication on the Conduct of Foreign Policy

On the Diplomatic Bluebook 2015, Japan stressed that strengthening the Japan-US alliance is one of three main pillars of Japanese foreign policy. It certainly reflects a neorealist argument that aligning more closely with the US would help Japan to balance China. On the contrary, in practice, what Abe has been doing is basically opaque, beyond this traditional balancing point of view. Indeed, it can be construed as a hotchpotch of strategy that is designed to killing two birds with one stone, namely to cast a shadow on China’s further expansion as well as simultaneously to further his “normalization” goal.

Abe’s constructive balancing is accompanied by a set of “salesmanship” that brings a watershed in the conduct of Japanese foreign policy. First, the turning point in Japan’s 21st century art of diplomacy. Japanese foreign policy was used to exercise a model of “quiet diplomacy”, in which Japan tended to focus on low profile initiative or just lied on the “mercantile realism”, mainly through adapting itself to the existing international environment that reckoned Japan is not capable of changing and only keen for peace and prosperity (Jerdan and Hagstrom, 2012). The regional security environment changed and Chinese economic and military power now threaten Japan in ways it did not previously. Hence, under Abe administration, Japanese foreign policy has displayed “a posture of proactivity” of getting much coverage and defending Japan’s position in the existing international order. It is explicitly coined as “diplomacy that takes a panoramic perspective of the map” (MOFA Diplomatic Bluebook, 2014), where this paper argues that the paradigm implies that Japan’s strategic diplomacy can no longer be defined only by the US-Japan alliances, but is a strategy which encompasses a normalist point of view, namely a broader regionalism to augment the alliance, including India and Australia. This is very apparent on the concept of Indo-Pacific “Security Diamond”, whereby Australia, India, Japan, as well as US, form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the Western Pacific. It was also announced by Abe himself on his diplomacy agenda through a publication on Project Syndicate (2012), and currently has been making concrete progress toward the realization of his diamond strategy albeit critical debates. More interestingly, Abe also emphasized the “diamond alliance” is based on common values, such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in which indirectly showcased his nation as a regional beacon of democratic values and a counterweight to authoritarian China.

Second, tensions between Abe and Xi, are likely to undermine the bilateral economic relationship and thus bubble over the geopolitical rivalries in the realm of economic interactions. The background is Japan’s weapon, seikei bunri, does not have much significancies to entail China under the more assertive leadership of Xi. The relations that usually coined with “cold politics, hot economics”, would not seemingly project the relationship trajectory in the foreseeable future. China’s macro economic policy is shifting from the value-chain to a higher value added manufacturing and services, and due to the overcapacities, its outbound investment has moved up for resource extraction towards exporting capital goods and construction services in the Belt and Road development framework. In that way, Beijing ostensibly reminds Tokyo that it is losing prominence in Chinese foreign policy and the country’s prosperity is not about to rely on Japanese investment significantly.
In regards to those matters, Abe has been carrying out a strategy that aims to resist Chinese dominance over the region and vilifying the “securitizing China” policy to the key countries in the region. On the one hand, the stage is merely set for Abe and Xi’s growing geo-economic rivalry and would not keep the region above China-Japan fray. In this context, countries in the region have increasingly emerged as the “targets” for both China and Japan’s infrastructure contracts. After a heavy blow of losing to China Railway Group in bidding to build Indonesia’s first high-speed railway, Abe leveraged his clout in India by injecting 15 billion USD to build its iconic cutting-edge technology, shinkansen, between Mumbai and Ahmedabad. Along with that, while Chinese companies have begun work on a railway project in Laos, Abe’s “shinkansen diplomacy” thus scores a win in Thailand where Japan is about to gear up the joint development of the ambitious 635 kilometres of high-speed train project linking Bangkok and Chiang Mai, including a double-track railway route linking Bangkok with eastern and western provinces ( Strait Times, October 8, 2015; South China Morning Post, October 22, 2015; Sweet, 2015). The battle to sell infrastructure is seen as a broader proxy for the competition between Abe and Xi to retain influence in the region. Interestingly, following the lifting of international sanctions on Tehran, Abe also visited Iran and set forth an improved business environment in a bid to increase Japanese companies’ competitiveness. Beside of oil interest, there is an assumption that the visit is part of racing with China that also is moving aggressively to deepen ties with Iran (Japan Times, September 22, 2016; Nikkei Asian Review, March 7, 2016).

On the other hand, Abe also accentuated strong interests in bringing the rhetorics of the “securitization” of China by its Southeast Asian neighbours to the fore. Not only in bids to tackle the conventional human-security issues, the current trend of Japan foreign relations seemingly also involves the military preeminence. The dramatic improvement signified how Japan is heading to the efforts of sharing of norms and general rules in “securitizing” China whether by furthering defense diplomacy or reaffirming the rhetoric of “proactive contribution to peace”. One of the egregious example, in case of Indonesia, there has been remarkable changes in Japan’s tenet of low profile policy which resulted a desecuritized Japan-Indonesia bilateral relations. Major milestones in the process of the “desecuritization” have been apparent through several fronts. Firstly, for the first time in December 18, 2015, Japan-Indonesia held two plus two Ministerial Meeting, namely Foreign Minister and Defense Minister. In the Joint Statement, ministers explicitly bear the urgency of South China Sea issue into mind and emphasize the importance of maritime exercise, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), as well as the freedom of navigation (MOFA, 2015, December 18). In addition, in the recent Joint Statement concluded between Shinzo Abe and President Joko Widodo in January 2017, two countries also vividly mentioned the Natuna Island', as one of the important areas toward enhancing a bilateral cooperative relationship (MOFA, 2017 January). Secondly, Japan in tandem with the loosening of JSDF restrictions has also been stepping up its involvement with Indonesia in the realm of security, such as the bilateral military exercises and agreement on defense equipment. In April 2016, for the first time, the large MSDF destroyer Ise crossed the South China Sea for the first time to participate in an international fleet review and multilateral

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1 The resource-rich Natuna Island is located in the South China Sea, off the northwest coast of Borneo and is under Indonesian administration. Though Indonesia is a non-claimant state in the South China Sea tension, yet the exclusive economic zone off the coast of Natuna reportedly overlaps with the large part of the South China Sea which is claimed by China as its Nine-Dash line.
exercises held in Indonesia though in the beginning Indonesia has attempted to remain a “neutral arbiter” in the disputes and does not see itself as a claimant in the South China Sea (Satake, 2016, August 26). Additionally, following its decision in April 2014 to ease the country’s long-standing ban on international military sales, Japan surely is looking for opportunities to export such technology following decision and Indonesia would arguably be the potential partner, as it is eyeing Japanese weaponry purchase, plan to procure US-2 amphibious aircraft (Witular, 2015, December 18).

Finally, Abe has also invested an unprecedented amount of political capital through foreign visits and aims to give Tokyo greater diplomatic leverage in encountering China’s expansion. By the end of 2016, Abe had visited 92 countries for a total of 204 days - more than half of all United Nations members - costing 8.8 billion Yen in total and has conducted 260 summit meetings since being elected to his position at the end of 2012 (Japan Times, 2016, May 31; Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2016). Amidst the pure intention to strengthen economic relationships, Abe’s “wanderlust” accentuated several trends. First, seeking out partners to hedge against a rising China and building new strategic partnerships with other countries to “collectively” restrain China’s hegemony. Second, positioning Japan as the leading actor in the formation of such a defense coalition. Third, gaining support for “proactively pacifist” Japan in spite of the security bills coming into forces. Fourth, stating that Japan’s multifaceted and strategic diplomatic relations can cover and go beyond the region.

Diagram 3: The Shift of Foreign Policy Tenet

In this sense, Japan might ostensibly have titled toward the argument of balancing China, but this also implies how the strengthening identity yet a set of cautious approach Abe has been pursuing within the framework of Japan’s China policy, is largely parallel with the transformation of the execution of Japan’s foreign policy in balancing China’s preponderance in the region. In a broader sense, Japan’s foreign
policy could be categorized into four categories. First, the pacifist who against the military institution and embrace unarmed neutrality. Second category is the middle power internationalists who defend Japanese low profile policy with self-imposed limits on its right to belligerency. Third category is the neoautonomist who desire policy that allows expanded role of an independent Japanese military and the last category which the groups of fourth cluster identity pose fondness is the normal nationalist, who wish Japan to become a great power and to step onto the international stage as an equal of the US (Samuel, 2011; Funairole, 2015). Having said that, Abe’s foreign direction in the face of China’s rise has utterly pledged him such a “bonus” card to have more authority in expanding the outreach of foreign policy from the second category to the third category with the last category as the final goal.

(5) Conclusion

The dichotomy of Pacifist-Normalist, Pacifist-Merchantilist, Merchantilist-Nationalist, and Nationalist-Normalist has been underresearched in puzzling out Japan-China relations. Nonetheless, in the case of Abe’s China policy, it has been instrumental in defining the direction of Abe’s strategy than the conventional strategic studies’ scholarship offered. The growing influences of the fourth cluster has put leverage on Japan’s strategy. Abe’s remarkable comeback has undoubtedly broken the mold in Japan’s China policy as well as in Japan’s foreign policy tenet. The long-standing ties of both positive engagement and external balancing have been rejuvenated into a new rule of balancing. Though it is largely triggered by the logic of two-level games, both domestic and geopolitical weight, yet Abe’s China policy is also well-vetted in the defining political identity and situational choices.

First, the rise of China has paved way for the high water mark of Abe’s political identity, playing between normalist and nationalist. Rather than challenging, the Chinese assertiveness in tandem with the North Korean threat has been contributing to construct the long-standing political goal of Abe. Thus, as the so-called “constructive balancing”, Abe’s China policy tiptoes the revisionist goals and upends the state of haisenkoku (loser nation), at once simultaneously balancing the risk of China. Though the US-Japan alliance remain intact, Tokyo vigorously addressed the more muscular SDF and the reinterpretation of collective self defense to leapfrog into a normalization as well as internally balancing China. Additionally, Abe’s policy shifted away from “accommodating the past” to being “less indulgent” about Chinese harping on the history issue. Neither depoliticize the history nor accomodating it, Abe adamantly attempted to close the page of history in purpose to doom the historic card that China “deliberately” used to restrain Japan – seems no compromise.

Accordingly, the situational choices decisively put constraints on the overhyped balancing strategy of fourth cluster. Abe still showcases a sense of accommodating with China’s interests and has tendency to maintain seikei bunri although China might not tantalize on it. Thus, because of the risk-aversion, there remains room for carrying out the art of pragmatism in managing Sino-Japan relations as Abe known very well the limits in balancing and probably containing China, otherwise it would backfire on the political capital that he has been constructing for years.
Thirdly, in order to resist Chinese dominance over the region as well as vindicate the benign intention of normalist agenda, the constructive balancing has been pivoting on “salesmanship” of foreign policy as well as piqueing the “securitizing China” policy. To a greater extent, it has led the transformation of Japan’s model of “quiet diplomacy” to a “posture of proactive diplomacy” which consequently actuate Abe and Xi’s growing geo-economic rivalry in the region. In a similar vein, it also indicates the parallel moves between the growing identity of Nationalist-Normalist and the strong interest in neo-autonomist tenet, which give a leeway for the revisionist desire to involve the military preeminence in the conduct of foreign policy.

However, to sum up this paper, it is worth noting that Abe’s China policy should prudently differentiate the rhetoric and reality. His ambitious “salesmanship” as well as the securitizing China strategy would never be working if the strategy set deliberately aims to force his counterparts choose Japan and abandon China. Of particular notes, the newly trend of military cooperation with Southeast Asian countries could be at risk of being overly focused on China despite their own strategic worries.

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