



# Japan's strategy amid US–China confrontation

Ryo Sahashi<sup>1</sup>

Received: 26 October 2020 / Accepted: 10 November 2020 / Published online: 18 November 2020  
© The Institute of International and Strategic Studies (IISS), Peking University 2020

## Abstract

Japan's strategy amid US–China confrontation has focused on securing national defense and economic prosperity by maintaining Japan's alliance with the United States and promoting Asia's socioeconomic integration. Japan is working toward an institutional order based on universal values. It realizes that such a long-term goal requires coexistence, including with countries in the midst of integrating into the political and economic world order, and prioritizes stability. This approach explains the historical development of Japan–China relations since the 1970s. During this period, Japan has expected to maneuver China into integration with global politics through economic statecraft while maintaining its alliance with the US. During the current US–China confrontation, Japan faces the challenge of maintaining this complex strategic position in the US–China–Japan triangle. Its reaction to this new reality is to enhance its alliance with the US (including cooperation for economic security) and strengthen international partnership to promote its preferred mode of institutional order, while maintaining diplomacy with China.

**Keywords** Japan · Japan–China relations · Japan–US relations · Asia Pacific · Indo-Pacific

## 1 Introduction

Over the course of the past 2 decades, scholars have observed two developments: (1) the increasing challenge posed to Japan by China, and (2) the consequent shifts in Japan's security policy. They insist that Japan has strengthened its balancing strategy against China through measures such as increases in its defense budget and changes to its legal interpretation of its Peace Constitution (Liff 2018; Koga 2018). Different perceptions of history exacerbate the security dilemma between the two countries (Bush 2010). Some scholars have argued that the Japanese government has used the region's crises to expand its military power

---

✉ Ryo Sahashi  
sahashi@ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, The University of Tokyo, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo, Japan

(Hughes 2017). In addition to territorial and historical issues, Japan is wary of losing its status as a major power in the international community and the regional order. Many analysts of Japan–China relations emphasize that the strategic confrontation between Japan and China is here to stay.

These arguments have certain limitations in explaining Japan–China relations and even Japan’s foreign and security policies as a whole. The Japan–China relationship has been restored, despite the recent political confrontations over the Senkaku Islands in 2010 and 2012. Though Japan has not relaxed its guard against China, the two governments have come to terms with one another and have gradually improved their relations. Since the spring of 2017, the two governments have frequently exchanged top-level meetings, most notably Abe’s visit to China in October 2018, and have made substantial promises to ease tensions. A state visit by Xi Jinping to Japan was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but top-level politicians in Tokyo show continued interest in improving relations with China, which suggests that they are willing to host him in the future. The development of Japan–China relations contrasts with the deterioration of US–China relations, despite the entrenchment of Japan’s view of the US–Japan alliance as crucial.

While Japanese national security policy has undergone significant changes in recent years in terms of Japan’s increased defense budget, expansion of largely American military equipment, and reinterpretation of its constitution to allow greater participation in collective self-defense, the Japanese government has promoted cooperation with China. In addition to third-country cooperation in international infrastructure building projects, Japan is promoting Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations that include China, and it does not exclude the possibility of China’s participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Although Japan is not a member of the China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), it has tended to accept the value of AIIB’s activities while maintaining its strong backing of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and promoting the “quality infrastructure” concept. There are numerous events or actions that are difficult to explain under the assumption that Japan leans toward balancing, maintaining its status, and satisfying Japanese nationalism.

What is the logic behind Japan’s diplomacy toward China? How should we explain Japan’s policy toward China and its development in recent years? To answer these questions, we should first explore Japan’s grand strategy and the goals of its foreign and security policies. Given Japan’s pivotal role in determining the future order in East Asia (Buzan and Goh 2020), this article offers tools to interpret and predict Japan’s choices in the era of US–China competition.

This paper suggests that Japan’s primary goal is to maintain regional order through stability and interdependence and that Japan retains its own rationale for pursuing the difficult task of enhancing its alliance network and stabilizing the neighboring region at the same time. This paper identifies the promotion of rules and norms, the Japan–US alliance, and diplomacy toward China as important means for achieving this goal. Japan’s defense policy, including deterrence, is merely one part of Japan’s efforts to stabilize its environment. While its defense policy emphasizes its preparedness against regional contingencies and the integration of the

self-defense forces and the US military services, Japan continues to pursue a strategy that promotes regional socioeconomic integration.

The first section of this paper explains Japan's foreign policy as a pragmatic response to Japan's geopolitical and social contexts. The second section traces the historical development of Japan's China policy, focusing on Japan's stability-seeking behavior. The paper then argues that the escalating US–China confrontation creates a challenge for Japan: while its strategy prefers strong American commitment in the region, Japan wants to uphold regional integration.

## 2 Japan's search for order and stability

What are the goal and means of Japanese diplomacy? What is Japan's understanding of the international/regional balance of power and order? Japan has released various publications on its security strategy, including its National Security Strategy (2013), National Defense Planning Guidelines (2018), and annual Diplomatic Bluebooks (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan 2013; Ministry of Defense of Japan 2018). Remarks by its prime minister and foreign and defense ministers also provide hints. However, the substance of its grand strategy remains rather elusive. The main reason for this difficulty is that Japan respects the United States as its only ally and understands that the US–Japan alliance is its greatest asset and tool for diplomacy. The strong emphasis on the US alliance in its policy statements is consistent. Nevertheless, this does not mean Japan's understanding of the power balance or international order is the same as that of the United States. Nor does it mean that Japan and the United States necessarily share the same view on what kind of state China should be and how much time it should take to become it.

Some people think that only a superpower can have a grand strategy and implement it. However, if we think of grand strategy as an intellectual framework that binds foreign, security, and economic policies together based on geopolitical conditions, national identity, and values, any country can have one (Brands 2015). In this sense, Japan does have a grand strategy. It needs to survive and prosper under the conditions under which it is placed. It is difficult to argue that when Japan restored its sovereignty in 1952, it had its own free choice. Nevertheless, gradually, as its economy boomed, Japan increased the number of areas in which it now exercises freedom of action.

Japan has the world's third-largest economy. The global balance of power is shifting toward emerging economies, most notably China and India, while the United States, with an increasing population, still shows robust growth potential. However, Japan's domestic demand is strong because of its large population, and the country's scientific and technological base and the technological development capabilities of its private companies remain at a high level. Many Japanese manufacturers are integrated into Asian supply chains and often deliver technology-intensive components and equipment to firms in other countries (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan 2019). Japan has become a particularly strong member of Asia in recent years, not only in political terms but also in economic reality.

Further, while the four islands that form the center of Japan's national territory are mountainous, Japan holds vast expanses of sea area as its territorial waters and exclusive economic zone under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Because the sea area, including its exclusive economic zone, is the sixth largest in the world and holds potentially vast underwater resources, Japan has the potential to become a resource-rich country. However, this means that Japan needs to monitor its islands and vast sea areas.

Japan is in a position to plan its strategy in the context of these geopolitical conditions and the social context in which it finds itself. What are Japan's political values? Japan believes that liberalism and democracy should be at the core of the world order. Japan has a history of gradually discussing and absorbing universal values since the Meiji Restoration. Japanese people's desire for greater civil liberties continues to grow, even as it conflicts with the patriarchal worldview of many in the older generation. Japan aims for progressive goals not only domestically, but also in the international order. Japan's aid policies and Asian diplomacy in the past were indeed rather weak with regard to human rights and democracy. However, since the 1990s, the shift in Japan's theorization of human security, its emphasis on global governance rules, and its emphasis on achieving the sustainable developmental goals (SDGs) has become evident. It seeks a liberal international order by means of improving the individual's situation.

Japan prioritizes the development of an institutional order based on universal values and requires the development of an additional order to promote coexistence. International political and economic reality demands the deepening of cooperation, without which an inclusive world will not exist. In other words, Japan's values are rooted in inclusiveness and progressiveness.

Japan's attitude, which views multiple layers of orders as both possible and desirable in the creation of international orders, tells that Japan's grand strategy is rooted in pragmatism. Japan is not the kind of power that would be quick to use military force. However, Japan's pragmatism does not necessarily mean that it is not a value-seeking nation. It seeks to promote universal values. Its National Security Strategy and its December 2018 review report released emphasize that Japan's strategic approach aims to achieve peace and stability by "shaping a desirable national security environment" (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan 2018). Japan seeks to transform its surrounding environment and has used all possible means toward that purpose, including aid, rule-making, and the self-defense forces—its long-term objective is to establish influence over a long period of time (Tamaki 2020).

Japan's policy towards China is based on this strategic view. In addition to achieving stability, Japan hopes to form its desired order over the long term. It seeks to ensure its economic prosperity on the basis of this achieved stability. In recent years, some analyses of Japan's foreign policy, particularly its posture toward China, have placed undue emphasis on security, perhaps due to the security-centric government public relations approach that Japan has adopted in recent years with regard to its China policy—that is, a strong posture against China is electorally popular. However, Japan's actual strategic ideas are formed from a broader context. The introduction of institutional reforms and new equipment does not explain the entirety of its China strategy.

It is important and highly indicative that Japan does not see the rift between the US and China as beneficial to itself. In the past, the stability of US–China relations, the fact that China in reality accepted the existence of the US alliance network, and the fact that both countries were increasingly involved in multilateralism fostered a stable international environment for Japan. While Japan saw important value in its alliance with the United States, it believed that multilateralism and international cooperation were necessary to bring about inclusiveness, which in turn would lead to long-term stability and the promotion of universal values.

So, how can Japan implement its grand strategy? Japan's relationship with the US is the cornerstone of its diplomacy, but the preservation of the relationship itself is not an objective. Japan positions its relationship with the US as an important tool for achieving national and international security and forming a rules-based international order. In addition to US–Japan relations, cooperation with developed countries and the formation of international legal frameworks provide other means for Japan to achieve these objectives. Trade, environmental protection, and natural resources are good examples of issue areas that demonstrate Tokyo's inclination for rule-making through international laws and negotiations.

Moreover, Japan seeks to build a stable neighborhood through bilateral diplomatic negotiations, as is the case with its relations with China and, to a lesser extent, Russia. The essence of Japan's historically grounded approach to China is to engage in and maintain bilateral dialog to resolve differences over goals, preferences, and behaviors. From this perspective, inducing China to participate in regional and global cooperation is also important. Indeed, some policymakers claim that Japan's relationship with Washington is a useful resource for applying pressure to Beijing. As Richard Samuels rightly points out, the dream of mainstream Japanese strategists is to combine East Asian integration with the Japan–US alliance (Samuels 2008).

Overall, Japan is a stability seeker and advances a unique vision for order-creation. Japan's recent diplomatic practices demonstrate that Japan's foreign policy does not aim to alter the regional environment *for the sake of* the Japan–US alliance. Rather, Japan's foreign policy essentially focuses on “stabilizing” the regional situation through economic and rule-based engagement and multifaceted diplomacy while *utilizing* the alliance.

### 3 The historical development of Japan's China policy

Postwar Japan initially wanted to continue its trade relations with mainland China, with which it had enjoyed deep economic ties prior to the war. However, the onset of the Cold War made this impossible, and Japan recognized the relocated Republic of China in Taiwan and established a multifaceted cooperative relationship with the Chiang Kai-shek administration. At the urging of Eisenhower's Secretary of State Dulles, Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, the architect of Japan's post-war diplomacy, sent the Yoshida Letter, which promised just that.

Hence, in the early years of the Cold War, the relationship between Japan and mainland China was sparse. Unlike the US' total embargo of China, Japan and China resumed partial trade relations and humanitarian cooperation related to the

Sino-Japan war, including the return of human remains. However, Japan only formally recognized the Republic of China, which made the distance between Japan and mainland China appear greater than it really was, as demonstrated by the Nagasaki Flag Incident (Kokubun et al. 2017). Increasingly, Japanese industry raised its expectations of expanded economic relations with China. In the midst of this situation, the Sino-Soviet border dispute and the impact of the Vietnam War finally brought the United States and China closer together. The US did not notify Japan of its willingness to pursue rapprochement with China until just before Nixon's announcement of Kissinger's visit to China in July 1971. This meant that the nightmare that Asakai Koichiro, a former Japanese ambassador to the US, had long warned of—i.e., that the US linking up with China would suddenly and radically change the international environment—came true.

Nevertheless, even though it was a shock to the Japanese government, Japan welcomed the US–China rapprochement and used it as an opportunity to build relations with China. In 1972, the newly elected ruling party leader Tanaka Kakuei promised a breakthrough in Sino-Japanese relations, held a meeting with President Nixon in Honolulu to secure his approval, and went to China to swiftly realize the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and China (Inoue 2010). The Chinese government asked neither the United States nor Japan to review the US–Japan defense treaty, tacitly recognizing the US alliance system in Asia, which was of great significance to Japan's foreign policy. By preserving the most important tool of its diplomacy, the US–Japan alliance, Japan was able to stabilize the regional order and achieve the proximity between Japan and China that had been strongly demanded by its domestic politics.

After 1972, Japan has supported China's growth, and relations between the two countries have been good. Under the framework of the banner of friendship between Japan and China, Japan has made numerous efforts to support China's modernization. With the establishment of diplomatic relations, Japan and China have strengthened their relations without any hesitation. Many large-scale projects were launched with financial, technical, and human resource support from Japan in the form of official development assistance. The “honeymoon” between Tokyo and Beijing was sustained by Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro and Chinese heads of state, which resulted in the declaration of the four principles of the relationship and candid discussions on Cambodia and North Korea.<sup>1</sup> As Kawashima (2020) argues, “Nakasone succeeded in presenting a ‘model’ for the relationship in the form of the Japan–US–China triangle.”

In the 1990s, when China accelerated its modernization efforts, Japan's stance did not change significantly. When European nations were more critical of China due to their concerns regarding the abuse of human rights, Japan, along with the United States, took China's modernization efforts seriously and positively. In the

---

<sup>1</sup> The four principles include peace and friendship, equality and reciprocity, mutual trust, and long-term stability. Nakasone proposed adding “mutual trust” as the fourth principle during his 1983 meeting with Hu Yaobang, who agreed to the addition. Nakasone repeated these four principles during his speech in Beijing in 1986.

1990s, although it received much domestic criticism for doing so, Japan was the first member of the G7 to normalize political and economic relations with China. The Emperor paid a state visit to China, and the Joint Declaration on US–Japan Security, which served to reaffirm the US–Japan alliance in 1996, also emphasized and encouraged a constructive role for China. As former Deputy Foreign Minister Tanaka Hitoshi points out, Japan pushed for the addition of China, not Russia, during discussions to extend G7 membership and seriously considered allowing China to participate as an observer in the 2000 Okinawa Summit (Tanaka 2019). Ultimately, this did not happen largely due to the cautious stance of the Chinese government.

The spirit of friendship between the two countries partly resulted from Japan's decision to support China's growth, as Japan determined that a developed and stable China was in its own interest. Regional stability was an additional benefit and, like the US policy of engagement in the 1990s, Japan welcomed China's integration into the international order to bind Chinese economic policy through rules. In addition, Japan used its official development aid to China as leverage against China's actions. It suspended aid, for example, in protest against China's nuclear test and maritime activity in Japan's economic exclusive zone (Takamine 2006).

In the early 2000s, Japan's prime minister and other Japanese leaders prompted Chinese opposition through their visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, a contentious shrine that prompts memories of the Sino-Japan war. These activities were not consistent with Japan's grand strategy with regard to Sino-Japanese relations. In fact, at that time, Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō made a speech welcoming China's rise to power and the building of an East Asian community. However, as historical issues have become controversial, the influence of public opinion on Sino-Japanese relations has increased in both countries, and Sino-Japanese relations are no longer an area in which policies can be formulated and implemented based only on the strategic, big picture perspective. Individual issues, such as food safety, have also played a role in amplifying Japanese public opinion's negative perception of China (Smith 2015).

In Japan, as in the United States, the 1990s and the turn of the century saw the emergence of a debate that emphasized preparedness and serious consideration with regard to the impact of China's rise on the balance of power in Asia. This led to strategic moves, such as the deepening of contacts between Australia and the US–Japan alliance. It also led to investment in the idea of counterbalancing the rise of China by promoting the formation of a community in East Asia. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in 2001, the United States emphasized the stability of US–China relations. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Japan–China relations were dominated by political conflicts arising from historical issues, and confrontation between the two sides was also prominent in issue-areas including UN Security Council reform and Asian regionalism.

Nevertheless, Japanese diplomatic authorities continued to make maintaining Sino-Japanese relations an important goal. Japan's policy toward China was a process of “adaptation” to a growing China (Smith 2015). Aware of the challenges posed by China's rise, Japan continued to recognize the significance of the Japan–China relationship in terms of security and economics and maintained efforts to manage and proactively engage with bilateral issues. This was due to the

judgment that stable US–Japan–China triangular relations were in Japan’s interest. With the stability of US–China relations, Japan sought to control the regional environment by stabilizing all bilateral relations among the US, Japan, and China (Curtis and Kokubun 2010).

Japan’s subsequent Liberal Democratic Party administrations, though mired on the domestic front with three transfers of power in the 3 years following 2006, was also devoted to repairing Japan–China relations. Abe Shinzo rekindled the Sino-Japanese relationship during his first brief stint in power, and Fukuda Yasuo helped consolidate and reestablish it as a mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests. The 2008 Japan–China Joint Statement contained a series of concrete promises regarding cooperation in the East China Sea and became the fourth foundational document upon which Japan–China relations rest.<sup>2</sup> Aso Taro expressed his willingness to engage with China by describing it as Japan’s “eternal neighbor”.

The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which took power in 2009 with its overwhelming victory in the House of Representatives election, advocated for a renewed emphasis on Asian diplomacy. For a time, the prominence of DPJ politicians who were critical of the US–Japan alliance led some to predict that Japan–US–China relations would move into a new phase in which Japan would keep an ‘equal distance’ from both the US and China. In reality, however, the bilateral relationship settled into a more conventional one in which Japan’s relations with China served the goal of regional stabilization, but not much more. By 2010, China overtook Japan as the world’s second-largest economy in terms of GDP. Amid these developments, there was undoubtedly a growing rivalry between Japan and China and deepening regional conflict over the scope of membership in ASEAN-based economic partnerships (Oba 2013).

The second Abe administration implemented the Security Diamond Initiative and the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy. These measures were perceived by some as a shift in Japan’s strategy toward aiming to contain China. In fact, there was a time when Japan strengthened its cautions against and criticism of the rise of China even more than the United States, and it made moves that seemed to reinforce its security partnerships with Southeast Asian countries and Europe and persuade the United States to keep China in mind with regard to its Asia strategy. Japan increasingly viewed China more from a security perspective than an economic one. In contrast, China began to look far beyond Japan, reconsidering the world order and the emerging balance of power, and the differences between the two countries’ perspectives became clearer.

The Abe administration’s stance toward China, however, was intended to increase checks and balances, not to exclude China. The Abe administration not only enhanced Japan’s deterrence measures—for instance, by strengthening island defense capabilities and Japan–US relations, as seen in Japan’s National Defense Program Guidelines and the revision of the Guidelines for Japan–US for Defense Cooperation—but also had consistent intentions to settle bilateral tensions. The

---

<sup>2</sup> The other key documents in Japan–China relations are the joint communique of September 1972, the treaty of peace and amity of 1978, and the joint declaration of 1998.



gradual restoration of the balance between deterrence and dialog was a characteristic of its policy toward China. After 2018, when the US–China confrontation deepened, Japan accelerated its efforts to improve relations with China. In May 2017, Prime Minister Abe dispatched the second-highest ranked politician in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party to China to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative Roundtable. In the fall of 2018, he visited Beijing and confirmed he would work toward a non-confrontational, cooperative relationship with China. Japan’s vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific also developed into one that tried to find points of cooperation with China (Satake and Sahashi 2020). Indeed, Japan’s policy toward China has become more security-oriented in terms of homeland defense, and Japan has been actively working on its own security policy to enhance its ability to push back China and encourage the US to collaborate with Japan on the China question within the framework of the alliance. However, the Abe administration has simultaneously continued to pursue diplomacy aimed at stability in the region.

#### 4 Challenges for Japan’s strategic position

It goes without saying that the United States, and not China, has been seen by post-war Japan as both the primary instrument of its strategy and the crucial external factor influencing that strategy. As the United States deepens its engagement in regional conflicts in Asia, its explicit or implicit demand for cooperation inevitably falls on Japan. Japan has been conscious of the debate over US defense budget trends and foreign involvement, since they affect the future of power politics. Moreover, the alliance with the United States has brought about domestic political problems in Japan. The relationship between US military bases and local regions have troubled administrations from time to time, and there have been strong calls for more independent and proactive diplomacy in the face of US military intervention across the world. These concerns add to overt pressure on the Japanese government. Nevertheless, mainstream Japanese view the United States as a global hegemonic power and the partner that provides the most support for Japan’s economic development and security (Sahashi 2018).

At the same time, Japan’s economic relations with Asia have become more complex in terms of supply chains and capital relations. Further, Japan has integrated into the development of Asia as an entity and, by doing so, has helped its domestic economy, which has struggled to achieve significant growth. As China and other Asian countries have developed and their people’s standard of living has risen, a diverse Asia has become more and more attractive, and Japan has made great efforts in regionalism to ensure that East Asia continues to grow with stability.

Now, US policy toward China has come to the point of confrontation. The United States refers to its strategy as competition. This has implications for the Asian context. The Trump administration has adopted policies that cut off relations with China on multiple fronts, such as supply chains, imports and exports in general, scientific and technological cooperation, and the movement of people. China has reacted to such initiatives by employing policies to decrease its dependence on the US and adopting similar policies to tighten export controls. With each side beginning to give

up on cooperation and diplomacy, these action–reaction dynamics are creating a trend that runs counter to the integration of Asia.

What challenges lie ahead for Japan? First, Japan still considers its alliance with the United States as its most important diplomatic tool. The alliance is supported by the formation of a security cooperation network with Australia, India, and the United Kingdom, among others. These partnerships are important for creating regional stability. However, if the alliance network alone is strengthened, it will potentially divide the region, since most Asian nations that are not alliance members tend not to side with either the US or China. The US government is increasingly eager to institutionalize quadrilateral cooperation among the United States, Australia, Japan, and India. To be sure, Japan has been willing to reduce uncertainty in regional security to facilitate the growth of so-called “Quad” cooperation and to send the message to China that it should focus on regional stability. However, the success of such attempts are contingent on whether ASEAN responds to and cooperate with the scheme positively and whether China responds to the rising network of partnership by forming a hostile security network of its own.

Second, the US desire for burden-sharing with its allies is growing. At the same time, the relative power of the US will likely diminish, as will the interest and resources it devotes to foreign policy in the medium- to long-term due to domestic pressures. It is Asia that is at the core of this century’s economic growth. Nevertheless, questions remain as to whether future US diplomacy will adhere to its security commitments and prioritize free trade over protectionism.

Third, no matter how it behaves, Japan’s influence on the US–China confrontation is peripheral. Japan’s military and economic power remain marginal compared to that of the two superpowers, and the US and China are entering a systemic rivalry. The Japanese government’s recent use of terms such as “rules-based bridge-building between the US and China” express its desire to shape international economic order through rule-making. Japan may be aware of the concrete contribution it can make to rule-making with Western countries and others, even in an era of US–China confrontation, but as a matter of policy, it is difficult to stand between the US and China and move both countries toward a more peaceful relationship. One might argue that Japan should work with other countries to form a political coalition that sometimes adopts positions different from those of the United States and China and acts from a swing position. We may see such a move in the future in the formation of rules and norms for trade and environmental protection. Still, such a move will not stop the confrontation between the United States and China.

## 5 Navigating through China–Japan–US triangular relations

The confrontation between the United States and China will probably continue for at least a decade. So, what strategy will Japan adopt to deal with the international environment over a 10-year period? Again, Japan’s interests lie in maintaining the vitality of its declining population, the defense of its territory and critical interests, and the stability of the international order. The geopolitical outlook is that as the US–China confrontation continues, Sino-Russian relations will strengthen and

Sino-Indian relations will not be as friendly as they were in the past. Also, the situation on the Korean Peninsula will continue to be uncertain for the time being.

Japan's strategic options for achieving stability are, first of all, to deter challengers against the status quo and gain diplomatic weight by promoting its alliance with the United States and its network of other alliances. In addition to the military interoperability of the US–Japan alliance, efforts to link the US–Japan alliance more deeply with the overall US alliance network will intensify, as in Japan's security partnership with the United Kingdom and Australia. Moreover, Japan–US cooperation will be strengthened in science and technology as well as economic security. It is concerned about using advanced technologies for military purposes and the unfair dissemination of scientific and technological achievements from its laboratories. In addition to developing similar mechanisms to those of the United States and other advanced economies (e.g., introducing secret patents and security clearance systems and enhancing research integrity), Japan will also make efforts to establish multilateral economic security mechanisms.

The second option for achieving stability is to develop cooperation with advanced countries and establish a rule-making network. “Data free flow with trust” is a good example of Japan's initiative, and Japan has also promoted rule-making on economic fronts through the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP, created after the US withdrew from the TPP framework). A free and open Indo-Pacific is understood as rules]-making efforts in this context. This author has previously written:

[r]ather than directly targeting a particular country or excluding it, [a free and open Indo-Pacific] aims to strengthen the region's resiliency and connectivity to accommodate China's rise in the future successfully. To that end, Japan has accelerated its efforts in defense, economic, and diplomatic terms to establish a free and open regional order with other like-minded countries (Satake and Sahashi 2020).

In other words, Japan ultimately seeks to promote open and inclusive regional order-building and establish a network of partnerships to increase its international leverage.

In addition, building relations with China will never lose its importance for regional stability and prosperity. China is a key actor in Asia's security and economic problems, including the Korean Peninsula and non-traditional security concerns. Of course, as we have already discussed, Japan has no intention to stand passively in the middle ground between the US and China or to maintain an equal distance between the two (Liff 2019). However, Japan will continue to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with China and promote institutionalization and policy coordination to secure its economy while enhancing its security through the alliance with the US (Miyamoto 2011).

## 6 Conclusion

The stability and manageability of US–China relations and Japan–China relations have been central to the stability of the Asia–Pacific order since the 1970s. The stability of trilateral relations among the three powers in the region has given the order a peaceful character. The rise of China is forcing all actors in the region to rethink the balance of power. Still, Japan’s priorities for Asian order are to maintain stability to advance prosperity and to further regional integration and maneuverability to ensure a brighter future for humanity. From this angle, Japan’s alliance with the United States will retain the most significant role in Japan’s strategy, and Japan will continue to hope that the US’ Asia policy will be based on the collective expectations of a future Asia. Japan is not changing its support for US leadership to shape the Asian order, nor is it playing a swing role or hedging between the leaderships of the United States and China. It simply fears that the end of American leadership may result in a leaderless international order in which its interests cannot be maintained.

Japan is increasingly concerned with the US-guided decoupling effort to restructure global value chains. Japanese industry is reluctant to review its interdependence with the China’s economy, which is still growing steadily after recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic (Kodachi 2020). Of course, the Japanese government understands that the United States has a high level of interest in Japan’s and its own economic security and is looking for a common course with its allies. As a result, Japan’s response to US decoupling efforts will likely be to watch other developed countries and seek ways to implement regulations from a viewpoint of economic security while continuing a strategically non-sensitive trade and investment relationship with China.

A fact of Japan–China relations is the poor perception of China in Japan, which is not as likely to improve as the perception of Japan in China. The Chinese government does not seem to understand the harsh public perception of China in Japan or the fact that China’s behaviors have exacerbated it (Takahara 2020). In recent years, there has also been growing suspicion in Japan that China will not fulfill its international commitments. In the maritime domain, China has been challenging the status quo over the last decade, but there is a fundamental lack of understanding among Chinese policymakers that such behavior leads to unrest in the region and creates a hostile environment for China.

In light of this, it will be important to show Japanese that Japan–China relations are useful. Japan’s constructive and inclusive approach needs a response by Chinese government that will produce a substantial outcome. That is why Takahara Akio, one of Japan’s leading experts on China, insists that Japan and China should compose a joint message on building of a peaceful order during Xi Jinping’s currently postponed visit to Japan. Takahara also goes further, suggesting that Xi should speak of his intention to cooperate with Japan to build a free and open Indo-Pacific. Talks on order-building are essential (Sahashi 2015). Considering China and Japan’s gravity in the regional balance of power, such a development could reorder the regional political landscape. A future summit between China and Japan would

provide a good litmus test for Japan's search for order and stability in Asia. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan's political atmosphere is not yet suitable for hosting a state visit from Xi Jinping, but it is also important to first solve problems in the bilateral relationship to reduce bilateral tensions and improve political atmosphere. Japan's functional cooperation with China should follow the advancement of top-level diplomacy.

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

## References

- Brands, Hal. 2015. *What good is grand strategy? Power and purpose in American statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Busan, Barry, and Evelyn Goh. 2020. *Rethinking Sino-Japanese alienation: history problems and historical opportunities*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bush, Richard. 2010. *The perils of proximity: China-Japan security relations*. Washington: The Brookings Institution Press.
- Cabinet Secretariat of Japan. 2013. *National security strategy*.
- Cabinet Secretariat of Japan. 2018. *Review of national security strategy*.
- Curtis, Gerald, Ryosei Kokubun, and Wang Jisi. 2010. *Getting the triangle straight: managing China-Japan-US relations*. Japan Center for International Exchange.
- Hughes, Christopher. 2017. *Japan's remilitarization*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Inoue, Masaya[井上正也]. 2010. *Nichu kokko seihyoka no seijishi* 中国交正常化の政治史 (Political history of Japan-China normalization). Nagoya University Press (Japanese).
- Kawashima, Shin. 2020. The four principles that formed the basis of friendly relations between Japan and China: the China policy of the Nakasone Yasuhiro Government. *Asia-Pacific Review* 27 (1): 80–101.
- Kodachi, Hisao[小太刀久雄]. 2020. *Itabasami no keizaikai beichu dekappuringu ni kunou* 板挟みの経済境界、米中デカップリングに苦悩 (The business world caught between the boards: the pain of US-China decoupling). *Nikkei Newspaper*. October 13, 2020 (Japanese).
- Koga, Kei. 2018. The concept of “hedging” revisited: case of Japan's foreign policy strategy in East Asia's power shift. *International Studies Review* 20 (4): 633–660.
- Kokubun, Ryosei, Yoshihide Soeya, Akio Takahara, and Shin Kawashima. 2017. *Japan-China relations in the modern era*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Liff, Adam P. 2018. Japan's national security council: policy coordination and political power. *Japanese Studies* 38 (2): 253–279.
- Liff, Adam P. 2019. Unambivalent alignment: Japan's China strategy, the US alliance, and the “hedging” fallacy. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19 (3): 453–491.
- Ministry of Defense of Japan. 2018. *National defense planning guidelines for FY2019 and beyond*.
- Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan. 2019. *White Paper on international economy and trade 2019*.
- Miyamoto, Yuji[宮本雄二]. 2011. *Korekara Chugoku to Dotsukiauka* これから、中国とどう付き合うか (How to deal with China in the future). Nikkei (Japanese).
- Oba, Mie. 2013. Northeast Asia after the global financial crisis: power shift, competition, and cooperation in the global and regional arenas. In *The economy-security nexus in Northeast Asia*, ed. T.J. Pempel, 110–130. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Sahashi, Ryo. 2015. Fixing the relationship: a Japanese perspective. *East Asia Forum Quarterly* 7 (3): 12–14.
- Sahashi, Ryo. 2018. American power in Japanese security strategy. In *China's rise and Australia-Japan-US relations: primacy and leadership in East Asia*, ed. Andrew O'Neil and Michael Heazle, 143–166. London: Edward Elger.

- Samuels, Richard J. 2008. *Securing Japan: Tokyo's grand strategy and the future of East Asia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Satake, Tomohiko, and Ryo Sahashi. 2020. The rise of China and Japan's "vision" for free and open Indo-Pacific. *Journal of Contemporary China*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2020.1766907>.
- Smith, Sheila. 2015. *Intimate rivals: Japanese domestic politics and a rising China*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Takahara, Akio[高原明生]. 2020. *Nicchu no kihongensoku wo toraenaosu kikaini 日中の基本原則を捉え直す機会に(An opportunity to recapture the basic principles of Japan and China)*, *Gaiko* (March/April 2020): 12–17 (Japanese).
- Takamine, Tsukasa. 2006. *Japan's development aid to China: the long-running foreign policy of engagement*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Tamaki, Nobuhiko. 2020. Japan's quest for a rules-based international order: the Japan-US alliance and the decline of US liberal hegemony. *Contemporary Politics* 26 (4): 384–401.
- Tanaka, Hitoshi[田中均]. 2019. Beichu shinreisen no Zidai? Nichukankei ha dougoku 米中新冷戦の時代?日中関係はどう動く(The era of US-China cold war? The future of Japan-China relations). In *Chugoku nenkan 2019 中国年鑑2019 (China Yearbook 2019)*, ed. Institute of Chinese Affairs, 69–74. Tokyo: Akashi Shoten (Japanese).