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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

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**Reconceptualising the Asia-Pacific Order: Japan's Response to Strategic Uncertainties in the Era of Trump**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article examines how the perceived US unreliability, especially under the Trump administration, is influencing the security policy behaviour of Japan – one of America's core allies in the Asia-Pacific. By applying Kuik's conceptualisation of hedging, the article explores Tokyo's responses to two major strategic uncertainties in the Asia-Pacific. These are associated, on the one hand, with the sustainability of the US security commitments, and, on the other, with future Chinese intentions, especially in the realm of maritime security. The article also assesses the impact of uncertainties on Japan's conceptualisation of Asia-Pacific strategic order in the Trump era. The article argues that the Trump-generated strategic uncertainties have intensified Japan's long-standing concerns about the durability of America's regional engagements thereby magnifying Japan's China anxieties. This has stimulated Japan's rethinking of Asia-Pacific strategic order. While Japan now appears to have reluctantly accepted the prospect of a diminished American role in the region, or of a 'post-US' regional order, it has steadily resisted to consider a more prominent Chinese role in the evolving order.*

**KEYWORDS:** Strategic uncertainty; hedging; Japan; United States; China.

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## **1. 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. This order has been underpinned since the Cold War by a set of bilateral military alliances between America and several Asian countries, also known as the 'hub-and-spoke' security system. 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. Perceptions of America's relative decline have steadily grown since the 2008 financial crisis. The Donald J. Trump administration's unpredictable and transactional foreign policy has further heightened these uncertainties. In the meantime, regional perceptions of Chinese assertiveness in pressing its territorial claims in the East China Sea (ECS) and South China Sea (SCS) 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-Pacific strategic order has become all the more salient across Asia.

Keeping with the thrust of this special issue, this article examines how the perceived US decline and unreliability are influencing the security policy behaviour of one of Washington's core allies in the Asia-Pacific, namely, Japan. The article does so by exploring Tokyo's response to 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 the article is twofold: firstly, to examine how Japan has responded to these inter-related uncertainties since the early 2010s and,

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especially, since the second Abe Shinzo administration (2012-present). Secondly, to assess the impact of uncertainties on Japan's conceptualisation of Asia-Pacific strategic order in the Trump era. 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, the analysis is based upon the concept of 'hedging' (Kuik 2016), which refers in this article to a state's policy options that simultaneously aim at reducing risk and maximising gain in its relations with a bigger power or a competitor; this behaviour exemplifies the primary response to strategic uncertainties by Asian-Pacific countries.

The case of Japan is particularly relevant for understanding how regional players adapt to a perceived US decline and growing Chinese influence in the Asia-Pacific. Japan – a treaty ally of the US, relies heavily on America for its defence. At the same time, it also depends on China in the economic area and is vulnerable as a maritime nation, to some extent. Regional worries about China are largely driven by the PRC's maritime security behaviour, and Japan is no exception. Tokyo's concerns associated with China have progressively intensified since 2012, as a result of its territorial dispute with Beijing in the ECS.<sup>1</sup> Concomitantly, this has increased Japan's uncertainty about the US security commitments.

The article is structured as follows. It first conceptualises hedging and examines the pertinence 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 reflects on Japan's conceptualisation of the evolving Asia-Pacific order in the Trump era.

## 2. Conceptualisation of hedging

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<sup>1</sup>The dispute concerns maritime delimitation and sovereignty over five islands, known as *Senkaku* in Japan and *Diaoyu* in China. These territories are under Japanese administration, but are separately claimed by China and Taiwan. In 2012 the Japanese government nationalised three of the four privately-owned islands. This led to a major deterioration in Japan-China relations.

A number of studies over the past decade or so, 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 the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (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 in the above-mentioned studies is the element of uncertainty in response to which states choose hedging. Indeed, given the uncertain regional environment, the Asian states' hedging behaviour is not really surprising.<sup>2</sup> 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. The problem with most conceptualisations of hedging is that they define it in a loose way, i.e. as including anything between cooperation and competition. Essentially, this means that there is no, or little, variation in Asian states' behaviour.

This article applies Kuik's (2016) definition of hedging. In contrast to the other authors, Kuik seeks to unpack this concept by developing a set of 'constituent components' of hedging, which include military and non-military (economic and

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<sup>2</sup>I thank Park Jae Jeok for this remark.

diplomatic) elements. As his model examines the 'micro level', it allows for a better understanding both of the chosen policy options and variations in state behaviour (over time or in a region). Kuik's analytical model is particularly useful for the purposes of this article. Indeed, the objective is to identify Japan's specific policy choices as it adapts its security policy behaviour (at the micro level) and thinking about Asia's strategic order in response to its US- and China-associated concerns. It should be pointed out that Kuik's model was developed as a framework for examining the responses of smaller states, i.e. ASEAN players, to China-associated uncertainties. To be sure, in terms of resources and capabilities Japan is not a small state. At the same time, there are inherent limitations associated with Japan's security role. These are based, on the one hand, on domestic legal and institutional constraints related to the use of force, especially stemming from the interpretation of Article 9 of Japan's 1947 Constitution,<sup>3</sup> and, on the other hand, on external constraints related to Japan's dependence on the US for security. Given these limitations, the pursuit of a single policy option in a highly uncertain strategic environment would be both risky and costly for Tokyo. While not commensurable with the smaller ASEAN players, Japan is nevertheless vulnerable in the Asian-Pacific context of changing power configurations and shifting threats. 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

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<sup>3</sup> Article 9, or the 'peace clause', renounces the threat or use of force for settling international disputes and commits Japan to non-possession of war potential. The interpretation of Article 9 is that it permits possession of a military force for individual national self-defence, but prohibits Japan's participation in collective self-defence arrangements. Since 2014 a limited exercise of the right to collective self-defence has been allowed.

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.<sup>4</sup> 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 designed to diversify ties and avoid dependence, as well as to constrain the competitor in a more indirect way.

Kuik’s model of returns-maximising and risk-reduction policies is close to Hornung’s (2014) broader conceptualisation of hedging as ‘soft’ and ‘hard’, respectively. In the former case, the emphasis remains on power-acceptance and cooperation, but does not exclude, for example, some form of military hedging (or indirect-balancing). In the case of hard hedging, power-rejection and competition are dominant, yet some returns-maximising acts such as economic or diplomatic engagement remain present. All in all, 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 (Kuik 2016).

Two important caveats should be made here. Firstly, the analytical focus of this article is on Japan’s alignment choices vis-à-vis the two great powers, i.e. the US and China. In other words, the particular interest of this paper is to demonstrate how some of the constituent components of hedging identified by Kuik are increasingly relevant for Tokyo in the current Trump era, as Japan concurrently addresses 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

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<sup>4</sup>This article 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.

same degree (Kuik 2016). From this perspective, a special attention in this article is given to three hedging approaches. They have emerged as important constituent components of Japan's hedging behaviour (towards the US and China) since the late 2010s and have become especially pronounced in recent years. The first is Japan's pursuit of defence self-reliance in tandem with a strengthened US alliance. The second component consists in Japan's strategic diversification policies in the form of bilateral non-treaty alignments between Japan and some ASEAN states, as well as India. The final approach includes Tokyo's multilateral initiatives and policies towards ASEAN, and (collective) hedging acts pursued within multi- and minilateral settings. 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).

### **3. 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 is related to the sustainability of America's Asian-Pacific engagement, while the second dimension concerns the US-China relations (Atanassova-Cornelis and Van der Putten 2015). The relative weakening of the US influence in Asia following the 2008 financial crisis, unease about the sustainability of Barack Obama's 'rebalance' and worries generated by Trump's Asia policy have underlined Japan's more specific short- to medium-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). Washington's past strategic policy shifts, such as the Nixon shocks of the 1970s, drove such fears. With the end of bipolarity and Soviet collapse Japanese strategists contemplated such an abandonment scenario in the 1990s. However, it was the 2008 financial crisis that 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. Tokyo's concerns about Washington's ability to fund the rebalance remained until the end of Obama's term in office.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

Many Japanese strategists have openly doubted America's ability and willingness to sustain its medium- 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, thus vulnerable to the uncertainties of great power politics. All in all, the difference between Japan's present US-associated uncertainties and those of the 1990s stems from China's changed regional position. Whereas in the early post-Cold War years the PRC was not considered as a challenger to America's dominance in the Western Pacific, as it is now.

Although American retreat from the region is unlikely in the short to medium term, Washington's decision to accommodate Beijing remains a distinct possibility. Given Japan's security overreliance on America, Japanese strategists are particularly concerned about such a scenario, which could mean a certain degree of

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<sup>5</sup>Interview with Kotani Tetsuo, Tokyo, November 2015.

<sup>6</sup>Author's personal communications and interviews in Jakarta, Singapore and Tokyo in 2015.



Sino-US strategic understanding at the expense of Tokyo.<sup>7</sup> Japanese worries include a possible US decision not to intervene in a Senkaku/Diaoyu contingency on Japan's behalf, either for fear of negative repercussions for US-China relations or because of the high costs for the US that confronting China's 'anti-access, area-denial' (A2/AD) capabilities might entail (Hughes 2016). Sources of these Japanese anxieties already were the Obama administration's emphasis on engagement with the PRC, especially in 2009-2010, as well as 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 the Trump administration regional concerns have only grown across the Asia-Pacific. Indeed, Trump's tendency to view security alliances from a 'transactional' perspective and his objective to cut 'deals' benefiting the US generate worries in the region that Washington might decide to sacrifice the security interests of its partners in return, for example, for economic gains with Beijing (Huxley and Schreer, 2017). The US withdrawal from the *Trans-Pacific Partnership* (TPP) agreement in early 2017 and the persistent lack of clarity about the Trump administration's Asia-Pacific strategy, especially regarding China and North Korea, have reinforced Japan's 'abandonment' concerns. The president's rhetorical shifts on China, from threatening Beijing with a 'trade war' to emphasising 'friendly' relations with the PRC and then labelling it a 'strategic competitor', are making Japan nervous. Tokyo's fear of abandonment is now 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. In the short term, it is feared that such policy change may presumably occur in the wake of a US-China (trade) bargain under Trump. Similarly, the geopolitical uncertainties on the Korean Peninsula amid the on-going inter-Korean rapprochement and, especially, Trump's sudden shift towards dialogue with North Korea reinforce Japan's sense of insecurity.

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<sup>7</sup> Author's interviews with Japanese officials and scholars in Brussels in 2015 and in 2017, and in Tokyo in 2015.

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 clear manifestation of the continuing value the US attached to its alliance with Japan. For its part, early on in office, the Trump administration tried to reassure Tokyo of America's commitment to its Mutual Defence Treaty with Japan. Jim Mattis, the 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, President Trump himself has reiterated a long-standing US position that the US is '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 Trump administration, although Tokyo's abandonment concerns remain.

Japan's worries about the durability of the US security presence in the region are shared by some 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. Fears of a future reduction of American security presence (or of Washington's retreat from the Asia-Pacific altogether) arguably generate regional anxieties, for US disengagement would most likely lead to Chinese domination. While Japan considers this as unacceptable scenario, many Southeast Asian states do not embrace the idea of a China-led regional order either.

#### **4. Japan's China-associated uncertainties**

Regional 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 medium-term anxieties about Chinese maritime security objectives

in the region (Atanassova-Cornelis and Van der Putten, 2015). These Japanese and Asian anxieties have grown in response to the PRC's perceived assertiveness since 2010 in pursuing its territorial claims in the China Seas. However, it is Japan's doubts about Washington's willingness, and increasingly about its ability, to continue maintaining its defence commitments to Japan (and broadly its regional engagement) that arguably magnify 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 2012, 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). Japan's political discourse on China has been dominated by a perception of the PRC's unilateralism in seeking to change the maritime 'status quo by coercion' (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2013b, p. 8), disregarding international law and infringing upon the freedom of navigation.

At the same time, Tokyo's specific concerns about Chinese 'attempts to unilaterally change the status quo' in the ECS (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016, p. 24), and its intrusion into, what Japan considers the territorial waters and airspace of the Senkakus, have grown concurrently with wider geopolitical worries. The latter include China's alleged 'plans to further expand the sphere of its maritime activities' into the Pacific Ocean and objectives of sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) defence (Ministry of Defence, 2015a, pp. 47-48). This 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 trade routes that are strategically critical for Japan. This, in turn, could have potentially devastating economic (and security) implications for this island nation.

Japan's China anxieties are shared by countries in (maritime) Southeast Asia. There, too, 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 hegemony. In particular, SCS claimants have been alarmed by the PRC's construction activities on islands and reefs, as China expands its presence in the heart of maritime Southeast Asia. This has echoed Japan's own anxieties in the ECS.

While the Obama administration had limited success in curtailing China's maritime advances in the SCS (Huxley and Schreer, 2017), the administration initiated and conducted on a regular basis Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs). This was backed by strong diplomatic reassurance of allies and partners in the region, both at the bilateral and multilateral level, of the US commitment to

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<sup>8</sup> Author's interview with Dr. Simon Chang, Taipei, September 2012.

maintaining free and open SLOCs. Not surprisingly, Obama's policy was embraced by Japan. The US under Trump has continued FONOPs. Trump's emphasis on seeking a 'free and open Indo-Pacific region' now broadens the US security engagement in Asia to include India, including though the framework of the reinvigorated Quadrilateral Meeting (Quad) of like-minded democratic nations,<sup>9</sup> and is a response to China's growing maritime presence (Lee and Lee 2017). Japan has welcomed this US initiative, especially as the Quad was initially articulated by Abe in 2007.

### **5. Hedging in Japan's bilateral relations with the US and China**

Japan's first major response to strategic uncertainties is to embrace military-based approaches, with a particular focus on maritime security in the ECS. These policies simultaneously aim at returns-maximisation with the US and risk-reduction in regard to China. Japan has increasingly emphasised the pursuit of defence self-reliance by means of strengthened military capabilities and responsibilities. This has included a growing defence budget under the Abe administration, steady acquisition of capabilities to deal with potential ECS contingencies, as well as an overall expansion of the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) security role in terms of both geographical focus and missions.

The growing tensions with China over the Senkaku islands 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, p. 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, as well as the strengthening of Japan's Coast Guard. The defence budget has now seen five consecutive years of

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<sup>9</sup>The Quad includes Japan, the US, India and Australia.

rise since fiscal year 2013.<sup>10</sup> The budget for 2018, with an expected increase of 2.5 percent from 2017, is set to mark the sixth straight annual increase. The priority expenses reflect the Abe administration's main security concerns – China and North Korea, and its corresponding 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).

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. This move 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). The reinterpretation is all the more significant given the domestic legal difficulties associated with a full-scale constitutional amendment. The perceived lack of security options arguably feeds Japan's fear of abandonment.

In a similar vein, it was the logic of binding-engagement (a returns-maximising option) - i.e., to bind the US to the alliance and further institutionalise bilateral ties - 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 also covered US-Japan cooperation at the regional and global levels, for example, for securing the safety of SLOCs and maintaining maritime order. Al-

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<sup>10</sup> 1 April 2013 – 31 March 2014.

though not explicitly stated, the message was one of a strengthened joint deterrence of China's naval expansion in Asian waters. While Japan's current shift to south-western defence and focus on the Tokyo-Guam-Taiwan strategic triangle is aimed at reinforcing the SDF's surveillance of the vital SLOCs 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 regarding 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 Maritime SDF helicopter carrier *Izumo* was deployed to escort a US Navy supply ship off the Pacific coast of Japan. This was the first instance of the implementation of the security legislation. It was a highly publicised mission of Japan's protection of the military assets of its US ally and was meant to send an important signal to the Trump administration of Japan's firm commitments to the alliance. Japan's anxiety about US abandonment surfaced during the 2015 Diet deliberations of the new security legislation, when 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 the alliance has, therefore, served a dual purpose of reducing the risk of US abandonment, now especially salient under the Trump administration, 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 (Hornung 2014). Some political and military hedging was gradually implemented in the 2000s. Japan's growing uncertainties about the PRC, especially in the maritime domain, have driven a change in Tokyo's policy towards Beijing over the past decade (noticeably since 2010). There has been a palpable reduc-

tion in Japan's pursuit of returns-maximising options in favour of risk-contingency acts.<sup>11</sup> 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 2013a, p. 11). To this end, Tokyo has stepped up the various risk-contingency measures, which have included implementing the military hedge (defence self-reliance and strengthened alliance with the US) 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.

At the same time, as Japan does not perceive China as an imminent military threat, it has deliberately chosen to adopt a more ambiguous rhetoric centred on the term 'concern', and has supplemented the military hedge by binding-engagement policies (Vidal and Pelegrin, 2017). For example, the 2013 NDPG points out that Japan 'will promote security dialogues and exchanges with China, and will develop confidence-building measures (CBMs)' in order to prevent accidental clashes (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2013a, p. 11). To this end, Japan has pursued a binding-engagement policy towards China at the bilateral level in various ways. The meetings between Abe and Xi on the sidelines of multilateral gatherings, Japan-China foreign ministerial meetings, and the bilateral security dialogue have promoted institutionalisation, kept the channels of communication open and stabilised the bilateral relations. CBMs in the maritime domain, notably the 2017 agreement for an implementation of a hotline between defence officials, have aimed at reducing the risk of accidents at sea. Other examples of binding-engagement acts are Abe's recent diplomatic overtures to Xi, such as Japan's suggestion for a possible inclusion of the PRC in the 'free and open Indo-Pacific region' (The Japan Times, 2017). In the spring of 2018, the two sides also agreed to resume mutual high-level

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<sup>11</sup>Hornung (2014) provides a systematic analysis of the changes in Japan's China policy from soft hedging to hard hedging.



visits of leaders and the high-level Sino-Japanese economic dialogue. US-associated uncertainties under Trump are arguably a driver of Japan's latest diplomatic embrace of China. The recent rapprochement on the Korean Peninsula adds to these dynamics.

## **6. Strategic diversification: Japan's bilateral relations with Asian countries**

Japan's second major response to strategic uncertainties may broadly be identified as a diversification policy, i.e., away from the US and China (Atanassova-Cornelis and van der Putten, 2015). This includes reinforcement of the existing, or the establishment of new, bilateral (comprehensive) strategic partnerships with other players in the region, especially in maritime Southeast Asia and with India. Being 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-à-vis bigger powers. As discussed below, the pursuit of politico-diplomatic and economic initiatives is often paralleled by the enhancement of military ties between the hedging states.

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 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, as well as India, have reciprocated by embracing Tokyo's overtures. 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. Tokyo has also signed economic partnership agreements (EPAs), for example, with the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and India, and has increased its foreign aid provision to India and Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, for infrastructural projects (Wallace, 2013).

Japan's pursuit of strategic diversification has been markedly accelerated under Prime Minister Abe. The Abe administration has sought enhanced defence cooperation and security dialogue, in particular, with the Philippines and Vietnam. A *Strategic Partnership* was signed in 2011 with Manila, while the 2009 Strategic Partnership with Hanoi was elevated in 2014 to an *Extensive Strategic Partnership*. Both countries have territorial disputes with China in the SCS and share Tokyo's concerns about the PRC's geopolitical ambitions in the region. Both of them have acquired patrol boats from Japan. Additionally, Japan has conducted joint search and rescue exercises with the Vietnamese coast guard, and joint naval drills with the Philippines in the SCS. By providing military equipment to ASEAN states to enhance their coastal defence, Japan has pursued maritime security cooperation in the SCS (Hughes, 2016). As states in Southeast Asia increasingly respond to China's maritime advances in the SCS with growing defence budgets and naval build up, Japan is now an indispensable partner for maritime capacity building of these nations.<sup>12</sup> Consistent with the risk-contingency logic is Japan's focus on deepening its defence relations with the ASEAN states. Tokyo thus seeks to diversify its security partners in Asia, without jeopardising its alliance with Washington. At the same time, by cultivating its ties with Southeast Asian nations (both bilaterally and multilaterally with ASEAN), Japan also attempts to reinforce the regional role of America and thereby maintain the US-led alliance system in the Asia-Pacific (Sahashi, 2016), in line with the gains-maximising option.

The logic of hedging against multiple uncertainties is also present in Japan's deepening political and security ties with India. In 2014, the Japan-India relationship was upgraded to a *Special Strategic and Global Partnership*. Japan's relations with India have been particularly important to Tokyo from the perspective of the evolving tri-lateral US-India-Japan maritime security cooperation and in the context of the 'free and open Indo-Pacific' concept, promoted by the Trump administration. Japan is now a full member of the annual *Malabar* maritime exercises, conducted by the Indian and US navies in the Indian Ocean. In September 2017, the three countries

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<sup>12</sup> Author's personal communications and interviews in Jakarta, Singapore and Tokyo in 2015.

agreed to collaborate for the development of strategically important ports and other infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as to work together for maritime capacity-building of the coastal nations in the area. By engaging India, Japan manages the risks associated with China's growing regional role. At the same time, as Tokyo enmeshes Washington in trilateral and quadrilateral frameworks that include New Delhi, Japan also seeks to reduce the risk of possible US disengagement.

As the above discussion illustrates, the pursuit of strategic diversification in the case of Japan is associated with its China-related uncertainties in so far as Tokyo seeks to reduce the risks of potential Chinese hegemony in the Asia-Pacific in the medium to long term. 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, notably, in the Trump era. Thus, as observed by Ciorciari (2009), while these limited alignments seek to manage the risks associated with a rising threat (especially China), they also seek to reduce the risks related to overdependence on an ally (the US), as an ally 'may prove unreliable'. Importantly, these approaches are particularly useful to the hedgers, such as Japan, for these policies do not explicitly target any particular state (such as the PRC). This will not be acceptable to many Asian states due to their economic interdependence with China. Nor do limited alignments jeopardise Japan's respective ties with its US ally. This means that Japan can continue to pursue returns-maximising options with both the US and the PRC.

## **7. Multi- and minilateral dimensions of Japanese hedging**

The final major aspect of Japan's responses to strategic uncertainties includes its multilateral initiatives and policies, and (collective) hedging acts pursued within multi- and minilateral settings in the Asia-Pacific. Japan's approach to multilateral mechanisms has largely followed the logic of binding-engagement vis-à-vis the US, and dominance-denial thinking with regard to China.

In the framework of Japan's engagement of ASEAN, both at the bilateral level with individual countries and collectively with the organisation, Tokyo under

Abe has noticeably boosted its economic cooperation with, and investment in Southeast Asia. This has included increased foreign aid assistance to the region with a focus on improving Southeast Asia's disaster relief capabilities, funding transportation infrastructure and assisting the region's development. Observers point out that Tokyo's stepped-up engagement of ASEAN is a response to Beijing's growing diplomatic and economic influence in the region, including through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>13</sup> To be sure, Japan's economic initiatives in Southeast Asia cannot be compared with China's BRI in terms of either scale or (expected) impact. Tokyo's efforts, therefore, aim at reinforcing Japan's economic and geostrategic importance for ASEAN states rather than competing with Beijing. In this way, Japan attempts to minimise the risk of exclusion from various multilateral (economic) arrangements, and hedge against possible Chinese domination and coercion. This has become all the more important to Tokyo in the wake of the Trump administration's withdrawal of the US from the TPP. Indeed, Beijing now seems to be filling the vacuum left by Washington by pushing for the conclusion of a major multilateral FTA in the Asia-Pacific, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Abe's leadership role in moving forward the TPP agreement after America's withdrawal, i.e., in the form of TPP-11,<sup>14</sup> 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 specific multilateral initiatives with ASEAN, and various regional multilateral mechanisms 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

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<sup>13</sup> Author's interviews in Tokyo, November 2015.

<sup>14</sup> The TPP-11, known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), was signed in March 2018.

'China threat' perception in Japan (Sahashi, 2016). By aligning with ASEAN on issues related to maritime security, Japan attempts to reduce both the political (and legal), as well as military risks associated with China's growing maritime presence. Through its relations with ASEAN Tokyo thus attempts to constrain Beijing in an indirect way. To be sure, Japan understands well the obstacles it faces in seeking a unified stance with ASEAN. In particular, as the ASEAN members that are not involved in the SCS disputes and/or are closely aligned with the PRC, such as Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, do remain wary of becoming a part to any anti-China regional coalitions.

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 America in order to keep the US 'in' the Asia-Pacific (Ashizawa, 2014), consistent with the returns-maximising logic. From this perspective, both Abe and the ASEAN leaders evaluated very positively President Trump's attendance of the ASEAN meetings in the fall of 2017. Trump's presence at these meetings eased somewhat regional concerns about US disengagement from the multilateral arena, which had gradually grown after America's withdrawal from the TPP. Collectively, ASEAN has endeavoured to enmesh both the US and China in regional (security) configurations, including the EAS and the ADMM+. By having both powers participate in these configurations, ASEAN has sought to ensure Washington's commitments to the region, while concurrently engaging and socialising the PRC (He 2015b).

On the other hand, both Japan and the ASEAN states have implemented dominance-denial measures by using regional institutions in the Asia-Pacific to prevent Chinese domination (Kuik, 2016).<sup>15</sup> For example, ASEAN states have resisted Chinese efforts for a leadership role in, and exclusive membership of, the EAS, centred on ASEAN+3 (Sutter 2010). This converged with Japan's push in 2005 to include Australia, New Zealand and India in the expanded EAS. As argued by Kuik

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<sup>15</sup>Some authors, such as He (2015a), define this behaviour as 'institutional balancing'.

(2016, pp. 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 throughout the 1990s, Japan did pursue binding-engagement policies towards China via multilateral ASEAN-led frameworks, it is the risk-contingency logic that has increasingly become a driver of Japan's China policy. Multilateral mechanisms are now employed by Tokyo for the purpose of Japan's political hedging against the PRC and less so as a tool of engagement. In contrast, Tokyo attempts to tie down the US in regional multilateral arrangements so as to ensure America's regional engagement, while concurrently utilising this engagement as a political hedge against China. A case in point was the joint US-Japan position on the maritime territorial disputes in the SCS, which was articulated in a number of multilateral fora during Obama's term in office. The newest high-level dialogue, the Quad, now revived by Trump, strongly supported by Abe, and embraced by India and Australia, is the latest example of regional hedging responses to uncertainties associated with both the US and China. The Quad is a binding-engagement act for Japan in so far, as it seeks to enmesh America in minilateral settings with like-minded democratic nations along shared geopolitical interests. But it is also a manifestation of political and military hedging vis-à-vis Beijing, for the Quad's promotion of free trade and defence cooperation in the Indo-Pacific represents an indirect way of offsetting China's growing regional influence. It should be noted, however, that the Quad's future role in addressing Japan's uncertainties remains an uncertainty in itself. On the one hand, the unpredictability of the US Asia policies, under the Trump administration, raises the question of how serious Washington may be about moving beyond Quad's declaratory statements towards formalised cooperation on the ground. On the other hand, strategic divergences among the Quad members exist and will remain, especially concerning the PRC, while four-way security collaboration is still largely in the making.

## 8. Japan and Asia-Pacific strategic order

Japan's pursuit of hedging in response to a perceived US unreliability at a time of growing Chinese influence is not an exceptional security behaviour in the Asia-Pacific region. Many other regional players, including states in Southeast Asia (Kuik, 2016), have embraced hedging in order to adapt to the changing strategic environment. As one of the strongest supporters of the US-led security order in the Asia-Pacific (Sahashi, 2016), even to the point of exceeding Washington's own commitments,<sup>16</sup> Japan's behaviour deserves a particular attention in any discussion of Asia's future strategic order.

In the first place, Japan's hedging behaviour suggests that Tokyo may have embarked on reconceptualising its vision of strategic order in favour of a model that is inclusive of the US, but no longer US-centric. Given Japan's long-standing unwillingness or inability to consider a 'post-US' regional order with reduced American role (let alone a US disengagement from Asia) (Ashizawa, 2014), this may signify an important change in Japanese strategic thinking in the long term. Driven by Trump's unpredictability and growing US-associated uncertainties, Tokyo is likely to accelerate its efforts for laying the groundwork for a security architecture that does not rest on American primacy. Hence, Japan's defence self-reliance, and bi- and minilateral (security) arrangements with other Asian players are expected to gain prominence in Japanese policies in the years to come.

Secondly, what seems 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). Tokyo's continuing emphasis under Abe on risk-reduction measures in its policies towards Beijing supports this observation. To be sure, Abe's most recent diplomatic overtures to Xi indicate an increased attention to binding-engagement. This appears to be Japan's response to Trump-generated uncertainties and is consistent with Japan's hedging behaviour. In contrast to many

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<sup>16</sup>Such a view was expressed by a Japanese scholar during an interview with the author, Tokyo, November 2015.

Asian states, including ASEAN members, that encourage a certain Chinese role in regional order building through binding-engagement policies via multilateral frameworks, Japan is, as Sahashi (2016) argues, 'more assertive...in its desire to guard against increasing Chinese influence.' ASEAN does converge with Tokyo though on the adoption of dominance-denial measures in order to prevent an exclusive Chinese leadership in Asian multilateral organisations. Furthermore, to reduce the risks associated with the PRC's growing maritime security presence, Japan and Asian players continue to support and facilitate Washington's regional involvement under Trump, both at the bilateral and multilateral level.

Finally, by creating a web of bilateral and multilateral strategic alignments Japan seems to be hedging against the emergence 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 Asia-Pacific future. It is arguably one of the major uncertainties associated with the future of Sino-US relations, especially in the context of the transactional and unpredictable US foreign policy of the Trump administration.

The Asia-Pacific security order remains fluid with some contradictory and competing trends. On the one hand, Japan's and other Asian states' collective hedging acts through multilateral mechanisms reinforce the ASEAN-led system of interconnected regional institutions. This keeps the channels of communication open and promotes cooperation on various issues, including security. The existing multilateral groupings help Asian states cope with strategic uncertainties by easing US-China rivalry, and binding both Washington and Beijing to the region (Atanassova-Cornelis and van der Putten, 2015), while simultaneously mitigating hegemonic ambitions.

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 being challenged by the regional players' pursuit of bilateral, minilateral and exclusive arrangements. Japan, for one,



recognises the limitations of the various ASEAN-led organisations for addressing regional states' strategic uncertainties about both China and the US. In particular, this concerns the inability of these mechanisms to 'restrain', what Tokyo sees as, Beijing's assertive behaviour in pressing its territorial claims in the China Seas. Japan, therefore, implements various risk-reduction options towards the PRC by stepping up bilateral (with the US, India and the ASEAN states) and exclusive of China (such as the Quad) approaches to order building. As multilateral mechanisms are unable to sufficiently offset Japan's US-associated uncertainties, and more so in an era of Washington's turn away from multilateralism under Trump, bilateralism and minilateralism will likely remain prominent in Tokyo's policies. Japan's pursuit of multilateralism, therefore, is set to coexist with various other, including non-US centric, approaches to order building.

## **9. Conclusion**

This article has examined how Japan has been adapting its security policy behaviour to the perceived US decline and unreliability, especially under the Trump administration, at a time of growing strategic uncertainties about China's regional and maritime security intentions.

Japan's US-associated uncertainties have represented long-standing concerns. These have become more acute with the relative decline of America and due to a growing perception since Trump came to power of a weakening US leadership in the Asia-Pacific region. A particular concern for Japan is the possibility of a shift in US China policy towards accommodation; this amid a transactional deal or some kind of a bargain under Trump. Japan's China-associated uncertainties include worries about the PRC's long-term regional intentions, and concerns about Beijing's maritime security objectives, especially in the China Seas, in the short to medium term. Importantly, it is Japan's doubts about Washington's willingness, and increasingly about its ability, to continue maintaining its defence commitments to Japan

(and broadly its regional engagement) that magnify Japan's China-associated uncertainties.

Japan's hedging behaviour has sought to offset the China-associated security risks and ensure the continuing US defence commitments, while also preparing Japan for a possible 'abandonment' scenario. Under Abe, Japan has tended to de-emphasise binding-engagement policies towards the PRC. Instead, Tokyo has stepped up the risk-reduction measures through political, economic and military hedging. It has pursued both non-military (i.e., economic-diversification and dominance-denial), and military-based approaches. Japanese hedging against the US-associated uncertainties has followed primarily the logic of gains-maximisation by emphasising binding-engagement policies. These are seen in Tokyo's reinforcement of the alliance under Abe, especially underscored since Trump came to power, and in its efforts to keep Washington committed to the region via mini- and multilateral frameworks. Binding the US in this way has also served a purpose of reducing Japan's 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.

At the same time, in line with the risk-reduction logic, Tokyo has pursued (albeit to a lesser extent) economic diversification and incipient indirect-balancing policies towards Washington, 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 in Japan's growing defence partnerships (or limited alignments) with the ASEAN states and India, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Japan's risk-reduction policies vis-à-vis the US are likely to become more prominent in the Trump era.

All in all, the Trump-generated strategic uncertainties have intensified Japan's long-standing concerns about the durability and sustainability of America's regional commitments. This has stimulated a shift in Japan's vision for the Asia-Pacific strategic order, which has hitherto largely rested on US-centric approaches. In particular, Japan now appears to have reluctantly accepted the prospect of a diminished American role in the region, or of a 'post-US' regional order. At the same

time, up until now Japan has steadily resisted to include the PRC, or to consider a more prominent Chinese role, in the evolving order. Tokyo's latest diplomatic overtures to Beijing, not least as a response to uncertainties reinforced by Trump, may be a harbinger of change in the relations between Asia's two largest economies. For now, the regional strategic order remains fluid with some competing trends. Yet, this is a sign that the Asia-Pacific is preparing for a new era, with or without the US.

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